

Ideas for Effective Instruction at the High School Level

by Diana Marston Wood



Due to its impressive length and extensive documentation, China's history presents many challenges for high school teachers. We know that all periods and cultural characteristics of China's historical record cannot be covered; so what should we emphasize? Typically, we may have, at most, one month in which to explore the essence of Chinese culture. This often occurs in a course where students focus briefly on numerous widely disparate cultures. No matter how much time is available, however, we undoubtedly attempt to uncover the essential characteristics of Chinese religion. In this specific area there are numerous difficulties, many of them related to the fact that our students are primarily familiar with monotheistic cultures where there is a belief in one god supported by a clearly defined doctrine. Chinese religion presents quite a contrast.

For instance, just how many religions are important to understanding Chinese history? Should Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism all be dealt with equally? Should Taoism and Confucianism, as indigenous religions, be emphasized? Should Confucianism be treated as a religion or as a philosophy? Should one differentiate between popular and elite religions?¹ Most high school texts describe Taoism and Confucianism as discretely separate belief systems unique to China. These books then introduce students to Buddhism with the unfolding of the dynasties, especially the Han and Tang. I believe that such an approach is unnecessarily confusing and inappropriate for high school students. Instead, I shall argue that Chinese religion can best be understood through an emphasis on five essential and interrelated elements.

A few pedagogical factors guide my approach. High school students are concrete thinkers. Abstract subjects like religious beliefs easily attract the attention of only the most sophisticated students. Therefore, we high school teachers must use materials that "grab" their interest, making the concepts manageable and intriguing, and that recognize our students' often very short attention span. Our goal should always be to structure our teaching so that students use skills of analysis and synthesis both orally and through writing. Understandings attained through

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such an approach are more likely to be internalized and thus remembered. They may then provide the stimulus for further inquiry.

In recent years I have extensively modified my approach to teaching the main principles of Chinese religion. No longer do I focus on Taoism and Confucianism separately. I now believe that we should suggest to high school students that despite a variety of religious expression throughout Chinese history, e.g., Taoism and Confucianism, these two belief systems are intricately connected to being Chinese. Laurence Thompson argues that "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."² Therefore, I have found it effective to teach the existence of a Chinese religion based on the following five component parts: the presence of the Tao; the

continual ebb and flow of Yin and Yang; an important role for gods; the interconnectedness of humans with the functioning of the universe; and the crucial role of the family. This article will explore the meaning of each of these aspects of Chinese religion and suggest useful materials for conveying to high school students an understanding of these five component parts.

THE TAO

It is popular to say that the Tao cannot be defined. Indeed, Lao Tzu himself presumably said as much. But, of course, we must try to explain this pivotal concept, for its understanding is essential to an appreciation of Chinese religion. Livia Kohn writes,

The Tao, best described as the organic order underlying and structuring the world, cannot be named or known, only intuited. It is unconscious and without name [and] changes in predictable rhythms and orderly patterns. However vague and elusive, the Tao is at the root of all existence. It makes the world function. . . orders the entire universe.³

As a starting point, such a basic definition is useful with high school students. They can be asked to scrutinize their home life, school life, and the natural world in terms of how this “organic order,” the Tao, may be functioning around them. Building comparisons and contrasts with the personified power of Islam’s Allah and the Judeo-Christian God may be useful at the start. Following the introduction of a basic definition, I advocate the use of the Asiapac book, *The Sayings of Lao Zi*. Selections from this cartoon presentation of Taoist ideas have proven effective with high school students because of their concrete, humorous, and yet intellectually valid presentation of the Tao.⁴

YIN AND YANG

Attempting to understand the balance between the forces of Yin and Yang is tied inextricably to an appreciation of the Tao. For this “organic order,” the Tao, is determined through the ever-flowing interplay between the light, strong Yang force and the dark, weak Yin force. I have found that most students are familiar with, and extremely intrigued by, the symbol incorporating the Yin/Yang sign with the eight trigrams. The Asiapac *Sayings of Lao Zi* is again an effective source for introducing students to this concept of Yin/Yang; through the cartoons, they can begin to envision what it might mean in daily life to embrace the idea of non-action as a pathway toward the achievement of harmony. Both concepts, the Tao and balance of Yin/Yang, are usually associated with the institutionalized religion, Taoism. But both beliefs predated by perhaps thousands of years both Confucius and organized Taoism; they are truly an integral part of what I am referring to as Chinese religion.

Several interesting sources may provide high school students with a more concrete appreciation for the Yin/Yang and Tao principles. Students may be surprised to know that, even today in China, some Chinese are consciously committed to a life spent searching for the Tao, attempting to come close in their own lives to the “organic order” underlying the universe. I am intrigued with Bill Porter’s search for Chinese hermits in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Authorities in both Taiwan and China assured Porter, himself a Buddhist, that hermits no longer existed; but he persevered, finding and interviewing many male and female her-



View from the South Gate of Mount Tai, Shandong province. This mountain has been a popular pilgrimage destination for thousands of years.

mits within the Chungnan mountains west of Xian. The book is filled with wonderful photos of hermits, mainly old (70 to 90 years of age); typically these individuals had been living alone in the mountains for 20 to 50 years. They were searching for the Tao through a life of withdrawal and inner contemplation; in other words, they hoped to achieve a balance between Yin and Yang through harmony and a passive existence as close to nature as possible. One hermit questioned by Porter about his religious practice responded:

*Nothingness is the body of the Tao. Not only man, but plants and animals and all living things are part of this body. . . . Our goal is to be one with this natural process.*⁵

Another hermit told Porter:

People lose the Tao when they try to find it. They confuse existence with nonexistence. . . . All we can do is cultivate “Te” (virtue, spiritual power).

*. . . To cultivate true “Te” is to get rid of all powers and thoughts, to be like a baby, to see without seeing, to hear without hearing, to know without knowing.*⁶

I find that the search for the Tao comes alive within Porter’s book. A judicious use of the hermits’ personal words and photos, along with pictures of the precarious trails leading to their homes and temples, cannot help but intrigue high school students. Through the study of such materials, students can focus on a concrete application of the Yin/Yang principles of harmony and balance in pursuit of the Tao.

Several practical approaches to an understanding of Yin/Yang might focus on Feng Shui and Taijiquan. Feng Shui, the practice of Chinese geomancy, is fundamentally based on the balance of wind and water within the natural world. To this day, the principles of Feng Shui play an active role within Chinese culture all over the world. While Yin/Yang balance forms the basis of Feng Shui, other aspects like the five elements, ten stems, twelve branches, and eight trigrams, also constitute a part of the geomantic determination for buildings, burial sites, furniture placement, etc. Carefully excerpted selections from Evelyn Lip’s *Feng Shui: A Layman’s Guide* can be very useful in providing students with a practical application of Yin/Yang.⁷ Also

useful in teaching the importance of Yin/Yang is the exercise form, Taijiquan. This “soft” martial art, practiced widely in China and increasingly popular in the United States, epitomizes the balance between Yin/Yang forces. It consists of constantly flowing movements; when weight shifts to the right leg, a move to the left leg soon follows; when one reaches up to the left, this is balanced with a movement up or down to the right. If the teacher has no student or adult capable of either demonstrating Taijiquan or teaching students some of the movements, several excellent videotapes are available.⁸

THE GODS

Worship of multiple gods is also an important element of Chinese religion. I find, however, that there are fewer effective materials for conveying this principle to high school students unless the teacher has visited a predominantly Chinese culture. Taiwan constitutes an excellent location for appreciating the multiplicity of Chinese gods, most of whom inhabit the cosmos and are believed to be easily accessible within daily life. Temples proliferate: for example, some are dedicated to Guanyin, goddess of mercy and overseer of families and children; others focus on Mazu, goddess of the waters, and Guandi, the red-faced god of war and patron of business. Throughout Taiwan one can see huge temple complexes containing separate buildings dedicated to one or more of these gods.⁹ Despite the attempt of the People’s Republic of China to eliminate religious worship on the mainland, within the last decade it has become clear that the traditional Chinese attachment to particular gods still runs deep. Since the early 1980s, the Chinese have been observed worshipping in many locations, most notably at numerous sacred mountains. Also, recent research by Kenneth Dean documents the very recent activities of religious cults in Fujian province.¹⁰ While valuable teaching materials are not as prevalent as those elucidating the concepts of Tao and Yin/Yang, high school students need to understand that the Chinese have always worshipped numerous deities. However, these efficacious gods, as well as humans, are governed by the Tao and balance of Yin/Yang.

HUMAN CONNECTIVITY TO THE UNIVERSE

The fourth essential characteristic of Chinese religion constitutes a belief that humans are important only as they exist within a larger universe. Students can best appreciate the significance of this principle through a focus on Chinese landscape art. Within these paintings, both humans and animals are dwarfed by soaring



A Taoist priest telling fortunes, Qiyun Mountain, Anhui province.

mountains. Such a depiction of humans relates to religious belief because the humans are living in accordance with nature’s change; they are susceptible to the interaction between the Yang force of the mountain and the Yin force of the earth. *The Web That Has No Weaver* is another effective source which explicates this theory. Here, the author explores the basic principles of Chinese medicine. He suggests that the basis of Chinese medicine

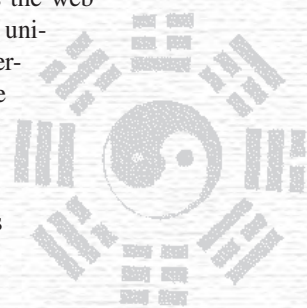
lies with “a logic which assumes that a part can be understood only in its relation to the whole. . . . a symptom, therefore, is not traced back to a cause, but is looked at as a part of a totality.”¹¹

Kaptchuk argues that the Chinese doctor looks for patterns of disharmony in the patient’s body. In developing his thesis, he links medicine with Yin/Yang theory and develops the web metaphor to explain the Chinese view of the universe. There is no single weaver of this web; certainly no one god and no humans influence the formation of the web. While humans may appeal to many different gods for help in the course of their lives, the gods are themselves susceptible to the balance of Yin/Yang forces which influence the Tao.

THE FAMILY

Finally, the Chinese stress on family relationships and the resulting mutual obligations constitute the fifth essential ingredient of Chinese religion. Texts universally discuss this important characteristic of Chinese culture and present it as the essence of Confucianism. I think it is more persuasive to recognize it as a part of religious belief. It seems clear that, while Confucius formalized rules of family relationships, both among the living and between the living and the dead, the seeking of harmony among family members long preceded Confucius’s impact on Chinese culture. Individuals are not important as individuals, but only within family units and within the larger universe. Worship of gods usually relates to family desires, e.g., birth of offspring and appropriate funeral rites. The achievement of family harmony must be in accord with the balance between Yin and Yang forces; only through the fulfillment of all these objectives will one find the Tao or the Way. Thus, family relationships become an integral part of Chinese religion and intersect with the four other essential elements of Chinese religion as argued above.

In connection with the principle of family relationships, I advocate the consideration of Chinese attitudes toward food as related to Chinese religion. Since various forms of Chinese





cuisine permeate the American landscape, high school students are invariably familiar with not only the dishes, but more importantly, the style of presentation. Dishes are usually placed in the center of the table; meal participants reach into the dishes for their portions. There is a communal focus to the meals which contrasts with the American approach which typically presents each person with an individual portion. The research of Jordan Paper supports the validity of connecting Chinese religion and food. Through an analysis of archeological objects, the function of restaurants, the nature of the Chinese home and its furnishings, Chinese social relationships and festivals, he concludes,

*Food is involved in the rituals of all cultures, often in some form of sacrifice. However, in China, from the protohistoric period to the present, a communal meal has continually been the form of ritual central to Chinese religion. In it, food is often shared with (sacrificed to) not only the relevant participants, but spirits, ancestral or otherwise, as well.*¹²

Historical evidence, continued Chinese adherence to festival traditions, and everyday reverence for good cooking, all indicate that food, like the family, may be viewed as an integral part of Chinese religion.¹³

At the high school level, we face the reality of a brief time period in which to present the essence of Chinese religion. Concrete and approachable teaching materials are necessary. I believe that focusing on the five essential elements described above allows the teacher to present Chinese religion in a coherent manner where religious beliefs and practices are closely intertwined with the evolution of Chinese culture. While Chinese religion is not conventionally presented this way in high school textbooks, I commend it. When coupled with a selection of the recommended teaching sources, students will gain a practical appreciation of the abstract principles associated with Chinese religion. Finally, I suggest that this presentation of Chinese religion can provide an effective basis for the inevitable comparisons with other religions typically studied in high school World Cultures and World History courses. ■

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Woman burning incense at a temple in Shanghai.

NOTES

1. See the article, "Chinese Religions: The State of the Field (Part II)" in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54:2 (May 1995) for corroboration of the ongoing scholarly debate concerning the above issues.
2. Laurence G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1989, 1-2. For support of this approach, also see Jordan Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995.
3. Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992, 45-6.
4. *The Sayings of Lao Zi*, ed. Tsai Chih Chung, Singapore: AsiaPac Books and Educational Aids, 1989. I have also found the following collection of poetry valuable in conveying the meaning of the Tao. *Songs of the Immortals*, trans. Xu Yuan Zhong. Singapore: New World Press, 1994.
5. Bill Porter, *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*. San Francisco, California: Mercury House, 1993, 57, 8.
6. Porter, 184.
7. Evelyn Lip, *Feng Shui: A Layman's Guide to Chinese Geomancy*. Torance, California: Heian International, 1994. Recommended sections include the following: chapters one and two which define Feng Shui and Yin/Yang; pictures of the Luopan or geomancer's compass, pp. 33-36; drawings and photos of auspicious and dangerous home locations, chapter six.
8. I have found selections from the following tape useful: *T'ai Chi for Health, The Yang Short Form* with Terence Dunn: Healing Arts Publishing, Inc., 120 minutes, available through China Books, 2929 24th Street, San Francisco, CA 94110. This tape includes a philosophical and historical introduction, warm-up exercises, step-by-step instruction, and a complete short-form demonstration.
9. For short descriptions and drawings of various gods, see Jonathan Chamberlain, *Chinese Gods*. Taiwan: Loyal Books, 1983.
10. Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.
11. Ted Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine*. New York: Congdon and Weed, 1987, 7. All of chapter one is useful for high school students.
12. Jordan Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, 40.
13. Additional useful sources which explore this connection between food and religion are Frederick J. Simoons, *The Food of China*. Boca Raton; CRC Press, 1991; and E. N. Anderson, *The Food of China*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Photos courtesy of Diana Marston Wood.