

# Pluralism of china

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



Beginning the semester we were asked a question, define religion. With my first thoughts, I scribbled down the conceptions of religion as I was taught through my Judaic background, " religion is a prescribed set of ideas and rules as given by a higher power to govern a body of people," it was almost a reflex. Caught up in the common pretenses of Western Judeo-Christian religions, I was quite ignorant to the models of the many eastern religions that exist, especially the popular religions of China. It is hard to consider something as vast as Chinese popular religion a religion, when it has neither an organized body nor a clear set of sacred scriptures. There is a distinctive clash of ideals when viewing the (commonly) exclusivist nature of Western religions compared to those of the pluralistic Eastern. Chinese secular religion is influenced greatly by its participants. By examining and analyzing notable texts and concepts of Chinese popular religion we can see that it is worldly, pragmatic, and pluralistic within itself and the context of other religions. In many societies we see culture being shaped by the religion; however, in China we see culture shaping the religion. Confucianism, a popular Chinese religion, is arguably just a methodology of thought; most likely due to its overtly pragmatic and worldly nature. However, Confucianism none the less is the primary facet of Chinese popular religion. Confucianism is considered to be the social Dao and the Dao of right action. The foundations of Confucianism rest upon: filial piety, ancestor worship, societal structure, and education. Among the Confucian and Popular Religion ideals, filial piety and ancestor worship are most likely the most emphasized. Confucius states, " When parents are alive, serve them according to the rules of propriety. When they die, bury them according to the rules of propriety

and sacrifice them according to the rules of propriety." (Shu-hsien) Though filial piety may be stressed the most heavily, all of the given aspects of Confucianism spill over into other parts of China's major religions. Filial piety and ancestor worship, which seemingly go hand in hand, are seen in various Chinese traditions through specific rituals. There is such a strong connection between the living and the dead found in the culture. The Chinese revere their ancestors just as much or arguably even more than their living family members. Reciprocal relationships between humans and the supernatural are highly regarded. By properly treating an ancestor, the ancestor in part will reward the living family members or help them when they are in need. Offerings, sacrifices, and prayer is frequently given to ancestors at household alters. Take for example, the traditional Chinese Ching Ming festival and the Buddhist holiday of Obon. In both of these traditions, filial piety and ancestor worship are key factors, and their rituals coincide. The focus in Ching Ming and Obon is to commemorate ancestors by visiting their grave sites. Similarly, at the grave sites existing family members will give food offering and conduct prayers. China has always been filled with a literary tradition. Ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were all recorded in their founding years. Commonly, religious aspects were incorporated into popular stories. Published in the 1590s under the Ming Dynasty, "Journey to the West" was considered to be one of the four classic novels of China and set somewhat of a foundation to the concept of Chinese religion, integrating Tao, Buddhist, and Confucian thought into one story (Berling 22). "Journey to the West" documents the travels of different characters to India in order to obtain Buddhist scriptures; sutras. The classic

novel encompasses ideas such as a pantheon of gods with individual personalities and powers that actively interact with humans, the notion of enlightenment, and spiritual heightening. These concepts are frequently reoccurring themes found throughout the religions of China and bring us closer to unraveling its pluralistic and pragmatic features. First though we must analyze how and why this epic novel helped pluralize Chinese religions. "Journey to the West" like most other stories spread its popularity through the Chinese oral literary tradition, a popular method of transporting ideas in Chinese culture. Due to the lack of the printing press, among many other forms of technology, it was difficult to spread literary documents to the masses. Usually, stories like "Journey to the West" would be shared by word of mouth in the community market place or in the comfort of one's own home. "Journey to the West" was very popular among the Chinese people; people wanted to hear the story as much as possible. The book served as an exciting magic filled adventure, allegory, and political satire of Chinese bureaucracy (Berling 23: 24). Journey was a type of novel relatable to various audiences, being able to reach out and appeal to children, adults, thrill speakers, spiritualists, and political activists alike. China's rich oral literary tradition helped to spread stories like "Journey to the West" around the large continent. Popular stories in Chinese culture were not limited to books. Stories commonly were transformed into operas and street shows. However, as one might suspect with such a volatile form of passing on literature, it was not uncommon for stories to become skewed over time being passed on from person to person, generation to generation. According to Shahar, near the end of the eccentric monk's transformation to a deity,

the stories about him have " nothing in common..." with that of his " ...earlier fiction" (Shahar 115). Crazy Ji, who will be discussed later, demonstrates the severity of the evolution of a God through time. Brought to attention in stories such as " Journey to the West" is a pantheon of Gods shared among all sects of Chinese religion. The fact that different sects of a religion can share a common God exudes a sense of pluralism within the vastness that is popular religion. To most people having a God or multiple Gods representative in a religion makes itself that much more acknowledgeable for most to accept it as a religion. Gods can be worshipped in sacred rituals or prayed to; characteristics common amongst most religions. Popular Chinese religion is filled with many Gods. Some Gods are worshipped only locally, other Gods are acknowledged on a national basis, and some are limited merely to a household. This factor of Gods being geographically restricted illustrates the worldliness/influence found amongst Chinese popular religion. The fact that certain Gods can exist in one area and not the other, exhibits the amount of veneration Chinese people have towards Gods. In ancient China areas, at a regional level, were divided in accordance to an areas' respective God or Goddess. Usually, a local God/Goddess would be responsible for protecting a village's well being and ensure fertility whether it is in humans or the land. As mentioned earlier, the Confucian ideal of filial piety and ancestor worship essentially is the root to Chinese popular religion. Though popular gods, practices, and rituals may have been spread through literature or word of mouth, these things would not even have transpired without the teachings of filial piety or ancestral worship. In popular religion all deities come into existence through the ancestor worship. All gods at one

point in time were humans just like anyone else. If the deceased ancestor dies as a reputable upstanding person in the eyes of his successors, through ancestral worship, he or she will gain a cult following and be deified. If the nature of the ancestor is appealing enough to other people, the God or Goddess could attain national recognition. The model of Confucian filial piety should also be scrutinized. Traditions such as ancestor worship and sacred family rituals would cease to exist if children unwillingly disobey/disrespect their parents by refusing to carry out the practices. Popular religion depends upon the younger generations continuing to uphold traditions practiced by their parents. The Chinese on a wide scale basis incorporate religion into their daily life routines, as seen in their utilization of Gods. Regularly, offerings of food, money, and incense will be given to Gods at either local shrines, temples or household alters. Gods play a very active role in peoples lives; they are tangible relatable beings. After all, in the hierarchy of life (according to Chinese religion), Gods at some point in time were human beings who became deified after they died. According to Chinese popular religion and culture, the supernatural is very much interconnected with human life. People will often pray to specific Gods for good fortune, offering various sacrifices. The popular Bodhisattva Guanyin for example is a Goddess best known for her ability to rescue or heal people in need, instantly curing lepers or saving people from shipwrecks. As seen in " Earliest Tales of the Bodhisattva Guanyin," she will come to the aid of anyone if they are completely focusing on her. The Chinese will treat Gods like they are alive, interacting with their statues; taking it to an opera or show. It would not be uncommon to see television sets dedicated to a God, set directly in front of

his alter to watch. Gods are also incorporated into stories, plays, and contemporarily speaking, movies and television shows. Theatre, a popular form of entertainment, usually encompasses ancient stories about Chinese Gods- making theatre have its religious implications as well. On top of this, the Chinese still practice the ritual of the spiritual medium. Spiritual Mediums, through the conduction of certain prayers and rituals, call upon a specific god. Once they complete the necessary rituals to become a medium, the God invoked will use the person's body as a vessel to the material world. The spirit medium, while in a possessed trance typically will act, speak and think as the God would. A popular God invoked by the Chinese for his various powers is Ji Gong, also known as Crazy Ji. Stated before, Crazy Ji was a God that evolved, with his persona transforming throughout the years. Over time, Daoji's different perceived characteristics were brought to attention and emphasized by the public. Ji Gong has been noticed as a monk, drunkard, magician, healer, martial artist, champion of the poor, and moral exemplar. Crazy Ji can attribute much of his recognition and popularity to his over the top eccentric behavior, sincere kindness, and normalness. " Ji Gong is an ordinary person and most Taiwanese people are ordinary people too; therefore they like him" (Shahar 158). Daoji's various human-like attributes were relatable to the masses; people began to form cults over the kind mad monk. In the transmission of Ji Gong he was not only thought to be a reincarnate of an arhat by Buddhists, but also recognized as a deity in Taoism too. In both these religions, famous eccentrics existed before Crazy Ji (Shahar 43). Being as likable as Ji Gong was to the average Chinese citizen, oral literary tradition passed Crazy Ji stories around the country; turning the

character from a local cult to a national icon/deity. Crazy Ji, a popular God utilized by spirit mediums, is utilized to provide aid in an array of things from gambling to healing to fighting. The many forms of Ji Gong (eccentric, martial artist, miracle worker etc...) justify the use of this god in spirit mediums. The Boxer clan called upon Crazy Ji, because of his superior skills in the martial arts, to protect them in battle. Gamblers thought " the carefree Ji Gong did not mind blessing his devotees with that extra little luck needed" (Shahar 181). Spirit writers used by gamblers would invoke Ji's spirit and ask him what the winning numbers were going to be. Chinese popular religion in all senses is a religion of the people- pluralistic, worldly and pragmatic. This intimate religion, which is seemingly defined by its participants, is a melting pot of the three major Chinese religions; Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Popular religion of China has no boundaries. Within popular religion, we can see aspects of Confucian standards of social conduct, Buddhist structures of reincarnation, and Tao methods of ritual renewal (Overmyer 1). Interestingly, when analyzing one of China's most popular deities, Crazy Ji, we see a Confucian's morals (as seen in his reverence for filial piety), a Buddhist's sense of karmic retribution, and a Taoist's ability in the magical arts. People, at their own will, through mass followings, can deify anyone. Chinese culture enshrouds itself in its popular religion with numerous festivals, daily rituals, and observance of deities of whom they have an interactive relationship with.