While India was giving birth to Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, three other major religions were developing in East Asia. Daoism and Confucianism grew largely in China, and later spread to Japan and Korea; Shinto is considered distinctively Japanese. In this chapter we will explore the two that developed in China from similar roots but with different emphases: Daoism and Confucianism. Shinto will be the subject of Chapter 7. Buddhism also spread to East Asia, where its encounter with Chinese traditions developed its world-affirming qualities. Buddhism is now the most common religion in China. There are also popular religious practices and beliefs that have persisted alongside, and mixed with, the more formalized religious ways and are still popular even as China becomes highly modernized and economically progressive.

In East Asia religions that will be treated as separate entities in this chapter and the next are, in fact, more subtly blended and practiced. Daoism and Confucianism, though they may seem quite opposite to each other, co-exist as complementary value systems in East Asian societies, and a person’s thought and actions may encompass both streams. The idea of distinct religions is not prominent in Chinese thought. Even though scholars may trace the historical threads of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, Chinese people tend to refer to their religious practices simply as “worshiping,” and temples may include images from more than one of the “Three Teachings.”

In this chapter we will be transliterating Chinese words according to the contemporary Pinyin system, which has replaced the older Wade-Giles system. Thus “Daoism” is the Pinyin transliteration; “Taoism” was the earlier Wade-Giles transcription of the same word. When terms are first introduced in this chapter, the Wade-Giles equivalent—which is still found in many English books—will be given in parenthesis.

Ancient traditions

Chinese civilization is very old and continuous. By 2000 BCE, people were living in settled agrarian villages in the Yellow River Valley, and also in areas of southern China, with musical instruments and skillful work in bronze, silk, ceramics, and ivory. Interpretations of archeological findings suggest that elements still present in Chinese religious ways, both popular and institutionalized, were practiced there as long ago as this.
Worship and divination

There is prehistorical evidence of worship of ancestors. Their graves were lined up in rows near villages and provided with funeral offerings such as ornaments, pottery, and tools, suggesting belief in an afterlife in which they could use them. Perhaps then, as now, the spirits of deceased ancestors were thought to remain closely bonded to their living descendants for some time. Chinese tradition requires that respect must be paid to the ancestors—especially the family’s founding ancestor and those recently deceased—through funerals, mourning rites, and then continuing sacrifices. These sacred rituals of ancestor worship are called *li*. They are essential because the ancestors will help their descendants if treated with proper respect, or cause trouble if ignored.

It appears that in addition to ancestors early Chinese people worshiped a great variety of invisible spirits. Plants, animals, rivers, stones, mountains, stars, cosmic forces—in popular religion, all parts of the natural world are vitalized by cosmic energy and many are personified, honored, and consulted.
As deities. From the earliest historical dynasty, the Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE), archaeological evidence indicates that kings and their priests were making regular sacrifices, not only to ancestors but also to deities living in the earth, water, and air. Wine for them was poured onto the earth, jade thrown into rivers, and grains and animal flesh burned on outdoor altars.

From ancient times, there was also belief in a great variety of demons (such as a thorn demon and a water-bug demon) and the ghosts of people who had not been properly honored after their death. These beings were seen as causing so much mischief that many efforts were made to thwart them, ultimately including evil-deflecting charms, gongs, firecrackers, appeals through spirit mediums, spirit walls to keep them from entering doorways, exorcisms, prayers, incense, and fasts.

The spiritual activities of the common people of the Shang period are not definitely known, but it seems clear that kings played very significant religious roles as chief priests for their kingdoms. They sought the help of their aristocratic ancestors and deities by a process of divination through the medium of oracle bones. These were large flat bones onto which the divining specialist scratched questions posed by the king, such as whether or not the sacrifices had been properly performed, whether hunting or military campaigns would be successful, whether or not the coming period would be favorable, and how to interpret dreams. Touching
the bones with a hot poker made them crack, forming patterns which the
diviner interpreted as useful answers from the ancestors or deities. Kings had
the questions and answers inscribed onto the bones, which were maintained
as part of the royal archives.

During the reign of the Shang kings, there was a highest god, above de-
ified humans, deities of the local environment, royal ancestors, and gods and
goddesses of the cosmic forces. This highest god was Shangdi (Shang Ti) the
Lord-on-High. He was understood as a masculine deity who ruled over impor-
tant phenomena such as the weather, crops, battles, and the king’s health. It
was the king who was chiefly responsible for maintaining harmony between
the transcendent realm of gods and ancestors and the earthly world.

During the Zhou (Chou) dynasty (c.1046–221 BCE), which overthrew the
Shang, the rulers continued to play major spiritual roles. However, the focus
shifted from Shangdi to Tian, a more impersonal power controlling the uni-
verse. Though typically translated as “Heaven,” the character tian has also
been translated as “Supreme Ultimate” and “One above man.” It may also
be used to refer to the high god of the Chou dynasty, derived from the word
for “sky.” Its precise meaning is not agreed upon, but it became an important
point of reference for rulers as well as philosophers.

The emperors of the ruling dynasty then developed the idea of the
“Mandate of Heaven” which justified their rule. This was the belief that
Heaven responds to human virtue and, specifically, that it endows rulers with
the authority to rule based on their virtue. It can also remove the mandate
when a ruler’s virtue declines. Rulers have a moral duty to maintain the wel-
fare of the people and a spiritual duty to conduct respectful ceremonies for
Heaven, Earth, and ancestors. These obligations would later become signifi-
cant aspects of Confucian thought.

Cosmic balance

In addition to ancestors, deities, and Heaven, there has long existed in China
a belief that the cosmos is a manifestation of an impersonal self-generating
physical–spiritual substance called qi (ch’i). It is basically the “stuff” of which
all things that exist are composed. It has two aspects whose interplay causes
the ever-changing phenomena of the universe. Yin is the dark, receptive,
“female” aspect; yang is the bright, assertive, “male” aspect. Wisdom lies in
recognizing their ever-shifting, but regular and balanced, patterns and mov-
ing with them. This creative rhythm of the universe is called the Dao (Tao),
or “way.” As traditionally diagramed, yin and yang interpenetrate each other
(represented by small circles). As soon as one aspect reaches its fullest point,
it begins to diminish, while at the same time its polar opposite increases.

Nothing is outside of this process. As contemporary Confucian scholar Tu
Wei-ming explains:

All modalities of being, from a rock to Heaven, are integral parts of a
continuum which is often referred to as the “great transformation.” Since
nothing is outside of this continuum, the chain of being is never broken. …
The continuous presence of qi in all modalities of being makes everything flow
together as the unfolding of a single process. Nothing, not even an almighty
creator, is external to this process.

To harmonize with the cosmic process, the ancients devised many forms
of divination. One system developed during the Zhou dynasty was eventually
### Timeline

#### Daoism and Confucianism

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>BCE</th>
<th>Legendary Yellow Emperor</th>
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<tr>
<td>Shang dynasty (c.1600–1046 BCE)</td>
<td>Ancient traditions of worship and divination</td>
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<td>Zhou dynasty (c.1046–221 BCE)</td>
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<td>Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE)</td>
<td>Life of Zhuangzi</td>
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<td>Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)</td>
<td>Immortality movements</td>
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<td>Queen Mother of the West cult</td>
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<td>Early religious Daoist sects</td>
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<td>Celestial Master tradition begins</td>
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<td>CE</td>
<td>Tang dynasty (618–907)</td>
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<td>Mutual influences between Daoism and Buddhism.</td>
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<td><em>Taiji quan</em> appears</td>
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<td>Northern Daoist sects flourish</td>
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<td>Song dynasty (960–1280)</td>
<td>Daoist Association of China (White Cloud Monastery, Beijing)</td>
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<td>1900</td>
<td>1911 Last imperial dynasty overthrown</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Temples and books destroyed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)</td>
<td>Daoist sects, temples re-established</td>
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<td>First Daoist Grand Ritual</td>
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<td>Chinese government suppresses Falun Dafa</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>1989 Students’ requests refused at Tiananmen Square</td>
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<td>1990–2010</td>
<td>Confucian Classics reintroduced in schools</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Confucius’s birthday celebrated</td>
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<td>International Association of Confucians established</td>
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#### Confucianism

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<tr>
<th>BCE</th>
<th>Life of Confucius</th>
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<tr>
<td>c.551–479</td>
<td>Lifes of Mengzi and Xunzi</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.340–245</td>
<td>Confucian scholars suppressed, books burned</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.368–340</td>
<td>Confucian Classics used as training for government officials</td>
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<tr>
<td>748</td>
<td>Some Buddhist sects reach peak, then are persecuted</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neo-Confucianism</td>
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<tr>
<td>1040–1280</td>
<td>Life of Zhu Xi</td>
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<td>1130–1200</td>
<td>Confucianism makes comeback</td>
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<td>1949–1976</td>
<td>Mao Zedong and Communist Party take control of China; Mao’s “Red Book” replaces Confucian Classics</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Temples and books destroyed</td>
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written down as the *Yijing* (*I Ching*) or *Book of Changes*. It is a common source for both Daoism and Confucianism and is regarded as a classic text in both traditions. The *Yijing* was highly elaborated with commentaries by scholars beginning in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). To use this subtle system, one respectfully purifies the divining objects—such as yarrow stalks or coins, whose manipulations will yield either odd numbers signifying yin or even numbers signifying yang. The person asks a question, casts the objects six times, and then consults the *Yijing* for the symbolic interpretation of the yin–yang combinations.

The pattern of throws is diagramed in the *Yijing* as a hexagram, with yin represented as a broken line and yang by a straight line. For example, hexagram number 46, called “Sheng” or “Pushing Upward,” has been likened to a tree emerging from the earth, growing slowly and invisibly:

> Thus the superior person of devoted character
> Heaps up small things
> In order to achieve something high and great.

Another set of commentaries is based on the two trigrams within the hexagram. In the case of hexagram 46, the upper pattern of three yin lines can be interpreted as devotion and yielding, and the lower pattern of two yang lines above one yin line suggests gentleness. According to the commentaries, these nonaggressive qualities will ultimately lead to supreme success.

By studying and systematizing the ways of humans and of nature, the ancient Chinese tried to order their actions so that they might steer a coherent course within the changing cosmos. They recognized that any extreme action will produce its opposite as a balancing reaction, and thus they strived for a middle way of discretion and moderation.

From these roots gradually developed two contrasting ways of harmonizing with the cosmos—the more mystically religious ways, which are collectively called Daoism, and the more political and moral ways, which are known as Confucianism. Like yin and yang, they interpenetrate and complement each other, and are themselves evolving dynamically.

**Daoism—the way of nature and immortality**

Daoism is as full of paradoxes as the Buddhist traditions it influenced: Chan or Zen Buddhism. It has been adored by Westerners who seek a carefree, natural way of life as an escape from the industrial rat race. Yet beneath its precepts of the simple life in harmony with nature is a tradition of great mental and physical discipline. As developed over time, some Daoist scriptures counsel indifference about birth and death; others teach ways of attaining physical immortality. These variations developed within an ancient tradition that had no name until it had to distinguish itself from Confucianism. “Daoism” is actually a label invented by scholars and awkwardly stretched to cover a philosophical (or “literati”) tradition, a multitude of self-cultivation and longevity techniques, and an assortment of religious sects which probably developed at least in part from the early philosophical texts and practices. Popular religious practices such as home worship of the kitchen god have often mixed with Daoist elements, although institutional Daoism has tried to distance itself from popular religion, seeing itself as a much higher form of religion, with gods who occupy higher heavens.
Teachings of Daoist sages

Aside from its general basis in ancient Chinese ways, the specific origin of Daoist philosophy and practices is unclear. In China, tradition attributes the publicizing of these ways to the Yellow Emperor, who supposedly ruled from 2697 to 2597 BCE. He was said to have studied with an ancient sage and to have developed meditation, health, and military practices based on what he learned. After ruling for 100 years, he ascended to heaven on a dragon’s back and became one of the Immortals.

Over the millennia the classic philosophical or literati form of Daoism has been pursued by intellectuals and artists, who explore the concepts about the Dao expressed in ancient texts and perhaps also try to apply them to their social and political environment in the effort to create a condition of harmony known as the Great Peace. The two most salient texts of the classic Daoist tradition are the *Dao de jing* and the *Zhuangzi*.

The *Dao de jing* (*Tao te Ching*, “The Classic of the Way and its Power”) has been translated many times into Western languages, including over 100 English translations, for its ideas are not only fascinating but also elusive for translators. According to tradition, the book was written for a border guard by Laozi (Lao-tzu), a curator of the royal library of the Zhou dynasty, when he left society for the mountains at the reported age of 160. The guard had recognized Laozi as a sage and begged him to leave behind a record of his wisdom. Laozi reportedly complied by inscribing the 5,000 words now known as the *Dao de jing*. This is traditionally said to have happened during the sixth century BCE, with Laozi somewhat older than Confucius. But archeological finds date the earliest existent version of the *Dao de jing* to 350 BCE and suggest it was an alternative to Confucianism. Many scholars think it was an oral tradition, derived from the teachings of several sages, and question whether there was ever a single person corresponding to the name Laozi (Old Master).

The book’s central philosophy is a practical concern with improving harmony in life. It says that one can best harmonize with the natural flow of life by being receptive and quiet. These teachings were elaborated more emphati-
cally and humorously by a sage named Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu) (c.365–290 BCE). Unlike Laozi, whose philosophy was addressed to those in leadership positions, Zhuangzi asserted that the best way to live in a chaotic, absurd civilization is to become detached from it.

At the heart of Daoist teachings is the idea of Dao, the “unnamable,” the “eternally real.” Contemporary Master Da Liu asserts that Dao is so ingrained in Chinese understanding that it is a basic concept that cannot be defined, like “goodness.” Moreover, Dao is a mystical reality that cannot be grasped by the mind. The Dao de jing says:

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.4

Another chapter of the Dao de jing is more explicit about the mysterious Unnamable:

There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
Goes round and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name
So I style it “the way.”
I give it the makeshift name of “the great.”5

Although we cannot describe the Dao, we can live in harmony with it. Ideally, says Laozi:

Humans model themselves on earth,
Earth on heaven,
Heaven on the way,
And the way on that which is naturally so.6

There are several basic principles for the life in harmony with Dao. One is to experience the transcendent unity of all things, rather than separation. This realization can only be attained when one ceases to feel any personal preferences. Daoism is concerned with direct experience of the universe, accepting and cooperating with things as they are, not with setting standards of morality, not with labeling things as “good” or “bad.” Zhuangzi asserts that herein lies true spirituality:

Such a man can ride the clouds and mist, mount the sun and moon, and wander beyond the four seas. Life and death do not affect him. How much less will he be concerned with good and evil?7

The Daoist sage takes a low profile in the world. He or she is like a valley, allowing everything needed to flow into his or her life, or like a stream. Flowing water is a Daoist model for being. It bypasses and gently wears away obstacles rather than fruitlessly attacking them, effortlessly nourishes the “ten thousand things” of material life, works without struggling, leaves all accomplishments behind without possessing them.
This is the uniquely Daoist paradox of *wu wei*—“actionless action,” or taking no intentional or invasive action contrary to the natural flow of things. *Wu wei* is spontaneous, creative activity proceeding from the Dao, action without ego-assertion, letting the Dao take its course. Zhuangzi uses the analogy of a butcher whose knife always stays sharp because he lets his hand be guided by the makeup of the carcass, finding the spaces between the bones where a slight movement of the blade will glide through without resistance. Even when difficulties arise, the sage does not panic and take unnecessary action.

*To know yet to think that one does not know is best; Not to know yet to think that one knows will lead to difficulty.*

Laozi

The result of *wu wei* is noninterference. Much of Laozi’s teaching is directed at rulers, that they might guide society without interfering with its natural course. Nothing is evil, but things may be out of balance. The world is naturally in harmony; Dao is our original nature. But according to tradition, the Golden Age of Dao declined as humans departed from the “Way.” “Civilization,” with its intellectual attempts to improve on things and its rigid views of morality, actually leads to world chaos, the Daoists warn. How much better, Laozi advises, to accept not-knowing, moving freely in the moment with the changing universe.

Daoism places great value on withdrawal from the madding crowd to a contemplative life and love of nature. The classic Daoist seeks to find the still center, save energy for those times when action is needed, and take a humble, quiet approach to life. As asserted in a fourth-century BCE essay on inner training:

*The vitality of all people inevitably comes from their peace of mind. When anxious, one loses this guiding thread; when angry, one loses this basic point. When one is anxious or sad, pleased or angry, the Way has no place to settle.* …

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**TEACHING STORY**

**Three in the Morning**

Whether you point to a little stalk or a great pillar, a leper or the beautiful Hsi-shih, things ribald and shady or things grotesque and strange, the Way makes them all into one. … Only the man of far-reaching vision knows how to make them into one. So he has no use [for categories], but relegates all to the constant. The constant is the useful; the useful is the passable; the passable is the successful; and with success, all is accomplished. He relies upon this alone, relies upon it and does not know he is doing so. This is called the Way.

But to wear out your brain trying to make things into one without realizing that they are all the same—this is called “three in the morning.” What do I mean by “three in the morning”? When the monkey trainer was handing out acorns, he said, “You get three in the morning and four at night.” This made all the monkeys furious. “Well, then,” he said, “you get four in the morning and three at night.” The monkeys were all delighted. There was no change in the reality behind the words, yet the monkeys responded with joy and anger. Let them, if they want to. So the sage harmonizes with both right and wrong and rests in Heaven the Equalizer.

Zhuangzi
That mysterious vital energy within the mind, one moment it arrives, 
the next it departs. 
So fine nothing can be contained within it, so vast nothing can be outside it. 
The reason we lose it is because of the harm caused by agitation.¹⁰

The ethical effects of such a philosophy are designed to harmonize humanity with the cosmos. Heaven, earth, and humanity all arise from the same source, the Dao, first cause of the cosmos. Coming from the same source, all things on earth are to be loved and allowed to exist and develop according to their nature. As the sage Ge Hong (283–343 CE) writes in the Inner Chapters of the Master who Embraces Simplicity, “Universal Dao acts on non-interference [wu wei], that is, lets everything be natural, no matter what relationship among them and how different they are.” Along with the motto “Dao follows what is natural,” the Daoist feels “I am one with all things.”

The only thing to be pursued is Dao, rather than material gain or fame. Laozi says:

I have three treasures 
Which I hold and cherish. 
The first is known as compassion, 
The second is known as frugality. 
The third is known as not daring 
  to take the lead in the empire. …
There is no disaster greater than 
not being content; 
There is no misfortune greater 
  than being covetous. 
Hence in being content, one will 
  always have enough.¹²

Furthermore, according to Daoist ideals, there should not be a great gap between the rich and the poor. Just as Heaven makes adjustments between surpluses and deficiencies, the rich should desire to share with the poor. But as Laozi observes:

Who is there that can take what he himself 
  has in excess and offer this to the empire? 
Only he who has the way.¹³

**Popular religion and organized Daoism**

Popular religion and organized Daoism became considerably intertwined over the centuries when Daoist specialists took charge of spiritual tasks such as alchemy, faith healing, and the use of talismans, which seem to have existed from ancient times in China. But some of the folk practices have also survived as independent traditions outside of formal Daoist frameworks.

People may believe in invisible spirits who are involved in their destinies, so out of both fear and respect they want to make sure to worship them properly. Burning incense and making offerings have been ways of communicating
with them since antiquity. In temple worship, these practices have become institutionalized, with detailed ritual instructions and a priesthood to carry them out. However, folk practices may transcend the restrictions of classic Daoism, with variations such as making offerings of nonvegetarian foods. Liu Zhongyu, of a branch of the Dragon Gate sect of the Complete Perfection lineage in Hong Kong, pragmatically explains, “In fact, it is forbidden in Daoism to give things such as pig’s heads as offerings. But as the people have long been doing so, Daoism has to let things take their own course.”

Letting things take their own course has long included the art of feng shui, or geomancy—determining natural flows of qi through the earth, as revealed by the flows of wind and water. Though awareness of these flows probably arose from shamanistic folk traditions, it sometimes became the province of specialists. By observing the contours of the land and the flows of wind and water, specialists in feng shui can reportedly determine the best places for the harmonious placement of a temple, dwelling place, or grave. By examining the flow of qi within a dwelling, they decide on the optimal placement of furniture and wall decorations.

Deities arising from folk traditions have in some cases become part of the Daoist pantheon. One of the most familiar deities in popular Chinese traditions is the kitchen god. Although his worship usually takes place at the family level in the home where he lives, he was at one time listed in official Daoist spirit pedigrees as the Great Emperor and Controller of Destinies of the Eastern Kitchen. According to folk belief, the kitchen god sits in a corner of the kitchen watching the family’s doings so that he can make an annual report about their virtues and failings to the Jade Emperor. Sometimes, humorous ruses are used to insure that he does not give a bad report. One is to make an offering before he sets off for Heaven that is so intoxicating that he forgets about the family’s flaws. Another is to offer him some sweet maltose that is so sticky that he cannot open his mouth to speak when he meets the Jade Emperor.

The ancient practice of worshiping certain people as divine, appointed to heavenly office after they have died, is also encompassed by organized Daoism. For example, during the Song dynasty a virtuous girl who had received talismans and esoteric teachings from a Daoist master was thought to have saved her father and brother with her spiritual powers when their boat capsized. Other miraculous interventions also became attributed to her. After she died at a young age, a temple was erected in her honor. Her cult thence spread along the southeast coast of China, and by the twelfth century she was recognized by the imperial court as a nationally important deity to whom
sacrifices were to be performed all over the country. Her importance grew as various titles were given to her by imperial decrees. In 1683, she was declared the “Consort of Heaven” (Tianhou, or Tien-hou), but most people continue to call her by the familiar name Ma-tsu (Grandma).

In popular practice, people vow to do a good deed if their prayer request is granted. Accordingly, they may offer incense, candles, or food to the deities to redeem the vow once they feel the deities have blessed them with success. Sometimes the vow-redeeming promises are more elaborate, such as releasing a captive animal, or sculpting a statue of a deity. Many people vow to do some kind of performance to please the deities, often including singing, dancing, music, or beating drums. Some such performances are organized on a large scale, as performance fairs at temples.

As in ancient times, Chinese villages make collective offerings to the local spirits or organize processions in which the spirits visit the local region, bless them, and protect them from harm such as epidemics. The images of the deities from the temple are put in palanquins (or today, trucks) and carried in the procession. Talismans are also made for protection, with the written characters presumed to have magical power to control the spirits.

**Inner alchemy**

In contrast to popular practices, an elite thread of ancient traditions that have also become interwoven with Daoism involve inner alchemy: individual spiritual practices for the sake of inner transformation, self-cultivation, longevity, and perhaps immortality. Daoist texts refer to powerful ascetic practices traditionally passed down secretly from teacher to pupil. The teachers lived in the mountains; great Daoist teachers are said to be still hidden in the remote mountains of China and Korea.

The aim of the longevity practices is to use the energy available to the body in order to become strong and healthy, and to intuitively perceive the
order of the universe. Within our body is the spiritual micro-universe of the “three treasures” necessary for the preservation of life: generative force (jing), vital life force (qi), and spirit (shen). These three are said to be activated with the help of various methods: breathing techniques, vocalizations, vegetarian diets, gymnastics, absorption of solar and lunar energies, sexual techniques, visualizations, and meditations.

The process of “inner alchemy” involves circulating and transmuting jing energy from the lower body into qi energy and then to shen energy to form what is called the Immortal Fetus, which an adept can reportedly raise through the Heavenly Gate at the top of the head and thus leave their physical body for various purposes, including preparation for life after death. In addition, the adept learns to draw the qi of heaven and earth into the micro-universe of the body, unifying and harmonizing inner and outer.

In contrast to physical practices to lengthen life and lead to immortality, Zhuangzi had counseled indifference to birth and death: “The True Man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back in without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all.”15 Laozi referred enigmatically to immortality or long life realized through spiritual death of the individual self, the body and mind transmuted into selfless vehicles for the eternal. As Professor Huai-Chin Han notes, people who are interested in Daoist practices:

usually forget the highest principles, or the basis of philosophical theory behind the cultivation of Tao [Dao] and the opening of the ch’i [qi] routes for longevity. … Longevity consists of maintaining one’s health, slowing down the ageing process, living without illness and pain, and dying peacefully without bothering other people. Immortality does not mean indefinite physical longevity; it indicates the eternal spiritual life.17

A quiet contemplative life in natural surroundings, with peaceful mind, health-maintaining herbs, healthy diet, practices to strengthen the inner organs and open the meridians (subtle energy pathways known to Chinese doctors), and meditations to transmute vital into spiritual energy, does bring a marked tendency to longevity. Chinese literature and folk knowledge contain many references to venerable sages thought to be centuries old. They live hidden in the mountains, away from the society of others, and are said to be somewhat translucent. The most famous of the legendary long-lived are the Eight Immortals, humans who were said to have gained immortality, each with his or her own special magical power.

Since ancient times, one of the most revered celestial beings has been the Queen Mother of the West. She guards the elixir of life and is the most wondrous incarnation of yin energy. The Daoist canon also includes the writings of some female Daoist sages who undertook the great rigors of Daoist meditation practices and reportedly mastered the processes of inner transformation. In her mystical poetry, the twelfth-century female sage Sun Bu-er describes the ultimate realization:
All things finished.
You sit still in a little niche.
The light body rides on violet energy,
The tranquil nature washes in a pure pond.
Original energy is unified, yin and yang are one;
The spirit is the same as the universe.18

Daoist sects

Institutionalization of such ancient, esoteric, and popular practices into distinctive religious movements, with revealed texts, detailed rituals, and priests serving as ritual specialists, developed as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) was declining amidst famine and war. An array of revelations and prophecies predicted the end of the age and finally led to the rise of religious/political organizations.

In 184 CE, inspired by a vision of Great Peace, hundreds of thousands of followers of a leader who was known as a faith healer and advocate of egalitarian ideas rebelled in eight of China’s twelve provinces; their rebellion took several years to suppress and presaged the fall of the Han dynasty. Simultaneously, in western China, Zhang Daoling (Chang Tao-ling) had a vision in which he was appointed representative of the Dao on earth and given the title Celestial Master. He advocated similar practices of healing by faith and developed a quasi-military organization of religious officials, attracting numerous followers. The older Han religion had involved demons and exorcism, belief in an afterlife, and a god of destinies, who granted fortune or misfortune based on heavenly records of good and bad deeds. These roles were now ascribed to a pantheon of celestial deities, who in turn were controlled by the new Celestial Master priesthood led by Zhang’s family. This hereditary clergy performed imperial investitures as well as village festivals, with both men and women serving as libationers in local dioceses. After the sack of the northern capitals early in the fourth century, the Celestial Masters and other aristocrats fled south and established themselves on Dragon-Tiger Mountain in southeast China. Today the Celestial Masters tradition is thriving in Taiwan and Hong Kong, but the movement is also being revived in mainland China.

In approximately 365 CE another aristocratic family in exile in southern China began receiving revelations from a deceased member, Lady Wei. These revelations of the names and powers of newly discovered deities, meditation methods, alchemy, and rituals were recorded in exquisite calligraphy and transmitted to a few advanced disciples. This elite group of celibates, who resided on Mount Mao, called their practices “Highest Purity Daoism.” They looked down on the Celestial Master tradition as crude, and they avoided village rituals and commoners. Instead, they focused on meditations for purifying the body with divine energies so as “to rise up to heaven in broad daylight.” Although the Highest Purity Daoism did not reach the mass of the people, its texts and influence continue to be revered today as the elite tradition of organized Daoism.

In the late fourth century, another group arose in the wake of Highest Purity: the Numinous Treasure school. It assimilated many elements of Buddhism, creating a medley of new meditation practices, divine beings, rituals, scriptures, heavens, rebirth, and hells. This tradition was in turn succeeded in the twelfth century by Complete Perfection, which has been the dominant monastic school ever since. It unites Daoist inner alchemy with
Popular religious practices of ancient origin survive in China today as happy festivals. One of the favorites is the Lantern Festival, the end of Chinese New Year celebrations. These begin on the twenty-third or twenty-fourth day of the twelfth month of the lunar year, which is thought to be the day the gods go to heaven to offer their respects to the supreme deity, the Jade Emperor. One of them is the kitchen god making his report about the family, which will determine their fortunes in the year to come. The New Year begins in the spring, as the earth comes back to life and ploughing and sowing of fields can start again. In preparation for the coming year, houses are thoroughly cleaned to remove any bad luck, and doors and windows may be painted and decorated with auspicious inscriptions. People happily visit each other with offerings of gifts and flowers, and attempt to clear all their debts. Families may wake early on the second or fifth day of the first lunar month to set off firecrackers to welcome the Magic Horse of Wealth to their home.

The climax of the celebrations—the Lantern Festival—occurs on the night of the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. People roam joyfully through the streets carrying, and looking at, a great array of paper lanterns, and enjoying lion dances, dragon dances, parades, plays, fireworks, acrobatics, and sticky sweet rice balls. Owners of the lanterns may write riddles on them, and those who successfully solve them are given small prizes. It is a cultural festival thought to have sacred origins, but there are various understandings of what is being celebrated. Lanterns may illustrate popular subjects or may be decorated with scenes of the Immortals—or else of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

According to one legend, the Jade Emperor in heaven was so upset because a town had killed his beloved goose that he determined to destroy the town with fire. But the townspeople, warned by a fairy, lit so many lanterns that from above the town appeared to be on fire. Feeling that his anger had already been avenged, the Jade Emperor did not send the firestorm. From then on, people celebrated their rescue by carrying lanterns on the first full moon of the year.

Another explanation features the god of heaven worshiped by people in ancient China. It was he who controlled the fate of the world, as he had sixteen dragons and could therefore send famine, plagues, droughts, or calamities. The emperor would therefore request him to send only good weather and good health to the people of the kingdom. During the Han dynasty, an emperor dedicated a night of great celebrations to the god of heaven, and the tradition has continued.

Yet another story revolves around the Heavenly Official Who Gives Blessings. His birthday is the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Because he likes all sorts of entertainment, the people decorate lanterns and offer many amusements in the hope of being blessed with good fortune.

Whatever the explanation, people are entertained by great cultural festivals in the name of pleasing the gods. A description of the Lantern Festival from the Song dynasty listed dozens of dancing troupes, including the Cloud Holders, the Sword Players, the Wedding Players, the Clothes Washers’ Songs, the Bamboo Horses, the Camels and Elephants, and the Deities and Ghosts, plus twenty-four puppet troupes such as the Land Dragon Boats and the Lantern Kickers. The celebrations and the lanterns became more and more elaborate and now, with the aid of modern electronics, people happily enjoy spectacular entertainments.
Chan Buddhist meditation and Confucian social morality, harmonizing the three religions. Actively monastic, it focuses on meditation and nonattachment to the world. Today its major center is the White Cloud Monastery in Beijing, the headquarters of the government-approved Daoist Association of China. Complete Perfection is also the foundation for most Hong Kong Daoist temples and martial arts groups.

The many revealed scriptures of Daoist movements were occasionally compiled and canonized by the court. The present Daoist canon was compiled in 1445 CE. Containing about 1,500 sophisticated scriptures, it has only recently begun to be studied by non-Daoist scholars. It includes a wealth of firsthand accounts by mystical practitioners—poems of their visionary shamanistic journeys, encounters with deities, advanced meditation practices, descriptions of the perfected human being, methods and elixirs for ascending to heavenly realms and achieving immortality, and descriptions of the Immortals and the heavenly bureaucracies. The rituals and inner cultivation practices of the canon are in use today, and the immense pantheon of deities that has evolved is represented by a great variety of images.

At death either Daoist or Buddhist priests may be hired by families to perform rituals to help the deceased. Every temple has a side shrine to Tudi gong (T’u-ti Kung), the local earth god, lowest member of the celestial hierarchy, who can transport offerings to deceased loved ones.

**Daoism today**

Historically, whenever the central Chinese government has been strong, it has tended to demand total allegiance to itself as a divine authority and to challenge or suppress competing religious groups. Since the Han dynasty, Chinese emperors were called “Son of Heaven,” and their families claimed to have received the Mandate of Heaven when it was taken away from the previous dynasty. Confucian scholars were suppressed and their books were burned by the Qin (Ch’in) dynasty (221–206 BCE), shamans were forbidden during the Han dynasty, Buddhists were persecuted during the Tang dynasty, the Taiping rebellion of the nineteenth century attempted to purge China of Daoism and Buddhism, and during the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 zealous young Red Guards destroyed Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian temples and books. However, during the economic liberalization that began in the late twentieth century in mainland China, in spite of an atheistic communist ideology temples were maintained as historic sites, pilgrimages to temples in natural sites and religious tourism have been encouraged, and an explosion of temple building has occurred.

All forms of Daoist practice are still actively undertaken today, in communist mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese communities overseas. Chinese temples combine Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist elements, but the liturgies tend to be Daoist.

Both Daoist and Buddhist groups continue to be recipients of new revelations and scriptures. These texts, known as “precious scrolls,” emanate from deities such as the Golden Mother of the Celestial Pool. It is believed that in
the past the Divine Mother sent Buddha and Laozi as her messengers but that now the crisis of the present world requires her direct intervention.

Starting in the 1980s, a few ancient Daoist practitioners in China tried to teach groups of young students so that the disciplines could be continually transmitted. They met with many bureaucratic obstacles within communist China but received considerable support from Chinese communities and scholars abroad. The Communist Party is still officially anti-religious, with the Marxist theory that religion will die out as unnecessary in a socialist state, but in fact there is a great resurgence of religious practice of all sorts, both in the countryside and in the cities. After the violent attempts of the Cultural Revolution to stamp out religion, shrines and halls for worship of clan ancestors are sprouting and many new Daoist and Buddhist temples, Muslim mosques, and Christian churches are being built. Temples are busy with worshipers, including people trying to find clues to their future by casting divining blocks after praying before the image of a deity. Party policy seems to have turned toward the pragmatic view that traditional religious and cultural traditions can perhaps play a “positive role” in building social stability in the midst of rapid social and economic change. Religious organizations must register with the government and operate under government control. There are hundreds of local Daoist associations in the provinces of China, as well as the Daoist Association of China, centered in the White Cloud Monastery in Beijing. Its stated goals include promoting:

"the mutual adaptation between Daoism and socialist society. The association is to participate in the building of the socialist modernizations, and devote itself to the maintenance of the stability of society, the unification of the country, and the peace of the world."19

Daoist nuns and monks are of equal status. Huang Zhi An, head nun of the Daoist Temple in Hengshan, Hunan Province, collected funds to help rebuild the temple and monastic complex—which also includes a Buddhist monastery and temple of both religions combined—and to build a center for training nuns in the classical arts, including chanting, music, and practices to develop qi. Her speech, gestures, and actions are very natural and spontaneous, like those of an energetic child, and yet she presides over solemn, ritualized chanting by the nuns. When asked to explain this combination of opposites, she says simply of Daoist practice, “It’s like democracy: There has to be a combination of freedom and also rules for confining freedom, or else there is chaos.”20

Hong Kong has long been home to many Daoist temples and activities. The Peng Ying Xian Guan (Fung Ying Seen Koon) branch of Complete Perfection Daoism began early in the twentieth century as an attempt by two Dragon Gate priests to develop a secluded holy place for self-cultivation, as a cure for decaying social morality. Now the organization sponsors a free clinic, a school, lectures for teaching the Dao, training classes for priests and study of rites and scriptures, and rituals to pray for blessings and redeem lost souls.
Attempting to unite Daoists and promote social welfare, the Hong Kong Taoist Association is developing schools to combine education with Daoist enlightenment and character-building, giving lectures encouraging morality, building and repairing Daoist temples, and organizing festivals observed by all Daoist temples such as Seven-Day-and-Night Rituals for Accumulating Merits for the sake of the prosperity and peace of Hong Kong and harmony in the world. Similar Daoist associations now exist in Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Academic study of Daoism is intensifying with the help of such Daoist religious organizations, university scholars, social science research institutes, and cultural and artistic institutions. The Chinese government’s Center for Religious Studies carries on activities such as a major project to republish the entire Daoist canon with extensive explanatory material from current research. A series of international conferences on Daoist Studies have been held in China, Hong Kong, Bavaria, Boston, and Los Angeles.

Daoist ideas are also being promoted to help curb the environmental and social damage that has resulted in China from rapid industrialization. Zhou Zhongzhi, Director of the Center of Business Ethics Study in Shanghai Normal University, describes the ecological principles embedded in Daoist thought:

> Through interaction and interdependence, humans and nature constitute a harmonious and unified system, but it is possible to lead to inharmoniousness of human and nature, even burst into ecological crisis, if man becomes insatiable and conscienceless, and impacts on nature become so far-reaching as to go beyond the limit of nature’s capability.21

According to Zhou, application of Daoist principles would lead people to limit their consumer desires and foster compassionate giving, countering the growing disparities between rich and poor.

Interest in Daoist practices and philosophy has boomed in the West from the middle of the twentieth century. By now there are many masters and centers in the United States. They include organized religious institutions, societies
for self-cultivation, and practitioners of techniques for spiritual development, health, and longevity. Tours of Daoist temples and sacred mountains in China are also being offered by American Daoist Studies scholars, including visits to a huge new statue of Laozi on Mount Qingcheng in western China. In the Western popularization of Daoism, classic Daoist texts are even being used by businesses to teach management practices.

Many people outside China are now benefiting from acupuncture therapy, which is based on the idea that qi flows through the body in channels, or meridians. Needle stimulation or burning of herbs above specific points along the meridians is successfully used to cure or alleviate many ailments. Traditional Chinese herbal medicine is also of increasing interest, as are energy training practices. Of these, *Taiji quan* (T’ai chi ch’uan) was developed in the eighteenth century as a training for martial arts. It is still practiced today by many Chinese at dawn and dusk for their health. It looks like slow swimming in the air, with continual circular movement through a series of dance-like postures. They are considered manifestations of the unobstructed flow of qi through the body. According to the *Taiji Quan Classics*, “In any action the entire body should be light and agile and all of its parts connected like pearls on a thread.” In combat, the practitioner of *Taiji* is advised to “yield at your opponent’s slightest pressure and adhere to him at his slightest retreat,” using mental alertness to subtle changes rather than muscular strength in order to gain the advantage. *Taiji quan* is also often physically beneficial in controlling blood pressure, muscular coordination, and balance, and thus is useful to elderly people.

In the early twentieth century, a sickly tuberculosis patient cured himself by practicing the energy training disciplines from an old Daoist inner alchemical text describing traditional meditation and longevity techniques. He learned to detect the inner movements of qi within himself and then wrote about them in contemporary biomedical terms. Others also thence became interested in the traditional health exercises. The self-cultivation systems they
popularized are now generally known as qigong (ch’i-kung) and are widely used in China and elsewhere to cure diseases, increase physical vitality, and improve concentration.

During the 1990s, Chinese masters made the techniques even more popular by advertising that one could attain supernatural powers through them. The most famous of these claims have been made by Li Hongzhi, who in 1992 developed a form of qigong that mixed Buddhism with Daoist energy practices, producing a hybrid known as Falun Gong. He proposed that he would spiritually install a “falun,” or Dharma Wheel, in followers’ abdomens so that they could perform advanced energy practices. Li, who moved to the United States, claims that practitioners of Falun Gong can attain excellent health, supernatural power, and cosmic enlightenment if they develop the cardinal virtues of truthfulness, benevolence, and forbearance, as well as carrying out the daily exercises. These are taught for free by volunteers at thousands of locations around the world. The movement, Falun Dafa, now claims millions of followers. But in China, the movement has been severely curtailed since 1999 by the government, which portrays it as an evil cult using the pretense of religion to practice political and criminal activities. The government has also cracked down on other forms of qigong that it once supported, and legislation has been passed that may be used to suppress any mystical Chinese group and any other religious group that has not been sanctioned by the Chinese Communist Party. This is in keeping with the centuries-old Chinese governmental assumption that it is responsible for controlling every facet of life.

Confucianism—the practice of virtue

To trace a different strand of East Asian religion, we return to the sixth century BCE, which was a period of great spiritual and intellectual flourishing in many cultures. It roughly coincided with the life of the Buddha, the Persian Empire, the Golden Age of Athens, the great Hebrew prophets, and in China with the life of another outstanding figure. Westerners call him Confucius and his teaching Confucianism. His family name was Kong; the Chinese honored him as Kong Fuzi (Master Kong) and called his teaching Rujiao (the teaching of the scholars). It did not begin with Confucius. Rather, it is based on the ancient Chinese beliefs in Heaven, ancestor worship, and the efficacy of rituals. Confucius developed from these roots a school of thought that emphasizes the cultivation of moral virtues and the interaction between human rulers and Heaven, with political involvement as the way to transforming the world. This philosophy became highly influential in China and permeated the cultures of East Asia, where it is still prevalent, despite great political changes. It exists not only as a school of thought but also as the practice of religious ethics.

For 2,000 years, Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism have co-existed in China, contributing mutually to the culture. Both Daoism and Buddhism emphasize the ever-changing nature of things in the cosmos, whereas Confucianism focuses on ways of developing a just and orderly society. This is the Confucian way of connecting human beings to the transcendent—yet also immanent—moral will of Heaven.

Individuals often harmonize the apparently opposite characteristics of Daoism and Confucianism in their own lives. For example, elderly Daoist Master An speaks on one hand of the fact that he and his fellows sweep the temple when they feel like it— “We’re not caught up in routines”—and on
the other of the ways that his father’s teaching of Confucian maxims shaped his life:

My father was very cultured and adamant about teaching us the true Tao. He mastered the classics, and would write out quotations all the time. Over on the wall there is a quotation by Confucius he wrote:

“If I’m not generous with those below me,  
If I’m disrespectful toward the proprieties,  
Or if I do not properly mourn at a funeral,  
How can I have self-esteem?”

He’d paste these quotations on our wall above the bed. I’d turn my head and there it was, sinking in my brain. … Confucius also said, “One who seeks the Tao cannot be deficient in manners.”

Professor Yu Yingshi explains that Daoism and Confucianism can co-exist because in Chinese tradition there are no major divisions between mind and matter, utopian ideals and everyday life:

For Chinese, the transcendental world, the world of the spirit, interpenetrates with the everyday world though it is not considered identical to it. ... So mundane human relationships are, from the very beginning, endowed with a transcendental character.

Master Kong’s life

Confucius was born in approximately 551 BCE, during the Zhou dynasty, into a family whose ancestors had been prominent in the previous dynasty. They had lost their position through political struggles, and his father, a soldier, died when the boy was only three years old. Although the young boy was determined to be a scholar, the family’s financial straits necessitated his taking such humble work as overseeing granaries and livestock. He married at the age of nineteen and had at least two children. His mother died when he was twenty-three, and during three years of mourning he lived ascetically and studied ancient ceremonial rites (li) and imperial institutions. When he returned to social interaction, he gained some renown as a teacher of li and of the arts of governing.

It was a period of political chaos, with the stability of the early Zhou dynasty giving way to disorder. As central power weakened, feudal lords held more power than kings of the central court, ministers assassinated their rulers, and sons killed their fathers. Confucius felt that a return to classical rites and standards of virtue was the only way out of the chaos, and he unsuccessfully sought rulers who would adopt his ideas. He then turned to a different approach: training young men to be wise and altruistic public servants. He is said to have had 3,000 disciples, of whom seventy-two became known for their wisdom and virtue, and who collected and spread his teachings. Confucius proposed that the rulers should perform classical rites and
music properly so that they would remain of visibly high moral character and thus inspire the common people to be virtuous. He thus instructed his students in the “Six Classics” of China’s cultural heritage: the Yi jing, poetry, history, rituals, music and dance, and the Spring and Autumn Annals of events in his state, Lu. According to tradition, it was Confucius who edited older documents pertaining to these six areas and put them into the form now known as the Confucian Classics. There are now only five; the treatises on music were either destroyed or never existed. One of the five Classics is The Book of Rites, whose contents include not only ritual instructions but also philosophical discourses such as the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean. Of his role, Confucius claimed only: “I am a transmitter and not a creator. I believe in and have a passion for the ancients.”

In addition to reviving the Confucian Classics, Confucius so inspired his disciples that they put together excerpts from what he had taught them as the Analects of Confucius. The terse sayings include what appears to be a sort of autobiographical statement:

The Master said, “At fifteen I had set my will upon learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the will of Heaven. At sixty, I heard it with a listening ear. At seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping what was right.”

In other words, after learning about the Way of Heaven, ultimately he manifested it in his own life.

Confucius’s work and teachings were considered relatively insignificant during his lifetime. After his death in 479 BCE, interstate warfare increased, ancient family loyalties were replaced by large and impersonal armies, and personal virtues were replaced by laws and state control. After the brutal reunification of China by the Qin dynasty, however, rulership required a more cultured class of bureaucrats who could embody the virtues advocated by Confucius. In the second century BCE the Confucian Classics thus became the basis of training for the scholar-officials who were to serve in the government. The life of the gentleman-scholar devoted to proper government became the highest professed ideal. Eventually temples were devoted to the worship of Confucius himself as the model for unselfish public service, human kindness, and scholarship. However, the official state use of the Confucian Classics can be seen as a political device to give the government a veneer of civility.

The Confucian virtues

Foremost among the virtues that Confucius felt could save society was ren (jen). Translations of this central term include “innate goodness,” “love,” “benevolence,” “perfect virtue,” “humaneness,” and “human-heartedness.”

The Noble Person does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to goodness. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it.

The Analects, IV:5

The modern Chinese character for ren is a combination of “two” and “person,” conveying the idea of relationship. Those relationships emphasized by Confucians are the interactions between parent and child, older and younger
DAOISM AND CONFUCIANISM

siblings, husband and wife, ruler and subject, and friend and friend. In all but the last of these relationships, the first is considered superior to the second. Each relationship is nonetheless based on distinct but mutual obligations and responsibilities. This web of human relationships supports the individual like a series of concentric circles.

At the top, the ruler models himself on Heaven, serving as a parent to the people and linking them to the larger cosmic order through ritual ceremonies. Confucius says that this was the source of the greatness of Yao—a sage king of c.2357 BCE: “It is Heaven that is great and Yao who modeled himself upon it.”

In Confucius’s ideal world, there is a reciprocal hierarchy in which each knows his place and respects those above him. As the Great Learning states it, peace begins with the moral cultivation of the individual and order in the family. This peace extends outward to society, government, and the universe itself like circular ripples in a pond.

In chapter IV of the Analects, Confucius describes the rare person who is utterly devoted to ren as one who is not motivated by personal profit but by what is moral, is concerned with self-improvement rather than public recognition, is ever mindful of parents, speaks cautiously but acts quickly, and regards human nature as basically good.

The prime exemplar of ren should be the ruler. Rulers were urged to rule not by physical force or coercion but by the example of personal virtue:

Confucius said: If a ruler himself is upright, all will go well without orders. But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders they will not be obeyed. … One who governs by virtue is comparable to the polar star, which remains in its place while all the stars turn towards it.”

Asked to define the essentials of strong government, Confucius listed adequate troops, adequate food, and the people’s trust. But of these, the only true necessity is that the people have faith in their rulers. To earn this faith, the ruling class should “cultivate themselves,” leading lives of virtue and decorum. They should continually adhere to ren, always reaching upward, cherishing what is right, rather than reaching downward for material gain.

The heart of moral rectification is filial piety to one’s parents. According to Confucian doctrine, there are three grades of filial piety: the lowest is to support one’s parents, the second is not to bring humiliation to one’s parents and ancestors, and the highest is to glorify them. In the ancient Book of Rites, as revived by Confucius, deference to one’s parents is scrupulously defined. For instance, a husband and wife should go to visit their parents and parents-in-law, whereupon:

On getting to where they are, with bated breath and gentle voice, they should ask if their clothes are (too) warm or (too) cold, whether they are ill or pained, or uncomfortable in any part; and if they be so, they should proceed reverently to stroke and scratch the place. They should in the same way, going before or following after, help and support their parents in quitting or entering (the apartment). In bringing in the basin for them to wash, the younger will carry the stand and the elder the water; they will beg to be allowed to pour out the water, and when the washing is concluded, they will hand the towel. They will ask whether they want anything, and then respectfully bring it. All this they will do with an appearance of pleasure to make their parents feel at ease.

Confucius also supported the ancient Chinese custom of ancestor worship, as an extension of filial piety—indeed, as the highest achievement of filial piety.
Confucius reportedly said that a “single thread” runs through all his teachings: the principle of reciprocity (shu). In this respect, he taught the famous maxim that is found in some form in all religions: “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”

Confucius said relatively little about the supernatural, preferring to focus on the here-and-now: “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve the ghosts and spirits?” He made a virtue of li (the rites honoring ancestors and deities), suggesting that one make the sacrifices with the feeling that the spirits were present. The rites should not be empty gestures; he recommended that they be outwardly simple and inwardly grounded in ren. His teachings clearly have a religious underpinning: that life is to be cultivated in a way that brings one into rapport with the ultimate religious authority of Heaven. He refers to Heaven as a given. For instance:

The Master said, “I would prefer not speaking.” Tzu-kung said, “If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?” The Master said, “Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?”

Although Confucius did not speak much about an unseen Reality, he asserted that li are the earthly expressions of the natural cosmic order. Everything should be done with a sense of propriety. Continually eulogizing the Noble Person (junzi) of China’s ancient high civilization as the model, Confucius used examples such as the way of passing someone in mourning. Even if the mourner were a close friend, the junzi would assume a solemn expression and “lean forward with his hands on the crossbar of his carriage to show respect; he would act in a similar manner towards a person carrying official documents.” Even in humble surroundings, the proprieties should be observed: “Even when a meal consisted only of coarse rice and vegetable broth, [the junzi] invariably made an offering from them and invariably did so solemnly.”

Divergent followers of Confucius

The Confucian tradition has been added to by many later commentators. Two of the most significant were Mengzi (Mencius) and Xunzi (Hsun Tzu), who differed in their approach.

A little over a hundred years after Confucius died, the “Second Sage” Mengzi (Meng Tza, commonly latinized as Mencius) was born. During his lifetime (c.390–305 BCE) Chinese society became even more chaotic. Like his predecessor, the Second Sage tried to share his wisdom with embattled rulers, but to little avail. He, too, took up teaching, based on stabilizing aspects of the earlier feudal system. Mengzi’s major addition to the Confucian tradition was his belief in the inherent goodness of human nature. Mengzi emphasized the moral duty of rulers to govern by the principle of humanity and the good of the people. If rulers are guided by profit motives, this self-centered motivation will be reflected in all subordinates and social chaos will ensue. On the other hand, “When a commiserating government is conducted from a commiserating heart, one can rule the whole empire as if one were turning it in one’s palm.” This is a natural way, says Mengzi, for people are naturally good: “The tendency of human nature to do good is like that of water to flow downward.” Heaven empowers the righteous, for there is a direct connection between the
goodness of human nature and the nature of Heaven. Learning is therefore ideally a process of coming to understand the Way of Heaven.

Another follower of Confucius quite disagreed with this assessment. This was Xunzi, who seems to have been born when Mengzi was an old man. Xunzi argued that human nature is naturally self-centered and that heaven is impersonal, operating according to natural laws rather than intervening on the side of good government or responding to human wishes (“Heaven does not suspend the winter because men dislike cold”38). Humans must hold up their own end. Their natural tendency, however, is to envy, to compete, and to desire personal gain and sensual pleasure. The only way to constrain these tendencies is to teach and legally enforce the rules of li and yi (righteous conduct). Though naturally flawed, humans can gradually attain sagehood by persistent study, patience, and good works and thereby form a cooperative triad with heaven and Earth.

Xunzi’s careful reasoning provided a basis for the new legalistic structure of government. The idealism of Mengzi was revived much later as a Chinese response to Buddhism and became required for the civil service examinations from the thirteenth to the early twentieth centuries. However, their points of agreement are basic to Confucianism: The appropriate practice of virtue is of great value; humans can attain this through self-cultivation; and study and emulation of the ancient sages are the path to harmony in the individual, family, state, and world, with proper relationships between Heaven, Earth, and humans.

These basic points situate Confucianism within the academic category that can be referred to as “religion,” if religion is defined broadly as Frederick Streng did: “a means to ultimate transformation.” All things considered, Confucian Studies Professor Rodney L. Taylor concludes: “The key to the religious interpretation of Confucianism lies in the role of Heaven, not just as an authority for the stability of society, but as a source of religious authority and inspiration for the individual.” The goal of Confucian learning is to become a junzi, fully cultivating one’s inner virtues and always acting according to righteousness, in accord with the Way of Heaven.

The state cult

Since ancient times, as we have seen, rulers have been regarded as the link between Earth and Heaven. This understanding persisted in Chinese society, but Confucius and his followers had elaborated the idea that the ruler must be virtuous for this relationship to work. During the Han dynasty, Confucius’s teachings were at last honored by the state. The Han scholar Dong Zhongshu (Tung Chung-shu, c.179–c.104 BCE) set up an educational system based on the Confucian Classics. He used Confucian ideals to unite the people behind the ruler, who himself was required to be subject to Heaven.

During the Han dynasty, the traditional Book of Rites and Etiquette and Ritual were reconstructed, with an increased emphasis on offerings, as practiced since ancient times. These rites were thought to preserve harmony between humans, Heaven, and Earth. At the family level, offerings were made to propitiate the family ancestors. Government officials were responsible for ritual sacrifices to beings such as the gods of fire, literature, cities, mountains, waters, the polar star, sun, moon, and former rulers, and also to Confucius. The most important ceremonies were performed by the emperor, to give thanks and ask blessings from Heaven, Earth, gods of the land and agricul-
ture, and the dynastic ancestors. Of these, the highest ritual was the elaborate annual sacrifice at the white marble Altar of Heaven by the emperor. He was considered Son of Heaven, the “high priest of the world.” Both he and his large retinue prepared themselves by three days of fasting and keeping vigil. In a highly reverent atmosphere, he then sacrificed a bull, offered precious jade, and sang prayers of gratitude to the Supreme.

**Neo-Confucianism**

Buddhism and Daoism became very popular during the period of disunity that followed the fall of the Han dynasty, and Confucianism declined. But during the Song dynasty (960–1280 CE), Confucianism was revived, on the premise that Buddhism and Daoism had brought moral and thus political weakness into Chinese society. This revised version is referred to as **Neo-Confucianism**.

Under Neo-Confucian influence, the civil service examination system became fully developed as the chief means of attaining government positions. In addition to the five Confucian Classics, the Four Books (the Analects, the Mencius, the Great Learning, and the Centrality and Commonality) formed the core of Confucian education. Its greatest proponent was the scholar Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi, 1130–1200 CE), who developed a curriculum running from elementary classes to higher education. This approach lasted for centuries, up to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Neo-Confucian thinkers also further developed the metaphysical basis for Confucianism: the individual is intimately linked with all of the cosmos. According to Zhang Zai’s (Chang Tsai) *Western Inscription*:

> Heaven is my father and earth is my mother and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my companions. The great ruler [the emperor] is the eldest son of my parents [Heaven and Earth], and the great ministers are his stewards. … To rejoice in Heaven and to have no anxiety—this is filial piety at its purest.41

The Hall for Prayer for Good Harvests, part of the Temple of Heaven complex in Beijing, built from 1406 to 1420 for the emperor’s annual prayer to Heaven for good crops. The same complex includes the white marble Altar of Heaven, where the emperor made sacrifices for favorable weather each year.
By becoming more humane one can help to transform not only oneself but also society and even the cosmos. The Neo-Confucians thus stressed the importance of meditation and dedication to becoming a sage.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, women were encouraged to offer themselves in total sacrifice to others. Confucian women had previously been expected to take a subordinate role in the family and in society, but at the same time to be strong, disciplined, wise, and capable in their relationships with their husbands and sons. Eventually, such virtues were subsumed under an extreme ideal of self-sacrifice.

**Confucianism under communism**

The performance of state rituals was a time-consuming and major part of government jobs, carried out on behalf of the people. But as China gradually opened to the West in recent centuries, a reaction set in against these older ways, and the last of the imperial dynasties was overthrown in 1911. In the 1920s republic, science and social progress were glorified by radical intellectuals of the New Culture movement who were opposed to all the old systems. Under the communist regime established in 1949, communism took the place of religion, attempting to transform the society by secular means. Party chairman Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung, 1893–1976) was venerated almost as a god, with the “Little Red Book” of quotations from Chairman Mao replacing the Confucian Classics.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Confucianism was attacked as one of the “Four Olds”—old ideas, culture, customs, and habits. The Cultural Revolution attempted to destroy the hierarchical structure that Confucianism had idealized and to prevent the intellectual elite from ruling over the masses. Contrary to the Confucian virtue of filial piety, young people even denounced their parents at public trials, and scholars were made objects of derision. An estimated one million people were attacked. Some were killed, some committed suicide, and millions suffered.

Mao said that he had hated Confucianism from his childhood. What he so disliked was the intellectual emphasis on the study of the Classics, the “superstitious” rituals, and the oppression of the lowest members of hierarchical Chinese society—women and peasants. He urged peasants to overthrow all authoritarian traditions, including religion. Nevertheless, in some respects, Confucian morality continued to form the basis of Chinese ethics. Mao particularly emphasized the (Confucian) virtues of selfless service to the people and of self-improvement for the public good:

> All our cadres, whatever their rank, are servants of the people, and whatever we do is to serve the people. How then can we be reluctant to discard any of our bad traits?42

For decades, communist China prided itself on being the most law-abiding country in the world. But recently there has been a rise in crime and official corruption. The society has changed abruptly since China opened its doors to the West in 1978, undermining what remained of traditional Confucian virtues. The government blames the influx of materialistic values, resulting from the indiscriminating embrace of the underside of Western culture and the rapid shift toward a free market economy. In 1989, Zhao Ziyang (Chao Tzu-yang), then Communist Party leader, urged officials to maintain Confucian discipline (without naming it that) in the midst of the changes: “The Party can
by no means allow its members to bar-
ter away their principles for money and
power.”43 But when the people picked
up this cry, aging leaders chose to sup-
press popular calls for greater democ-
racy and an end to official corruption;
they did so in the name of another
Confucian value: order in society.

For their part, the intellectuals of
the democracy movement had tried to
do things in the proper way but were
cought on the horns of the poignant
Chinese dilemma. Under Confucian
ethics, it has been the continuing
responsibility of scholars to play the
role of upright censors. On the other
hand, scholars had to remain loyal to
the ruler, for they were subjects and
observing one’s subservient position
as a subject preserved the security of
the state. The leaders of the democ-
racy movement tried to deal with this
potential conflict by ritualized, respectful action: in 1989 they formally
walked up the steps of the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square to
present their written requests to those in power. But they were ignored and
brutally suppressed.

Now, in twenty-first-century China, as noted earlier, popular and intel-
lectual interest in various religions is increasing. Evangelical Christianity has
grown so vigorous that China is now home to the second largest evangelical
Christian community in the world, and there are more Catholics in China
than in Ireland. Buddhists account for the majority of religious adherents,
with 320,000 nuns and monks in 16,000 Chinese temples and monastery.
Islam is strong in northwest China, home of most of China’s eighteen mil-
lion Muslims. The officially atheistic Communist Party is showing signs of
regarding religions as having a certain social usefulness, but it also attempts
to control religious activities and beliefs through its Religious Affairs Bureau
and police. While Confucianism is not recognized as a “religion”—the five
religions officially permitted in China being government-approved forms of
Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Protestantism, and Catholicism—its philosophy
and ethics are attracting new attention, and the government has sponsored
dozens of “Confucian Institutes” in other countries for the study of Chinese
culture and language.

Among intellectuals, conferences have recently been held on the mainland
in China and also in Taiwan and Singapore to discuss Confucianism. Today it
is being analyzed not as an historical artifact but as a tradition that is relevant
to modern life, with the potential to contribute significantly to cultural iden-
tity, economic progress, social harmony, and a personal sense of the meaning
of human life.

Confucianism may inform capitalistic behavior as well as Marxist com-
munism. There is now talk of “Capitalist Confucianism”—business conducted
according to Confucian ethics such as humanity, trustworthiness, sincerity,
and altruism. As Professor Yao Xinzhong explains:
Free choice is the foundation of modern society, and the pre-condition of market economy. However, freedom without responsibility would result in the collapse of the social network and in the conflict between individuals and between individuals and society, and would lead to the sacrifice of the future in order to satisfy short-term needs. This has become a serious challenge to human wisdom and to human integrity. In this respect, Confucianism can make a contribution to a new moral sense, a new ecological view and a new code for the global village.

Confucian values are also being reappraised as a significant addition to holistic education. In them is imbedded the motivation to improve oneself and become a responsible and ethical member of one’s family and society. Thus the Neo-Confucians developed multistage learning programs that extend beyond the years of formal schooling. Confucianism has always promoted education as a prerequisite to social reform, and further encourages a sense of voluntary service to the community. When a massive earthquake caused tens of thousands of deaths in China in 2008, there was a great outpouring of volunteers to help in clearing debris, locating and treating survivors, and donating money and emergency supplies. Alan Qiu, an investor from Shanghai, explained, “We grew up reciting Confucius saying that all men are born kind, but it takes a disaster like this to bring out the innate kindness of everyday human beings.”

The government office in charge of promoting socialist ethics, the ministry of education, and the central committee of Chinese communist youth selected fifty children who were given “heroic children” awards for their brave relief efforts.

In the moral and spiritual vacuum left after the demise of fervent Maoism, Confucianism may also help restore a sense of holy purpose to people’s lives. The traditional feeling was that the Mandate of Heaven gives transcendent meaning to human life. Professor Tu Weiming, a modern Confucian, explains:

*We are the guardians of the good earth, the trustees of the Mandate of Heaven that enjoins us to make our bodies healthy, our hearts sensitive, our minds alert, our souls refined, and our spirits brilliant. … We serve Heaven with*
common sense, the lack of which nowadays has brought us to the brink of self-destruction. Since we help Heaven to realize itself through our self-discovery and self-understanding in day-to-day living, the ultimate meaning of life is found in our ordinary, human existence.46

This desire for meaning in modern life is so strong that in 2006, when a media professor from Beijing Normal University, Ms. Yu Dan, broadcast a seven-day series of lectures about the teachings of Confucius on the state-owned national television network, she instantly became famous. The book thence compiled from her lectures sold ten million copies in its first year alone. Her accessible introduction to Confucian teachings draws on quotes from the sages, folk tales, scenes from everyday life, and her own observations as a person “immersed in the spring” of Confucian values. She concludes:

*Our ultimate aim is to let the key principles of Confucius enter into our hearts, uniting heaven, earth, and humankind in a perfect whole, and giving us infinite strength. In China today we often say that for a nation to survive and prosper, heaven must smile on it, the earth must be favorable to it, and its people must be at peace. It is to this harmonious balance that Confucius can lead us today.*47

Chinese authorities have reintroduced the teaching of Confucius in elementary schools as a vehicle for encouraging social morality, and the Confucian-based civil service examinations are being partially reintroduced in the selection of public servants. Earlier castigated as “feudal institutions,” Confucian academies are being described as fine centers for learning. Chinese authorities are also reviving aspects of the religious cult, such as observance of the birthday of Confucius, perhaps mostly for the sake of tourism. In 1995, the Confucian Temple in Qufu, the home of Confucius, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, and millions of tourists now visit the temple for gala celebrations of Master Kong’s birthday.

**Confucianism in East Asia**

Countries near China, which have historically been influenced by China politically and culturally, are also permeated by Confucian values. The city-state of Singapore has since 1978 sponsored an annual courtesy campaign to inspire virtuous behavior in the midst of fast-paced modern life. In one recent year, the focus of the campaign was courteous use of cell phones.

In Korea, where few people now consider themselves adherents of Confucianism as a religion, lectures and special events are nonetheless being sponsored by hundreds of local Confucian institutes to promote Confucian teachings. In some cases, Confucianism is associated with particular clans in East Asia, and thus with political favoritism. Some of the Korean institutes are politically conservative, opposing women’s efforts to revise family laws. The Korean Overseas Information Service...
Confucian traditions have become deeply rooted in Japan, where education up till World War II was based on the Confucian model. Professor Okada Takehito of Kyushu University recounts his own life struggles and offers a window into the practice of Confucianism in the modern world.

My father, Okada Shigenari, studied with Kameyama Umpei, the Harima sage. My father is said to have respected and served his parents. It is even said that he carried his father on his back to a festival after his father was ill. My father also liked drinking sake, however, and would often drink until dawn when he had visitors. [He] must have been heart-filled and kindly, though, for he was called the Shirahama sage [by the people of our village, Shirahama]. He also taught the Analects of Confucius to the young people of the village. I may very well have been influenced by my father to study the Chinese Classics and particularly Confucianism. 

We were very poor and I myself worked in home-factories of craftsmen from when I was ten years old until I was fourteen, even though as a child I was physically weak. I earned a little wage and gave it all to my mother. When I did not work in the home-factories, I assisted my mother in her work. We were so poor that instead of eating fish, we had fishbones and skins. 

[After many struggles] in 1931 I met my teacher Dr. Kusumoto Masatsugu. When I met my teacher he was lecturing on the work Instructions for Practical Living by the Ming Neo-Confucian Wang Yang-ming. I was very impressed. I felt his personality was strong and excellent and his explanations were extremely good. This caused me to think that it was appropriate to study with a teacher who had both wisdom and a warm and strong personality, devoting my entire being and physical energy to him. He always worried about my health because I was so weak. Whenever I talked with him about my family problems he listened very considerately. His personality had the humaneness of the famous Neo-Confucians Chou Tuni-I and Ch‘eng Hao. I myself felt that I was in the warm breeze of spring when I was in his presence. I certainly never worried about my teacher’s health, and then suddenly he was diagnosed as having stomach cancer. I feel so terribly sorry whenever I think about it, even now. He asked me at one point if after he was dead I would read the first chapter of the Doctrine of the Mean during the funeral service. And so, I read the first chapter of the Doctrine of the Mean and tears and sobs filled my eyes and face. Before he died he gave me an ink stone as something to remember him by, an ink stone from the Sung dynasty. In addition, I also received pieces of calligraphy and many books belonging to Kusumoto Tanzan, my teacher’s grandfather. This made me feel all the more committed to bringing Neo-Confucianism to society, for I was now a person who had had a great teacher who died. Because of this sense of responsibility, I organized the publication of a series of volumes on Neo-Confucianism. 

As I looked around me I realized that the world itself was engulfed in difficulties. I realized that we needed some basic principles for dealing with real society, with the conflicts of nations and the basic nature of humankind. When I became sixty-five years old, I reached a new understanding that the Principle of Heaven must be understood and then the problems of the world will be solved and this understanding must be through silent illumination. The ultimate becomes the practical concept of shijin—just people, that is all. I think in many ways that Eastern thought is always transforming the complicated object into a simple matter. The simpler the concept the deeper or more essential the point. This seems very different from the Western philosophical tradition. 

If we are going to make science totally responsive to the needs of the human community, we must let everyone—scientists and non-scientists alike—learn the importance of human life. We live in the same world together and mutual respect for life is a prerequisite. From my point of view Confucianism provides a suitable basis for this perspective. At the center of this perspective lies the Confucian idea of being in community with others. The basis of Confucian ethics is to have consideration for the other person’s heart. 

We don’t really need to have Confucianism as Confucianism in the future. All we need is the respect for human life and human dignity.
advocates a flexible, liberal version of the tradition, open to other cultures and to all religions but still providing a firm foundation for social order:

*Confucianism can present contemporary Koreans with a set of practical standards of conduct in the form of rituals and etiquette. Extensive introduction of Western modes of behavior led to the confusion and adulteration of Korea’s native behavior pattern. Civility and propriety in speech and deportment enhance the dignity of man. Rites and conduct befitting to a civilized people should be refined and adjusted to the conditions of the time. ... Korea should, through its Confucian heritage, sustain the tradition of propriety and modesty and defend the intrinsically moral nature of man from submergence in economic and materialistic considerations.*

Confucian organizations in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other parts of East Asia are attempting to restore religious versions of Confucianism, such as the worship of Confucius himself or study of the Confucian Classics.

Confucian thought has also played a significant role in Japan. It entered Japan during the seventh century when Chinese political thought and religious ideas first began to have significant influence there. It left its mark on the first constitution of Japan, on the arrangement of government bureaucracy, and in the educational system. From the twelfth to the sixteenth century, Confucianism was studied in Zen Buddhist monasteries. Neo-Confucian schools in Japan attempted to balance “quiet sitting” (meditation) with moral action in the world. In quietude the Way of Heaven could be discerned and truth understood, so that a person could act in the proper way. Then from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, Confucianism began to spread more widely among the people of Japan because of its adoption as an educational philosophy in public and private schools. Confucian moral teachings became the basis for establishing proper human relationships in the family and in Japanese society.

Both Confucianism and Shinto were manipulated by the Japanese military in the period before World War II to inculcate a nationalist expansionist ideology. More in keeping with the original motives of Confucianism, some scholars have observed that Japan’s notably effective modernization is partly due to values derived from Confucianism. These values include a high regard for diligence, consensus, education, moral self-cultivation, frugality, and loyalty.

Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker, noted scholar of East Asian studies and the relationships between religions and the environment, concludes that Confucianism is not outdated. Rather, it can be seen as quite relevant now and for the future as well, for, “It aims to promote flourishing social relations, effective educational systems, sustainable agricultural patterns, and humane political governance within the context of the dynamic, life-giving processes of the universe.”

**Key terms**

- **Celestial Master** Daoist tradition with hereditary lineage of priests representing celestial deities.
- **Complete Perfection** A monastic tradition combining inner alchemy, meditation, and social morality.

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Dao (Tao)  The way or path; the Nameless.
Falun Gong  A new religious movement combining Buddhism and Daoist energy practices.
feng shui  The art of architecture that harmonizes with natural energy flows.
Highest Purity Daoism  An elite tradition of celibates who meditate on purification of the body for spiritual elevation.
li  Ceremonies, rituals, and rules of proper conduct, in the Confucian tradition.
literati  Intellectuals and scholars.
Neo-Confucianism  Confucianism stressing the importance of meditation and dedication to becoming a sage, established during the Chinese Song dynasty.
qi (ch’i)  The vital energy in the universe and in our bodies according to Chinese cosmology and the Chinese sciences.
ren  Humanity, benevolence—the central Confucian virtue.
wu wei  In Daoism, “not doing,” in the sense of taking no action contrary to the natural flow.
yang  In Chinese philosophy, the bright, assertive, “male” energy in the universe.
yin  In Chinese philosophy, the dark, receptive, “female” energy in the universe.

Review questions
1. Describe ancient Chinese traditions such as ancestor worship, divination, and the concept of cosmic balance.
2. Describe the practices associated with different forms of Daoism.
3. In what ways might Confucianism be understood as either “religious” or “not religious?”
4. Compare and contrast the practices of Daoism and Confucianism.

Discussion questions
1. Discuss the ways Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism may be blended together in practice. Are you aware of similar patterns of blending religion in other areas?
2. Discuss the quotations from the Dao de jing in this chapter and what they reveal about the concept of Dao.
3. Discuss the ways in which Confucianism is being adapted to modern concerns in mainland China and other parts of East Asia.
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