

# Understanding and Correctly Evaluating the Relationship between Traditional Chinese Culture and Religion

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**Keywords:** traditional Chinese culture; religions in China; religious issues; religion management.

**Abstract:** Today, under the context of globalization, new religious problems arise constantly in the open social environment; the effectiveness of religion management is greatly reduced. The establishing of an effective religion management mechanism requires us to change our thinking, re-recognize and evaluate religions, and re-examine the relationship between religions and traditional Chinese culture, so as to thoroughly solve religious problems.

## 1. Introduction

In October 2017, Jin-ping Xi repeatedly mentioned contents about “traditional Chinese culture” in the report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China; he proposed “the extensive promotion of socialist core values and excellent traditional cultures of China”, and to “promote the creative transformation and innovative development of excellent traditional Chinese cultures”. Around this theme, there has been a wide discussion in the academic circles on “whether our religious culture should be included in the range of traditional Chinese culture mentioned by Jin-ping Xi”. There are two opposing views. One is that our religious culture is part of the traditional Chinese culture; the other one is that our religious culture cannot be included in that category. Such discussions are necessary. With the acceleration of globalization, new religious problems will arise constantly in the open social environment; the effectiveness of religion management will be greatly reduced. We need to change our thinking, re-recognize and evaluate religions, and re-examine the relationship between religions and traditional Chinese culture, so as to establish an effective religion management mechanism and thoroughly solve religious problems.

## 2. Traditional Chinese Culture

In the course of more than five thousand years’ history of the Chinese nation, the splendid and profound Chinese culture has been formed and made great contributions to the development of human civilization. To sort out and understand traditional Chinese culture, we first need to clarify the definition of culture, understand the connotation of traditional Chinese culture, and learn the content and significance of traditional Chinese culture.

There are thousands of definitions on culture at home and abroad. Now we choose two representative viewpoints in academic circles as the reference basis. The definition of culture in Word-Ocean published in 1989 is, “in a broad sense, culture is the sum of material wealth and spiritual wealth created by human beings in the process of social and historical practice. In a narrow sense, culture refers to the ideology of a society, as well as the corresponding institutions and organizations.”<sup>[1]</sup> Edward Tylor, a 19th century British anthropologist, defines “culture” in his book *Primitive Culture* as following. “Culture is complex. It includes knowledge, belief, arts, morality, laws, customs as well as other abilities and habits acquired in the society.” That definition is of the supreme academic authority.<sup>[2]</sup> It can be said that culture is a very broad concept. In short, culture is the product that human beings constantly create in order to meet their own needs in the process of social and historical development, and it is the general term of the form of human life factors.

Traditional Chinese culture is an important part of Chinese culture. It is created by the Chinese nation. Chinese culture includes not only the Han culture, but also cultures created by ethnic minorities. Han culture serves as the main body. Traditional Chinese culture is splendid and

diversified. Language, writing, science and technology, craft, literature, art, philosophy and religion constitute the basic content of Chinese culture. From the time point of view, traditional Chinese culture refers to the ancient culture of our country, generally refers to cultures before the Opium War in 1840. Some scholars think that traditional Chinese culture refers to cultures created in the slave society and feudal society of China.

It is worth noting that in the long course of history, the Chinese nation has produced various doctrines such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, the Mohist School, the School of Logicians, the Legalism, as well as the Yin and Yang School. In the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism merged. It shows that the traditional Chinese culture takes Confucianism as the core, and supplemented by Taoism, Buddhism and other cultural forms. The continuity of Chinese civilization also benefits from some favorable factors of the Chinese civilization itself, such as the ancestor worship. One of its manifestations is to deify the abilities and achievements of ancestors and to regard ancestors as their protection gods. The ancestor worship on the basis of consanguinity plays a great role in maintaining civilization.

Generally speaking, traditional Chinese culture refers to the culture that has formed and developed in the long history of the Chinese nation. It has a relatively stable form and still exerts an important influence on the Chinese people. It is closely related to the real life of Chinese people; it is the sum of our cultural achievements formed after constant screening, elimination and development. Although there are some defects in traditional Chinese culture, it retains the basic temperament and typical characteristics of Chinese civilization, reflecting its characteristics of extensive, profound, long-standing and inclusive. We should treat our national tradition objectively, rationally and dialectically, cherish and protect our spiritual and cultural heritage, and critically inherit the traditional Chinese culture through taking the essence and removing the dross, so that we can truly build an excellent traditional culture inheritance system in the current situation of “great development and prosperity of socialist culture”.

### **3. Evaluation and Orientation of Chinese Religions**

The history of the Chinese nation for thousands of years is the history of academic contention of hundreds of schools of thought, the history of ethnic exchange and integration, and the history of religious infiltration. It is a historical process of communication, collision and integration of different nationalities, cultures and religious beliefs, and the formation of a pluralistic and integrated culture. People have to think, is it reasonable to completely separate religion from our traditional culture?

Religion is an objective social phenomenon as well as a cultural phenomenon. Durkheim E, the founder of Sociology of Religion, believes that religion is “a unified system of beliefs and behaviors related to sacred things, or things classified as taboos. It unites all believers into a single moral community called as church”.<sup>[3]</sup> Da-ji Lv pointed out that “religion is a kind of social consciousness, which is fantastically reflected as superhuman and supernatural forces, and the act of expressing belief and worship them. It is a social and cultural system that integrates such consciousness and behaviors, and then standardizes and institutionalizes these acts and concepts.”<sup>[4]</sup> It can be said that religion has its own ideological form, as well as its specific organization and behavior forms, which has the binding power from concept and belief to behavior and organization. Religion belongs to social ideology; it is also a cultural phenomenon.

As early as ancient times, there were primitive religious forms such as nature worship, totem worship and ancestor worship in China. With the advent of the era of civilization, Chinese religion has gradually formed a belief system centered on the worship of gods. In the course of its later evolution and development, new religious contents and forms such as Buddhism and Taoism have been added. It can be said that religious phenomena in our country are very complicated. There are both monotheism and polytheism. Some people believe in Taoism, which is indigenous to China. Some people believe in Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, which are introduced from abroad and gradually been sinicized. In addition, there are various primitive religions among the minority nationalities lived in China. The emergence, development and evolution of religion in China have

wide and profound impacts. Philosophy, science, ethics, literature, painting, sculpture and architecture symbolize human civilization; they are all deeply influenced by religions. They have infiltrated and interacted with China's social, economic, political and cultural factors. It can be said that without understanding religions in Chinese history, it is impossible for us to truly understand the past history of China.

Ancient Chinese culture always upheld the spirit of "inclusive and harmony" throughout its development. China is a multi-religious country; it has the religious pattern of "harmony in diversity". With Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism as the main body, traditional Chinese culture also contains religious contents and elements which occupy a large proportion in our traditional culture. Ancient Chinese religions showed a spirit of tolerance when dealing with the interrelationship with religions. As far as the object of worship is concerned, the ancient Chinese religion has never formed the unique concept of an "absolute god". But one of the characteristics of Chinese religion is the separation of politics and religion. Religion must depend on the monarchy; it is not allowed to surpass the monarchy. Therefore, when we study Chinese religion as a cultural phenomenon and put it into the whole process of the development of traditional culture, we will find that all kinds of religions in China not only show their own cultural individuality to a certain extent, but also have inextricable links with other components of the traditional Chinese culture. The feature is especially vivid reflected in the exchange and conflict between foreign religions and traditional ideology and culture, which shows the universal connection, mutual penetration and profound influence between cultural phenomena.

The infiltration and interaction between Chinese religions and traditional culture are extensive and profound. If we do not take religion as a cultural phenomenon and study it in the light of the development history of Chinese culture, we cannot really grasp the development of Chinese religion, nor understand the whole history of Chinese culture. Therefore, we cannot regard the participation and dimension of religions in traditional Chinese culture with the attitude of historical nihilism; we must understand traditional Chinese culture comprehensively, systematically and thoroughly, and actively promote the religious and cultural contents.

#### **4. Views and Suggestions on Religion Management**

Jin-ping Xi pointed out at the National Conference on Religious Work in April 2016, "the religious issue has always been a major issue that our Party must deal with in ruling state and dealing with politics. Religious work is of special importance in the overall work of the Party and the state. It is related to the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics, to the flesh and blood contact between the Party and the people, to social harmony, and to national unity, security and reunification". The importance of religion management in China is self-evident. At present, the process of globalization is accelerating; the social environment is becoming increasingly open. Faced with the open social environment, new religious problems will continue to arise and the effectiveness of management will be reduced. This requires us to change the way of thinking and correctly evaluate religion from the value level, in order to establish an effective mechanism for the management of religion.

First of all, we should re-recognize and evaluate the relationship between traditional Chinese culture and religion. Generally speaking, people regard culture as the soul of the nation and the spiritual pillar of the society. In the "New Culture Movement" in the early 20th century, religion was questioned and even denied. Since the reform and opening up, people began to justify the role of religion. First, religion is a kind of culture. Scholars point out that "in the field of human cultural knowledge activities, religion has always been an important component".<sup>[5]</sup> Secondly, people began to recognize that religion is an important content of culture, and to view the relationship between Chinese culture and religion with the understanding that "the religion believed by a nation is an important part of its national culture". Although people are still debating the nature of religious culture as well as the status and the role of religion in Chinese culture, religion has been recognized as a kind of culture itself. In this way, we can re-recognize and affirm the existence of religion in traditional Chinese culture. The inheritance and promotion of traditional Chinese culture are

directly related to religious culture in essence. The construction of advanced Chinese culture cannot be realized without excellent traditional cultures of China. Therefore, religious culture cannot be fundamentally excluded. We should explain the positive factors of religion in traditional Chinese culture, explore the deep positive values and carry forward religion's function of guiding people positively.

Secondly, the interpretation of religious knowledge should conform to traditional Chinese culture. In the social system and framework of contemporary China, “the socialist core value system is the soul of rejuvenating the country and the essence of advanced socialist culture”; we must “insist on leading the social trend of thought by the socialist core value system”. Therefore, we need to keep our principle of religious work unchanged, “actively practice the socialist core values, promote Chinese culture, and make efforts to integrate religious doctrines with Chinese culture. Religion participants should abide by national laws and regulations, consciously accept the state’s administration according to law, and devote themselves to the project of reform and opening up as well as socialist modernization, so as to contribute to the realization of the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” We should adhere to the basic principles of religious work in China. We should fully implement the Party’s policy of freedom of religious belief, manage religious affairs according to law, adhere to the principle of independence and self-management, and actively guide religions to adapt to the socialist society. The basic principle of the Party's religious work is that our Party adheres to the Marxist concept of religion. It considers our national conditions and specific reality, and draws on both positive and negative experiences. Religion itself must also reform and innovate, remove the dross and carry forward the essence, so as to adapt to the development of the times and embody the spirit of the times. “We should use socialist core values to guide and educate religious personages and believers, carry forward the fine traditions of the Chinese nation, guide the broad masses of believers with the concepts of solidarity, progress, peace and tolerance. We support all religions to maintain basic beliefs, core doctrines and etiquette systems, to find out doctrines that are conducive to social harmony, progress of the times and healthy civilization, and to explain the doctrine of the rules and regulations in line with the requirements of the development and progress of contemporary China as well as the excellent traditional Chinese culture.”

Finally, we should attach importance to the positive factors in religious ideology and culture. On the premise that the mainstream ideology advocates the “main melody” of socialism, religion can still actively participate in the “chorus” of social harmony and the coexistence of multi cultures in China today. Therefore, we must actively guide religions to adapt to the socialist society, exercise the positive functions of religious ideology and culture, so that religions in China can organically integrate into today’s harmonious family, and become part of our basic social strength as well as cultural soft power. This recognition is of great importance to our cultural construction strategy today, and to the promotion of the “great development and prosperity of socialist culture” in our country.

## **5. Conclusion**

The long existence of religions in China is closely related to Chinese culture; religions have practical significance and play an important role in Chinese culture. The evaluation and attitude of Chinese society towards traditional Chinese culture and its relationship with religions since the New Culture Movement deserve to be considered and re-examined in terms of historical experience and lessons. The religious dimension of traditional Chinese culture and the possibility of its integration into contemporary society provide a positive impetus for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation; the positive development of religious factors in traditional Chinese culture helps to construct the “soft power” of today’s Chinese culture as well as its cultural strategy toward the world.

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