

Popular Beliefs and Practical Morality of the Chinese

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The Chinese people in general are perhaps less formally religious than any other nations, and fewer Chinese belong to any particular sect, but the tenets of many religions form the substratum of their every-day living to an extent difficult for the Westerner to grasp. The common beliefs in China are a mixture of different religions, especially of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. These three have been so intermingled that they are indistinguishable to the common people. Many Chinese ideas and customs of every-day life are not of any one religion but are combinations of all three. To this mixed faith, which neither has a name nor is peculiar to a special sect, the majority of the Chinese adhere. Most Chinese revere equally Confucius (孔子), Lao Tzu(老子), and Buddha(佛陀), but they do not follow the teaching of any of these as a religion. The Chinese scholars follow Confucian doctrines in social and family relations, practice Taoist principles in private life, and attend Buddhist services on the occasion of funerals or birth-days. They find no conflict among them, but feel them appropriate and harmonious. This is the very spirit of Chinese civilization.

Among these three religions, as probably among all religions in China and in the Orient at large, is a common belief in the Law of Causality. They all hold that any and all actions, manifested or otherwise, will surely bring back, either directly or indirectly, their reactions, favorable or unfavorable. As a general rule these reactions are recognized as corresponding to and in accordance with the original actions. So the Chinese proverb says: "When we plant melons, we reap melons; when we plant beans, we reap beans." Because many conflicting causes interact to produce various effects, however, the result may appear contrary to what is expected, so another proverb says: "Flowers may fail to bloom when we intentionally plant the seeds, while willow trees may grow up when we unknowingly cast a branch."

The fundamental law of cause and effect is, however, undeniable, as applied not only to the material world but also to the mental and spiritual worlds, not only to abstract forces, but also to individual conduct and the affairs of actual life. This law is called in Chinese Yin Ko (因果, cause and effect) or Pao Ying (报应, response or compensation). We should never doubt the law and never murmur against anything that happens in life.

It is explained in the Confucian classics as follows: "Accordance with the right is good fortune; the following of evil is bad: the shadow and the echo" (*Book of History*, Part II, Book II, Chapter

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5). “On the good doer all blessings are sent and on the evil doer all miseries”(Book of History, Part III, Book II, Chapter 8).

Since Confucianism emphasizes family relations, its explanation of the law of causality, in its exceptional and seemingly contradictory cases, is that both cause and effect are hereditary through generations; so the response or compensation of our doings may come, instead of to ourselves, to our offspring, and that which we now receive may be from the results of the doings of our forefathers. “The family that accumulates good deeds retains surplus blessings; the family that accumulates evil deeds retains surplus miseries”(Book of Changes, Diagram II).

The Taoist philosophy taught that “Calamity rests upon happiness and happiness underlies calamity”(Tao Teh Ching, Chapter 58). And, according to its masters, nothing is real and nothing matters much in the eternal life. We should remain always indifferent toward any cause or effect. Let nature do the work and everything takes care of itself. But they do believe in the law as it is described by Lao Tzu thus: “Heaven’s net is vast, so vast. It is wide-meshed, but it loses nothing”(Tao The Ching, Chapter 73). The Taoist religion seeks the prolongation of life physically as well as spiritually and holds also the spiritual existence after physical death, when the law of causality will act upon the spiritual being.

Buddhism, like many other Oriental religions, teaches reincarnation. What we do not reap in this incarnation we will certainly reap in the next or some still distant future incarnations. This gives us some hope, and it explains the law of causality. The Chinese under the influence of Buddhism accept reincarnation quite simply as a fact. It has become an essential feature of their composite philosophy.

Confucius and Lao Tzu are too dignified for home worship. Sakyamuni (释迦牟尼), Amitabha (阿弥陀佛), and Guan Yin(观音) are the common objects worshipped at home, aside from the ancestors and the kitchen god (*dong chu si ming*, 东厨司命). We should notice here that the ancestor worship is a Confucian practice, the kitchen god is a Taoist invention, and the others mentioned are Buddhist deities. So every Chinese family actually performs the rites of the three different faiths. The Three Lucky Stars (*san xing fu lu shou*, 三星福禄寿), and the Eight Genii(*ba xian*, 八仙) of Taoist origin, the 18 Arhans (*shi ba luo han*, 十八罗汉) of Buddhist origin, and the 24 Examples of Filial Piety(*er shi si xiao*, 二十四孝) of Confucian origin are all familiar subjects of Chinese art and literature.

The official sacrifice in every city to the city god, Cheng Huang (城隍); and in every village to the village god, Tu Di(土地), is a queer mixture of the three religions. Confucianism first spiritualized the earth and its sections, Taoist mysticism personified the individual gods of cities and villages, and Buddhist legends assigned to them their official functions in heaven and in hells. These gods in the unseen world correspond to the governmental officials in their respective ranks and localities. In the old holidays and on the first and fifteenth days of every lunar month, we still see big crowds coming from every corner of the country to worship in the temples. Before the Republic regime, local officials were required to be present there to lead the people in a ceremonial sacrifice.

Aside from religious belief, practical morality is taught at home and in the schools. Loyalty (*zhong*, 忠), filial piety (*xiao*, 孝), chastity for women (*jie*, 节), and righteousness to all fellow men (*yi*, 义) are the four prime virtues of the individual life, while propriety (*li*, 礼), justice (*yi*, 义), incorruptibility (*lian*, 廉), and sense of shame (*chi*, 耻) are said to be the four corner stones (*si wei*, 四维) of the nation.

Besides the Confucian and the ancient Taoist classics and novels, which have great influence on moral life, both individual and collective, the most popular works in Chinese on religious and moral teachings may be grouped as follows: In Confucianism there are *Jin Si Lu* (近思录, Records of Immediate Thoughts) of the Song Dynasty, *Shen Yin Yu* (呻吟语, The Chanting Words), *Zhi Jia Ge Yan* (治家格言, Instruction of Family Administration), *Gong Guo Ge* (功过格, Classifications of Virtuous and Vicious Deeds), all of the Ming Dynasty; and *Quan Shan Yao Yan* (劝善要言, Important Advice on Moral Conduct) and *Sheng Yu Guang Xun* (圣谕广训, Commentary on Imperial Edict) by two emperors of the Qing Dynasty. In the Taoist religion there are *Tai Shang Gan Ying Pian* (太上感应篇, Supreme Laws of Cause and Effect) and *Yin Zhi Wen* (阴鹭文, The Secret Virtues). Among Buddhist classics there are the Diamond Sutra (*jin gang jing*, 金刚经) and the Heart Sutra (*xin jing*, 心经), and a vulgar treatise of infernal conditions named *Yu Li* (玉历) or the Jade Almanac. The last few on Taoist and Buddhist religions are more popular among the common people than any of the Confucian literature. It has been a custom for the local charitable societies to print and distribute these tracts annually to every family in town and in the village. They are probably the best-read books in China.

An ideal Chinese home is a large family with the parents and grandparents at the head, all brothers and their wives and children living together, each having a separate income, but each contributing a portion to the commonweal and all enjoying everything in the commonweal.

An ideal Chinese society would be one where the aged are respected, children are protected and educated, and the grown people properly employed; men and women discharging different duties, rich and poor receiving equal treatment, and virtue and knowledge occupying high social standing instead of force and wealth. In such an ideal society, people would value time more than money, attend more to self-cultivation than to social reform, seek mental contentment more than material comfort, and enjoy life instead of merely struggling for an existence.

Confucius' ideal society, "The Grand Union" (*da tong*, 大同) goes even farther, as he depicts: "Men do not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons... They accumulate articles of value, disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. They labor with their strength, disliking that it should not be exerted, but not exerting it only with view to their own advantage. In this way selfish scheming are repressed and find no development. Robbers, filchers, and rebellious traitors do not show themselves and hence the outer doors remains open and are not shut" (*li ji*, 礼记, Book VII, Section 1). This sounds very much like Plato's *Republic* or Moore's *Utopia*.

The Chinese have been taught to love their homes and their birthplaces. Local patriotism has been highly encouraged. Most of the people do not care to travel and are content to live and die at home. Travel on vacations or for pleasure is new and uncommon to the Chinese. They travel only when it is necessitated by official or private business. Unless migrating with the whole family, the Chinese never like to stay away from the old home in their advanced age, and they often will that the body be sent to a clan cemetery in case of death. Even if they do live and die outside, they always go to the clubhouse(*hui guan*, 会馆) and are buried in the community graveyards (*yi yuan*, 义园) of their own local groups. Until recently, provincialism has been stronger in every case than nationalism.

On the other hand, the Chinese are unaccustomed to national jingoism or to racial prejudices. They always tolerate foreign religions and approve of intermarriage. Before the rise of the Western Powers, all foreigners in China were treated by the government and society equally with the natives. Confucian maxims taught them that “All under heaven is but one family”(*tian xia yi jia*, 天下一家) and “All within the four seas are brothers”(*si hai zhi nei jie xiong di*, 四海之内皆兄弟). The Chinese are the most cosmopolitan people in the world.

Novels have great influence on moral life, both individually and collectively. The most popular novels in Chinese are four in number. Unfortunately, they represent four evil characters which are condemned by all moralists. The first work *San Guo Yan Yi*(三国演义, Treatises of the Three Kingdoms) represents the character *Jian*(奸), or treachery; the second, *Shui Hu Zhuan*(水浒传, Biographies of the Bandits by the Water Side), represents the character *Dao*(盗), or robbery; the third, *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*(聊斋志异, Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio), represents the character *Xie*(邪), or heterodoxy; and the fourth, *Hong Lou Meng*(红楼梦, Dreams of the Red Chamber), represents the character *Yin*(淫), or lust. These four novels have had the largest circulations for the last two or three centuries, but they were strictly prohibited to the youths for the fear that their vicious influence might poison the young minds. Since the proclamation of the Literary Revolution, the leaders recommended these novels, except the third which is in classical language, as models of colloquial literature. Students were encouraged to study them as textbooks. What a contrast between the old and the new ideas of education! The writer is in deep sympathy with the movement for the simplification of literary writings for the school children, but regrets profoundly that the revolutionary leaders could not substitute these novels with some more appropriate works as its standard.