The Heritage of Non-theistic Belief in China

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Naturalism and humanism have long histories in China, side-by-side with a long history of theistic belief. In this paper I will first sketch the early naturalistic and humanistic traditions in Chinese thought. I will then focus on the synthesis of these perspectives in Neo-Confucian religious thought. I will argue that these forms of non-theistic belief should be considered aspects of Chinese religion, not a separate realm of philosophy. Confucianism, in other words, is a fully religious humanism, not a "secular humanism."

The religion of China has traditionally been characterized as having three major strands, the "three religions" (literally "three teachings" or *san jiao*) of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Buddhism, of course, originated in India in the 5th century BCE and first began to take root in China in the 1st century CE, so in terms of early Chinese thought it is something of a latecomer. Confucianism and Daoism began to take shape between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE. But these traditions developed in the context of Chinese "popular religion" (also called folk religion or local religion), which may be considered a fourth strand of Chinese religion. And until the early 20th century there was yet a fifth: state religion, or the "state cult," which had close relations very early with both Daoism and Confucianism, but after the 2nd century BCE became associated primarily (but loosely) with Confucianism.

The earliest documented form of Chinese religion was the state religion of the earliest state-level dynasty, the Shang (roughly 15th to mid-11th century BCE). It was heavily ritualistic, centering on sacrifices made by the kings to their ancestors and oracle-bone, pyromantic divinations to determine the will of the ancestors and the will of the single high god whom they served, Di (Lord, or Shangdi, High Lord).[1] This ritual dyad of sacrifice and divination

[1] The Shang of Shangdi is unrelated to the name of the dynsty. For a concise description of this

symbolized and enacted a belief that became central to both Confucianism and Daoism: the belief in an inherent, ontological connection between the human realm and the realm of gods and ancestors, called "heaven" (*tian*). In Confucian thought, as we shall see, Heaven continued to be the realm of those celestial beings, but it also was reinterpreted as a non-personal absolute reality that was the source of moral authority.

Daoism

The earliest strand of naturalism is found in the Daoist classics, *Laozi* (aka *Daodejing*) and *Zhuangzi*. The *Laozi*, which was compiled into roughly its present form in the 3rd century BCE, is a collection of sayings attributed to an anonymous "Old Master," which is what the word *Laozi* literally means (it is not a name). This Old Master was said to have been an older contemporary of Confucius (Kongzi, or Master Kong), who lived in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE (551-479). However, there is no information about who "Laozi" might actually have been, or even whether there was such an individual, for "Laozi" can also mean "Old Masters," and the book in fact is clearly the product of multiple voices. The other major Daoist classic, *Zhuangzi* (Master Zhuang), is named for its main author, Zhuang Zhou, an actual person who lived in the 4th century BCE. Both of these texts focus on an impersonal absolute reality called the *Dao*, which means "Way" or "Path." The *Dao* in these texts is the "Way of nature," the ineffable origin of all phenomena and the path to be followed to achieve harmony with the natural world. Nature acts spontaneously, without preconceived purpose, but its actions follow patterns that can be understood. By understanding this *dao* and emulating nature one can lead a long and fulfilled life with minimal stress.

Classical Daoism was an intellectual current, not a religion. However, its alleged founder, Laozi, over the course of several centuries became a god. (In Chinese popular religion many gods are former human beings.) In the 2nd century CE this deity, now called Taishang Laojun (Lord Lao the Most High), was the source of a set of revelations to a man named Zhang Daoling, who

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system see Joseph A. Adler, *Chinese Religious Traditions* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002), chapter 2. For a thorough scholarly study by the leading American historian of the Shang see David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

founded the religion of Daoism. From the end of the Han dynasty through the Song dynasty (960-1279) a huge new pantheon of deities came into being, whom Daoists considered to occupy higher heavens than those of the popular pantheon. Eventually there was considerable mutual influence between Daoism and popular religion, to the extent that today many people ignore the difference and call it all Daoism. Nevertheless, underlying this panoply of gods is the essentially impersonal concept of *dao* as the natural order.

Classical Confucianism

Dao was never unique to Daoism; it was equally important in Confucianism, although interpreted somewhat differently. While the Daoist *dao* was the way or pattern of nature, *dao* for the early Confucians was the ideal social-political-ethical order. The Daoist *dao* was always perfectly realized in nature; only humans were alienated from it. For Confucians, the *dao* depended on humans to be put into effect. Confucius said, for example, "If the Way prevailed in the world I would not be trying to change things."[2] Humans could make the Way prevail by learning certain virtues and putting then into effect in their own lives and in society. Chief among these were the virtues of humanity or humaneness (*ren*), rightness or behavior appropriate to circumstances (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*), and wisdom, the knowledge of good and evil (*zhi*). These virtues, at least in potential form, were "given by Heaven (*tian*)," and the ideal person who fully perfected them was a "sage" (*shengren*).[3]

The importance of the terms "Heaven" and "sagehood" in the Confucian tradition, from the earliest times to the present, is one of the reasons (not the only one) for calling Confucianism a religious tradition. "Heaven" has a range of meanings, from purely naturalistic to semi-personalistic. It is "the heavens," including the sky and the realm of the heavenly bodies (sun,

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[2] Trans. Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Macmillan, 1939).

[3] For the sake of brevity I am glossing over the details and omitting the textual evidence here. For these see Adler, *Chinese Religious Traditions*, chapter 3. I am thinking mainly of the *Analects* (*Lunyu*) of Confucius and the *Mencius* (*Mengzi*). Mencius, or Master Meng (Mengzi), lived in the 4th century BCE, about 150 years after Confucius. Both texts are available in several English translations; two good and accessible ones are by D.C. Lau, both in the Penguin Classics series: *Confucius: The Analects* (1979) and *Mencius* (1970; rev. ed. 2003).

moon, planets, stars). It is also the realm of the gods and ancestors. And finally it is the locus of a moral will known as the "mandate of Heaven" (*tian ming*). The original meaning of this term is a doctrine of religio-political legitimation formulated perhaps in the 11th century BCE by the founders of the Zhou dynasty (c. 1145-256 BCE). According to this doctrine, the authority to rule is "given" to a particular royal family by Heaven based on the family's virtue. When that dynasty's virtue dissipates and declines, as it inevitably will, Heaven "takes away" their mandate to rule and awards it to another family. This is, therefore, a theory of dynastic change. It also implies that Heaven recognizes and responds to human virtue. Confucius, for example, says "When you have offended against Heaven there is nowhere you can turn to in your prayers" (*Analects* 3:13), and "If I have done anything improper, may Heaven's curse be on me, may Heaven's curse be on me!" (*Analects* 6:28).

Yet Heaven retained a naturalistic meaning. For example, the first line of the *Zhongyong* (Centrality and commonality), part of the early Confucian canon, says "What Heaven decrees (or "what is given by Heaven") is human nature."[4] But this is interpreted to mean precisely what Mencius meant when he said that human nature is innately good, i.e. that human goodness is natural.[5] Likewise, Mencius interprets the Mandate of Heaven as a way of speaking about the natural attraction of the people to a particular ruler, based on his virtue. Quoting the *Shujing* (Scripture of documents), another canonical text, Mencius says, "Heaven does not speak.... Heaven sees as my people sees; Heaven hears as my people hear."[6] So Mencius (here at least) seems to lean towards the naturalistic end of Heaven's spectrum of meaning.

Nevertheless, Confucians understand Heaven to be the absolute reality, the ultimate moral authority, and the source of the creativity inherent in the natural world. Heaven is the explanation for whatever is beyond human control, for example events that we might attribute either to

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[4] See Wing-tsit Chan, trans. and comp., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 98.

[5] E.g. Mencius 2A.6, 6A.6, 6A.8. The *Zhongyong* is attributed Mencius' teacher and Confucius' grandson, Zisi. Although this cannot be confirmed, there is no doubt that the two texts reflect the same school of thought.

[6] *Mencius* 5A.5.

chance or to necessity, such as the family one is born into or the fact that we must all die. Heaven is also the source of human virtue, and is therefore immanent (in humans); Confucius said, "Heaven produced the virtue (*de*) in me."[7] But that virtue is the creative power that enables humans to transcend their given conditions and become sages. Heaven is therefore both transcendent and immanent.[8] In many respects Heaven is a functional equivalent of the Biblical god. But it does not speak to people, it is not a personal god, and it did not create the world as a whole. Creativity, in traditional Chinese thought, is inherent in the world, not extrinsic to it (more on this below).

The word "sagehood" (*sheng*) has clear religious connotations in Chinese. For Confucius the sages were semi-divine beings who are completely beyond the capability of human beings to match. For him, the ultimate goal of moral self-transformation is to become humane (*ren*). Beginning with Mencius, though, sagehood is redefined as humaneness, making the attainment of sagehood a theoretical possibility for any human being (*Mencius* 6A.7). Yet it still retains an aura of sacredness. For example, the word for a sage, *shengren*, was much later used for the Christian "saint." And the Christian Bible in Chinese is called *Sheng jing*, Holy Scripture. (That word *jing* or "scripture," incidentally, is the same word used for the Confucian canonical books, usually and misleadingly called "classics." It was also the word chosen to translate *sūtra* when Buddhism entered China.)

The third great classical Confucian scholar, Xunzi or Master Xun (3rd century BCE), took the naturalistic strain in Confucianism even further by denying any transcendent meaning to Heaven. For him, *tian* simply means the natural world. The fact that he devotes an entire chapter of his book (*Xunzi*) to debunking the idea that Heaven is a willful entity shows that this semi-personalistic level of meaning was still current in his time. Xunzi argues forcefully, for example, against the common belief in portents and omens, such as the appearance of comets as meaningful symbols of Heaven's pleasure or displeasure with the ruling power. These are simply natural occurences, he says:

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[7] *Analects* 7:22 or 23, depending on the edition.

[8] See Shu-hsien Liu, "The Confucian Approach to the Problem of Transcendence and Immanence," *Philosophy East & West*, 22, no. 1 (1972): 45-52.

> When starts fall or trees make strange sounds, all the people in the country are terrified and go about asking, "Why has this happened?" For no special reason, I reply. It is simply that, with the changes of Heaven and earth and the mutations of the yin and yang, such things once in a while occur. You may wonder at them, but you must not fear them. The sun and moon are subject to eclipses, wind and rain do not always come at the proper season, and strange stars occasionally appear. There has never been an age that was without such occurrences. If the ruler is enlightened and his government just, then there is no harm done even if they all occur at the same time. But if the ruler is benighted and his government ill-run, then it will be no benefit to him even if they never occur at all.[9]

In making these arguments Xunzi is actually developing an important theme that goes back to Confucius himself: the effort to redirect attention from the formal ritualism of court sacrifice and divination to the human socio-ethical-political sphere, which is the arena in which the Way can be put into effect. This is Confucian humanism. Confucius had said, for instance, "Respect ghosts and spirits, but keep them at a distance" (*Analects* 6:22). Thus he believed in the existence of ghosts and spirits, but did not believe that placating them should be one's main concern.[10] Xunzi is likewise saying that humans should devote their energy to the socio-ethical realm, and should realize that human flourishing depends entirely on ourselves. We ultimately control our own destinies, and we must accept that responsibility; we must not fool ourselves into thinking that Heaven can intervene to help us or that Heaven is willfully responsible for our troubles.

Xunzi also had a very interesting, humanistic theory of ritual. He said that formal rituals, especially those practiced in ordinary life, such as marriage, funerals, and ancestral sacrifice, were devised by the great sages of the past in order to embellish or adorn human life by giving us structures through which we can fully develop and express our natural emotions. Such feelings as joy, grief, and reverence are distinctly human characteristics, and so to fully realize them is to be

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[9] Burton Watson, trans., *Hsün Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 83-84.

[10] See the section on Neo-Confucianism below for further discussion of ghosts and spirits.

fully human. Ritual is a means of bringing into existence a fully human world from the raw material of our emotions; it is a means of satisfying certain psychological needs and desires without encroaching on those of others. Only the ancient sages could have achieved this delicate balance, so it is necessary to learn their Ways, which are recorded in the "classics" (scriptures). In relation to sacrifice he says, with astute psychological insight:

> The sacrificial rites originate in the emotions of remembrance and longing for the dead. Everyone is at times visited by sudden feelings of depression and melancholy longing. A loyal minister who has lost his lord or a filial son who has lost a parent, even when he is enjoying himself among congenial company, will be overcome by such feelings. If they come to him and he is greatly moved, but does nothing to give them expression, then his emotions of remembrance and longing will be frustrated and unfulfilled, and he will feel a sense of deficiency in his ritual behavior. Therefore, the former kings established certain forms to be observed on such occasions so that men could fulfill their duty to honor those who deserve honor and show affection for those who command affection. Hence the sacrificial rites originate in the emotions of remembrance and longing, express the highest degree of loyalty, love, and reverence, and embody what is finest in ritual conduct and formal bearing.... To the gentleman they are a part of the way of man; to the common people they are something pertaining to the spirits.[11]

Xunzi's theory of repression clearly anticipates Sigmund Freud by over two millennia. In the last sentence he also makes an interesting point concerning ritual and belief. Since the sages had a psychological purpose in creating the rituals, their efficacy does not depend upon belief in the existence of ancestral spirits or their ability to respond to sacrifice. Common people believe in those things, but a superior or morally noble person (*junzi*) understands their importance and efficacy in psychological, not theological, terms. In this respect and others, Xunzi sounds rather modern to our ears.

Another debunker of common beliefs in the supernatural was Wang Chong, who lived in

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[11] Watson, *Hsün Tzu*, 109-110.

the 1st century CE during the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) and is traditionally not associated with any particular school of thought. Wang explained the efficacy of ritual in terms very similar to Xunzi's theory, and he shared with Xunzi a rational, skeptical intelligence. But he applied it in a more thoroughgoing manner. A widespread belief at that time was that "Heaven, though not anthropomorphic, was purposive, asserting its will through prodigies as warning to men."[12] Wing-tsit Chan summarizes Wang's surviving work, the *Lun heng* (Balanced essays), as follows:

> In clear, critical, and strong terms, he declared that Heaven takes no [deliberate] action, that natural events, including prodigies, occur spontaneously, that there is no such thing as teleology, that fortune and misfortune come by chance, ... that man does not become a ghost at death [and that] any theory must be tested by concrete evidence.[13]

Popular religion

Thus by the time that Buddhism entered China in the 1st century and the Daoist religion arose in the 2nd century, there was a well-established tradition of naturalistic and humanistic thought. On the whole, though, polytheism thoroughly pervaded Chinese life, especially among non-educated commoners. Their beliefs were closely tied to the agricultural cycle and to the forces that influenced it. In contrast to the more abstract Heaven, these forces took the form of an astonishing variety of gods, ghosts or demons, and spirits. Many of these were troublesome, while others were more neutral or benign, such as the gods of particular mountains, rivers, and seas (usually depicted in hybrid animal or animal-human forms), and earth gods (*tu shen*) of other specific localities. The High Lord (Shangdi) of the Shang dynasty survived under several different names, but for the most part was not worshipped by ordinary people.[14] It is important to note, however, that the worldviews of the elite and the commoners were not radically distinct. The panoply of spiritual beings was known to all, and to the extent that members of the elite had

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[12] Chan, *Source Book*, 292.

[13] *Ibid.*, 293.

[14] See Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

family roots in the agricultural tradition, they too engaged in the ritual forms of propitiation of and communication with the various gods, ghosts, and spirits. The religious worldview was a continuous whole, in which differences in emphasis corresponded to differences in the immediate concerns and interests of its participants.

With the possible exception of the high god, none of these spiritual beings was immortal. Nor were they concerned with human virtue: like the ancestors of the Shang kings, the deities worshipped by commoners responded to sacrifices as an exchange of favors (*do ut des*, "I give so that you give"). Sacrifice and divination, and when gods became troublesome, exorcism, were the usual forms of interaction between humans and gods. These rituals performed by commoners, as one might expect, were primarily directed toward the personal welfare of individuals and families, unlike the predominant concerns among the elite for affairs of state. Human interactions with gods involved mutual obligations. Humans were obliged to worship them and to sustain them with sacrificial offerings (usually food). But that obliged the gods to do what they could to benefit human life, e.g. by providing timely rain and sun for crops, or producing sons, or not causing illness. If worship and sacrifice were deemed sufficient yet misfortune continued to occur, people were entitled to turn to different gods (a distinct advantage of polytheism). The relations between humans and gods were governed by the same principles – especially mutual obligation – that governed human society. Thus we can see at this early stage in the history of Chinese religion a characteristic that continues to be prominent to this day: the absence of a sharp disjuncture between the spiritual and mundane worlds. As the oft-quoted saying has it, "Heaven and humanity are one" (*tian ren heyi*).

Buddhism

Buddhism, simultaneously with Daoism, greatly enriched the religious landscape of China. After being brought to China by monks from India and Central Asia in the 1st century, Buddhism slowly spread and underwent a process of "sinicization." This involved the development of several new schools that incorporated distinctly Chinese characteristics – Huayan, Tiantai, Chan (Zen), and Pure Land – between the 5th and 8th centuries.

These new schools arose within the Mahayana ("Great Vehicle") branch of Buddhism.

For our purposes here, the most salient difference between Mahayana and earlier, South Asian forms of Buddhism (Hinayana or Theravada) is the multiplicity of buddhas and bodhisattvas in Mahayana, which for all intents and purposes on the popular level joined the pantheon of Chinese deities. On the level of Buddhist theory, however, there are important distinctions. First, buddhas and bodhisattvas are not gods. Gods occupy the highest rung of the ladder of *samsāra*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This means that humans can be reborn as gods, and that gods are not immortal. Gods exist, and they can help people with mundane ends, but they cannot help people achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth because they themselves are still trapped in it.[15] Second, the most fundamental philosophical principle in Buddhism is the concept of "no-self" (*anātman*), which means that a person has no unchanging essence, no fixed substance of which all observable characteristics are attributes. Mahayana Buddhism extends this concept to all things: all things are "empty" of independent, autonomous essence. Or to put it another way, all things are fundamentally *impermanent* and *interdependent*. Furthermore, this interdependence is not simply mutual influence or relationship; all things are contingent for their very being on all other things.

One effect of the doctrine of no-self or emptiness, on the philosophical level, is to undermine the validity of the *personalization* that is inherent in theism. The concept of a personal deity, like the concept of an autonomous self, is merely a conventional designation for a temporary, ever-changing local sub-system of the universal web of causation.[16] This, in addition to the irrelevance of deities to Buddhist soteriology, makes Buddhism a basically non-theistic religion. (I use "non-theistic" instead of "atheistic" to suggest the fact that the provisional existence of gods is not denied, but they play no role in the scheme of salvation.) Where this is most evident is in Buddhist philosophy and in the religious practice of monastics and more

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[15] A buddha, like the historical Buddha of our cosmic age, Sakyamuni Buddha (5th century BCE), is a person who has entirely left the realm of rebirth. A bodhisattva, such as the bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin, is a person who has achieved enlightenment but vows to remain in the samsaric cycle in order to help other sentient beings achieve enlightenment. The bodhisattva is thus characterized by *wisdom* (enlightenment) and *compassion* (the vow to help other sentient beings).

[16] This is obviously a theory that requires much more explanation than I will provide here. See any introductory text on Buddhism, or my *Chinese Religious Traditions*, chapter 4.

educated laypeople. In a Chan (Zen) monastery, for example, there will be iconic imagery of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and monastics will bow and make symbolic offerings to them. But when asked who or what they are worshipping, they will say something to the effect that the imagery is symbolic of the potential for Buddhahood – the innate wisdom and compassion or "Buddha-nature" – in every sentient being. Less educated commoners, on the other hand, will most likely be completely unaware of the doctrines of no-self and emptiness. For them, the buddhas and bodhisattvas are basically deities, although perhaps on a higher, more universal level than the other deities they worship.

Neo-Confucianism

Buddhism and Daoism dominated the religious and intellectual worldviews of China between the fall of the Han dynasty in the early 3rd century CE and the beginning of the Song in the late 10th. A strong revival of Confucianism, known in the West as "Neo-Confucianism," began in the 11th century and dominated Chinese intellectual life until the 20th.[17] Neo-Confucianism is in part a synthesis of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, although the Confucian core is distinctly dominant. The Daoist strand is mainly the Neo-Confucian cosmology based on *qi* ("psycho-physical stuff"), while the Buddhist element is most evident in the Neo-Confucian theories of mind and mental cultivation, including the practice of meditation. Here I will focus on Neo-Confucian attitudes towards gods, ghosts, and ancestors, the three general types of spiritual beings in Chinese religion.

The seeds of Neo-Confucian cosmology were planted in the early Han dynasty, primarily by Dong Zhongshu (2nd century BCE), a high official who persuaded Emperor Wu of the Han (r. 140-87 BCE) to switch from Daoism to Confucianism as the officially-sanctioned ideology of government.[18] Dong integrated the natural philosophy of *qi* into Confucian thought, in particular

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[17] The term "Neo-Confucianism" is problematic, not only because it is not an indigenous terms, but also because there is little agreement among specialists on what its boundaries are. However, I will use it here for the sake of simplicity. The more accurate term for the group of Confucians I will be discussing is the "Cheng-Zhu school," referring to Cheng Yi (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200). The term they used for themselves is *Daoxue*, or "Learning of the Way."

[18] See de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, 292-310.

the ideas that all existing things (including mind, spirits, and gods) are composed of *qi*, and that *qi* is characterized by two complementary functional modes: *yin* (dark, moist, condensing, sinking) and *yang* (light, dry, expanding, rising). By means of these concepts Dong constructed a cosmological anthropology in which the human body is a microcosm of the universe. This idea would become central to the Daoist view of the human body and its place in the cosmos. The salient point in regard to Neo-Confucianism is that early (classical) Confucianism, which hitherto had no cosmology to speak of, now incorporated the vocabulary of *yin-yang qi* with which to develop a cosmological or naturalistic basis for its moral psychology.[19]

Neo-Confucianism began in the 11th century among *literati* (intellectuals) who were interested in reviving and strengthening Confucianism as an alternative to Buddhism. Buddhism had been attracting many of the creative thinkers in China for several hundred years and was especially popular in the Song.[20] Many of the early Neo-Confucians believed that Buddhism was a threat to Chinese civilization, as it encouraged people to leave their families and join monasteries and nunneries. They felt that Chinese society and Chinese values were based on the family, and that Buddhism – which after all was not an indigenous Chinese tradition – threatened to weaken the social and moral fabric.[21] The conquest of the northern half of Song China in 1127 by the Jurchen, a non-Chinese nomadic culture from the northeast, reinforced the idea that China needed to return to its indigenous cultural roots in order to strengthen itself and regain its lost territory.[22]

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[19] Mencius had made some use of the concept of *qi* (*Mencius* 2A.2), but not in a systematic way. He did, however, emphasize the idea that *qi* has a moral dimension, which is an important point, one that challenges the traditional Western separation (since Hume) of fact and value.

[20] See Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz, Jr., eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), and John R. Mcrae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[21] For a famous example of anti-Buddhist rhetoric see Han Yu's "Memorial on the Bone of the Buddha," in de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, 583-585.

[22] The Jurchen themselves were conquered by the Mongols in 1234, and the Mongols conquered the remaining Song territory in the south in 1279, on their way to assembling the large contiguous land empire in human history (as far west as the Danube). The Chinese eventually drove out the Mongols in 1368.

By the 12th century, after the conquest of north China, some of the new Confucian theories that had arisen in the 11th century were forged into a synthesis by Zhu Xi (1130-1200), who is known as the architect or "great synthesizer" of the Neo-Confucian religio-philosophical system that dominated Chinese intellectual life until the 20th century. The extremely prolific Zhu Xi constructed not only a system of philosophical thought and religious practice but also a complete educational curriculum extending from what we could call primary school to the graduate level. His philosophical system, which incorporated cosmology, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, anthropology, history, literature, and government, included a naturalistic theory of gods, ghosts, and ancestors, to which we now turn.

As mentioned above, *qi*, or psycho-physical stuff, is the substance of which all existing phenomena are constituted, including all the phases of matter, energy, mind, and even the various forms of spirit (*shen*). It is convenient, although over-simplified, to think of *qi* as a fundamental vapor that can condense into solid matter and disperse into finer and finer forms. It is something like the *aer* of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Anaximenes, who claimed that it (like *qi*) was the fundamental substance or nature (*physis*) of all things.[23] *Yin* and *yang*, whose root meanings are "shady" and "sunny" (or dark and light), are not substances or things but rather functional modes of *qi*. *Yin* is *qi* in its dense, dark, sinking, wet, condensing mode; *yang* denotes the light, bright, rising, dry, expanding mode. Together *yin* and *yang* represent the principle of bipolarity or complementarity, which was almost universally considered in China since the Han dynasty to be the most fundamental ordering principle of the cosmos – in Neo-Confucian terms, the most fundamental, universal *li* (principle, pattern, or order).

Li and *qi* are the fundamental terms in Zhu Xi's philosophical system. *Li* is the inherent orderliness of all *qi*. But unlike the modern scientific notion of natural law (descriptive but not prescriptive), *li* has both descriptive and normative aspects; it is both the natural order and the moral order. In Zhu Xi's terms, *li* is both "the principle by which [things] are as they are" (*suo yiran zhi li*) and "the principle of [things] as they must be" (*suo dangran zhi li*).[24] This non-

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[23] See G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 143-162.

[24] See Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Edmund Ryden (New Haven:

dualism of fact and value in Confucianism goes back to the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which implies that the natural world (the naturalistic aspect of Heaven) responds to human virtue, and it was reinforced by Mencius' claim that morality is natural to human beings.[25]

Neo-Confucian ideas about theism are expressed in terms of their theories on "ghosts and spirits," or *gui-shen*. Ghosts (*gui*) are unfriendly, dangerous spirits of the dead, especially those who died in unnatural or otherwise extraordinary ways; those for whom the proper burial rites were not performed; and those whose descendants have neglected them, leaving them with no proper place in the social order, which includes both the living and the dead. Spirits (*shen*) are those whose deaths were natural and properly observed, and whose descendants honor them properly with sacrificial offerings. In other words, these spirits are ancestors (*zu*, or *zuxian*).

But the word *shen* – in the Song dynasty as well as the present day – also refers to gods, in all their varieties. There are gods of nature (mountains, rivers, etc.); there are gods who were once powerful people, and therefore also ancestors (e.g. Guan Yu, the famous warrior of the post-Han period[26]); there are household gods (e.g. Caojun, the stove god); there are bureaucratic gods (e.g. Chenghuang, the city god); and there is the master of them all, the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang dadi or Yuhuang shangdi, the most common modern names for the High Lord of the Shang dynasty, Di/Shangdi). All of these are *shen,* who were and are clearly and unambiguously worshipped as gods.

Then there are the spirits of the Confucian sages (*shengren*) and worthies (*xian*), such as Confucius and his chief disciples, and Mencius, who were installed in government-established temples and accorded special rites. Whether these are to be considered gods, heroes, or ancestral spirits – in this case not of families but of the class of scholar-officials – is open to question. Functionally they seem to be parallel to the patron gods of various occupations (e.g. shoemakers,

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Yale University Press, 2002), 346.

[25] The rest of this section is adapted from one section of my chapter, "Varieties of Spiritual Experience: *Shen* in Neo-Confucian Discourse," in Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Confucian Spirituality*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 120-148.

[26] He is one of the heroes of the much-loved historical novel *Sanguo yanyi* (Tale of the Three Kingdoms), and is worshipped as Guangong or Guandi (Lord Guan).

printers, dyers), who were also once historical individuals. But since the word *shen* covers them all, this is not a problem we really need to solve. In any case there will be no definitive answer, as different worshippers have different conceptions of them.

Confucius was famously reticent concerning ghosts and spirits, and the Neo-Confucians were very much aware of this. As mentioned earliler, Confucius had said, "Respect ghosts and spirits, but keep them at a distance." And when a disciple asked about "serving ghosts and spirits" he replied, "When one is not yet able to serve other people, how can one serve ghosts?" When the disciple asked about death, Confucius said, "When one does not yet understand life, how can one understand death?" (*Analects* 11:11).

Statements like these do not mean that Confucius did not believe in ghosts and spirits; they reflect, rather, his attempts to redirect the attention of the literati of his day to the urgent social, ethical, and political tasks of restoring harmony to a society wracked by war and political strife. He felt that what was most urgent was the moral revitalization of the ruling class, and that the way to achieve this was not to court the favor of gods and ancestors but to revive the idealized Way or ways of the benevolent sage-kings who had founded the Zhou dynasty some five hundred years earlier. While this Way included worship of ancestors and various gods, such worship without proper understanding and reverence was meaningless and ineffective, and even with understanding and reverence was no substitute for good government. So Confucius stressed learning, thinking, and moral self-cultivation as the key to good government and meaningful ritual. "If one is not humane (*ren*), what can he have to do with ritual? If one is not humane, what can he have to do with music [part of court ritual]?" (*Analects* 3:3).

The Neo-Confucians went considerably further than Confucius in distancing themselves from popular worship of ghosts and spirits – except for ancestral spirits, which will be discussed below. While not denying the existence of apparitions and ghosts, Zhu Xi and his school "rationalized" or "naturalized" them to a considerable degree. That is, they interpreted them as functions of the natural processes of *qi*, implying that at least some forms of ghosts and spirits lacked conscious, personal wills. In this respect they were in line with the rationalistic and sceptical traditions of Xunzi and Wang Chong. Zhang Zai (1020-1077), for example (one of Zhu Xi's predecessors), said, "Ghosts and spirits are the inherent potential (*liang-neng*) of the two

[modes of] *qi*."[27] Another predecessor, Cheng Yi (1033-1107) said, in a similar vein, "Ghosts and spirits are traces of the creative process."[28] Zhu Xi himself said, "The same principles (*li*) apply to human beings, heaven and earth, ghosts and spirits."[29] And Zhu's disciple Chen Chun (1159-1223) said, "Ghosts and spirits are nothing more than the contraction and expansion, coming and going, of *yin* and *yang qi*. "[30]

As these statements suggest, the terms *gui* and *shen* were thoroughly integrated into Neo-Confucian natural philosophy. They were even used in reference to such phenomena as phases of the weather, in which case they definitely lacked consciousness. Zhu Xi's explanation of the terms relied in part on the traditional etymologies of *gui* and *shen,* relating them to the homophones "returning" (*gui*) and "extending/expanding" (*shen*), as we shall see below.[31] But he was primarily interested in correlating the terms with the most fundamental polarity, *yin* and *yang*, thereby making it possible to incorporate all aspects of spirit and spirituality into his comprehensive religio-philosophical system. For this he relied primarily on his Northern Song

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[27] *Zheng-meng* (Correcting Youthful Ignorance), in *Zhangzi quanshu* (Zhang Zai's Complete Writings) (Sibu beiyao ed.), section 10; cf. Chan, *Source Book,* 505; quoted frequently, e.g. by Chen Chun in *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:6a, p. 611. Chen explains *liang-neng* as "the spontaneous ability of the two [modes of] *qi* to expand and contract, or go and come" (ibid.) – i.e. the inherent dynamism of *qi*. See also Ch'en Ch'un, *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained: The Pei-hsi tzu-i*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 143.

[28] *Yichuan Yijuan* (Cheng Yi's Commentary on the *Yijing*) (Congshu jicheng ed.), 2: 82); and *Er Cheng quanshu* (Sibu beiyao ed.), 1:7b. Cheng had also referred to *gui* and *shen* as "functions of Heaven and earth" (quoted by Zhu Xi, *Zhongyong zhangju* in *Sishu jizhu* [Sibu beiyao ed.]: 8b), and "products of the creative process" (Hu Guang, comp., *Xingli daquan shu* [Taibei: Commercial Press, 1986), vol 710, 28:1a, p. 608).

[29] Zhu Xi, *Zhouyi benyi* (The Original Meaning of the *Yijing*) (1177; rpt. Taibei: Hualian, 1978), 1:9a, comment on *Wenyan*, hexagram 1.

[30] *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:6a, p. 611; cf. *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained*, p. 143. Daniel K. Gardner has thoroughly documented Zhu Xi's beliefs on *gui-shen* in "Ghosts and Spirits in the Sung Neo-Confucian World: Chu Hsi on *Kuei-shen*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115.4 (1995): 598-611, where he places them under three categories: (1) contractive and expansive forces, (2) ghosts, monsters, and spirits, and (3) ancestral spirits. See also Gardner's "Zhu Xi on Spirit Beings," in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996):106-119.

[31] See, e.g., Wang Chong, *Lun Heng* (Balanced Essays) (Sibu beiyao ed.), 20:9b, and Zhu Xi, *Zhouyi benyi*, 3:4b.

predecessors, Zhang Zai and Cheng Yi, arguing that the terms *gui* and *shen* could be used to describe impersonal, empirically observable manifestations of *qi*: According to Zhu:

> *Gui* and *shen* are nothing more than the growth and dispersion of *yin* and *yang*.[32]
>
> That which alternately contracts and expands is *qi*. Within Heaven-and-earth there is nothing that is not *qi*. Human *qi* and the *qi* of Heaven-and-earth are constantly interacting, with no interruption.[33]
>
> *Shen* is expanding (*shen*); *gui* is contracting (*qu*). For example, the moment when wind and rain, thunder and lightning, first appear is *shen.* And when wind stops and rain passes, thunder stops and lightning ceases, this is *gui.*[34]

In popular belief ghosts and spirits were personal, conscious beings who could be placated or driven away (e.g. by exorcism or firecrackers), but were fundamentally uncanny. In Neo-Confucian theory *gui* and *shen* operated according to the natural principle of *yin* and *yang* and were therefore capable (at least theoretically) of being rationally understood:

> By the time we have attended thoroughly to ordinary daily matters, the principles governing *gui* and *shen* will naturally be understood.[35]
>
> [Most] explanations of *gui-shen* take them to be uncanny. But the world itself has a moral principle (*daoli*). We cannot say that these [phenomena] are not unusual, [but neither can we say] that they are not regular aspects of the creative process.[36]

In *Analects* 7:20, it is said that Confucius "did not discuss the uncanny (*kuai*), force (*li*), disorders (*luan*), or spirits (*shen*)," with no distinctions noted among the four items. But Zhu Xi introduced a qualification. He said that the first three items

> are not regular aspects of principle (*fei li zhi zheng*), and are definitely what the Sage did not discuss. [But] "ghosts and spirits are traces of the creative process"

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[32] *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:2a, p. 609, and *Zhuzi quanshu* (Zhu Xi's 'Complete Writings'), comp. Li Guangdi (1713; rpt. Taibei: Guangxue, 1977), 51.2b.

[33] *Xingli daquan shu,* 28:2b, p. 609.

[34] *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:2a, p. 609.

[35] *Zhuzi quanshu,* 51:2a, trans. Chan, *Source Book:* 644.

[36] *Zhuzi quanshu,* 51:5a.

> [quoting Cheng Yi]. Although they are not irregular (*fei bu zheng*) [i.e. they are "principled" or ordered], nevertheless they are not the goal of fathoming principle. There are things which are not easily understood; therefore one does not lightly discuss them with others.[37]

In other words, ghosts and spirits are part of the *natural* world, but one should not be overly concerned with them. Zhu was also willing to acknowledge the possible existence of bogeys, monsters, or uncanny apparitions (*kuai*), but insisted that they are not outside the natural order (*tianli*):

> For example, the *Jiayu* (Sayings of the Confucian School) says, "The monsters of the mountains are called *gui* and *wangliang*; the monsters of the water are called *long* (dragons) and *wangxiang*; and the monsters of the earth are called *fenyang*." All these are produced by confused and perverse *qi* and are surely not without *li* – you mustn't stubbornly think they are without *li*. It's like the winter's being cold and the summer's being warm; this is the regular (*zheng*) *li*. But there are times when suddenly in the summer it turns cold and in the winter it turns warm – how can we say there isn't a *li* for this! Still, because it isn't the ordinary (*chang*) *li* we consider it uncanny.[38]

It is clear that Zhu Xi was determined to show that everything that actually existed in the world – or had at least been attested in books that he accepted as canonical or trustworthy – was part of the natural/moral order (*tianli/daoli*). Some of the strange or uncanny phenomena that filled the Chinese popular imagination, such as ghosts and hauntings of various sorts, fell into this category for him.

When it came to ancestral spirits, however, it was not a matter of accepting or rejecting popular beliefs. Since ancestor worship had been incorporated into Confucian thought and practice from the very beginning, and had been philosophically elaborated in the doctrines of

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[37] Zhu's comment on *Analects* 7:20, in *Sishu jizhu*, 4:5a.

[38] *Zhuzi yulei* (Master Zhu's Classified Conversations), comp. Li Jingde (1270; rpt Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 3:37; trans. Gardner, "Ghosts and Spirits in the Sung Neo-Confucian World," 605-606 (slightly modified).

filial piety (*xiao*) and ritual propriety (*li*, originally referring primarily to ancestral sacrifice), the Neo-Confucians never questioned the real existence of ancestral spirits. But here too these spirits (*shen*) or ancestors (*zu*) were very nearly stripped of their personal identities. They were simply "traces of the creative process" or "the expansion and contraction" of *qi*.

Zhu Xi's explanation of death is likewise a straightforward application of his basic theory of *qi* in terms of the *yin*-soul, or *po*, and the *yang*-soul, or *hun*, which are the *yin* and *yang* portions of *qi* in the body and mind. These were and are widely-used concepts in popular Chinese religion, although there are numerous variations of belief concerning their number and their natures.[39] Zhu's theory represents the simplest, most systematic version. He said, for example:

> While humans have much *qi*, there must come a time when it is exhausted. When it is exhausted, then the *hun qi* returns to Heaven and the physical *po* returns to earth, and they die. When humans are about to die, the warm *qi* rises upward, which is called the *hun* ascending; the body down below gradually cools, which is called the *po* descending. This is why when there is life there must be death; when there is a beginning there must be an end. What gathers and disperses is *qi*.[40]

This might appear at first to be a rather mechanistic account that would preclude the ancestral spirits' having consciousness. Were this the case, then the efficacy of ancestral sacrifice would be called into question. But a naturalistic explanation based on *qi* did *not* preclude consciousness on the part of the ancestral spirits, because the prevailing view among Neo-Confucians was that conscious awareness is in fact an attribute of the purest, finest grades of *qi*, which is what constitutes spirits. For example, as Zhu Xi's student (and son-in-law), Huang Gan, explained:

> Human biology [lit. human life] is simply *jing* (vital essence) and *qi*. What constitutes hair, bones, flesh and blood is *jing*. What constitutes breath, cold, and warmth is *qi*. But humans are the most numinous (*ling*) of the myriad things;[41]

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[39] See, for example, David K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 31-33.

[40] *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:13a, p. 614; also *Zhuzi yulei*, 3:37.

[41] Paraphrasing Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo* (Discussion of the Supreme Polarity Diagram).

> they are not trees and rocks. Therefore their *jing* and their *qi* are full of spirit (*shen*). The spirit of *jing* is called *po*; the spirit of *qi* is called *hun*. What enables the eyes and ears to see and hear is the *po*; what enables this mind to think is the *hun*. Together, the *po* and *hun* are the spirit of *yin* and *yang*, and yet they are full of *li.* Only in the *hun* and *po* is there the fullness of *li* (moral order/principle).[42]
>
> The *Yijing* says, "*Jing* and *qi* constitute things."[43] *"Jing"* means vital essence and blood; *"qi"* means warmth and vapor.... Vital essence and blood, warmth and vapor each have pure, numinous awareness (*xuling zhijue*) within them. The pure, numinous awareness of vital essence and blood is the *po*. The pure, numinous awareness of warmth and vapor is the *hun*. This pure, numinous awareness is not a pure, floating object. It is composed simply of abundant [or many] moral principle(s).[44]

"Pure, numinous awareness" (*xuling zhijue*) is thus characteristic of *qi* itself, at least in its finer phases, and is inherently moral. Thus it is the inherent capacity of consciousness in the finer forms of *qi* that make ancestral sacrifice efficacious. While a more naturalistic or mechanistic notion of affinity or resonance might account for the impersonal connection itself between the *qi* of the ancestor and that of the descendant during the rituals of ancestor worship, it is difficult to see how it would explain their *efficacy* (i.e. the ancestor's presumed awareness of and meaningful response to the petition, for example). So, while in certain respects Neo-Confucian theories about *gui* and *shen* were reminiscent of the rationalistic and naturalistic theories of Xunzi and Wang Chong, most Neo-Confucians differed from these forebears in insisting on the linkage between the natural world and the human world – in particular, the immanence and naturalness of human values (implied above by "the fullness of *li*"), and the potential for an attenuated form of consciousness in the fundamental substrate that constitutes all things in the natural world.

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[42] *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:24a, p. 620.

[43] *Yijing* (Scripture of Change), *Xici* (Appended remarks) A.4.2. *Zhouyi benyi*, 3:4b.

[44] *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:25a, p. 620. Although *xu* is more literally translated as "empty," I use "pure" here, in the sense of "pure consciousness" (i.e. consciousness without an object), which conveys a clearer and more appropriate meaning in this context.

Conclusions

Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian system of thought and practice, which dominated the religious and philosophical life of most Chinese literati for about 800 years, was a naturalistic, humanistic worldview that was flexible enough to acknowledge the existence of gods, ghosts, and ancestors and to incorporate them into its natural philosophy.[45] It was not a scientific worldview by our current standards because it was not based on mathematics – although mathematics was highly developed in Song China.[46] That was a linkage that would have to wait for Galileo. It was based on two fundamental concepts: *qi*, which comprehends the entire continuum of matter and energy and claims "spirit" to be the finest, most refined end of that spectrum; and *li*, the natural/moral order that is inherent in *qi*. There is, therefore, no real distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" in this system. Or, to put it another way, there is no "supernatural."

The breadth and non-duality of this system enabled Chinese intellectuals to contemplate all aspects of human experience – including religious experience – as being theoretically within the realm of human knowledge. There was no sharp distinction, for example, between rationality and intuition, or thinking and feeling, because both elements in these pairs were functions of the "mind-heart," or *xin*. Likewise there was no ontological distinction between mind and body, because mind was one of the functional modes of *qi*. This is not to say that these distinctions were not recognized; it simply means that their relationships were understood according to the *yin-yang* model, which is one of "unity in duality," or "non-duality." That is, the differences between them are real, but neither can exist without the other, like north and south or positive and negative.

The significance of this middle ground between monism and dualism for an understanding of Chinese thought cannot be exaggerated. It makes possible a worldview in which rationality does not preclude or conflict with a sense of awe and an appreciation of mystery. As Zhu Xi put it,

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[45] I mention "practice" here, although it is not covered in this paper, to alert the reader that this was a total religious worldview that included formal and informal ritual as well as specific methods of self-cultivation, such as meditation.

[46] See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 3: *Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and Earth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

> *Yang* ... is the beginning of things; *yin* ...is the end of things. If we are able to trace back to their beginnings and understand how they are generated, then we can turn to their ends and understand how they die. This is the ineffable mystery (*buyan zhi miao*) of the orderly process of creation, flowing from past to present throughout heaven and earth.[47]

Some modern thinkers, such as Thomas Berry, have written in a similar vein about "the great cosmic liturgy of the natural world."[48] Freed from the limitations of personalistic theism, this kind of perspective has intriguing possibilities for the 21st century.

Although Chinese humanism and naturalism have in general been limited to literati or intellectuals, and theism (polytheism) has been the rule on the popular level, China has never experienced the kind of clashes that we have seen in the West between religion and science, from Galileo to the present day. One reason for this might be that Chinese gods are not creators. Creation myths are relatively unimportant in Chinese religions; in fact the creators, such as Pangu and Nüwa, are not even part of the popular religious pantheon. And some of the most influential creation myths concern not the creation of the natural world but the creation of culture.[49]

The Chinese, on all levels of society, seem to have always assumed that our world *evolved* from a primordial chaos. One way this has been commonly expressed is in terms of the familiar *taiji* symbol of *yin* and *yang*: ☯. The outer circle represents the primordial chaos out of which spontaneously *emerges* the fundamental polarity of *yin* (dark) and *yang* (light), which then go on to produce the "myriad things" by combination and recombination.[50] Although not a Big Bang theory, the *yin-yang* principle of bipolarity clearly has scientific parallels with, for example,

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[47] Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Taijitu shuo jie* (Master Zhu's commentary on the "Discussion of the Supreme Polarity Diagram"), in Zhang Boxing, comp., *Zhou Lianxi xiansheng quanji* (Zhou Dunyi's Collected Works) (1708; rpt. in *Zhengyi tang quanshu* [Baibu congshu jicheng ed.]), 1:31a.

[48] Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 19.

[49] E.g. the primordial sages Fuxi, Shennong, and Huangdi and the mythic kings Yao, Shun, and Yu.

[50] For Zhu Xi's statement of this idea see Chan, *Source Book*, 642.

electro-magnetic polarity. Similarly, the early Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (4th century BCE) proposed a theory of biological evolution.[51] Though not based on the principle of natural selection and somewhat fanciful by modern standards, Zhuangzi's account reflects the fundamental Chinese claim, directly contradicting Plato and the whole series of "footnotes to Plato" that constitutes Western philosophy (according to Alfred North Whitehead), that what is real is that which changes. Thus *change*, not permanence, is the descriptive and normative baseline of Chinese natural philosophy.

In the second half of the 20th century, attitudes toward such matters in mainland China were of course deeply influenced by the powerful indoctrinating influence of the Maoist adaptation of Marxist historical materialism. This perpetuated a naive faith in materialistic science that absolutely ruled out any theistic opposition to such theories as evolution. So if anything China has displayed the opposite of the contemporary American distrust of science, but based on a similar naiveté and lack of critical thinking. But there is an astounding revival of religion occuring in mainland China today, including a renewed interest in Confucianism. So perhaps the pendulum will eventually reach a point of equilibrium where the Chinese again draw on their traditions of religious naturalism and humanism.

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[51] See Chan, *Source Book*, 204.