

Ideas & Beliefs

Although the emerging culture of ancient China coalesced from a number of different Neolithic cultures scattered across the length and breadth of the subcontinent, by the beginning of the Bronze Age (2000 BCE¹), we can begin to see some constant strands that are part of Chinese culture from that point forward.

Importance of Family

One of the most prominent of those is the primacy of the family as the basic social unit of society. That is exemplified very strongly by these magnificent bronzes that I am standing next to today. These were used in sacrifices to royal ancestors of the king of the Zhou dynasty and are from the first millennium BCE, long after the first appearance of bronze in China. Vessels of this kind were used century in and century out to offer sacrifices of meat, grain, and wine to the royal ancestors as part of rituals that were designed to encourage the royal ancestors to bring favor to their descendants. The Chinese believed in many different gods, but they tended not to approach them directly but rather through the intermediaries of their own ancestors, who were held to be somehow, although deceased, still alive, still conscious, and still capable of intervening in the lives of those presently here on earth. The ancestors were part of the continuum that went into the deep past, several generations, continued in the present and would continue in the future through generations of descendants yet to come. And so the family was the social glue of ancient China and it was widely acknowledged that the family was the basis of everything and that the family was going to be the model of society itself.

China as Center

Now, there were other things that you would find at this period of the Bronze Age as well: the notion of China as central, the idea that China was somehow the Middle Kingdom (that phrase was not yet current in the early Bronze Age, but the idea behind it was current); that the royal palace was the center of the universe—it was surrounded by loyal farmers and loyal aristocrats, making it the interior of a set of nesting boxes that constituted the world, and beyond that were people of dubious loyalty and beyond that were barbarians and beyond that the howling wilderness. The Chinese saw themselves as the center of

everything, and not only that, but they oriented themselves as if to imitate the cosmic centrality of which they felt a part. One of the things that became a cliché in ancient China was the idea that heaven is round and earth is square. If you look at this vessel to my right, you'll see that it's not just a vessel to offer sacrifices to the ancestors, it's actually a microcosm of the universe, with the round heaven sitting on top of the square base which represents the earth itself, so that in using this vessel to offer grain to the ancestors, one is symbolically encompassing heaven and earth as part of the ritual behavior that is going on.



Confucius

All of this existed long before the time of Confucius, who was born in 551 BCE and lived to 479 BCE. Confucius saw himself as, not an innovator, but rather as a conservator of traditions that had come down from long before his time. One of those traditions was the family, another was the importance of ritual, and the third was something that he saw in

¹ BCE stands for 'Before Common Era' and correlates with BC or 'Before Christ.' CE stands for 'Common Era' and correlates with AD or 'Anno Domini.'

the past, but, in fact, [that] I think he was inventing in his own time, and that is the idea that virtue is the test of individual worth. He expressed this in an interesting phrase, *junzi*, which means the son of a prince. Someone asked Confucius what this word meant and he said that it didn't mean someone who's literally the son of a prince, whose father was a prince, but rather someone who behaved in a princely way, so that the actual son of a prince who behaved badly was no prince at all, whereas an ordinary person who behaved in a princely way could be treated as the son of a prince. This is something really new in Chinese philosophy and it sets the stage for one of the great innovations of Chinese culture, one that was to last for centuries, right up to modern times—that is the idea that the right to rule rests with those who are supremely virtuous and who demonstrate their fitness to rule through their own virtue. For Confucius, this meant not just being good to people but understanding the proper hierarchy of society, particularly the virtue of filial piety, the duty that children owed to their parents. That duty was expressed in the larger sphere as the duty that a minister owes to the ruler, in the family sphere the duty that a younger brother owes to an elder brother. This hierarchal society was built into the Confucian notion of harmony and of virtue. The virtuous gentleman, the prince, would be the custodian of the cultural riches of China. He knew the literary tradition, he knew the precedents of history, and he knew how to behave in every possible situation.

Civil Service System

Long after the time of Confucius, the words of Confucius himself and of his principal disciples came to be the test of virtue. Did you know the classics? Did you know what Confucius taught? Were you able to reproduce on an examination the lessons from the Confucian tradition itself? Confucianism, with the addition of some very un-Confucian ideas, such as self-cultivation to attune oneself with heaven and earth, or the idea of written law which came from ideas that Confucius himself deeply disapproved of—Confucianism, with these additions, became the basis of the civil service system of China in which bureaucrats and members of the ruling class were selected by their performance on written examinations. They formed the basis of an educated, trained, disciplined core of governing individuals who could serve the dynasty and the emperor, and make sure that society was well governed and uniformly governed no matter where an official happened to be—north China, south China, central China, it didn't matter. Chinese government was able to extend itself to the natural frontiers of China by this remarkable innovation of examinations and the idea of a trained corps of civil servants.

Buddhism

While Confucius was teaching virtue, while the Daoists² were teaching self-cultivation, other currents came into Chinese thought, Chinese philosophy, and religion, as well. One of the most important of these was Buddhism, which is originally, of course, an Indian religion that reached China some time in the first or second century CE¹. This was a real innovation in China, and something that after a period of acclimation became very important in Chinese society. It supplemented the ancestor worship of China rather than replaced it. One of the key issues in integrating Buddhism into China, in fact, was reconciling the idea of the celibate clergy with the duty of sons to produce future generations to carry on the family line. That was reconciled by ensuring that there was always one son that stayed in the secular world, even if other sons became monks. Buddhism answers the question: what is life all about? Confucius didn't spend much time on that. Confucius, in fact, said respect the spirits, but keep them at a distance. Buddhism talked a lot about the meaning of life; its explanation of the meaning of life was, in some ways, perhaps a pessimistic one. Life, said the Buddhist, consists of birth, old age, sickness, and death. People were shackled to a world in which you will be reborn over and over and over again and a world which is filled with unhappiness and disappointment. What's the answer? The answer is liberation, liberation of the soul from a cycle of desire and bondage to an illusory world that seems to offer rewards, but in fact does not. The Buddha taught the four noble truths that all life is suffering, that suffering stems from desire, that desire can be overcome, and the means to overcome desire is the noble eightfold path, a prescription

² Daoist and Daoism are sometimes spelled “Taoist” and “Taoism”.

for a good life of right thoughts, right intentions, right actions, and right living that will allow you to release yourself from the bondage of enslavement to the illusion of the world.

The Three Teachings

Buddhism did not replace Chinese religion but it took its place alongside Chinese religion and eventually in China we find what comes to be called the Three Teachings. The Three Teachings are Confucianism, which is largely a secular faith, concerned with harmony on the family level, on the level of the state and society, on the maintenance of harmony and hierarchy, and the middle path to leading a good life. The second is Daoism, the early philosophy of China that has to do with man's place in nature: man's place is part of the grander scheme of things. It is the Daoist that says that spontaneity and naturalness is the best way to behave but not just any spontaneity, not just any naturalness: not recklessness, not loudness, not any ungoverned behavior, but rather self-cultivated spontaneity, studying and understanding the rhythms and the force of the universe itself, attuning yourself to those rhythms and that force and living a life in which spontaneous actions are right without your having to think about them. This was self-cultivation on a personal level, looking for longevity, perhaps even physical immortality, and eventual enrollment in the pantheon of Daoist gods. But it was also self-cultivation as a part of a society that valued harmony and valued a spiritual oneness with the world. The third of the Three Teachings was Buddhism, which took its place alongside the other two and filled the gap, saying, What does it mean to be alive? What happens when I die? How can I escape from the sadness and the turmoil of the world? Those three teachings continued down to the modern era and, in fact, are very much a part of China today, even after several decades of determined secularization in China and a determined effort to eradicate religion from Chinese life. Religion is very, very much a part of China today—there is new respect for Confucius, and there is new interest in Daoism and in Chinese popular religion. The Buddhist temples of China are thronged today, so that over the long period of time, over many centuries from the Han dynasty down to today, these religions, these avenues of faith, have evolved and changed, but have been a constant of Chinese cultural life and China's spiritual life.