

# The historical roots and character of Secularism in China

‘...unlike the West, which had to deal with a powerful Church for centuries, the Chinese had begun with a secular outlook that ensured that no Church could be established to challenge political authority.’\*

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\*Quote from ‘Secular China’ in *Diasporic Chinese Ventures: The Life and works of Wang Gengwu*. Benton, Gregor and Hong Liu. 2004. Routledge. p.126.



Above: Qin Shi Huang, (reign: 246-221 BC) was the first Qin emperor. He was known for introducing Legalism and for unifying China. Qin Shi Huang outlawed Confucianism and is purported to have buried alive many of its scholars.

Left: Confucius statue at the Confucius Temple (Beijing, China). Photograph by Miguel A. Monjas. 2005.

Below: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are one, a litang style painting portraying three men laughing by a river stream, 12th century, Song Dynasty.



PROFESSOR WANG GUNGWU’S observation and claim about Chinese religion is an important one. Prasenjit Duara argues that this statement is fundamentally correct for much of Chinese history. In this article, he explores the roots of this statement and the implications for our understanding of Chinese state and society. Note another related comment, this time from the 4th Century BCE text *Guoyu*, quoting a minister explicating cosmology to the king of Chu:

*“Anciently, men and spirits did not mingle...(there were special men and women called xi and wu) who supervised the position of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters... [But later] Men and spirits became intermingled, with each household indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances which had hitherto been conducted by the shamans. As a consequence, men lost their reverence for the spirits, the spirits violated the rules of men, and natural calamities arose. Hence, the successor of Shaohao, Quanzhu, charged Chong, Governor of the South, to handle the affairs of heaven in order to determine the proper places of the spirits, and Li, Governor of Fire, to handle the affairs of the Earth in order to determine the proper places of men. And such is what is meant by cutting the communication between Heaven and Earth.”*

Prof. K.C. Chang notes that this myth is the most important reference to shamanism and its central role in ancient Chinese politics in early China. He argues that the king himself was the most important shaman and he and his priests sought to monopolise access to the sacred authority of Heaven. (Chang, Kwang-chih. 1983. *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*. Harvard University Press. 44-55.)

In other words, the emperor aided by his ritual specialists not only claimed monopoly of communication with sacred power with regard to other clergy or church but also with regard to the people. This modality of historical authority was very different from other Axial Age (AA) civilisations.

AA civilisation is a concept pioneered by Karl Jaspers who built on Max Weber and it was developed subsequently by S.N. Eisenstadt. It has recently become important once again in historical sociology. The period covers a thousand years from 600 BCE and concerns revolutionary developments in society, philosophy and religion across the geographical axis of China, India, the Middle East and Greece. Key thinkers and elite intellectuals sought the quest for human meaning beyond this world and beyond magic.

Key to AA is the split between transcendence and mundane. The goals of these civilisations were embedded in a divine transcendent realm. Although these goals were beyond human reach –including that of the state –all humans should aspire towards their realisation. Several Indian religions felt they could never be realised in this world and became other-worldly. A deep tension developed in the Abrahamic religions between transcendence and human effort to realise it, e.g. ‘City upon the hill’ (a phrase from the parable of Salt and Light in Jesus’ sermon on the Mount). He tells his listeners, ‘You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.’ In the Chinese religions, Heaven was transcendent, but its power, moral authority and ideals could be realised in this world. (According to Weber, it was not transcendent but immanent).

In all AA civilisations, professional clerical groups emerged (church, priests, monks, ulama) as institutionally separate from the state in order to interpret transcendence and limit the moral authority of the state. They thus dominated a public sphere autonomous from the state. As a consequence of the divergence between the transcendent goals and its practical achievement, AA religions have a built-in motor or propensity to challenge the existing establishment and seek new means of personal and institutional change to achieve the transcendent goals. (Note, for example, how in India, bhakti and oppositional movements evoked the transcendent in defying authority and create a wandering public sphere). But co-optation is an ever-present possibility.

In China, the institutional separateness of Confucianists and Daoists was never fully secured because the state claimed the monopoly of access to the transcendent. While the critique of the ruler based on Heaven’s authority was a recurring trend in China, co-optation was often the result. I see two basic reasons for this. The first has to do with the developed form of pre-Axial traditions of sacred authority in Shang China.

Anthony Yu has shown that there were always two forms of religious authority in China: Heaven and the ancestor. The emperor made two kinds of claim for his absolute sovereignty. One was in the cosmic realm of the relations between Heaven and Earth and the other was in the realm of human relations. The former derived from a transcendent Heaven and the latter from a less transcendent but no less powerful cult of the imperial ancestor who also had sacral potency. For instance, for punitive expeditions during the Shang, the emperor had to receive mandate from ancestor Di. (Yu, Anthony C. 2007. *State and Religion in China*. Chicago: Open Court. 30-40.)





Left: Hieromartyr Metrophanes (Metrophanes) Tsi-Chung Chang, Chinese priest of Peking, martyred in June 1900 (Boxer rebellion). The icon is painted by the sisters of the Holy Nativity Convent, Brookline MA, based on the original group icon of the Holy Martyrs of the Boxer Rebellion located at the dining hall of the Holy Transfiguration Monastery also in Brookline MA.



Left: Anonymous Chinese artist, 19th century: Ancestors gallery. Tempera paint on canvas, c. 185 x 98 cm. The rituals of the pre-Axial tradition of ancestor-worship – or what Yu calls ‘ancestor-making’, transform a kinsman into a symbol of divine power – that authorises the emperor to trump or pre-empt the transcendent power of Heaven.

Therefore, it is the pre-Axial tradition of ancestor-worship – or what Yu calls ‘ancestor-making’, whereby rituals transform a kinsman into a symbol of divine power – that authorises the emperor to trump or pre-empt the transcendent power of Heaven.

Yet this is not entirely true. There is always a mix of AA and pre-AA ideas. Confucius and Mencius sought to locate Heaven beyond the exclusive access and control of the ruler and create a morality that also subjected the ruler and every individual to it. Not only was there a learned Confucian elite and Daoist priesthood present for two millennia but also a Buddhist clergy seeking autonomy. In each case, however, the imperial centre was able to subordinate them to his power. Most famous was the first Qin emperor’s effort to exterminate Confucianism. In the Han period, Confucius was ‘made’ into a lineal descendant of the Shang. Thus, he was converted into an imperial ancestor which gave the emperor the greater right of ancestral access to his worship (Yu, 45–48).

From one perspective, the political history of China may be seen as a contest between imperial authority and elites seeking to claim the authority of Heaven or other forms of transcendence. The Confucians and the Buddhists were, of course, the most important claimants. The institutional history of imperial China documents the rise and fall of the autonomy of Buddhist monasteries and the changing role of Confucians in the court and in the opposition. However, it is also believed that with the Kangxi era (1661–1722), the right of Confucians to serve as an alternative authority outside the state – except under conditions of individual self-sacrifice – was extinguished and they were subordinated to imperial power for the last time.

From the perspective of Confucianism, the elite had to fight both the incorporation by imperial power as well as the challenge posed by the Buddhists (and to a lesser extent, the Daoists). Indeed, it is possible that by fighting the strong notion of transcendence of the Buddhists they were forced into an alliance with the state. Note also that ancestral worship and the lineage system (an instrument of attack against Buddhism) was one that joined Confucians with the imperial state as part of imperial ideology. But perhaps the most important instrument to co-opt the Confucian literati was the examination system.

The examination system was not merely a means to co-opt the successful candidates. It reflected the genius of the imperial state which used it to prevent the kind of destabilisation of the imperial system caused by the commercialisation that burgeoned after the Tang Song transition (10th century AD). In Europe this destabilisation ultimately led to the rise of commercial bourgeoisies that overthrew the imperial orders, but in China the rural and urban commercial elites were often co-opted into the imperial system.

Because of problems of control and management, the imperial bureaucracy was very small in relation to the society it governed. It had to rely on an ingenious model of local government without requiring too much of the imperial government. By the 19th century, there was one representative of the bureaucracy governing three to four hundred thousand people. The imperial state was able to govern by delegating the symbolic power of the government while at the same time keeping public funds out of the reach of those to whom it delegated this power. As is well-known, the literati or degree-holding gentry (*shenshi*) recruited through the examination system possessed the right and symbolic power to distinguish themselves as an elite by their formal access to officialdom. They were designated as community representatives who had the sanction of the imperial state to manage their own problems (perhaps the *fengjian* model of imperial times did have an influence). The gentry society model involved the entrustment of an ideologically state-oriented elite with the imprimatur of state power without expending fiscal and political power on social maintenance.

The co-optation of the elite in cosmological and institutional terms meant that the main challenge to the undisputed power of the imperial state emerged from popular culture and religion. With the periodic campaigns to sweep out popular religions that were not state-oriented or part of the state-cult, many of the ideas and practices related to alternative conceptions and popular access to Heaven were driven into popular culture where they mingled and often camouflaged themselves in the thicket of popular religiosity. Here it would be difficult to trace what the minister of the state of Chu had proscribed: ‘to cut the communications between Heaven and Earth’ so as to prevent ‘each household indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances.’

Thus, there were even orthodox religious groups in popular society who invoked the gap between transcendent ideals and the present order. They were, as David Ownby has put it, ‘both against and from within the mainstream.’ For example, some of them condemned the Buddhist church ‘for having abandoned its own mission of self-abnegation and transcendence.’<sup>1</sup>

Ownby’s study of the apocalyptic Way of the Temple of the Heavenly Immortals exemplifies how these societies mediated deeply orthodox or ‘fundamental’ values from Confucianism or Daoism with popular cultural traditions to reconstruct community along traditional, even utopian prescriptions.<sup>2</sup> These societies call on the ideals of transcendent authority to change the established order; as such they do evoke the momentum of AA tension to propel society to change towards the transcendent ideal.

Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, popular rebellions through imperial Chinese history were often inspired by religious movements. These included the Daoistic Yellow Turbans, the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice and later, Buddhistic or syncretic movements such as those associated with the White Lotus and later still Taiping Christianity. Note even how the Boxers would perform ritual exercises to appropriate the superior power of Heaven to repulse the barbarian violation of the sacred lands. It is important to view these movements within the AA framework of tension between transcendent and practical order. While they rebelled because of historical conditions and opportunities, they were authorised and legitimated by transcendent ideals.

As organised religions became increasingly controlled by the state, intellectuals in popular society performed some remarkable syntheses from the variety of transcendent ideals that became available in Chinese society by Ming Qing times, namely from Daoist, neo-Confucian as well as Buddhist ideals. One of the most important was the synthesis known as the three-in-one or *sanjiao heyi*. While the trope of combining the three-in-one was almost universal in popular religion, different thinkers and groups performed different syntheses.

By and large, these movements were not violent or conflictual, but periodically Confucian orthodoxy and state repression led to opposition. There is a cultural logic to this opposition that continues to make the state afraid of religion as a cover for politics. At the core of it, however, is a cultural logic of access to transcendent power. Even if it does not apply to the state, the cosmology of religious believers tends to empower those with the right to access. By banning religious groups the state continues to favour this logic. Note the case of Taiwan when the democratising state began to legalise the popular sect *Yiguandao* (Way of Unity) and others. Without the pressure of repression these groups became relatively powerless and piety followed a civic religion model.

In contrast to Abrahamic traditions, where the conflicts emerged over the true God and the correct reading of transcendent truth, in China the conflict emerged over who had the right to access the will of Heaven. While the imperial state succeeded in co-opting and containing the elite traditions’ right to such access, notions of alternative means to access to achieve transcendence were driven underground where they were disguised in cultural forms which were accommodative and resistant. As a result, in the religious, cultural and political realm, the fault line in Chinese civilisations emerged as one between the state-elite versus popular culture.

In the West and other parts of the world following the Abrahamic traditions, this vertical division (which also existed, to be sure) was overcome by another lateral one. Here, transcendence and the individual’s proximity to it was forged around faith and belief in a monotheistic, personal God. The distance from transcendence was mediated by faith. While those who believed in the same God were theoretically equal and part of the community, those who did not were excluded. This idea of faith-based communal division was never always hostile or militant but it was potentially so, particularly since the state was located within the community and could drive hostilities when necessary. In the modern period, when faith-based communities became intertwined with competitive national identities, the potential for violence became much greater.

China has indeed been fortunate to not be possessed by faith-based communities because of the powerful role of the state in monopolising access to the transcendent. That said, the vertical division remains a volatile one and the state should look to incremental steps to dismantle the relationship in which it has become locked against communities to whom the older cosmologies and transcendence remain meaningful.

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#### References

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