

# Table of Chinese Religious History

## Ruling Dynasties

## Major Religious Events and Characteristics

### I. Formation of Native Traditions

Hsia (?-? 1751 BCE) (not yet confirmed by archaeology)

Shang (?1751-?1111) (last centuries also called Yin)

Chou (?1123-221) 722-481, "Springs and Autumns" (period covered by *Ch'un Ch'iu*) 403-221, "Warring States" (feudal system destroyed)

Ch'in (221-206) (First Emperor unifies China)

Oracle bones used for divination; ancestor worship already dominant; worship of spirits of natural phenomena

Feudal polity, *Scripture of Song Lyrics (Shih Ching)*, *Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents (Shu Ching)*, *Scripture of Change (Yi Ching)*; Master K'ung ("Confucius") (551-479); *Springs and Autumns (Ch'un Ch'iu)* and commentaries; The Old Master (Lao Tzû) and *Scripture of the Tao and Its Individuating Power (Tao Tê Ching)*. Formative Age of Philosophy: Master Mo (Mo Tzû) (c. 480-390), Master Mêng ("Mencius") (c. 390-305), Master Chuang (Chuang Tzû) (c. 365-290), Master Hsün (Hsün Tzû) (c. 340-245), et al.; *Analects (Lun Yü)*, *The Central and Universal Moral Law (Chung Yung)*, *The Highest Form of Learning (Ta Hsüeh)*, *Li texts*, *Scripture of Filiality (Hsiao Ching)*

First Emperor establishes totalitarian dictatorship, attempts thought control by book burning; rise of "religious Taoism" (although not yet so called)

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## II. Introduction, Assimilation, and Dominance of Buddhism

Former Han (206 BCE–9 CE)	Imperial polity finally established; first great expansionist empire; Literati Tradition becomes State orthodoxy; scholars concentrate on texts of Canon of the Literati; State university founded to teach this canon; great age of credulity and superstition begins; early varieties of religious Taoism flourish; Buddhism enters China and Buddhist missionary work begins
Later Han (23 CE–220)	
Three Kingdoms (220–265) (China partitioned)	Rise of so-called Neo-Taoist philosophy
Tsin (265–420)	Taoism and Buddhism eclipse Literati Tradition; K'ô Hung ( <i>Pao P'u Tzû—The Master Who Holds in His Arms the Uncarved Block</i> ) (253–333?)
China partitioned between Southern (Chinese) and Northern (non-Chinese) Dynasties (420–589)	Buddhism flourishes
Sui (589–618) (China united under Chinese rule)	
T'ang (618–907)	China is world's greatest civilization; Buddhism reaches zenith of its influence, and then its temporal prosperity is destroyed by State (845); first stirrings of renaissance of Literati Tradition

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## III. Renaissance of Native Tradition: Dominance of New Literati Philosophy

Five Dynasties (907–960) (brief period of disunion)	
(Northern) Sung (960–1127)	Chinese high culture attains its peak; New Literati Schools of the Principle and Mind ("Neo-Confucianism") reassert ancient native tradition against Buddhism
Second partition of China, between Southern Sung (Chinese) and Kin (non-Chinese) (1127–1280)	Cultural brilliance continues despite political weakness; Chu Hsi (1130–1200) is great synthesizer of the new School of the Principle and commentator on Literati Classics, whose interpretation of the canon was "orthodox" until twentieth century

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*Major Religious Events and  
Characteristics*

**xix**  
*Table of  
Chinese  
Religious  
History*

Yüan (1280–1368) (all of China under Mongol rule)

Europe gets its first glamorous impression of Cathay from book of Marco Polo (in China 1275–1292)

Ming (1368–1644) (last Chinese dynasty)

New Literati School of the Principle at first dominant, but School of the Mind as formulated in the teachings of Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) comes to the fore in mid Ming; unbroken contact with Europe begins: Matteo Ricci, S.J. reaches Peking (1600), followed by hundreds of Catholic missionaries

Ch'ing (1644–1911) (all of China under Manchu rule)

School of the Principle orthodoxy strait-jackets Chinese thought; "Rites Controversy"; Catholic missions decline and missionary work proscribed; Protestant missions begin (1800); China invaded by Western world (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and then by Japan (late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries)

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*IV. Disruption of Tradition by Western Impact*

Republic of China (confined since 1949 to Taiwan, i.e., Formosa) (1912 to date); People's Republic of China (Communist-controlled mainland) (1949 to date)

Collapse of imperial polity; disruption of tradition

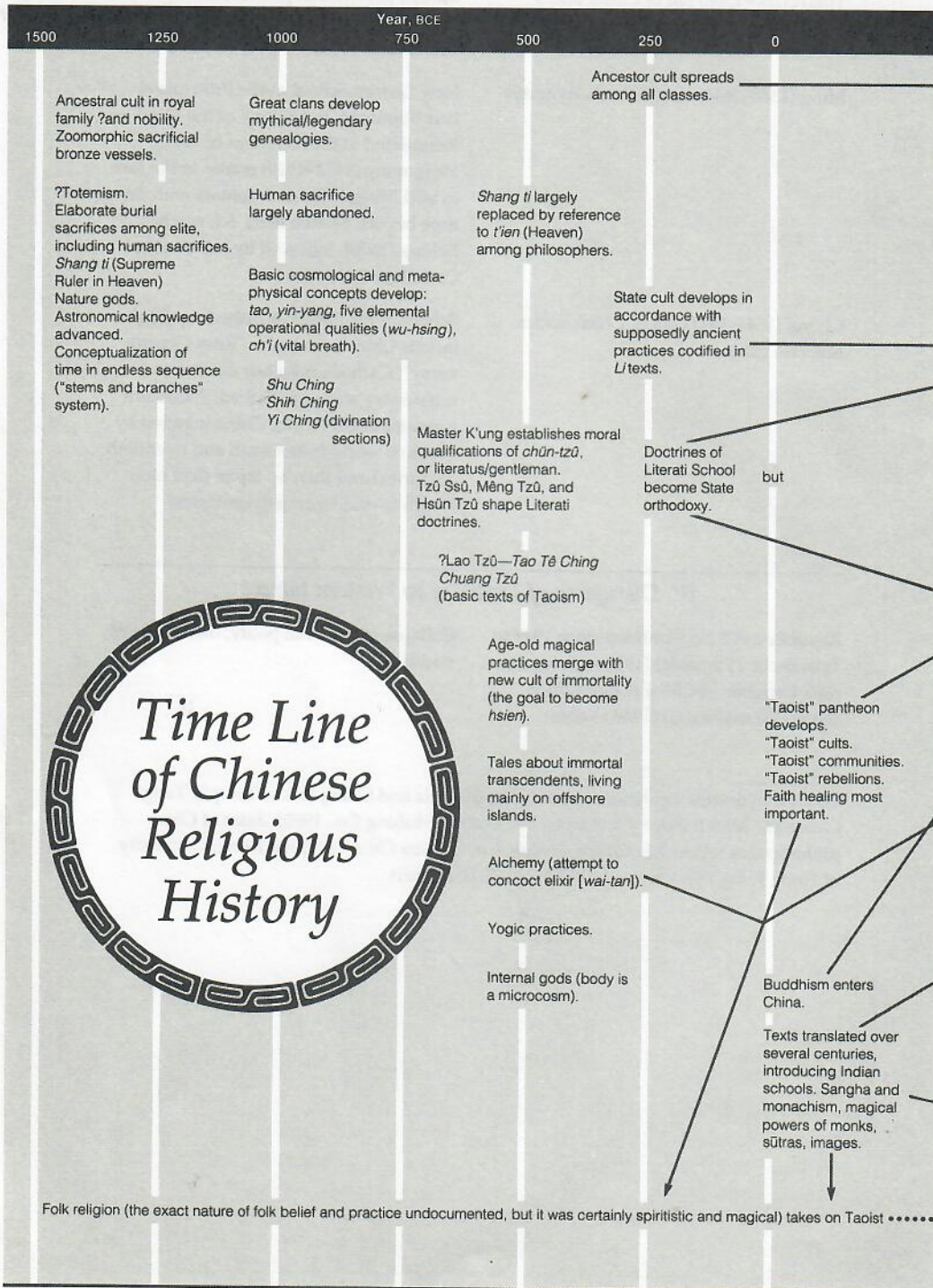
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Data on dynasties much simplified. Dates for Hsia and Shang follow Tso-pin Tung, *Chung-kuo Nien-li Chien-p'u* (Taipei: Yee Wen Publishing Co., 1960); dates of Chou philosophers follow Mu Ch'ien, *Hsien-Ch'in Chu-tzu Chi-nien* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, rev. ed., 1956), vol. II, final chart.

**YIN (late SHANG)**  
"Feudal" polity

**CHOU**  
Feudal polity disintegrates;  
great states emerge

**CH'IN/HAN**  
Unification under  
imperial polity



**SIX DYNASTIES**  
China divided under  
"barbarians" (N) and  
Chinese dynasties (S)

**T'ANG**  
Reunification

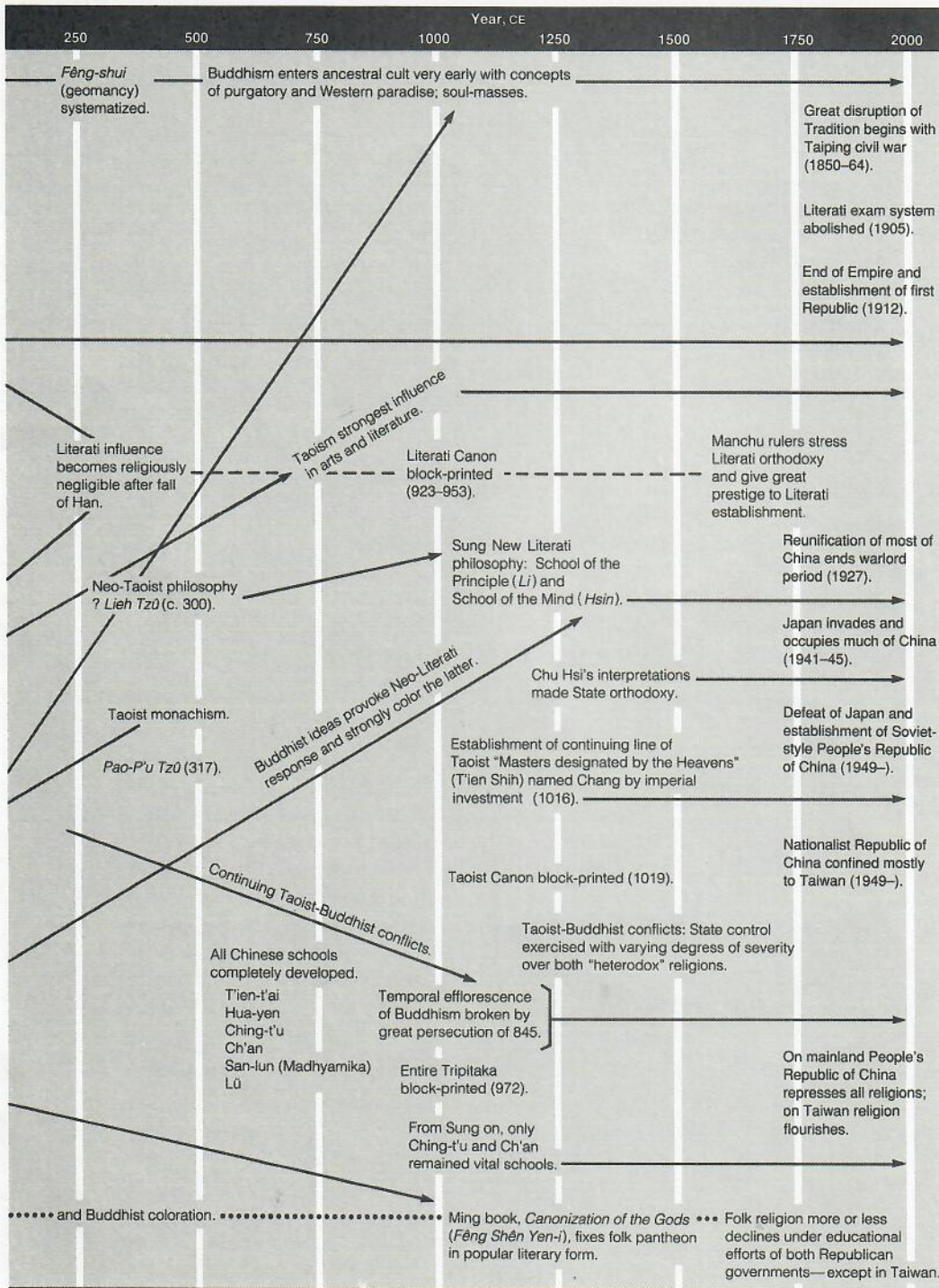
**SUNG**

**YÜAN**  
(Mongols)

**MING**

**CH'ING**  
(Manchus)

**REPUBLIC**  
(1911-)  
**PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC**  
(1949-)



**IN (late SHANG)**  
"Feudal" polity

1250

ancestral cult in royal family? and nobility. cosmorphic sacrificial bronze vessels.

Totemism. elaborate burial sacrifices among elite, including human sacrifices. *hang ti* (Supreme ruler in Heaven) are gods. astronomical knowledge advanced.

conceptualization of time in endless sequence systems and branches" (stem).

**CHOU**  
Feudal polity disintegrates; great states emerge

1000

Great clans develop mythical/legendary genealogies.

Human sacrifice largely abandoned.

Basic cosmological and metaphysical concepts develop: *tao*, *yin-yang*, five elemental operational qualities (*wu-hsing*), *chi'i* (vital breath).

*Shu Ching*  
*Shih Ching*  
*Yi Ching* (divination sections)

Master K'ung establishes moral qualifications of *chün-tzu*, *Tzu Ssu*, *Meng Tzu*, and *Hsun Tzu* shape Literati doctrines.

*Tao Tzu*—*Tao Tê Ching*  
*Chuang Tzu*  
(basic texts of Taoism)

Age-old magical practices merge with new cult of immortality (the goal to become *hsien*).

Tales about immortal transcendents, living mainly on offshore islands.

Alchemy (attempt to concoct elixir [*wai-tan*]).

Yogic practices.

Internal gods (body is a microcosm).

# Time Line of Chinese Religious History

**CH'IN/HAN**  
Unification under imperial polity

250

Ancestor cult spreads among all classes.

*Shang ti* largely replaced by reference to *Heaven* among philosophers.

State cult develops in accordance with supposedly ancient practices codified in *Li* texts.

Doctrines of Literati School become State orthodoxy.

but

"Taoist" pantheon develops.  
"Taoist" cults.  
"Taoist" communities.  
"Taoist" rebellions.  
Faith healing most important.

Buddhism enters China.

Texts translated over several centuries, introducing Indian monachism, magical powers of monks, sutras, images.

**SIX DYNASTIES**  
China divided under "barbarians" (N) and Chinese dynasties (S)

500

*Fêng-shui* (geomancy) systematized.

Buddhism enters ancestral cult very early with concepts of purgatory and Western paradise; soul-masses.

Literati influence becomes religiously negligible after fall of Han.

Neo-Taoist philosophy ? *Lieh Tzu* (c. 300).

Taoist monachism.

*Pao-P'u Tzu* (317).

Continuing Taoist-Buddhist conflicts. All Chinese schools completely developed.  
*T'ien-t'ai*  
*Hue-yen*  
*Ching-t'u*  
*Ch'an*  
*San-lun* (*Madhyamika*)  
*Lü*

Temporal efflorescence of Buddhism broken by great persecution of 845.

Entire Triptaka block-printed (972).

From Sung on, only *Ching-t'u* and *Ch'an* remained vital schools.

..... and Buddhist coloration. .... Ming book, *Canonization of the Gods* (Fêng Shen Yen-i), fixes folk pantheon in popular literary form.

**T'ANG**  
Reunification

750

Buddhism enters ancestral cult very early with concepts of purgatory and Western paradise; soul-masses.

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**CH'ING**  
(Manchus)

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**REPUBLIC**  
(1911-)  
**PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC**  
(1949-)

2000

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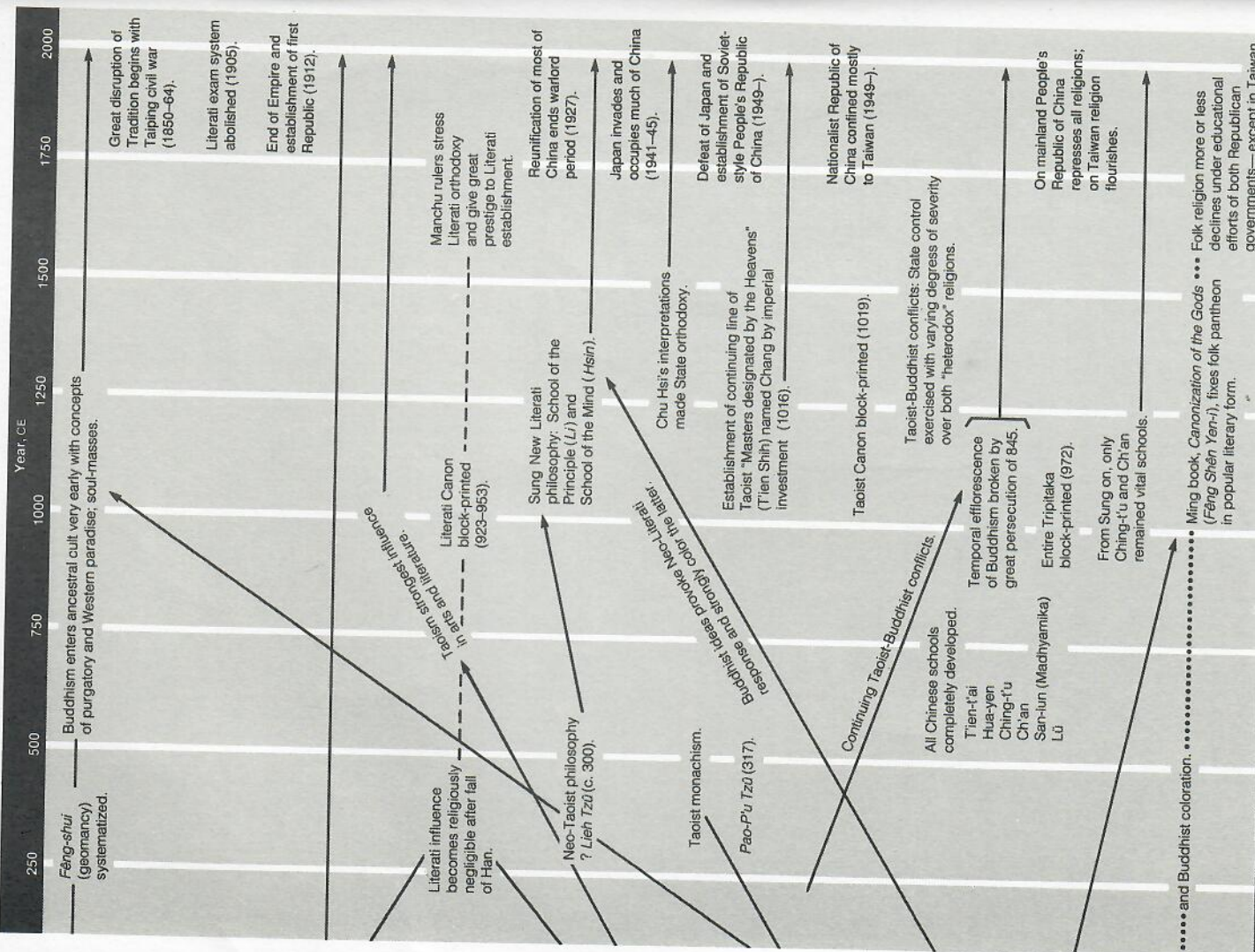
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## Introduction

The reader, even before opening the book to this page, may have felt some curiosity about the title. Why Chinese "religion" rather than Chinese "religions"? Surely more than one religion has been important in this most ancient of living civilizations? The slightest acquaintance with Asian history will have introduced one to terms like *Confucianism* (which we shall call the Literati Tradition), *Taoism*, *Buddhism*. However little one may know about these terms, it is at least clear that they refer to distinctive forms of philosophical-religious thought and practice.

It is indeed the purpose of this book to give life to such terms and in the doing to make apparent the rich variety of religious expression in China. And yet an even more pervasive theme in our exposition is what we may call the *Chineseness* of all these varieties of religious expression. Through the long ages of her history, China has been exposed to many religions, including Judaism, Islam, and the several forms of Christianity, as well as more exotic types such as Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism. All these remained what they were when they came to China: foreign. The only religion of non-Chinese origin that succeeded in naturalizing itself in China was Buddhism.

Our use of the word *religion* in the singular is intended, then, to convey our interpretation that the character of religious expression in China is above all a *manifestation of the Chinese culture*. To attempt to understand religion in China as several systems of doctrine is to read Western experience into a quite different set of circumstances. In the past almost every member of Western society belonged to some religious sect, each sect being distinguished from others by its insistence upon certain doctrinal propositions. In China laypeople did not usually belong to an institutionalized sect, nor did their religious life have anything to do with signing articles of faith. Except in the case of the professional religious living apart in monasteries, religion in China was so woven into the broad fabric of family and social life that there was not even a special word for it until modern times, when one was coined to match the Western term.

Most significant of all, in the West the development of religion was closely bound up with the lively history of ideas. Because of the central place of doctrine in religion, it necessarily shared in the questionings, the changing insights, the disputations, and the actual warfare of the Western

world of ideas. Philosophers, theologians, and scientists endlessly pondered and argued and revised the hypotheses upon which sectarian tenets were based. But in China not only did doctrinally founded churches not exist, but the worldview and the ethic did not undergo such restless revisions. Even the impact of Buddhism, which began at about the time of the common era, failed to change materially the fundamental Chinese outlook. Instead, after a thousand years Buddhism itself was largely accommodated to these ingrained views.

Because of these facts, we have thought that the most meaningful introduction to Chinese religion is one that stresses, first, the worldview that finds expression in religion and, second, the functioning of religious expression in Chinese society. The worldview and the society here pictured are those generally characteristic of China during the past two thousand years. In a final chapter we have given a brief description of the changes being wrought in this great tradition by the circumstances of the most recent century. Such changes are certainly far reaching, but we are as yet too close to the processes to be able to predict the outcome, not to mention the uncertain fate of Soviet Communism, which has collapsed throughout much of the world in which it was dominant. Although the People's Republic of China as such has not collapsed, it has changed radically, and its future is in much doubt. In any case, the developments of the contemporary period can be understood only in their relationship to the traditional religion; and that traditional religion, far from having passed from the scene, is still very lively.



# CHAPTER 1

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## *The Early Chinese Worldview*

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### NATURE

#### The Naturalistic Universe

The universe of the ancient Chinese was naturalistic in the sense that it was characterized by the regularity that Western philosophy has called "law"—*but it lacked the Western assumption of an outside "lawgiver."*<sup>1</sup> Three features of this regularity were conspicuous to the ancients: first, the cyclical processes, such as night following day followed by night, or the rotation of the seasons; second, the process of growth and decline, exemplified by the waxing and waning of the moon; third, the bipolarity of nature. The latter meant not simply that everything had its opposite but that opposites were necessary and complementary to each other. These opposites tended to merge into each other and even to become each the opposite of its former self. The ground or fundamental stuff of the universe was seen to be homogeneous, and all particular phenomena were individualized through these processes. The bipolarity of nature was no doubt the latest principle to be grasped, being by far the most sophisticated.

In fact, once this third principle was recognized, it could be seen to account for the other two, which were merely its operational aspects. As a principle, it was one of the most fruitful and useful ever devised by the mind of man for making sense out of the infinite multitude of diverse facts in the universe. Today, described as positive and negative electrical charges, it is the basis of "matter" according to science (we are not suggesting that the ancient Chinese knew about electricity); in traditional China, expressed through the concepts of *yin*\* and *yang*, bipolarity constituted the specific characteristic of Chinese metaphysics. Once this principle had suggested itself, perhaps as early as 1000–500 BCE,<sup>2</sup> the Chinese were able to develop a perfectly coherent theory of the cosmos. Nature

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\*Boldfaced terms are defined in the glossary.

was seen to operate through the interplay of light and darkness, heat and cold, male and female, and so forth. The *yang* (as represented by the first of each pair) and *yin* (the second of each pair) were not in absolute and permanent opposition to each other. They might best be described as definable phases in a ceaseless flow of change:

When the sun goes the moon comes; when the moon goes the sun comes. The sun and moon give way to each other and their brightness is produced. When the cold goes the heat comes; when the heat goes the cold comes. The cold and heat give way to each other and the round of the year is completed. That which goes wanes, and that which comes waxes. The waning and waxing affect each other and benefits are produced. (*Scripture of Change, "Appended Commentary," Part II; Yi Ching, Hsi Tz'û, hsia*)

It is significant that this bipolar worldview did not, in its ancient, classical formulation, have anything to do with a struggle between basic principles of good and evil. *Yin* and *yang* were equally essential forces in the ceaseless dynamic of an impersonal universe.

In the material world produced through this process, there was an infinite variety of phenomena, and the Chinese by late Chou times (fifth to third centuries BCE)\* had, like other ancient peoples, overcome this confusion by classifying all things into what seemed to be irreducible elements. As a consequence of the principle of constant transformation embodied in the *yin-yang* theory, the Chinese concept of the primary elements focused on the fundamental *qualities* observed in things. These qualities were not static but were ceaselessly interacting, transforming, and replacing each other. The Chinese word *hsing*, which has customarily been translated as "element," is actually a verb meaning "to walk, to go, to act." There were five *hsing*, given in the *Hung Fan* chapter of *Shu Ching* (see Appendix 1) as water, fire, wood, metal, and earth (their order and mutual reactions differ in other texts). Thinking of *hsing* as verbal will help us to keep in mind their active nature (water overcoming fire, fire burning wood, and so forth), while thinking of *hsing* as adjectival will help us to understand their elemental nature (that is, all things may be categorized as either "watery," that is, liquid; "fiery," that is, gaseous; and so forth). So as to emphasize both of these aspects of the Chinese term, we will throughout this book refer to the *hsing* as the *five elemental operative qualities*. Their ever-changing character is also indicated by the rendering *the five phases*.

### The Supreme Ruler in Heaven

Although the universe thus functions through the workings of "law without a lawgiver," there is at the same time a personalized power of conspicuous importance in the thinking of the ancient Chinese. At the dawn of their history, twelve centuries before the common era, the writing on oracle bones (see pp. 1-32) and ritual bronze vessels, as well as the somewhat later texts preserved in *Shu Ching* and *Shih Ching* (see Appendix 1), speak

\*For dates of the dynasties into which Chinese history is conventionally divided, see Table of Chinese Religious History preceding the Introduction.

frequently of a Supreme Ruler in Heaven called *ti*, or *shang ti*. *Ti* is written with a graph that later becomes a title of the Chinese emperor, while *shang ti* means the superior *ti*, or the *Ti-on-High*. These appellations have often been rendered by translators as "God." *T'ien* is a word that has the simple meaning of sky and the more pregnant meaning of heaven. In its latter significance it is happily rendered in English with the capital letter, for of course we commonly substitute *Heaven* for *God* in such expressions as "Heaven help me!" or "Heaven only knows!" It is *t'ien* that eventually becomes the customary term for the Supreme Ruler, and this shows very well the impersonal character the latter often came to assume in the Chinese mind by the last two or three centuries of the Chou dynasty. *Ti* lost its connotation of the Highest and became an appellation not only of the earthly emperor but of deities subordinate to Heaven.

Nevertheless, *shang ti* was retained as the name, or part of the name, of the Supreme Ruler in Heaven in the worship performed by the emperor in postfeudal (that is, after Chou) times. The question as to the correct connotation of these Chinese terms remains open despite several centuries of discussions and investigations by Western scholars. Our view is that the Supreme Ruler in Heaven, although the highest deity, is not equivalent to the God of Western religion or philosophy. Like the Old Testament Jehovah, *shang ti* or *t'ien* is pictured in the ancient texts as being concerned with the actions of man and as the source of the "mandate" from which the ruling dynasty receives its legitimacy. From *shang ti* or *t'ien* come blessings and punishments. But there is no hint that he is the Creator of the universe or the Cause of its functioning. Like Jehovah, the Chinese Supreme Ruler is a tribal god, and indeed one plausible interpretation is that the term *ti* or *shang ti* actually means the High Ancestor of the ruling house. It is only later, when the depersonalized *t'ien* becomes the Highest in a trinity of Heaven, Earth, and Man, that we might ascribe a God-like power to the Supreme Ruler. And yet even this Heaven of later times is not the Ultimate or the Absolute. For that we must explore another term, the famous *tao*.

### *Tao*

This is such an important word in Chinese thought that translators have often felt it best to leave it in transliterated form. Key terms in any great tradition are inevitably distorted or even falsified by translation, and they can be grasped in something like their true significance only by seeing their operation in many contexts. In studying Buddhism, for example, such words as *nirvāṇa* and *śūnyatā* are rightly considered as technical terms and customarily left untranslated. This may well be the best way to treat *tao*.

For our purposes it will be sufficient to explain that there are two general applications of the term *tao* in Chinese thought. The first is fortunately easy to appreciate because it is a metaphor that we also use: From the commonplace meaning of a road, path, or way, the analogy is drawn of a Way, or *the Way*. In this usage *tao* refers to truth—ethical, religious, or other—and in terms of conduct it means the normative standard:

The Master said, "The *tao* is not far from man. If what one takes to be the *tao* is far from man, it cannot be considered [the true] *tao*." (*The Central and Universal Moral Law* XIII.1; *Chung Yung*)

This passage from *Chung Yung* (see Appendix 1) is rendered into English by Ku Hung-ming,\* a scholar with an excellent command of English, in such a way as to bring out fully this sense of *tao*:

Confucius remarked: "The actual moral law is not something away from the actuality of human life. When men take up something away from the actuality of human life as the moral law, that is not the moral law."<sup>3</sup>

One other example, from *Analects* (see Appendix 1), will suffice:

The Master said, "Shên, my *tao* is unified by a single [principle]. . . ." When the Master went out, the [other] disciples asked, "What did he mean?" Tsêng Tzû replied, "The *tao* of our Master is only *chung* and *shu*." (*Analects* IV.15; *Lun Yü*) (Shên was the personal name of the disciple Tsêng Tzû. *Chung* is usually translated as loyalty or conscientiousness and *shu* as reciprocity.)

The second sense of *tao* is more specifically pertinent to understanding the Chinese worldview. It is this sense that has been made most famous by the often-translated text *Tao Tê Ching*, traditionally attributed to the Old Master (Lao Tzû, sixth century BCE), a somewhat older contemporary of Master K'ung. But although *tao* was such a central concept to the Old Master and his school that it gave its name to that school, it is by no means the exclusive property of the Taoists. *Tao* in the sense we are discussing is, from one point of view, that regularity of operation in the universe that has earlier been noted. But it is more: It is the reality behind or within appearances, the ultimate metaphysical truth. Like the God of some Western philosophers or the Void (*śūnyatā*) of Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is that about which nothing can be predicated but because of which all particular phenomena have their being. The opening lines of *Tao Tê Ching* struggle to put this essentially inexpressible concept into words:

The [human] way can be discussed  
But not the Eternal Way;  
Names can be defined  
But not the Eternal Name.  
As undefined, It is the beginning of Heaven-and-Earth;  
As defined, It is the Mother of the ten thousand things-and-beings.  
Therefore, because It is eternally desireless  
We perceive Its wonder;  
Because It eternally possesses desire  
We perceive Its subtle workings.  
These two—[desire and desirelessness]—emanate together  
But are differently named,  
And both are called mysterious—  
Mystery of mysteries, the Gateway of all mysteries. (*The Old Master* 1;  
*Lao Tzû*)

\*Note that Chinese always give surname first; the given name follows, either a single word or a double name hyphenated.

Without going any further into various metaphysical interpretations of *tao*, we summarize by saying that *tao* might be likened to the laws of nature or, better, to nature itself. And whether taken as Being or as Nonbeing, or as the Principle in all particular things, it is in any case never conceived as Deity.

### Supernatural Beings

There is thus perhaps no real Deity with the capital letter to be equated with the God of Western religion. We have seen that Heaven eventually becomes the term customarily used for the Supreme Ruler, but we now know that behind or beyond Heaven there are the workings of *yin* and *yang*, which have their source in the *tao*. Such would be the metaphysical view of sophisticated minds. It is probable that a few of these minds were in all ages able to content themselves with such an abstract theory, but certainly most, even of these educated elite, shared to some extent the belief in supernatural powers prevailing among the great masses of the people. Not the *tao*, and not the one, omnipotent God of Western monotheism, but a countless host of greater and lesser deities accounted in the popular mind for what went on in this world.

There is nothing distinctively Chinese in the way whereby the forces of nature were personified or the heavenly bodies were believed to exercise a direct influence in human affairs, or the way in which otherwise inexplicable occurrences of disease and other misfortunes were attributed to malignant spirits. The deification of human beings characteristic of both family and popular religions is somewhat more exceptional, although not unique. These matters will be taken up in later chapters. Here we wish only to underline the point that in the Chinese worldview there was *an unseen but completely real dimension to the world: that of the spiritual beings*. This was the dimension in which the deified ancestors dwelt, and it was the dimension inhabited by the malevolent ghosts of those whose sacrifices had been discontinued or who had otherwise been wronged in their earthly term. The malevolent ghosts sought revenge on mortals, and much of the popular religion was concerned with protection against their attacks. Charms, exorcism, communication through mediums, sounding of gongs and firecrackers, placing of spirit-walls to prevent entry of evil spirits through a doorway, offerings to placate them, the burning of incense, prayers, fasting—the long catalog of such practices gives ample evidence of the reality of dangers to people from the spiritual dimension.

### A Gestalt Cosmology

The total worldview of the popular religion may thus not unreasonably be called *animistic*.<sup>\*</sup> Although in popular view the most important spiritual beings were of human origin, there was no lack of other spirits such as those of animals, plants, and nonorganic objects, including stones and

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<sup>\*</sup>I am well aware that this term is considered passé by modern scholars. I would replace it with a more suitable term if one could be found, but thus far I have not been able to find one.

stars, rivers and mountains. And although the educated intelligentsia would certainly not hold the more naive and crude notions of the peasant populace, they did share the same general outlook, at least to the extent that they never set humans and nature apart.

To modern people in the West, it must require a great effort of the imagination to empathize with the traditional Chinese feeling. We are so accustomed to seeing the physical world as something "out there," as an environment (often hostile to us), or as a purely material object for our exploitation, that we can scarcely comprehend the Chinese sense of the wholeness of the universe, in which man is a part and only a part.\* This intimate feeling of being at home in nature is shown in many ways in the traditional Chinese culture: in the philosophical writings, particularly the wonderful flights of Master Chuang (365–290 BCE), as a perennial theme of poetry through the ages, and visually in those landscape paintings that place man in perspective as a tiny observer of the vast universe—an observer who is seeking to absorb himself therein.

In an integrated universe, it will occur to humans to seek out the signs writ large in nature whereby they may confirm that human actions are in accord or discordant with the *tao* of this universe. In the *Shu Ching* we may read how these signs were interpreted by the Chou people:

The several kinds of evidence are rain, sunshine, heat, cold, wind, and their seasonableness. When all five of these come in due amount and order, the vegetation thrives luxuriantly. When one of them is too much it is bad, and when one is too little it is [likewise] bad. What we call the auspicious evidences are solemnity, to which seasonable rain is the correlate; good order, to which seasonable sunshine is the correlate; wisdom, to which seasonable heat is the correlate; good planning, to which seasonable cold is the correlate; saintliness, to which seasonable wind is the correlate. What we call the inauspicious evidences are violence, to which constant rain is the correlate; arrogance, to which constant sunshine is the correlate; dissipation, to which constant heat is the correlate; rashness, to which constant cold is the correlate; stupidity, to which constant wind is the correlate.

...

What the king examines is the year; what the ministers and warrior aristocrats examine is the month; what the chiefs and local rulers examine is the day. When the seasonableness of year, month, and day is unchanging, the hundred kinds of grain thereby ripen, the administration of government is thereby enlightened, talents among the common people are thereby revealed, families are thereby peaceful and healthy. . . . (*Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents, "The Great Plan"; Shu Ching, Hung Fan*)

In another section of the same text, we find a clear illustration of the application of this theory. The Regent, uncle of the young king, is accused of having plotted to usurp the throne. Heaven responds to this calumny by sending down its testimony in the form of natural disasters:

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\*In our own time, it is interesting to see this traditional view of Westerners being modified by the ecological exigencies now so conspicuous.

In the autumn, when the abundant crop had not yet been harvested, Heaven sent down great storms of thunder, rain, and wind. The grain was beaten down and large trees were uprooted. . . . The King and Great Officers put on their ceremonial headdresses to open the document [that had been placed] in the metal-strapped depository. And then they found the statement in which the Duke of Chou [that is, the Regent] had offered himself as tribute [to the ancestors] in lieu of the Martial King. . . . The King [i.e., the Martial King's son] held the document and wept, saying, . . . In times past the Duke labored on behalf of the royal house, but I, the minor child, did not understand it. Now Heaven acts to overawe us in order to show forth the virtue of the Duke of Chou. We, the Little Child (another deprecatory term used by kings) will go in person to meet him. . . . When the King went out to the suburb Heaven sent down [gentle] rain and turned away the winds, and the grain then revived. The two lords [i.e., King and Duke of Chou] commanded the people of the country to raise up all the big trees that had been uprooted and replant them. The harvest was then abundant. (*Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents*, "The Metal-Strapped Depository"; *Shu Ching*, *Chin Têng*)

Such a belief in the interactions of people (particularly represented in the person of the Son of Heaven, as the king was titled) and the rest of nature continued to be a basic aspect of the Chinese worldview up to modern times. The reading of omens and portents was a pronounced feature of the Chinese religion.

It is surely this "gestalt cosmology" that gives to the worldview of the native Chinese tradition its specific character. Lacking the premise of a God "out there" who created and controls the universe and requires human worship, the typical Western form of religion did not develop. Lacking the theory that human souls are particularizations of the universal Brahman, the typical Indian form of religion likewise did not develop. The Chinese religion, based on the premises we have outlined, developed on its highest level a mysticism perhaps not essentially different from the mysticisms of other religions but nevertheless felt to be identification with the *tao*, or nature itself, and not with God, beyond or outside of nature. The Chinese religion, while giving to Heaven power to punish people's misbehavior, defined this misbehavior as actions inimical to the harmonious workings of the universe. The Chinese religion conspicuously lacked the central concept of the ever-brooding presence of Almighty God continuously attending to the sins and virtues of every individual, swift to save or damn, requiring submission, belief, faith, and adoration.

## MAN\*

### Theory of the Soul

In view of the central place of ancestor worship in Chinese culture (which we shall examine in detail later on), one might suppose that a systematic

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\*It is perhaps wise to point out that we here, and in many other places, use "man" in the universal sense of humankind.

rationale would have been developed to clarify the nature of the soul. The Western mind has always felt the necessity for logical "proofs" of such things, and the Western religion emphasizes doctrine. The Chinese mind, however, did not feel this compulsion to formulate speculative systems, and Chinese ideas concerning the soul must be gleaned from here and there, never having received any thoroughgoing formal treatment.

Although we have no way of knowing the age in which the Chinese began to formulate their specific notions concerning the human soul, it is obvious from the fact that ancestor worship was already a fully developed cult at the dawn of history that survival beyond death was the accepted belief. For literary evidences concerning this belief, we have to rely on the same books we have already cited, as well as others that made their appearance in late Chou times. From these sources we discover that ideas about the soul and its survival emerge from the general cosmological views already outlined.

In this way of thinking, the human being, like every other thing in the universe, is a product of the operations of *yin* and *yang*—most obviously, in fact, since new life is produced through the union of male and female. This reduces the status of human souls to something less exalted than that assumed in India or the West. Human beings are not the special creations of God, much less are they God Himself. In the works of the Taoist philosophers, most picturesquely in the book of Master Chuang (365–290 BCE), the Chinese naturalism is expressed in its most extreme form:

Master Lai suddenly fell ill. Panting and gasping, he was at the point of death. His wife and children gathered around and wept over him. Master Li, who had gone to inquire about his condition, drove them away so they would not startle [the dying man] during the process of change. Leaning against the door he said, How great is the [Power] that Makes and Transforms! What will you become next? Where will you be sent? Will you become a rat's liver? Will you become the arm of an insect?

...

Master Lai replied, A son has only to be ordered by his parents to go east or west, south or north, and he obeys. The Yin and Yang are no less to a man than his parents. As they have brought me near to death, not to obey would be to resist them. How could I blame them for it (i.e., for bringing about my death)? Now the Great Clod\* has carried me in my bodily form, favored me with life, given me ease in old age, and will put an end to me in death. Therefore, what has made my life good will [likewise] make my death good. When a master smith is casting his metal, were it to leap up saying, I must become a Mo-yeh (the name of a famous sword of antiquity), the master smith would certainly regard it as a metal of evil omen. When now, having once succeeded [in acquiring] human form, were I to say, Only as a human, only as a man, the Making and Transforming [Power] would certainly regard me as a person of ill omen! Let us take all Heaven-and-Earth as a great furnace, and the Making and

\*For this figure of speech see H. G. Creel's essay "The Great Clod," in *Wen-lin*, ed. Chow Tse-tsung (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), pp. 257–268; later reprinted in the collection of Creel's essays entitled *What Is Taoism?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 25–36.



Transforming [Power] as the master smith—then where could I go that would not be all right? Calmly I lay me down, and when I am given form I shall awake. (*Master Chuang*, scroll 6, "The Great Master"; *Chuang Tzû*, "Ta Tsung Shih")

In this view it may be said that there is really no room at all for the soul. *Tao*, functioning through the operations of *yin* and *yang*, produces both grosser material manifestations and subtler spiritual manifestations. A human being is a combination of these, and upon death the former would return to Earth (which is *yin*) while the latter would ascend to the bright, ethereal region of Heaven (which is *yang*). Although there seems to be a dualism in the human constitution, it thus differs from the dualism of body and soul that has plagued the Western philosophers. Perhaps the human constitution in this Chinese concept could be likened to a mixture in a test tube. During life it is kept in stable solution by vigorous activity, but with the cessation of that activity due to death, it separates out, the coarser components settling to the bottom, leaving the pure liquid above.

But all this is too abstract to satisfy the common need for a more comforting theory, a theory certainly required for ancestor worship. In China, as elsewhere, the vulgar notion of the soul would be that of a pale shadow of the living person, usually invisible, but capable of horrifying people occasionally by appearing before them as a grotesque caricature of the mortal form. Such ghostly apparitions have been a staple of Chinese stories from early Chou times to the present. However, there was a distinction made between such sinister apparitions and the benevolent souls of properly cared-for ancestors. In the popular way of speaking, the former were called *kuei*, meaning demons, devils, and ghosts, while the latter were referred to as *shên*, meaning kindly spirits.

The material or *yin* component of the soul (called *p'o*) was that which would turn into a *kuei* if not placated by suitable burial and sacrifices. As for the burial, it was thought that this portion of the soul would reside in the grave as a natural habitat, both it and Earth being *yin*. If the deceased were properly interred and sacrificed to, the *p'o* soul would rest peacefully, while the spiritual or *yang* soul (called *hun*) would send down blessings to the surviving family members. This power of the *hun* soul derived from its nature as *shên*, which not only was a generic term for kindly spirits but also was used in reference to all deities.

*Thus the rites of burial and sacrifice were sanctioned both by fear of the dead becoming a vengeful demon and by hope that the dead would become a benevolent god. Such a fear and such a hope underlie all of Chinese religion.*

But we have not yet completed the Chinese theory of the soul. What has been sketched to this point is the native theory deriving from the remote past. At the beginning of the common era, the Indian religion of Buddhism had reached China, and within a couple of centuries enough of its texts had been translated into Chinese that new, imported notions of the afterlife began to influence Chinese concepts. These notions ultimately became inextricably entangled with the older Chinese ideas, particularly in the popular mind.

Although one of the Buddha's fundamental teachings was nonexistence of self—that is, of a "soul" in any permanent sense—common sense

seemed to demand some sort of continuing agent to carry out the process of karmic "justice." *Karma*, universally accepted in Indian religions including Buddhism, was originally an impersonal physical "law," comparable to the laws of action and reaction, or the conservation of energy. As popularly interpreted, however, it became a sort of merit and demerit system according to which the condition of one's future existence was determined by one's past actions. One reaped in the next life what one had sown in this. Furthermore, before being cast up by the wheel of life-death-rebirth into that next existence, one had to expiate in purgatory all of one's evil deeds. It is interesting that the most important social function of Buddhist monks in China was the priestly one of saying "soul masses" to alleviate as much as possible the sufferings of the soul in purgatory.

The chief value of these popular Buddhist notions was that they furnished incentive to do good and shun evil, while at the same time providing an explanation for the puzzling question of why virtue was so often unrewarded and vice so frequently profitable—the answer in this case being that the books were always balanced although the figures had been written in the unknown ledger of a past existence. *Karma* required the soul as its agent—at least in minds unequipped to understand the higher Mahāyāna philosophy of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*)—and so (by about 300 CE) this soul had become an integral part of Chinese Buddhism.\*

During later centuries, when Buddhism had spread all over China and was the strongest religious force in the land (its influence increased until the mid-ninth century and was only seriously weakened by the rise of the new *Literati* philosophy in the Sung dynasty), these ideas about *karma*, rebirth, and purgatory were adopted into the folk religion. The end result was a purgatorial system organized along *Literati* bureaucratic lines, with a well-organized program of karmic bookkeeping, trial in courts exactly like those of the magistrates in the Chinese empire, and punishment in various hells where the tortures meted out fitted the crimes of the guilty souls. Those rare souls with an excess of good deeds over bad were able to pass directly into new births in favorable circumstances without undergoing these torments or were able to find eternal bliss in the Paradise of the West.

There were thus two theories of the soul, the first based on the *yin/kuei* and *yang/shên* concept of the native tradition and the second based on the imported Indian belief in karmic process. The first is perhaps more closely bound up with the family religion and its ancestor worship, but the influence of the second is also very strong, especially in the funeral rites, which are a vital part of the ancestral cult.

### Man to Man

The Chinese worldview was focused to a considerable extent on the relations of man to man. Chinese philosophical discourse throughout the ages concerns itself with the nature of human nature and the ethical impera-

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\*Chinese Buddhism is discussed in Chapter 8. For more detailed treatment of Buddhism, see Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, 3d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982).

tives of family and social life. This is not to deny various issues of great importance in the religious outlook of Chinese intellectuals. From the latter Han (first century of the common era) on, the influence of Taoism and Buddhism was every bit as strong as that of the Literati tradition, and we by no means want to contribute to the perpetuation of the myth of a "Confucian China."<sup>\*</sup> But whatever personal religious views one might hold, all Chinese shared general and specific concepts about the social order and individual conduct, derived from those Literati texts to which we have so often alluded.

As we shall see in Chapter 3, the religion of the family was the universal religious institution of China, and the ethical views of the Literati tradition were essentially a rationalization and extension of the familial virtues. The principles of this familial morality were derived from natural relationships rather than abstract theory. By the early Chou dynasty the *Shu Ching* refers to "the five classes," meaning fathers, mothers, eldest brothers, younger brothers, and sons, and to the obligations of each "class." In *Mêng Tzû* (see Appendix 1) there is a somewhat different but similarly homely classification attributed by the philosopher Master Mêng (c. 390–305 BCE) to the times of the legendary sage-emperor Shun:

Between father and son there is affection; between prince and minister there is integrity; between husband and wife there is a proper distance; between senior and junior there is proper precedence; between friend and friend there is faithfulness. (*Master Mêng* IIIA.4.8; *Mêng Tzû*, *T'eng Wên Kung*, *shang*)

And in the Literati codes, *Records of Rituals* of the Literati Tradition (see Appendix 1), compiled in early Han (second century BCE), yet a third form of the same domestic ethic is expressed:

The father is merciful, the son filial; the elder brother is good, the younger brother submissive; the husband is upright, the wife complaisant; the adult is kind, the child obedient. (*Records of Rituals*, "Evolution of Rituals"; *Li Chi*, *Li Yün*)

This age-old familial morality, preached by Master K'ung and his principal followers and eventually enshrined in the Canon of the Literati, came to permeate all of Chinese society. To the vast majority of the Chinese, who followed conventional careers, these precepts were the moral norm; to the minority who were different, it was this tradition from which they differed. Even Buddhist and Taoist monks and nuns, living apart from society, were still guided in their conduct largely by this family style of morality advocated by the Literati Tradition.

Above the level of the code of familial relationships was the body of ethical teachings meant for the "superior men," the small minority who received a literary education and who were thereby destined to govern the nation and to guide its cultural development. This higher tradition was

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<sup>\*</sup>By this is meant the notion, still quite widely entertained by the modern "descendants" of the Literati and hence by Western students, that everything of importance in the traditional Chinese civilization was "Confucian" in derivation and character.

directly inspired by the life and words of Master K'ung (551–479 BCE). The Master exemplified the ideals by which all educated men should guide their conduct. He was a man to whom truth, honor, and the furtherance of just government meant everything. He stood for the good ways of the ancient sages. He sought all his life for a prince who would use him by putting his principles into practice; but when a ruler found expediency more profitable than principle, Master K'ung left his service. Before Master K'ung, in China as in old Europe, a "gentleman" was a man of noble blood; after Master K'ung, a gentleman was a man who possessed the *character* a gentleman should possess, regardless of his blood. This emphasis upon character, upon moral excellence, was the great contribution of Master K'ung to Chinese society.

The gentleman was to cultivate his own character, and, equally important, he was, like his Master, to put this highly cultivated character at the service of the State whenever this was feasible. The educated—those who mastered the Literati Canon—served as officials, governing the untutored masses; this government was in theory one of moral example rather than coercion. Master K'ung had said, "The Gentleman is like the wind; his inferiors are like grass. When the wind blows the grass must bend" (*Analects* XII.19). The full implication of this remarkable conception of government as moral example is seen in a passage near the beginning of the canonical *Ta Hsüeh* (*The Highest Form of Learning*; see Appendix 1):

The men of old who wished to make their bright virtue shine throughout the world first put in order their own states. In order to put in order their own states they first regulated their own families; in order to regulate their own families they first disciplined their own selves. In order to discipline their own selves they first rectified their own minds (or, hearts); in order to rectify their minds they first resolved sincerely upon their goals; in order to resolve sincerely upon their goals they first broadened their understanding of things to the utmost. The broadening of understanding to the utmost was accomplished by studying the nature of things.

When they studied the nature of things then their understanding became complete; when their understanding was complete then they resolved sincerely upon their goals; when they were sincerely resolved upon their goals then their minds (or, hearts) were rectified. When their minds were rectified then they were able to discipline themselves; when they could discipline themselves then they could regulate their families; when they could regulate their families then they could put in order their own states; when their own states were in order then they could bring peace to the world.

From the Son of Heaven (i.e., the emperor) down to the common people there is a single [principle]: discipline of the self is fundamental.

Thus, aside from their family religion, the educated elite in China had as their primary religious obligation the perfection of themselves to serve as moral paragons. The self-discipline of the Literati was therefore quite different from the asceticism and yogic concentration of Buddhist practice, or the breath control, dietary, alchemical, and other techniques of religious Taoism (see Chapter 6).

Moral perfection was summed up in the term *rên* (often romanized as *jên*), whose graph eloquently expresses its basic requirement: It is formed from the elements "man" and "two." From this composition of the word, translators have derived such renderings as "man-to-manness" and "human-heartedness," attempting to improve on older definitions such as "benevolence" or "goodness." There is actually no doubt that in common usage *rên* came to be no more than goodness or even just charity, but to Master K'ung it stood for such an exalted ideal that he had never known a person to whom the word could truly apply.

Aside from *rên*, the virtues stressed in the teachings of Master K'ung and his school are down-to-earth and easy to understand, or at least we can approximate them with the names of virtues familiar to Western morality: righteousness, loyalty, trustworthiness, modesty, frugality, incorruptibility, courtesy, learning, and the like. If they seem like moral platitudes, it is because they were practical ideals in the education of gentlemen destined to run the empire. The important thing to understand is that it was this *concentration on character building* that engaged the minds of the men who governed China and created her high culture. It was this that engaged them, rather than other forms of the religious quest.

Finally we should note that in this naturalistic view of man there is no original sin, no inherent depravity from which man can be lifted only by a savior. There was, to be sure, a running debate throughout the history of Chinese philosophy about whether human nature is good, bad, or morally neutral. But even those philosophers who proposed the second of these alternatives did not conceive of "badness" as a sort of taint, ineradicable except by divine grace. The majority view in the Literati Tradition was that given its authoritative expression by Master Mêng, who argued that human nature was inherently good. His greatest opponent was Master Hsün (c. 340–245 BCE), but Hsün Tzû merely insisted that men were inherently *inclined* toward evil and selfishness, and he believed that they would become good through education. The Literati Tradition subsequently blended these two views: The goodness of human nature was generally accepted in theory, while education was given the place of supreme importance in practice. In any case, there was no question of sinfulness and salvation in the Western sense.

## CHAPTER 2

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### *Prescientific Theory and Religious Practice*

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It is not within the scope of this book to deal with complex questions of the origins of religion according to psychological and anthropological theories. However, we consider that the strangeness of the traditional religious life of the Chinese masses to the student in contemporary Western society requires at least a few remarks concerning its milieu.

In Chapter 1 we became acquainted with the worldview of the early Chinese native tradition. This worldview was mainly that of the elite educated class, as it was formulated in the texts of the Literati Canon and by several of the great philosophers of the later Chou dynasty. When we consider the outlook of the Chinese people as a whole, we find a rather different worldview. It is not unrelated to the more sophisticated view of the intelligentsia, but it is more an animistic than a naturalistic one. In this popular worldview the ancient tradition native to China was markedly influenced by Taoism and the Buddhism imported from India, as we have already noted in our discussion of the theory of the soul. By way of background to the popular animism with its Buddho-Taoist admixture, we shall make a few observations regarding man's life in the prescientific world.

#### **REGULARITY AND CAPRICE IN THE PRESCIENTIFIC WORLD**

It is not easy for the Westerner living in a highly industrialized, scientifically progressive, technologically advanced civilization to visualize even how his or her grandfather lived only fifty years ago. Such is the accelerating rate of scientific-technological progress that now there are greater changes between decades than formerly there were between centuries. But the first requirement for understanding the popular religion of China is the ability to enter into the spirit of a people whose lives and thoughts are as foreign to us today as those of our own medieval forebears. Like these,

the great masses of the Chinese population were peasants, illiterate, or only semi-literate, unimaginably provincial in their experience, dwelling in tiny villages or small towns in the midst of their fields, largely out of contact with the high culture of the elite class, uncared for by the remote imperial government but always subject to taxation, corvée (forced labor), and military conscription. Their masters were the landowner, the county magistrate, the local bandit chief. Living at all times on the very margin of subsistence, they had so few earthly possessions that we can scarcely conceive of such poverty.

For all their ignorance and confinement, these peasants were wise in the ways of the seasons, skilled in the management of water, and unsurpassed in their mastery of tillage. And though they read no books, they were thoroughly imbued with the Literati ethic, which at least after the beginning of the common era, became widely disseminated through proverbs and moral axioms, the tales of storytellers and the rustic stage, and the ancestral cult. In fact, the gulf between the peasant masses and the philosophers was not nearly so great as that between a laborer and an academic philosopher today. Chinese philosophy for the most part stayed in touch with the simple realities of life and nature rather than flying to the stratosphere of abstract speculation. Such concepts as *yin*, *yang*, and *tao*, the five operational qualities, the "gestalt cosmology" (see Chapter 1), and so forth, were not only comprehensible in their elementary form to the untutored peasant mind but must actually have derived originally from the "nature wisdom" of the peasant.

We have emphasized that an important part of this worldview was the consciousness of *regularity in change*. But this comforting, sensemaking regularity was far from perfect. The capriciousness of nature was also notorious, and to no one more than the peasant. On the one hand, so dependable were the seasonal changes that in north China the solar year could be divided into twenty-four periods of fifteen days each,<sup>1</sup> and the specific natural phenomena peculiar to each period would usually, in fact, occur exactly as charted in the calendar. On the other hand, all too often the seasonable rain would fail to arrive, or the frost would come too early. Despite the peasant's mastery of the techniques of agriculture, despite his indefatigable toil and his incredibly patient care, now and then he would be overwhelmed by some sudden catastrophe such as flood, drought, or plagues of insects.

Life itself was precarious in a way we can hardly realize. Death of the mother in childbirth was common, and death of infants was even more frequent. As recently as the 1920s, a study of rural areas in central China revealed that "one-half of those born in China die before they are twenty-eight years of age."<sup>2</sup> No vaccinations or inoculations immunized people from such prevalent diseases as smallpox and typhoid. No antibacterial medications prevented infections from reaching lethal potency. No surgery removed the swollen appendix. No measures of hygiene and sanitation were understood that could have forestalled the frequent, widespread epidemics of cholera, malaria, or plague. The terror of disease lay not only in its customarily fatal outcome but perhaps even more in the unpredictability with which it struck. It is the same terror with which we today think about cancer. Yet today we are confident, because of the past

record of science, that the cause and cure for cancer and every other dread disease will be found, but in China there was no such history of progress on which to base such a hope.

Conditions of this sort produce as a natural psychological defense an attitude of resignation to the inevitable. This resignation, often described as "fatalism," was frequently noted by earlier Western observers, who were accustomed to reproach the Chinese for such a pessimistic and spiritless attitude. These observers forgot that only a few lifetimes ago their own ancestors required an equal amount of fatalism (expressed as resignation to the will of God) to bear up in a world of unpredictable disasters beyond human control. It is only the power acquired through science that has enabled people to become optimistic and actually successful in many of their encounters with the afflictions of nature. Modern man turns to science, confident that by choosing the correct application of scientific method, any problem can be solved.

Prescientific man could have no such confidence because prescientific methods had no history of increasing success. These methods resembled what we call science in that they were attempts to make sense out of the infinite multitude of facts in the universe and that on the theoretical bases thus constructed systems of practical application were erected. In China as in Europe these prescientific efforts could not attain the authority we today attribute to science, because in fact their *results* were undependable. No matter how logically coherent the prescientific theories might have been, when practically applied there were simply too many contradictory results. In other words, these systems were what we today call pseudosciences—although they were not of course "pseudo" to the people of their time. There was unquestionably a certain amount of empirical truth in these pseudosciences that kept alive their credibility; and to people who lived before scientific method had been perfected, they were one important means by which to cope with the environment. The Chinese pseudosciences were in a general way the counterparts of those familiar to us in Western history. Although they had their special Chinese features, the Western terms are indicative of their nature: astrology, chronomancy, physiognomy, and so on. Chinese medical theory was likewise pseudoscientific, dominated by the *yin* and *yang* functions of the five elemental operative qualities—the latter an interesting comparison with the four Aristotelian "humors" of premodern Western medicine.

The pseudosciences were an outgrowth of the naturalistic worldview on the one hand and the animistic view on the other. The regularity in change of the first view furnished a basis for hypotheses of order in nature, while the conception of the world and all things in it as alive conditioned the particular nature of these hypotheses. In the Chinese popular religion the ordered aspect of nature faded somewhat into the background, so to speak, and the animistic aspect was more prominent. This is not surprising since the function of religion was to give support to people in coping with the problems resulting from the unpredictable and capricious aspects of the world, rather than to provide an intellectually satisfying cosmology. The simplest way to account for disorders was to picture them as the willful activities of beings. These beings were in the ingenuous mind



very much like human beings, except that they dwelt in the unseen spiritual dimension and had superhuman powers.

In fact, the whole animistic system was but an extension of the ideas we have already examined in our section on the theory of the soul. The gods, even those who had the most efficacious power, were essentially the same as the *yang* soul—called *hun* and titled *shên* (deity), as we recall—of human ancestors. The demons or malignant beings were essentially the same as the *yin* soul—called *p'o* and titled *kuei* (ghost or devil)—which issued from an inauspiciously sited or neglected grave to wreak vengeance on mortals. The ancestral religion, as we shall see in Chapter 3, stressed those acts that would obtain blessings from the *yang* soul and appease the *yin* soul of one's ancestors. Just so, in the wider contexts of the community or the whole nation, the animistic religion functioned to secure the blessings of the deities and appease or render harmless the demons.<sup>3</sup> Thus, man played his part in maintaining that order of nature of whose fundamental processes he was conscious, and thus he had at least some hope that he could by his actions improve his fate.

The pseudosciences, then, were attempts to read the meanings of certain sets of signs that human ingenuity had detected and arranged into logical sequences. When such meanings are directly related to present and future happenings in people's lives, then pseudoscience becomes a form of *divination*. This term is also used to refer to another technique that seeks to bring man into communication with the spiritual beings in the invisible dimension.

## DIVINATION

There are two major motivations in divination. The first is the desire to understand the operations of the natural and supernatural forces in the environment so that one's own actions may be in accord with them, thus producing favorable results. The second is the filial responsibility to keep in touch with deceased family members so that one may do whatever mortals can do to help them in the nether world. The first may be seen as a logical procedure in light of the native worldview; the second results from acceptance of the Buddhist notions about the fate of the soul.

The particular techniques of divination practiced in China have been as varied as those found in other cultures. But whatever method was employed, there was no hard and fast line between consulting the deities and reading the invisible ink in the book of natural principles. The rationalistic wing of the intellectuals might scoff at crude notions of ghosts and gods and hold to entirely naturalistic conceptions; and yet many of their ideas were, from the vantage point of science, no more valid than the very superstitions they derided. In this respect there is a close correspondence with premodern Europe, whose learned men likewise seem to us to have been almost comically deluded about the real workings of the universe. There is even a correspondence in the scholasticism of the medieval Chinese philosophers with their colleagues in medieval Europe. The Literati

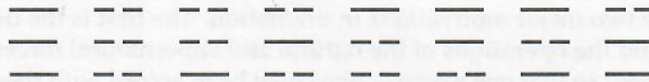
philosophers of the School of the Principle (*li*), whose Thomas Aquinas was Chu Hsi of the twelfth century, spun elaborate webs of metaphysical and cosmological theory and even emphasized that one should search out the Principle in things; but, after all, their searching was entirely speculative and lacked experimental and mathematical basis.\*

There is still a further parallel between these Chinese thinkers and the premodern Europeans: The latter could not find the road to true science because they were prisoners of tradition—their reverence for Aristotle, Galen, the Bible, and other ancient authorities constituted a mental block. In exactly the same way, the Chinese were victims of their reverence for ancient authorities. Although Buddhism had introduced various types of idealistic thought, the native naturalism prevailed. The most influential source of this naturalistic theory was the *Scripture of Change*, the *Yi* (or *I Ching*).

### The *Yi Ching*

The *Yi* is one of the core works of the Literati Canon (see Appendix 1), but it is no more the exclusive property of the Literati than the concept of *tao* is the special possession of the Taoists. It is no doubt one of the most influential books ever written, no small part of its continuing, universal appeal being that it is so ambiguous and suggestive that every reader is challenged to find its true significance. Unfortunately, it will not be possible here to convey any adequate idea of its contents, which would involve us in lengthy technical discussions. We must be satisfied to indicate in a general way its place in the protoscientific worldview of the Chinese.

The *Yi Ching* evolves from eight trigrams consisting of all the possible combinations of broken and unbroken lines, placed one atop another:



The eight trigrams are further developed into sixty-four hexagrams by the simple method of putting one trigram on another and carrying out the same procedure to combine broken and unbroken lines in all possible combinations.

The unbroken line stands for *yang*, the broken line for *yin*. The diagrams are symbols as wholes, and each line is also a symbol. There grew up about each diagram a text to explicate its significance, line by line and as a whole. It seems certain that the original work was a diviner's text. By casting lots the diviner determined whether the first line would be *yin* or *yang*; he then built up the diagram from bottom to top, casting lots for each line.

The oracular judgments on the diagrams are no doubt the heart of the *Yi Ching*, but at various unknown times during the Chou dynasty, other sections were added to give us the present text. Tradition attributes these additions to ancient sages, including Master K'ung himself. It is these com-

\*The new Literati movement of Sung and Ming times (usually called "Neo-Confucianism") is discussed in Chapter 7.

mentaries that have lifted the work from its original position as a fortune-telling manual to the status of a profound revelation about the principles of the cosmos. Unfortunately, as we have remarked, this philosophizing is so far from lucid that many of the most intelligent minds in Chinese history have failed to explain it satisfactorily. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the diagrams became in the Chinese world the main system of conceptualization of the universe. In the prescientific attempt to formulate universal principles and grasp the operational modes of nature, the diagrams played a part comparable to that of mathematics in modern science. The diagrams were dynamic, in the sense that the arrangement of lines changed as one took different readings, and *it was this changing that interested the Chinese mind*—hence the title *Scripture of Change*, or *Yi Ching*, indicative of the Chinese view that the cosmos was a functioning organism rather than a static object. Because the concern of Chinese scholars was predominantly with moral, social, and political problems, and not with the physical world as such, the content of the commentaries was bent to humanistic purposes. Nevertheless, it supplied the humanistic philosophers with what seemed a sound metaphysical rationale.

Now the interesting thing, the thing we must grasp in order to appreciate the functional part played by the *Yi Ching* in Chinese religion, is that there was a subtle, vital shift in the attitude with which the diagrams were regarded. Originally they had been symbols—visual representations of what happened in given circumstances. But eventually they came to be invested with *operational power*. They no longer simply stood for specific changes, they actually brought about these changes. It was this belief that gave the *Yi Ching* its dominance in the Chinese worldview and molded many of the elaborate, pseudoscientific theories. The diagrams were key components in the complex system of correlations that underlay all this pseudoscience and that involved the five elemental operative qualities and many numerical constructs.<sup>4</sup>

Divination could be performed for any situation to relate it to any other situation by virtue of the fact that the diagrams were thus related to all the primary factors in the scheme of things. These primary factors included not only the elemental operative quality dominant in the particular situation but also the color, musical note, flavor, position of various heavenly bodies, compass point, season, and so forth.

### *Fêng-shui*

As far as religion is concerned, the most influential pseudoscience was that of “winds and water,” the literal translation of *fêng-shui*. This is usually called “geomancy” in Western writings, but we prefer the transliterated term because the Chinese pseudoscience does not correspond very well with any Western lore. *Fêng-shui* constitutes a system of divination for determining the auspicious siting of human dwellings—for the living or for the dead. The rationale is that which we have already considered, namely, that people may help improve their own fate by determining the workings of nature and then bringing their own actions into accord with them. The theories of *fêng-shui* purport to explain what the pertinent natural processes are, and the practices of *fêng-shui* are designed to effect the desired results. Since we already know the basic premise that the spirits of

the dead are very influential in the world of the living, it is unnecessary to explain why the siting of graves should be a crucial matter or why the homes of the living should be located in the most favorable situations.

We shall not be surprised to learn that the fundamental thing is to place the grave or home properly with regard to the functioning of *yin* and *yang*.<sup>\*</sup> The former is represented in the technical vocabulary of *fêng-shui* as the white tiger, and the latter is called the azure dragon—which, in fact, stand for the cardinal points of west and east. Eitel has summed up the basic theory as follows:

The azure dragon must always be to the left, the white tiger to the right of any place supposed to contain a luck-bringing site. This therefore is the first business of the geomancer on looking out for a propitious site, to find a true dragon, and its complement the white tiger, both being discernible by certain elevations of the ground. Dragon and tiger are constantly compared with the lower and upper portion of a man's arm: in the bend of the arm the favourable site must be looked for. In other words, in the angle formed by dragon and tiger, in the very point where the two (magnetic) currents which they individually represent cross each other, there may the luck-bringing site, the place for a tomb or dwelling, be found. I say it *may* be found there, because, besides the conjunction of dragon and tiger, there must be there also a tranquil harmony of all the heavenly and terrestrial elements which influence that particular spot, and which is to be determined by observing the compass and its indication of the numerical proportions, and by examining the direction of the water courses.<sup>5</sup>

The topographical characteristics of the earth are in themselves manifestations of the *yin* and *yang* forces that can be seen more obviously in meteorological phenomena, and that as wind, rain, clouds, clear-sky heat, and so forth are quite fittingly designated as "breaths" (*ch'i*). But in the Chinese view the earth is no different from the heavens in pulsating with the breaths of the two primal forces:

Wherever there is nature's breath pulsating, there will be visible on earth some elevation of the ground. Where nature's breath is running through the crust of the earth, the veins and arteries, so to speak, will be traceable. But nature's breath contains a two-fold element, a male and female, positive and negative . . . breath. . . . Where there is a true dragon, there will be also a tiger, and the two will be traceable in the outlines of mountains or hills running in a tortuous and curved course. Moreover, there will be discernible the dragon's trunk and limbs, nay, even the very veins and arteries of his body, running off from the dragon's heart in the form of ridges or chains of hills. As a rule, therefore, there will be an accumulation of vital breath near the dragon's waist, whilst near the extremities of his body the energy of nature's breath is likely to be exhausted. . . . But even near the dragon's heart, the breath of nature, unless well kept together by surrounding hills and mountains, will be scattered. When the frontage of any spot, though enjoying an abundance of vital breath, is broad and open on all sides, admitting the wind from all four quarters,

<sup>\*</sup>Even whole cities were located and laid out in accordance with the principles of *fêng-shui*.

there the breath will be of no advantage, for the wind scatters it before it can do any good. Again, suppose there is a piece of ground with plenty of vital breath, and flanked by hills, which tend to retain the breath, yet the water courses near the place run off in straight and rapid course, there also the breath is scattered and wasted before it can serve any beneficial purposes. Only in places where the breath of nature is well kept together, being shut in to the right and left and having a drainage carrying off the water in a winding tortuous course, there are the best indications of permanent supply of vital breath being found there. Building a tomb or house in such a place will ensure prosperity, wealth and honour.<sup>6</sup>

From these remarks it will be understood why the entranceways to temples usually have at least slightly U-shaped walls and why the tombs of southern China are surrounded by horseshoe-shaped walls. For what nature has failed to provide, man may artificially correct.

Such artificial improvements of a situation are equally necessary to prevent the malign effects either of the topography itself or of malicious spiritual beings:

Now, all these evil influences, whether they be caused by straight lines of hills or water courses or by rocks and boulders, can be fended off or counteracted. The best means to keep off and absorb such noxious exhalations is to plant trees at the back of your abode and keep a tank or pond with a constant supply of fresh water in front of your house. This is the reason why in South China every village, every hamlet, every isolated house has a little grove of bamboos or trees behind and a pond in front. A pagoda, however, or a wooded hill, answers the same purpose. . . . Another device to keep off malign influences is to place opposite your house gate a shield or octagonal board with the emblems of the male and female principles, or the eight diagrams painted thereon, and to give the pathway leading up to your front door a curved, or tortuous direction. Lions carved in stone or dragons of burnt clay also answer the same purpose, and may be placed either in front of a building or on top of the roof; but by far the best and effective [*sic*] means is to engage a geomancer, to do what he says, and to pay him well.<sup>7</sup>

Why should the *yin* and *yang* be personified as they are in *fêng-shui*? The answer to this question illustrates very well the correlative thinking of the Chinese pseudosciences. The system of correlations associates east with spring and west with autumn, as is quite appropriate in view of the symbolism of rising and setting sun. Spring, which brings all things to birth, is naturally *yang*; autumn, portending the death of all things as seen most clearly in vegetation, is naturally *yin*. This correlation is but one of many that the *fêng-shui* expert would make and for which he used his elaborate compass.<sup>8</sup>

In the center of this compass is the needle, which, like so many things Chinese, is viewed in reverse to our way of thinking—that is, it is seen as pointing south, rather than north. Surrounding the pit with its needle is a series of concentric circles, numbering from eighteen to twenty-four or even more, according to the completeness of the instrument. These circles contain the markings for all the various factors that must be considered in determining whether there is “a tranquil harmony of all the heavenly and

terrestrial elements which influence that particular spot." Such factors include the eight trigrams, the cyclical signs called "celestial stems" (*t'ien-kan*) and "terrestrial branches" (*ti-chih*),<sup>9</sup> planets, stars, constellations, various arrangements of the five elemental operative qualities, and others.

With so many factors to be correlated in addition to the visually determined aspects of the terrain, it is no wonder that often "the doctors differed." It was this wide leeway for interpretation afforded by all these calculations that kept alive the credibility of *fêng-shui*.<sup>10</sup> If, despite the careful choosing of a spot for tomb or home, bad luck still visited the family, the obvious explanation was that the practitioner first consulted had not analyzed all the factors correctly—an explanation that the next expert would be sure to underline as he rectified the findings of his colleague.<sup>11</sup>

### The Almanac

The principles given scriptural authority in the *Yi Ching*, and embodied in *fêng-shui*, have been operative in all the pseudosciences. But one did not have to consult a specialist in order to know the trend of natural forces during the course of the year. In every home there would be found the almanac, which combined calendrical and cabalistic (occult) information in exactly the same manner as the almanacs frequently found in American homes only a few generations ago. Publication of the calendar was from the most ancient times a distinctive prerogative of the government; in fact, it was one of the symbols of the regime's legitimacy. It was issued in various versions, the contents of the cheapest being limited to the most essential information, and the contents of the most elaborate being quite encyclopedic, forming a sort of popular manual for the household. For example, the almanac for 1952, issued in Hong Kong and designated by the combination of the "celestial stem" called *rên* and the "terrestrial branch" called *ch'ên*, contains the following items, among many others:

High and low tides of Kwangtung province; Taoist charms; the story of the encounter of Master K'ung with a precocious child; a list of the names of the "3,000" disciples of Master K'ung; the place-origins of Chinese surnames; a treatise on the analysis of dreams; fortune-telling methods (using physiognomy, palmistry, coins); the stories of the Twenty-four Paragons of Filiality; methods for cultivating longevity; the *Thousand-character Essay* (a sixth-century piece); the *Household Maxims* of the philosopher Chu Hsi; etc., etc.

All this material is copiously illustrated with wood-block cuts, and some of the printing is in two colors, red and black. But the essential information is that concerning divination, as based on the astrological implications of the stems and branches, the five planets with their associated operational qualities, and the gods of certain stars. A "basic almanac" will give guidance about actions that may be undertaken on each day of the year; a fuller version such as the one here described will devote many separate sections to all the various aspects of divination, including the ruling natural forces, the connection of these with the forces ruling the life of a person born at any particular time, and the general and specific characteristics of every day and even every hour of each day.

For example, the following advice is given in one divinatory section of the Hong Kong almanac under discussion. On the twelfth day, denoted by the cyclical signs *hsin* and *ssû*, of the fifth month (that is, June 4, 1952)—a day under the influence of the operational quality of metal and hence its associated planet, Venus—one should avoid mixing soya sauce, making liquor, or going on a journey. It is suitable, however, for getting together with friends, for taking up one's official duties, for marrying a wife or marrying out one's daughter, for making clothes, for moving, for treating an illness, for setting up the posts or raising the ridgepole of a house. . . .

If it seems that such mechanical or arbitrary divination could hardly command real belief, one need only consider that similar material is commonly found in bookshops and published in the newspapers of America today and recall that many well-known personages in contemporary Western society are rumored not to take any important action without consulting their horoscope, in order to see the authority of this age-old, universal system lingering still in our scientific milieu. One can understand how much more pervasive and persuasive its influence would have been in the premodern age. The almanac thus shows us the eclectic character of Chinese popular religion, with its blend of naturalistic and supernaturalistic features.

### **Spirit Mediums**

From the most ancient times, the Chinese religion has used mediums for communicating with the spiritual realm. The medium is not like the gypsy woman with her crystal ball; he (or she) is rather the Chinese version of the shaman, who by certain techniques puts himself into a trance, during which he is possessed by the spirit. The spirit may be that of any of the innumerable beings, eminent or humble, who inhabit the unseen dimension, and the medium speaks as the mouthpiece of this being. The spirit may be the chief deity of a temple who will give instructions to his followers, or it may be the soul of a person whose kinsfolk want to contact him as he is undergoing the purgatorial interlude. The medium may be a professional, usually a young person having special gifts marking him for this career; or mediumship may be a temporary ability conferred on a layperson. The professional may be the star attraction of a temple, drawing to it crowds of people to seek the advice and help of the god, or he may have only a small private circle of clients. The medium may work matter of factly without any props at all; or as the popular performer in a big temple, he may require special costumes, a sedan chair in which to be carried in procession with his god's image, weapons for inflicting self-torture and expelling demons, musical stimulation, various attendants, an interpreter, and so forth. Sometimes the spirit speaks through the planchette, a technique analogous to the automatic writing of the West. Often the medium is given the power to speak in tongues, the most convincing demonstration of true possession by the spirit being the ability to speak a dialect that in his normal state he does not even understand.

The medium, in the capacity of spokesperson or representative of the deity, is naturally able to bless people by the power of the deity's spirit or to exorcise demons. The deity will give his power to an amulet, through

the medium, who may cut his tongue and smear the charm with a bit of the blood. The medium of a temple may serve as medical adviser, psychologist, and business counselor to his clients as he relays to them the guidance of his familiar spirit. Some of the topics on which temple mediums in Singapore were consulted by Chinese clients, according to a field study undertaken in 1950–1951, included the following, in order of frequency: "miscellaneous illness," "bad luck," possession by evil spirits, erring spouses, childbirth, investment advice, news of relatives in distant parts, the choice of auspicious dates, gambling advice, wayward children, accidents, advice concerning partnerships, insanity, protection in courts, and communication with the dead.<sup>12</sup>

The final item on this list is also a familiar service of mediums in the Western world. In China the communication may be for the purpose of comforting the dead or of receiving information and advice from them. An eyewitness account of a séance held for both of these purposes, a commonplace event in Hong Kong, is given by Burkhardt:

Two sisters, employed as wash-amahs (laundry-women) in different houses in Hong Kong, wished to get in touch with the spirit of their deceased mother, who is buried in a village near Kukong, up the North River from Canton. The journey is expensive and tedious, and letters are few and far between. . . . A third sister is working in Singapore, but fails to answer letters. The idea was that a talk with the mother would clear up questions of the family welfare and solve the mystery of the sister's silence.

The Colony has no lack of mediums, and the most unexpected women appear to be gifted in this way. A few are professionals, but the vast majority are amateurs who have no fixed fees, and give their services for "lucky money" a percentage of which is always returned. . . . The medium's only properties consist of a cigarette tin filled with rice and covered with a scrap of red paper, which acts as an incense burner. Having lit her three sticks, she clasps her hands above her head, intones a short prayer, and then seats herself in front of the improvised altar. Her clients sit alongside her on the sofa, and provide her with the data consisting of the name of the departed with whom communication is desired and the exact location of the grave.

The medium closes her eyes, and joins her open hands with the finger tips touching and thumbs separate. This forms the "Eight directions," in one of which every spirit in the universe is to be found. The first communication was startling, for the spirit replied that the mother was not available, as her father-in-law wished to speak with his grand-children instead. Being of the senior generation he naturally had precedence, and no objection could be raised to his monopolising the conversation. He first identified himself by giving an account of the family, which children had died, and how the others were employed. These details are always expected to ensure that the right spirit is at the other end of the line. Having established his identity, the grandfather declared that the family had decayed since his days and, that though not actually in want, his descendants were none of them prosperous. . . . He attributed the reduced circumstances of his descendants to the fact that a house had been built in front of the family mansion which had broken its luck. . . .\*

\*That is, blocking off the benign emanations deriving from a site with good *fêng-shui*.



As to the correspondence with the girl in Singapore the old man stated that her letters were being stolen, and that they should write by registered post with receipt to sender. . . . On the termination of the conversation the old man was of course asked if he were in need of anything. He replied that he was well off for clothing, but could find a use for \$500, and gave minute directions as to how it was to be sent. The mode of communication was through the "Third daughter-in-law" and "Fifth Princess" through whom the medium carries out all her transactions with the Spirit world. . . .

In sending these remittances it is usual to remember other dead members of the family at the same time, lest their spirits should feel resentment at being neglected. In this case the mother, with whom communication was first sought, would certainly be propitiated by a packet. Gifts are also included in the despatch on behalf of other living members of the family, who have not had the opportunity of hearing the request of the deceased. . . .

Of course the old gentleman's modest demand for a remittance of \$500 was not taken at its face value and, when the time for despatch arrived, packets of notes on the Bank of Hell, and quantities of white paper stamped with a golden square were purchased from the purveyor of underworld commodities. . . .

A lucky day, fifteenth after the conversation with the grandfather, was chosen for mailing the packet, and at noon the consigner presented herself with her parcels at the medium's hut . . . [which] consists of two rooms and a lean-to kitchen, scrupulously clean throughout. The bamboo table altar was backed by a watercolour of her Patron Saint, "The Third Daughter-in-Law." . . .

The money to be despatched is placed on the altar accompanied by a quantity of cheap blank paper slips with rough holes punched in two rows lengthways. These represent the insurance, and are intended to distract malignant spirits who infest the route from interference with the packets. . . . The priestess, after lighting three sticks of incense, places herself on the right of the altar and the client takes up her position on the left. After committing the packages to the safe keeping of the saint, with a few short prayers to beseech her good offices, the money is enclosed in the preaddressed envelopes. The officiant offers them one by one, igniting a corner of the envelope from the candles on the altar. They are then handed to the consigner who moves to the front of the altar and waves the blazing mass three times up and down, before carrying it to the door to be consumed in a brazier.

The whole ceremony only occupies about ten minutes and the participants have the same confidence in this mode of despatch as they have in the services of the General Post Office.<sup>13</sup>

## MAN AGAINST DEMONS

The deities, or spiritual beings whom we have designated by the general term *shên*, represent the benignant influences constantly working on humankind from the unseen, but entirely real, spiritual dimension of the world. Since that dimension is in effect but a continuation of the visible world, evil must exist in it as well as good. We know already that the *shên* are the spiritual essences of the *yang* souls and that the *kuei*, or demons,

are the spiritual essences of the *yin* souls. We also know that although the *yin-yang* theory originally had no moral connotation and was only a way of conceptualizing the workings of the universe, in the popular way of thinking these terms when applied to souls took on the connotations of good and evil. The *shên* are honored, flattered, and asked for blessings; the *kuei* are feared, guarded against, and propitiated.

Although the Chinese perhaps invented nothing new in the realm of demonology, they certainly developed the subject as extensively as any people on earth. Their *kuei* are of every conceivable variety and inhabit every environment. Animals, plants, insects, mountains, forests, and waters all harbor specters. They are at work in illness and suicide; they operate as vampires and vultures.

The broadest generalization covering the activities of malignant spirits is that it is they who are responsible for any untoward happening, any sort of trouble that cannot readily be explained by a more obvious cause. From nightmare to madness, from strange noises to ghostly apparitions, from melancholia to death by smallpox, from losses at gambling to the ruination of a once-flourishing family, from tripping to drowning—the catalog of devils' mischief is endless. Everyone was exposed to danger throughout every day of his or her life, although certain circumstances were especially favorable to the evil designs of these spirits. Women in childbirth and helpless infants were obviously vulnerable, as could be seen in their high mortality rate.

But it is especially significant that in the last analysis the depredations of malignant spirits were not a principle of evil working for its own ends but were actually the functioning of *karma*. The *kuei* were after all maleficent because they had been wronged, either through improper burial or neglect or in their mortal term. Their vengeful natures might cause them to harm those who were apparently innocent, but if one could know all the facts, one would find the karmic process working in the long run with perfect justice. Plenty of cases in which the work of evil spirits was quite apparently retributive justice were known to everyone. Some of these involved persons who had been driven to suicide by merciless creditors, mothers-in-law, or officials and who, in return, drove their persecutors to confession, to ruin, to punishment by the law, or even to suicide on their own part.

### Defense and Propitiation

Even though *karma* theoretically would work its way, of course nobody—innocent or guilty—would passively submit to the attacks of its agents in the form of evil spirits. Precautions against attack took many forms, a few of which have already been mentioned in our discussion of *fêng-shui*. Charms and amulets were universally employed, placed in the home and worn on the person.<sup>14</sup> Guardian figures were painted on the gates, and walls were placed across the entranceways beyond, in both temples and homes, to keep out evil spirits. Small children, particularly the all-important males, would be called by derogatory names by their parents in order to fool the demons into thinking that they were of so little value that there was no point in attacking them. The spiritual power of a *shên* was a potent

antidote to the baleful influence of the *kuei*, and there were many household gods that served this purpose.

Just as the common man stood in awe of the Literati officials, so the common run of specters would not dare to bother these powerful personages, and those things that gave them this power—notably the books and other furnishings of the scholar's study—were in themselves talismans against the evil ones. In China, as elsewhere, the surest safeguard against the malicious power of demons was the purity of a moral life bolstered by deep learning and true faith in religion. The power of the Literati derived in actuality from their knowledge of books, and this "knowledge," like the Western knowledge of the Bible, was above all knowledge of the true Way. Needless to say, the more strictly religious character of the Buddhist and Taoist priests gave them in the popular mind much power against the devils. The Taoists especially were professionally qualified as demon fighters and would be employed to write charms, to drive evil spirits out of the home with incantations and sword waving, and to exorcise the demons who possessed people's bodies and souls.\*

The *yin* spirits might also be propitiated and not simply warded off. It was recognized that many of them were more to be pitied than censured, particularly those who were categorized as "hungry ghosts"; that is, those whose plight was simply that they had no sacrifices from their descendants. One of the most widely observed festivals in the yearly religious calendar was that which took place on the fifteenth day (full moon) of the seventh month, called the "*kuei* festival," or, as it has been largely taken over by Buddhism, the *Yü-lan hui*, often described in English as All Souls' Day. During the entire seventh month the gates of Hades were open so that the hungry ghosts might roam about; they returned to their gloomy abode on the last day of the month, which is the birthday of their special savior, the Chinese Bodhisattva Ti-tsang. The *kuei* festival was marked by many observances intended to comfort the neglected spirits and to ensure that their resentment would not bring misfortune to the living. Services were held in all Buddhist temples and many private homes. Offerings were set out, incense was burned, families tended to the tidying up of their own tombs, and "spirit money" and many other paper items for the use of the spirits were sent across in conflagrations. In many places paper boats with paper crews were set afire and sent out on lakes, rivers, or the seas. Nor were the bereaved spirits neglected in the official religion, for every local seat of government was furnished with a special altar dedicated to them.†

### Exorcism

Exorcism means the driving out of *kuei*. Its success is dependent on the triumph of *yang* over *yin*, and many individual features of exorcist rituals

\*These magical functions of the clergy may be traced back to the specialists in esoterica (*fang-shih*) of late Chou times (see reference to *fa-shih*, occult specialists, in Chapter 6).

†We have written in the past tense, but it is to be noted that in this, as in so many other features of the popular religion, the beliefs and practices of the past linger on today wherever they have not been prevented by government measures against "superstitions."

will be recognized as deriving their efficacy from their *yang* nature. In the following description, taken from Burkhardt, we have set the obvious *yang* symbols in italics.

A special altar is arranged on which are burning *candles* and *incense sticks*. In many countries *peach wood* is believed to possess mystic qualities . . . so the exorcist is provided with a sword of that material, or the demon-dispelling weapon formed by welding copper cash *coins* into a tapering line. This was also hung above the bed of a person suffering from nightmares. The priest places it upon the altar and prepares a scroll on which *talismanic inscriptions* are penned. The officiant reverently burns the charm and mingles the ashes with a cup of *pure water* from the spring. With the *sword* in his right hand, and the cup in his left he prays for power. "Gods of Heaven and Earth, invest me with the healing seal that I may purge this dwelling of all evil lurking therein!" Having received his mandate, he invokes the demons. "As quick as lightning, begone." He then picks up a sprig of *willow* which he dips in the cup, and sprinkles first the east, then west, north and south corners of the house. To re-enforce the spell he fills his mouth with the water, and spurts it against the east wall with the *invocation* "Slay the azure spirits of the east, spawn of unlucky stars, or let them be expelled to a distant country." The red demons of the south, the white in the west, and the yellow in the centre, are similarly banished to the accompaniment of *gongs* and *crackers* whose efficacy is commensurate with the riot of sound they create. When the pandemonium is at its height, the exorcist raises his voice to be heard above the din and screams: "Evil spirits of the East get you back to the East, of the South return thither. Let all demons seek their proper quarters and vanish forthwith." The officiant then makes his way, sword in hand, to the door and goes through the exercises to preclude all chances to return.

Exorcists are not tied down to a set form of ritual, and vary their methods to suit their clientele. Sometimes the doorposts are sprinkled with the *blood* and feathers of a freshly killed *cock*, and a single demon may be disposed of by fixing a padlock round his neck.<sup>15</sup>

The most dramatic scene in the entire picture of man's warfare with the malignant spirits is the attempt to cast out devils that have taken over a human being. Demon possession is a very ancient and universal phenomenon, on which the last word has not yet been said. Whatever scientific explanation may be offered, such possession has seemed an undeniable fact to countless witnesses up to the present day. Here is an eyewitness account from the autobiographical book by Peter Goullart published in 1961:

We arrived at a medium-sized stone courtyard, half-way up the hill, situated in front of a temple. There was a small group of onlookers standing in corners in the shadow of the wall, among them a distracted couple who . . . were the energumen's parents. The energumen (one possessed) himself, a rather emaciated man of about twenty-five . . . lay on an iron bedstead on a rush mat. He was very pale and there was a wild, roving look in his fevered eyes. The [Taoist] priest . . . was attired in full ritual robes and stood before a portable altar on which was an incense burner, the small image of a god, a vase with holy water, a ritual sword and other articles and a book from which he was reading. Two

monks were assisting him, whilst four muscular men watched the prostrate demoniac.

The abbot was reading the scriptures in a monotonous, droning voice, repeating *mantras* [spells] over and over again with a great deal of concentration. Then he stopped and, taking an elongated ivory tablet, the symbol of wisdom and authority, he held it ceremonially in both hands in front of his chest and approached the bed slowly. There was a visible transformation on the energumen's face. His eyes were filled with malice as he watched the priest's measured advance with a sly cunning and hatred. Suddenly he gave a bestial whoop and jumped up in his bed, the four attendants rushing to hold him.

"No! No! You cannot drive us out. We were two against one. Our power is greater than yours." The sentences poured out of the energumen's distorted mouth in a strange, shrill voice, which sounded mechanical, inhuman—as if pronounced by a parrot. The priest looked at the victim intensely, gathering all his inner strength; beads of perspiration appeared on his thin face.

"Come out! Come out! I command you to come out!" He was repeating in a strong metallic voice with great force. "I am using the power of the One compared to whom you are nothing. In His name I command you to come out." Immobile, he continued to focus his powers on the energumen's face. The man was struggling in the bed with incredible strength against the four men who held him. Animal growls and howls issued from time to time from his mouth which became square, his teeth gleaming like the fangs of a dog. . . . I had the impression that a pack of wild animals was fighting inside his body. . . . Terrible threats poured out of the contorted mouth, now fringed in white foam, and interspersed with such incredible obscenities that women had to plug their ears with their fingers. . . .

Again the abbot cried his command to the unseen adversaries to leave the prostrate man. There was a burst of horrible laughter from the victim's throat and suddenly with a mighty heave of his supernaturally strengthened arms he threw off the men who held him and jumped at the priest's throat like a mad bloodhound. But he was over-powered again. This time they bound him with ropes and fastened the ends to the bedposts. . . . The abbot, still immobile, continued his conjurations in a metallic voice, his eyes never leaving the body. With unutterable horror, we saw that it began to swell visibly. On and on the dreadful process continued until he became a grotesque balloon of a man.

"Leave him! Leave him!" cried the monk concentrating still harder. . . . Convulsion shook the monstrous, swollen body. . . . It seemed that all the apertures of the body were opened by the unseen powers hiding in it and streams of malodorous excreta and effluvia flowed on to the ground in incredible profusion. . . . For an hour this continued and then the energumen, resuming his normal size, seemed to come to rest, with his eyes watching the unmoved priest who was still reading. . . .

The priest stopped reading; with sweat pouring down his face, he backed down to the altar, laid down the tablet and took up the ritual sword. Threateningly and commandingly he stood again over the energumen.

"The struggle is useless!" he cried. "Leave him! Leave him in the name of the Supreme Power who never meant you to steal this man's body!" Another scene of horror evolved itself before our dazed eyes. The man on the bed became rigid and his muscles seemed to contract turning

him into a figure of stone. Slowly, very slowly, the iron bedstead, as if impelled by an enormous weight, caved in, its middle touching the ground. The attendants seized the inert man by his feet and arms. The weight was such that none of them could lift him up and they asked for assistance from the onlookers. Seven men could hardly lift him for he was heavy as a cast-iron statue. Suddenly he became light again and they put him on a wooden bed which had been brought in. A long time passed with the abbot reading and commanding interminably. At last he sprinkled the inert man with holy water and advanced to him again with a sword. His concentration was so deep that he did not seem to see anybody. He was utterly exhausted and swayed slightly. Two novices came up to support him.

"I have won!" he cried triumphantly in a strange voice. "Get out! Get out!" The energumen stirred and fell into dreadful convulsions. His eyes rolled up and only the whites were visible. His breathing was stertorous and he clawed his body until he was covered with blood. Foam was issuing from his mouth and a loud gurgling sound. . . .

"Damn you! Damn you!" came a wild scream from the foaming lips. "We are going but you shall pay for it with your life." There was a terrific struggle on the bed, the poor man twisting and rolling like a mortally-wounded snake and his colour changing all the time. Suddenly he fell flat on his back and was still. His eyes opened. His gaze was normal and he saw his parents who now came forward.

"My parents!" he cried weakly. "Where am I?" He was very feeble and they carried him out in a specially ordered sedan chair. The abbot himself was in a terrible state of prostration and was half-carried and half-dragged away by his novices.<sup>16</sup>

Mr. Goullart was prepared to believe the statement of his Taoist hosts that these exorcist priests sacrificed years of their mortal lives as the price for every victory of this kind, their vital forces drained and spent. Whatever explanation we can think of for the phenomenon of demon possession itself, and whether this account is somewhat embellished by the author's imagination, the ritual of exorcism is dramatically illustrated.

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN HISTORY



*Chinese  
Religion*

AN

INTRODUCTION

*Fifth Edition*

LAURENCE G. THOMPSON

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# Chinese Religion

## *An Introduction*

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 FIFTH EDITION

**Laurence G. Thompson**

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East Asian Languages and Cultures  
University of Southern California*



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# Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	
<i>Preface</i>	
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	
<i>Table of Chinese Religious History</i>	
<i>Time Line of Chinese Religious History</i>	
<i>Introduction</i>	
<b>1 The Early Chinese Worldview</b>	<b>1</b>
Nature	1
Man	7
<b>2 Prescientific Theory and Religious Practice</b>	<b>14</b>
Regularity and Caprice in the Prescientific World	14
Divination	17
Man Against Demons	25
<b>3 The Family: Kindred and Ancestors</b>	<b>31</b>
Central Importance of the Ancestral Cult in Chinese Culture	31
The Lineage and Its Families as a Religious Corporation	32
Religious and Ethical Functions of <i>Li</i>	34
<i>Hsiao</i> : The Motivating Ideal	36
The Theory of Ancestor Worship	40
The Practices of Ancestor Worship	44
<b>4 The Community: Gods and Temples</b>	<b>53</b>
The Gods	53
Temples and Their Functioning	60
<b>5 The State: Emperor and Officials</b>	<b>67</b>
State Religion and the Literati Tradition	67
Kingship and Imperial Worship	69
The Official Religion	71

Official Religion at the Local Level	73
The Temple for Master K'ung and the Most Eminent Literati	74
<b>6 Three Ways to Ultimate Transformation:</b>	
<b>(1) Taoist Tradition</b>	<b>80</b>
Taoism as Religion	81
Institutionalization of Taoism	88
The Taoist as Exorcist and Ritualist	89
<b>7 Three Ways to Ultimate Transformation:</b>	
<b>(2) Literati Tradition</b>	<b>95</b>
The Renascent Literati Tradition	96
Religious Structure and Praxis (Practices) of the Renascent Literati Tradition	98
<b>8 Three Ways to Ultimate Transformation:</b>	
<b>(3) Buddhist Tradition</b>	<b>101</b>
Mahāyāna: The Capacious Vehicle	102
Monks and Monasteries	106
Chinese Buddhist Schools	110
<b>9 Their Separate Ways: Cults and Sects</b>	<b>115</b>
Characteristics of Lay Religion	115
Religious Societies and Sects	116
<b>10 The Festival Year</b>	<b>118</b>
New Year	118
Third Month	120
Fourth Month	120
Fifth Month	121
Seventh Month	121
Eighth Month	122
Ninth Month	122
Tenth Month	122
Twelfth Month	122
<b>11 Traditional Chinese Religion as Means of Coping</b>	<b>124</b>
Suffering	125
Quirks of Fate	126
Human Inadequacy	127
Meaninglessness of Existence	127
Authority and Submission	128
Omnipresence of Evil	129
Death and Salvation	130

<i>Bhakti</i>	132	<b>ix</b> <i>Contents</i>
A Summing Up	132	
<b>12 The Disruption of Tradition</b>	<b>134</b>	
The Turbulent Twentieth Century	134	
The Clouded Crystal Ball	141	
<b>Appendix 1 The Canons of the Three Traditions</b>	<b>144</b>	
The Canon of the Literati	144	
A Note on the Buddhist Canon	148	
A Note on the Taoist Canon	148	
<b>Appendix 2 The Mind or Heart Scripture of Perfect Wisdom</b>	<b>150</b>	
<b>Appendix 3 The Heaven-Honored One of the Primal     Beginnings Speaks the Scripture of the Precious     Names of the Three Controllers</b>	<b>152</b>	
<i>Notes</i>	155	
<i>Glossary</i>	161	
<i>Selected Readings</i>	164	
<i>Index</i>	177	