Pre-Axial Ancient Indigenous Chinese Religion

The Axial Age

Scholars call the period when the world religions were taking shape the “Axial Age,” which lasted roughly from 600 BC to AD 200. In the early Axial Age, the major religions of China took shape, including Confucianism and Daoism. Later in the Axial Age, Buddhism came to China. In this presentation we explore some aspects of pre-Axial Age Chinese religion that influenced all the later major religious traditions.

Pre-literate Tribal Religion

“Religion changed in significant ways with the move from pre-literate tribal societies to the civilizations in the ancient world.”

Tribal hunter-gatherer societies existed before civilization. Tribal religions shared common features. There was no sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural. There were no sharp boundaries between humanity and nature. All of nature—living and non-living—was seen as an organic whole, and as sacred. Ultimate reality was everything. There was no “creator” outside of nature.

When civilizations appeared in India and Greece, a dualism between the physical and the spiritual emerged. The goodness of nature and the unity of the natural and spiritual, however, endured in Chinese thought after the dawn of civilization. In fact, these Chinese beliefs were obstacles for the first Buddhist missionaries to China. The Chinese could not view all life as suffering.

Animism and Shamans

Tribal religion was also characterized by animism, the belief in spirits everywhere to explain the unexplainable. Not understanding the workings of nature, people attributed things like storms and fruit on trees to spirits.

The religious leader was the shaman. The word “shaman” comes from his role in ancient China. Shamans deal with the spirits. In China, shamans were mediums for the manifestation and communication of spirits. Shamans practiced primitive medicine also. Because people did not understand its natural causes, illness was also attributed to spirits. Shamans performed exorcisms to cast out evil spirits in attempts to heal the sick.

Ancestor Worship

Tribal cultures also saw communities as more real and important than the individual. The dead were still a part of society, either reincarnated or inhabiting a spiritual world that the living could access. In China, ancestor worship and seeking their help was essential. Dead ancestors fixed disputes among the living. A chief duty was to perform proper funeral rituals, and to honor dead ancestors every year. Failing to do so could make them angry and cause trouble.

Children were a great blessing, partly because they would honor their parents when they died. Thus the organic divine whole of reality also included the enduring relationships of family and society. This social nature of the divine whole of reality remained a distinctive part of Chinese religion even after the dawn of civilization. Ancestor worship and strong family ties persisted, seen in Confucianism’s virtue of “filial piety.”
Religion in Ancient Civilizations

Around 4000 BC, civilizations appeared along major rivers worldwide. These new urban societies brought many changes—lifestyle, social, cultural and technological—and necessitated the invention of writing for commercial accounting. Religion changed drastically, too. Priests in agrarian civilizations replaced tribal shamans. Permanent places of worships, temples, appeared. Metalsmithing was invented resulting in new tools and weapons, and metal becoming a religious symbol and ritual implement.

Religious thought and practice advanced in direct proportion to the level of stability an ancient civilization enjoyed. When people are struggling to make a living, fight natural disasters, and ward off enemies, they have little time for religious contemplation. Thus ancient Egypt and China, which both enjoyed relative stability across time, developed complex religious systems.

Family, Society, and Empire

From very early times, China viewed itself as a single entity. There was one emperor with districts ruled by local warlords. The north and south were separated by different languages, but the invention of pictograph writing promoted a national language unifying the empire. Government service was the highest social position, and any adult male from any background could enter it by passing civil service exams. This led families to value education highly, as they hoped a son would secure a coveted and lucrative career in government service. Those in such positions would do all in their power to help their families. Duty to family was first, with duty to society a close second. These familial, social and educational values became cornerstones of Confucianism, and persist among the Chinese to this day.

The Lord of Heaven and the Emperor

Early Chinese civilization had belief in a semi-personal ruling deity, the “Lord of Heaven” (Shong Di). This Lord of Heaven was not a Creator but a giver and sustainer of law, order, and harmony. As elsewhere, the Chinese emperor was viewed as the earthly representative of the deity, called the “Son of Heaven.” The decree and order of heaven became central in Confucianism.

The Tao

The concept of the “Tao” refers to divine rule and order, but in a less personal and anthropomorphic way. Like “Dharma” in Sanskrit (India), “Tao” means “Way” or “Path”, and refers to the sum total of nature’s workings. The idea of the Tao originated in tribal Chinese cultures. Harmony between all interrelated aspects of nature was considered good, while disharmony led to disorder, evil, and suffering. Going against the Tao was bad, but going with the Tao was good. All later Chinese schools emphasized following the Tao.

Yin and Yang

The Yin and Yang concepts developed very early and parallel polarities in other religions. Yin and Yang reconciled stability and change. They are complementary, not opposite forces, operating everywhere in nature: light and darkness, heat and cold, dry and wet, male and female, activity and passivity, life and death, height and depth. The constant motion and interplay of these forces constitute all that exists. Neither is good nor bad, rather, their balance is good, and their imbalance is bad.

Dia Ji

The interplay of yin and yang is called Dai Ji (“Die Jee”, Tai Chi). This is the most fundamental principle operative everywhere in nature. The waves and curves of Dia Ji when depicted, represent constant motion and interplay. Dai Ji is not static, but ever-active. Yin and yang constantly change and transform into one other. At the center of each is a piece of the other. This indicates that nothing is pure “yin” or pure “yang.” Yin and yang always contain part of their opposite within themselves. Nothing is either “yin” or “yang,” only “more yin” or “more yang.” The dot in each indicates that whenever something reaches its extreme, it becomes its opposite.
The Elements

The ancients sought the fundamental building blocks of reality. Lacking modern science and technology, they identified common features of the world observable with the naked eye as the "elements." In the west, fire, air, water, and earth were everywhere and were so believed to be the elements. Everything was thought to be comprised of one or more of these. Notice how these elements are also primordial religious symbols. They added a unifying principle of "spirit" to the four elements. Ancient India had the same four elements, plus a quintessence.

The Chinese Elements

The Chinese identified Fire, Air, Water, Wood and Metal as the elements. Earth, instead of Spirit, was the fifth element. This fact is revealing. In making Earth the unifying element, the Chinese revealed their positive view of the physical world. The Greeks and Indians had a negative view of the physical world, and so Spirit their unifying element.

For the Chinese, a balance of elements led to harmony, peace, and joy. An imbalance led to disorder, chaos, and suffering. Everything: all living and non-living things, possessed a particular elemental character by primarily exhibiting the traits of one element. Each element was either “more yin” or “more yang,” except Earth, which was neutral. Yin, Yang, and the elements remained central in the Chinese Axial religions.

Microcosm and Macrocasm

In ancient cultures belief in the interconnectedness of all things led to the belief that individual things contain and mirror the whole reality. The human person, for instance, was viewed as a microcosm of the macrocosm. Balance on the microcosmic level leads to balance on the macrocosmic level. Ancient Chinese mystical practices parallel yogic practices in India. Mastery of the body to attain a balance of yin, yang, and elemental forces was the goal. Acupuncture influenced yin, yang and the elements to restore harmony and health. Confucianism later affirmed that the order and balance at the level of the family results in order and balance at the societal level. Later Taoist sects would incorporate mystical yogic practices.

Divination and Magic

Divination tries to gain knowledge normally beyond human reach (like across space and time). Divinization was important in pre-Axial China. The interconnectedness of all things meant that one thing tells us about another; even the whole. Influencing one thing could influence the whole. The Tao, Dai Ji, yin yang and the elements were again important. Tribal divination involved throwing ox bone dice or examining cracks in tortoise shells. The patterns of long and short wooden straws cast on the ground was thought to reveal the future. Using a correlation derived from human anatomy, a single unbroken straw was yang, and two shorter straws with a gap was yin. The “Book of Changes” compiled the meanings of the patterns. This classical Chinese text was later used by Axial Chinese religions.

Yin, yang, and the elements, also informed folk cures and herbal medicine. Foods were either "more yin" or "more yang," and associated with an element. Feng Shui, popular today with modern westerners, relied on the belief that some spatial arrangements promote balance and peace, while others foster imbalance and disorder. The “Divination” School of the Axial Age relied on these pre-Axial Chinese beliefs and practices. Some Taoist sects incorporated them as well.

Instability and the Axial Age

The Axial Age in China witnessed great political instability. The “Warring States Period” (400s through 200s BC) resulted in large-scale changes, not the least of which were religious. The chief Axial Chinese religions, including Confucianism and Daoism, emerged. We saw how similar circumstances caused religious innovation in India. Pre-Axial Chinese influenced and was incorporated into these major Chinese religions.