
Integration of the Three Religions in Chinese Ideological History: Four Stages And Three Dimensions.

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Abstract: There is a very remarkable phenomenon in the Chinese ideological history which is known as 'the integration of the three religions'. The three religions refers to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Since its introduction into China in 2nd century B.C., after a long fusion with local Confucianism and Taoism, Buddhism has finally succeeded in taking its roots in Middle Kingdom. Standing side by side with Confucianism and Taoism, It has become the mainstream of Chinese ideology and culture. During the process of fusion, the three schools of thought of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have jointly formed the three cornerstones of Chinese traditional culture. Based on the fusion of Buddhism, Chinese Confucianism and Taoism, this paper explores the four stages and three dimensions of the integration of the these three religions in China.

Keywords: Integration, Three religions, Chinese History, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism

Introduction: Four stages of the Integration of three religions

The integration of the three religions in the history of Chinese thoughts and culture originated in the Han, Wei, and Southern & Northern Dynasties (220-589 A.D), it got developed in the Sui and Tang dynasties, got matured in the Song dynasty and reached its peak in the Ming dynasty. In the history of China, there have been endless arguments and fusion among these three religions. There has been fusion in arguments and arguments in fusion. This paper adopts the expression of the integration of the three religions instead of the expression of the "unification of the three religions", because the three religions have always maintained their individuality in the fusion, and these three religions can not be truly "unified" at any time in future. If the three religions truly get "unified or merged into one", it will be impossible for each religion to have its own beauty. It will render Confucianism without Confucius, Buddhism without Buddha and Taoism without Tao. In the struggle and fusion, the three religions have always maintained their identity and characteristics; they have maintained strain in the fusion and absorbed each-others' strengths without losing their own characteristics, and at the same time, they have maintained their uniqueness in co-existence and exhibited and shared their respective beauties together which is the essence of the fusion of these three religions. The true meaning of the three religions' integration is reflected by the fact that they have always kept their own characteristics and peculiarities and meanwhile have learned from each other.

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The Historical Track of the Integration of Three Religions

1. Han, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasty Period

The original proposition regarding fusion of the three religions can be traced back to "Mou-tzu on the Settling of Doubts; Li Huo Lun" (Ch'en 1972, Biernatzki 1991) in the late Eastern Han dynasty. From the author's preface we learn that he was held up to ridicule and defame by Confucians due to his study of Buddhism and Taoism. In order to resolve the contradiction in understanding, He advocated the fusion of the three religions. "The Removal of Doubts" (Lagerway 2010), justified Buddhism by quoting Laozii and Confucius with an attempt to reconcile Buddhism with Confucianism and Taoism. Based on the three religions' role in social functions, the book expounds and proves that Buddhism is on a par with Confucianism and Taoism in essence .

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties of the Three Kingdoms, the Chinese ideology changed from Confucianism to Metaphysics (Xuanxue; 玄学) and from Metaphysics to Buddhism. Emperor Wudi of Liang Dynasty propagated Buddhism by administrative order and strongly promoted the development of Buddhism. However, in order to true development, Buddhism must have been integrated with Confucianism and Taoism at the ideological level. At this stage, among those who advocated the fusion of the three religions, Zen Master Fu Dashi has been acknowledged as a representative figure.

One day, Master Fu went to court to meet the king wearing Taoist cap and Confucian shoes, while draping monk's ragged robe around his body. "Are you a monk?" asked the emperor. Master Fu pointed his finger towards his hat. "Taoist?" asked the emperor. The master pointed his finger towards his shoes. "Confucian, then?" the emperor continued, then the Master pointed his finger to his ragged robe.¹

Emperor Liang Wudi himself wrote a Poem called "The poem of three Religions" (*Hui San Jiao Si*), advocating the fusion of three religions, in which two key sentences were brought to light. The two most important sentences are "*Qiong yuan wu er sheng, Ce shan fei san ying*."² The remarks indicate that if we study the root of the three religions, we find out that they are identical. There is no so-called "two sages" like Buddha and Confucius, as the three religions serve the same purpose of persuading their followers to perform good deeds and there are no so-called three heroes like Confucius, Laozi and the Buddha. The two lines are aimed at revealing the fact that the three religions share the same origin and direct the people to behave kindly. Mr. Ren Jiyu holds that the thought of San-Jiao Hui Tong put forward by Liang Wudi means that three religions' depth of thoughts may differ but kindness maintains an unchangeable doctrine within them. Another apocrypha work produced by Liang Wudi called "The Sutra of Purification" (*Qing jing fa xing Jing*) says "*San Jiao Sui Shu, Quan Shan Yi Yi; Tuji Cheng Yi, Li Hui Ze Tong*"³ meaning that "Although the three religions are known as different, but they all advocate kindness and righteousness and exhort people to be good human being."

There is an another famous allusion regarding the fusion of three religions which is found in the Wei and Jin Dynasties called "Three Smiles in Huxi" (*Huxi San Xiao*). A prominent Buddhist monk, named Hui Yuan of the Eastern Jin dynasty, accompanied his visitors Tao Yuanming, a Confucian and Lu Xiujing, a Taoist out, and unknowingly crossed the Hu Xi bridge which was far outside the Dong Lin temple. Therefore, the monk broke the rule he himself had set while seeing his friends off, he went as far as the bridge. seeing this, the three friends laughed while looking at each other leaving behind the story of "Three Smiles in Huxi". This story later became an important theme of Chinese painting and the object of poetry reciting.

During the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the study of Confucian classics which occupied a dominant position in Two Han dynasties collapsed, and Metaphysics (玄学; Xuan Xue) of Wei and Jin dynasties took its place which became a social fashion. Under the influence of this trend, in order to integrate with Chinese culture and carry out theoretical transformation of Sinicization, Buddhism absorbed traditional Chinese philosophy, ethics and religious concepts. When translating Buddhist scriptures, the Buddhist scriptures were interpreted in a "Geyi" way, using Confucianism and Taoism term, and thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi to find a way out for the spread of Buddhism. This way of translation of Buddhist scriptures is called "Geyi Buddhism." For example, the translation of "Sakyamuni" as "Nengren" (the able and benevolent one) caters to the Confucian concept of sage; the translation of "non-self" as "non-body" allows Buddhism to communicate with the traditional concept of immortality of the soul; In order to eliminate the contradiction with Buddhism which doesn't allow sages to marry and the Confucian concept of filial piety which encourages marriage, Buddhism divides filial piety into small filial piety and greater filial piety; The great kindness of Buddhism is described as the greatest filial piety

¹ Lou Ying (1978), [FU DASHI LU 傅大士录]; [WA XU ZANG 帛续藏], Lao gu press, Minguo 67, Taipei, Vol.69, pp-1335; When Wang Anshi assumed prime ministership in the Song Dynasty, he placed a portrait of Fu Dashi in his hall, on which there was a poem by the Zen master Fo Yin: "Wearing Taoist hat, Confucian shoes, and Buddhist kasaya, I turn the three religions into one. Forgetting Tushita pure land, I stay in Shuanglin temple and wait for Longhua." [YUN WO JI TAN 云卧纪谭], Vol.2; [WAN XU ZANG 帛续藏], Vol.86, pp-67

² [GUANG HONG MING JI 广弘明集] (1922), Vol. 30; [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol.52, p. 352

³ [GUANG HONG MING JI 广弘明集], Vol.8; [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol.52, p. 136

and the Ullambana Sutra is referred as “The Classic of Filial Piety” of Buddhism.⁴

The confluence of Metaphysics and Buddhism in the Two Jin Dynasties had already begun to take on the significance of the fusion of the three religions. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the trend of the integration of the three religions developed again. Many famous scholars, Buddhist and Taoist priests, at that time put forward the viewpoint on the integration of the three religions from different angles.

2. Sui and Tang Dynasties- The evolution period

Taoism and Buddhism got closely related in the Sui Dynasty when Wang Tong, a Famous Confucian, proposed the idea of the fusion of three religions. He advocated that each of the three religions has its own advantages and disadvantages, but the value of governing the country is the same. His view stood for those of the majority. In the early Tang Dynasty, Wang Ji put forward the view that the fundamental teachings of Confucius, Laozi, and Shakyamuni were consistent. In the Tang dynasty, the official speech and lecture activities promoted the integration of the three religions. In the seventh year of Wushu ethics (624 year), calling together the representatives of the three religions, emperor Li Yuan ordered Xu Kuang, a state scholar to deliver lecture on “The Classic of Filial Piety”, Hui Cheng, a Buddhist monk to expound “Prajnaparamita-Sutra”, and Liu Jinxi, a Taoist to elaborate on “Laozi.”⁵

The theoretical fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in Sui and Tang Dynasties was mainly based on first religion which absorbed the other two religions in order to enrich and develop itself. The promotion of the integration of the three religions was to emphasize their social functions and their role in maintaining feudal rule and assisting in social education. Liu Zongyuan is the main representative of Confucianism in the thought of "fusion of three religion" in Tang Dynasty. He along with Buddhist Zong Mi and Taoist Du Guangting are listed as three philosophers who represented the fusion of the three religions from their own perspectives.⁶ Zong Mi's "Original Man Theory" (*Yuan Ren Lun*) advocates the unity and parallelism of the three religions. During this period, pseudo-scriptures such as "The Heavy Grace of Parents and the Difficulty of Repaying debts" (*Fu Mu An Zhong Nan Bao Jing*) appeared, which showed the harmony between Buddhism and traditional Chinese ethical thoughts.⁷

Zen sect which is deeply integrated with the Chinese culture, has been the main promoter of integration of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism since the Tang Dynasty. Pregnant with the unique wisdom of Chinese culture, enriched with essence of India's Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Zen expressed its purpose of “finding it's true self” in a vivid way and popular language. The Zen, at the height of popularity at that time in China, exerted a great influence on Confucianism and Taoism. It had become a common practice for Confucians to learn and talk about Zen. Li Ao of Tang Dynasty learned Zen practice at Yaoshan mountain from Zen master Wei Yan.⁸ He wrote “On Returning to the Nature” (*Fu Xing Shu*)⁹ where he used the theory of mind and nature of Zen to explain the Confucian theory of mind and nature, which was the first of the Neo-Confucianism in Song Dynasty.¹⁰ After the late Tang Dynasty, fusion of three religions began to take shape and was widely accepted by the society.¹¹

3. Song Dynasty: The maturation period

In the Sui and Tang Dynasties, in order to strengthen the balance of ideology and culture, the rulers established a system with Confucianism having the orthodox status and implemented the cultural policy of combining the three religions taking Buddhism and Taoism as an important supplement to the official ideology. It was in the Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties that the true integration of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism was completed. In 1176, Zhao Shen, the second emperor of the Southern Song Dynasty, composed “*Yuan Dao Bian*” which records;

*“The three religions share the same origin but differ in their implementation’. Only fools take them as different. Buddhism is designed to cultivate the mind, Taoism to preserve the health, and Confucianism to govern the country.”*¹²

⁴ Can Hong Xiuping, Han Fengming, (2013), On the Relationship between Sinicization of Buddhism and the Three Religions Journal of East China Normal University, Issue-3 (Chinese)

⁵ [JIU TANG SHU旧唐书], Vol. 189

⁶ Can Zhanyong (2010), Liu Zongyuan: Representative of Confucianism in the Fusion of Three Religions in Tang Dynasty, Confucius Studies, issue-3 (Chinese)

⁷ Kumārajīva, -. (761987). Fo shuo fu mu en zhong nan bao jing /. Taipei Shi: Da sheng jing she yin jing hui.

⁸ Barrett, Timothy Hugh.(1978), "Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism in the Thought of Li Ao." PhD diss. Yale University.

⁹ Li Ao (1983). Fu Xing Shu 复性书 (On Returning to the Nature). In: Quan Tang Wen 全唐文 (The Complete Anthology of Tang), Vol. VII. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju

¹⁰ Zhang Yupu (2012), "Thoughts of Emperors of Tang and Song Dynasties on the Three Religions Fusion ", "Dong Yue Tribune", Issue -7, (Chinese).

¹¹ Chen, Jo-shui.(1998) “Fuxing shu' sixiang yuanyuan zaitan: Han Tang xinxing guannian shi zhi yizhang.” Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan 69 (3), pp. 423–482.

¹² [JIANYAN ZAJI建炎杂记] Second Edition, Vol. 3

It further records that It is reasoned to govern a country with Confucian ethics, to preserve one's health with Taoist approach, and to cultivate one's mind with Buddhist wisdom. Despite possessing different functions, the three religions can play great roles at different levels.

The Shu School of Sansu, to the great extent accepted the thought of Buddhism and Laozi. Su Zhe openly advocated the compatibility of Buddhism with Taoism and took the content of fusion of the three religions as the topic of the imperial court's policy and asked the students questions based on same, which shows that the atmosphere of harmony between Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism also influenced the imperial court and the imperial examinations.¹³ Zhang Shangying inclined to delve into to Buddhism and wrote "Theory of Protection of Dharma" (**Hu Fa Lun**)¹⁴, reflecting the idea of fusion of three religions. In the "Theory of Protection of Dharma", Zhang Shangying pointed out that although the three religions have different tenets and doctrines, particular methods can be used to "encourage and inspire people to do good deeds and make world better". Employing a metaphor of curing diseases, he expressed the indispensability of the three religions where Confucianism treats Dermatoses, Taoism fights Hematosis, and Buddhism controls Myelopathy. The three religions are like the three legs of a tripod where each one is indispensable.¹⁵

In the Song Dynasty, Confucian scholars profoundly studied Buddhism and Taoism, and absorbed their teachings which finally led Confucianism into its golden age. A group of Confucian Masters emerged. Scholars like Zhou Dun Yi, Cheng brothers(Cheng Yan, Cheng Yi), Zhuxi and Lu Xiang Shan etc advocated new kind of Confucianism which is called "Neo Confucianism"(*Xin Ru Xue*). The Neo-Confucianism draws largely from Buddhist thoughts. Both Cheng Zhu's "Neo Confucianism" or Lu Xiangshan's "Philosophy of Mind"(*Xin Xue*), established their ideological systems on the basis of the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Zhu Xi's Neo Confucianism was deeply influenced by Hua Yan and Zen school of thoughts. Zhu Xi's philosophy of "Everything is One Tai ji"(*Wu Wu Ming Yi Taiji*) is deeply influenced by Buddhist Huayan school's metaphor of "One is Everything and Everything is One; and the Zen school's of metaphor of "one moon mirrors all waters and all waters are pictured by one moon". The literary work of Zhou Dunyi "Ode to the Lotus Flower"(*Ai Lian Shuo*) is related to Buddhism's lotus Self-Purification preaching.

In Taoist circles, Zhang Boduan, the founder of Jindan School in the Northern Song dynasty, clearly put forward the theory of "Amalgamation of Three Religions"(*San Jiao Gui Yi*), believing that "Although there are three religions, all illustrate the same Tao."¹⁶ Chen Tuan believes that Confucius cultivates one's moral character and faithfulness, Laozi cultivates one's life with harnessing energy and raising vital spirit, and Shakyamuni uses clear mind to see the nature and to find one's true self. Chen Tuan insists that combination of the three religions would be a perfect beauty. Zhang Boduan's law of Dan cultivates life first and nature later, it practices Zen during cultivation of nature. His masterpiece "Awakening to Reality"¹⁷ (*Wu Zhen Pian*) talks about the traditional Taoist Internal Alchemy(Wei Dan), and the outer chapter about "Zen Poetry"(*Chan Zong Shi Jie*) which reflects the peculiarity of fusion between Taoism and Zen Buddhism.

At the same time, Buddhist circles also actively advocated the fusion of the three religions. Qi Song, a famous monk wrote "The Original Teaching"(*Yuan Jiao*), "The Auxiliary Teaching"(*Fu Jiao Pian*) connected the five precepts and ten virtues of Buddhism with the Five Cardinal virtues of Taoism, and believed that the three religions had the same objective and should coexist without neglecting each other. Master Dahui Zonggao held that "Creeds set by founders of the three religions are nothing than exhorting people to be good and guard them against evil."¹⁸ Chan Master Xutang Zhiyu insisted that "thousands of sects originated from the same principle, and the three religions insist on the same moral values."¹⁹ "Records of Monk Wu Zhun"(*Wu Zhun Heshang Zou Dui Yulu*) says "Sages of three religions preach same teachings. Each opens the door for another, each one has the same purpose"²⁰. In the Southern Song Dynasty, there also appeared an "Ode to The Three Religions"(*San Jiao Chu Xing Song*) in the name of "Three Religions", which emphasized the indispensability of the three religions by equating the three religions with the three legs of tripod.²¹

The sound of the integration of the three religions in the Song Dynasty had become the main theme, historians term this period as the period of "Unification of three religions". In fact, the three religions did not combine into one religion, but after a long period of struggle and adaptation, they found the point of convergence of doctrinal

¹³ [CE WEN YI SHI LIU DAO, SUZHE 策问一十六首, 苏辙集], Vol.72.

¹⁴ Shangying Zhang (1916), Hu Fa Lun; Jiading Wu you si jing ye sha men pu yu Min guo 5,pp. 1043-1121.(Chinese)

¹⁵ Cai Fanglu (2011), The ideological tendency of the integration of the three religions of Shu learning in the Northern Song Dynasty., Journal of Jiangnan University, Issue-3 (Chinese).

¹⁶ [WU ZHEN PIAN ZHU SHU 悟真篇注疏], Vol.1

¹⁷ Pregadio, Fabrizio. 2009. *Awakening to Reality: The "Regulated Verses" of the Wuzhen pian, a Taoist Classic of Internal Alchemy*. Golden Elixir Press.

¹⁸ [DA HUI PU JUE CHAN SHI YULU 大慧普觉禅师语录], Vol.24; [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol.47, pp- 911.

¹⁹ [XU TANG HESHANG YULU 虚堂和尚语录], Vol.6; [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol.47, p.1030.

²⁰ [WU ZHUN HESHANG YULU 无准和尚奏对语录], [WAN XU ZANG 续藏], Vol.70, pp. 277.

²¹ [WAN XU ZANG 续藏], Vol.101, p. 409.

harmony and mutual accommodation. After the Song Dynasty, the integration of the three religions with the theory of mind and nature as the main philosophical foundation gradually became the mainstream of Chinese ideological and cultural development.

4. Ming and Qing Dynasties: The peak period

Taizu of Ming dynasty wrote books such as "Theory of Three Religions" (*San Jiao Lun*) and "Theory of Buddhism and Taoism" (*Shi Dao Lun*) etc which opened the beginning of fusion of the three religions in the Ming Dynasty, and the fusion of the three religions became the ideological keynote after the mid-Ming dynasty. From the Northern and Southern Dynasties to the mid-Tang Dynasty, it was Buddhism and Taoism that played a leading role in the history of Chinese philosophy. Wang Yangming's mind theory draws on Confucianism's theory of conscience and Buddhism's theory of mind and nature. He believes that the noumenon of conscience is the basis on which all things exist, and is a new realm of Confucianism that integrates Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

At the same time, Taoist circles absorbed the theoretical essence of Buddhism and Confucianism, and produced new Taoism of Song and Yuan Dynasty called **Quanzhen Taoism**. The emergence of Quanzhen Taoism is a typical example of the fusion of the three religions. Wisdom and finding one's true self is the basic tenet of Quanzhen Daoism. Its basic doctrine is based on "fusion of three religions", "dual cultivation of life and nature", "integrity of both action and behaviour" and "the integrity and immortality". With the theory of fusion between Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, advocacy of same origin, same functions and equality among all three religions etc, It makes fundamental changes to the teachings and doctrines of traditional Taoism and establishes a new theoretical system of Taoism. More precisely, Quanzhen Taoism is mostly influenced by the Zen Buddhism, It first uses the method similar to Zen to recognize the mind and see the nature, and then uses the traditional internal alchemy method to cultivate the vital essence.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Buddhism gradually declined. Four eminent monks of the Ming Dynasty made positive contributions towards the fusion of three religions in theory and practices. Yunxi Zhuhong advocated the conformity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism; *"As far as verification is concerned, Confucianism and Buddhism are mutually beneficial rather than being mutually harmful. Therefore two should not attack each other but merge and compliment each other."*²²

The work of Yunxi Zhuhong "Mountain miscellanea:-Meeting of Three Religions" (**Shan Fang Za Lu: Ti San Jiao Tu**) depicts the meeting of *"long bearded Confucius with book in one hand, white haired Laozi with pill of immortality and blue eyed Buddha with robe on shoulder. It shows co-existence, mutual learning, mutual understanding and mutual respect for each other."*²³ **Master Zibo** had the thorough knowledge of Confucianism and Buddhism, He takes 'Five Ethical Norms' of Confucianism (benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom and faith) as "Five Buddhas" for people. He wanted people to attain Buddha-hood through the path of "Five Ethical Norms". Master **Qu Yi** often uses Zen Buddhism to interpret Confucianism claiming that although he is a Buddhist, he loves to learn mental cultivation methods of Confucianism.²⁴ He left behind his works such as "An Interpretation of Zhouyi by the Chan Thought of Buddhism" (**Zhou Yi Chan Jie**), "Four Book of Qu Yi Interpretation" (**Si Shu Qu Yi Jie**) which interprets Confucianism using Buddhism.²⁵

Hanshan Deqing also spared no effort to promote the fusion of three religions:

*"There are three main points for learning; "if one is ignorant about "Spring and Autumn Annals" (Chun Qiu), he can not gain life experience, if one has mastered the teachings of "Laozi" and "Zhuangzi", his life would be free of problems, and one can not experience the life without experiencing Zen."*²⁶

Deqing's works on the fusion of three religions such as "Resolving doubts of outline of the Great Learning" (**Daxue Gang Mu Jue Yi**), "Outright explanation of the Great Learning and the Doctrine of Mean" (**Daxue Zhongyang Zhi Zhi Jie**), "Mental cultivation methods of Zuo Zhuan", "Laozi's Annotation on Tao Te Ching", "Annotation on Zhuangzi's Inner Chapters", and "Influence theory of Guan Lao-Zhuang" have been the classic texts in academic circles demonstrating the ideological trend on fusion of the three religions in Ming dynasty. Its purpose is to show that *"The three founders of the three religions arrived at the same end by different means....thousands of sects pursue the same goal, and hundreds of ways lead to the same destination."*²⁷

²² Hong Xiuping (2011) *zhongguo ru fo dao san jiao guanxi yanjiu*; Beijing, China Social Sciences Press, pp. 272-273

²³ [SHAN FANG ZA LU山房杂录], Vol.2, [DA ZAN JING BUBIAN大藏经补编], Taipei Huayu Press, 1984, Vol.23, p. 421

²⁴ Jin-liang, X. (2006). Principle of Zhouyi and that of Buddhism share the same goal:On the ideological innovation of Zhou yi chan jie.Semantic Scholar.

²⁵ Can Chen Bin (2007), The ideological trend of fusion of three Religions and its modern significance since late Tang Dynasty , Journal of Sichuan Normal University, (4), (Chinese).

²⁶ [HAN SHAN LAO REN MENG YOU JI.憨山老人梦游集] 2005, Beijing tu shu guan chu ban she in Chinese - 880-03 Di 1 ban.Vol.39, [WAN XU ZANG祀续藏],Vol.73, p. 764

²⁷ [HAN SHAN LAO REN MENG YOU JI.憨山老人梦游集] Vol.45; [WAN XU ZANG祀续藏], Vol.73, p.772

Based on the thought of fusion the three religions, Hanshan Deqing, made his contribution towards establishing a system that enable the three religions to interpret one another. He starts from the ideological standpoint of fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, uses Zen school's theory of finding one's true self to explain Confucianism doctrine of knowledge and uses Buddhist ontology and the eight consciences theory to invent purpose of Laozhuang Taoism, he again uses Confucian ethical thoughts to explain Buddhism's doctrines and precepts, thus forming a systematic thought of mutual interpretation of the three religions.²⁸

In the late Ming Dynasty, Lin Zhaoen was the most powerful figure who push forwarded the idea of fusion of three religions. He set up "Three-in-One Religion"(**San Yi Jiao**), which pushed the idea of unity of the three religions to the top. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the beliefs of the Three Religions were extremely popular in the society. A large number of churches related to these three religion were built as places of worship in various places, which had a profound impact on society.

In modern times, a constellation of famed scholars such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong, Zhang Taiyan etc. devoted themselves to Buddhism and integrated Buddhism and Confucianism. The book "Benevolence" (**Ren Xue**) authored by Tan Sitong is considered as the work which blends Confucianism with Buddhism. Great Masters of modern Neo Confucianism such as Xiong Shili, Liang Shuming, Ma Yifu, Feng Youlan, Mou Zongsan, and Tang Yijun have all built their thoughts around this three religions. Merging Zen and consciousness-only (Wei Shi) School of Buddhism with Confucian Yi-ology, Xiong Shili founded modern Neo Confucianism which had a strong flavor of Zen Buddhism. Liang Qichao, in his work "An academic Overview of the Qing Dynasty" (**Qing dai Xueshu Gailun**) remarked that "therefore, almost all the so-called new scholars in the late Qing Dynasty had something to do with Buddhism."²⁹

Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, fusion of the three religions has become a basic trend in the development of Chinese culture and a concept generally accepted by the general public.

Integration of three Religions: Three Aspects

In the process of their respective development and dissemination, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism all strive to absorb the essence of each other and integrate with each other. This kind of fusion has three dimensions: First, is the integration of social ethics, Second is the integration of academic concepts and ideas, and the Third is the fusion of religious practices. The integration of Buddhism and Confucianism in social ethics is manifested in the fact that Buddhism has absorbed the Confucian concepts, eliminated the accusation of "unfilial" and "unfaithful", and advocated the "loyalty" and "filial piety" of Buddhism. The academic integration of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism shows that the three religions fully realize the role of mind and emphasize that the three religions share the same origin in one heart, original intention and benevolence. The integration of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism in religious practices is manifested in the three religions guiding people toward goodness, advocating universal living, benevolence and valuing all lives.

1. Social and Ethical fusion

This is mainly manifested in the fact that Buddhism absorbs Confucianism and advocates the loyalty and filial piety of Buddhism. The primitive doctrine of Buddhism does not respect the king, does not allow worshipping parents and is not bound by the secular etiquette. Moreover, According to China's political and ethical concepts, filial piety is the most important of all virtues, and emperor is the son of heaven who exercises power on behalf of heaven and has the supreme authority. No one can violate the will of the emperor, which becomes the biggest conflict between Buddhism and Chinese ethics and politics. In the process of Sinicization, Buddhism gradually converged with Chinese ethics and politics, and thoroughly subordinated to Confucianism in terms of the most basic ethical and political concepts such as filial piety, ancestor worship and King worship. In the face of the strong ethical and political ecological reality, Buddhism adopted a compromise attitude, recognized the supremacy of monarchy over theocracy, and held up the political theory of Confucianism as a model, declaring that "*Confucianism and Buddhism have common mottoes and teachings.*"³⁰ Huiyuan, a famous monk and teacher of the Eastern Jin Dynasty said: "*I often think that the difference between Confucianism and Buddhism is only the starting point of thought and the specific path, but the goal is the same.*"³¹ Drawing closer to the Taoism, he believed that Buddhism and Confucianism can complement each other in the two aspects of civil education and social governance.³²

Since the Tang dynasty, Buddhists owed their allegiances to the emperor and had been well aware of the fact that "*Without the support and permission of the emperor there was no way to establish and carry out their doctrines.*"³³ Zan Ning, in "Biography of Eminent Monks" (**Jin Gao Seng Zhuan Biao**) called himself "I, monk Zan Ning",

²⁸ Zhao Guangge (2014), Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism from the Eastern Han to the Tang Dynasty, II, In: An Intellectual History of China, Vol.1, pp. 317-378. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047425076_008

²⁹ Zongqi, C. (1997). THE RETHINKING OF EMOTION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL LITERARY CRITICISM IN THE LATE QING ERA. *Monumenta Serica*, 45, 63-100. Retrieved December 8, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40727392>

³⁰ [LI DAI SAN BAO 历代三宝记], Vol.5, [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol.49, p. 59

³¹ [JI SHAOMEN BU YING BAI DENG SHI 集沙门不应拜俗等事], Vol.2; [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol.52, pp.450

³² Bary, Theodor de (1999). Huiyuan: A monk does not bow down before a king. In: Sources of Chinese tradition, vol. I, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 280-286

³³ [ZI MEN JING XUN 缙门警训], Vol.3, [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol.48, p. 1054

reciprocally, the emperor would address the Buddhists as “Qing” in turn. The change in appellation shows that monks were no longer pretended to be outsiders and fighting against imperial power. Buddhism became completely dependent and subject to the imperial power. After the Song Dynasty, Buddhism changed from a general advocacy of saving sentient beings to the actual loyalty to the emperor, patriotism and filial piety. It integrated with the basic theories of Confucianism and proposed that Buddhism should participate in supporting the government of the king. Qi Song, a famous monk in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), said:

*"The doctrine of a monk is to be good and virtuous; the Dharma of the kings is to govern first. The Buddha uses the five precepts to persuade the world, how can he want it to be chaotic?"*³⁴

In terms of political ethics, Buddhism took the initiative to move closer to Confucianism in accordance with the actual conditions of China's political society, thereby gaining an ethical foundation and political support for the spread of Buddhism in China.

2. Fusion of Academic ideas

This is mainly manifested in the fact that the three religions fully realize the role of the mind emphasizing one mind, true intention and benevolence being the origin of all three religions. In the process of the Integration of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, the concept of same origin of the three religions has always existed which has found a theoretical ground for this integration. The sages of the three religions have all pointed out that the origin of the three religions is directly related to the origin of the mind.

Lu Guangzu, secretary of the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the Ming Dynasty, once asked Wang Longxi about the teaching of the three religions. Longxi replied that *"Buddhism attaches importance to 'finding one's true mind', Taoism thinks highly of 'cultivating the mind', and Confucianism lays stress on 'maintaining the mind'. It is on the 'mind' that all three religions rest. The 'mind' plays different roles due to different circumstances."*³⁵

Ouyi Zhixu offered further explanation that the three religions share the same doctrine because they share the same 'mind'. *"Mind is the source of these three religions as these three religions are based on this mind. If there is no mind, then there is no religion; and if there is ignorance in one's mind, there will be ignorance in all three religions."*³⁶ The mind is nothing rather than being benevolent to people and cherishing creatures. He further said that;

*"It is hard to discern their depths of thought but their intentions of being benevolent and cherishing creatures are no different."*³⁷

In terms of specific application, Confucianism uses this mind for "protecting people", Buddhism uses this mind to "save lives" and Taoism uses this mind to "cherish creatures". With this benevolent heart, Confucius is the true Confucius, Buddha is the true Buddha and Tao is the true Tao, and all these three could be integrated into one. Hanshan Deqing also advocated the theory of "Isogeny of three religions" and believed that Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism originated from the same mind. So it makes sense that "the three religions derive the same principles", *"the three sages are originally the same"*³⁸ and *"Confucius and Laozi are the incarnation of Buddha."*³⁹

3. Fusion of religious practices

This is mainly manifested in the fact that all the three religions encourage people to do good deeds. From the perspective of the utility of the three religions, all the three religions guide people to be benevolent. During Jin and Song dynasties, the hermit Zong Bing wrote "Theory of Ming Buddhism"(Ming Fo Lun), saying that *"Confucius, Laozi and Buddha may follow different paths; however the pursuit of benevolence is their common cause."*⁴⁰ In mid-Tang Dynasty, Zong Mi noted in his "Theory of primitive man" (Yuan Ren Lun) that *"Confucius, Laozi and Buddha are all acknowledged as sages;"* and *"All the three religions should be observed as they punish wickedness and encourage virtue, and reach the same goal of bringing stability."*⁴¹ As far as governing people and ruling the country are concerned, Song Zhenzong proposed that all religions must assist and uphold imperial authority and guide people towards being benevolent. He said: *"The three religions are all designed with the same purpose of exhorting people to be good."*⁴²

³⁴ [TAN JIN WEN 谭津文集], Vol.16, [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol. 52, p. 773.

³⁵ Wei Yueping, (2008), Cong "lang zhi" dao "kong ju": lun yangming hou xue san jiao he yi zhi yanbian, History of Chinese Philosophy (4), (Chinese)

³⁶ [LING FENG ZONG LUN 灵峰宗论], Vol.4 of 7.

³⁷ [LING FENG ZONG LUN 灵峰宗论], Vol.4 of 7.

³⁸ [HAN SHAN LAO REN MENG YOU JI 憨山老人梦游集], Vol.45, [WAN XU ZANG 卮续藏], Vol.73, p. 767

³⁹ [HAN SHAN LAO REN MENG YOU JI 憨山老人梦游集], Vol.45, [WAN XU ZANG 卮续藏], Vol.73, p. 772

⁴⁰ [HONG MING JI 弘明集], Vol.2, [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏], Vol.52, p.12

⁴¹ [YUAN REN LUN 原人论], Vol.1; [DA ZHENG ZANG 大正藏] 《大正藏》, Vol.45, p. 707

⁴² [XU ZI ZHI TONG JIAN CHANG BIAN 续资治通鉴长编], Vol. 81.

During Hongwu (1368-1398), Shen Shirong, an official of Nanjing city, wrote 14 articles on “Sequel to explanation of the continuation of the original religion” (Yuan Jiao Lun) in which he expressed that all three religions derive from the mind. The lines read as follows:

As people are born with different characteristics, religions preserve diversity too, and they develop in different ways. Although their ways of performing benefaction are different, they all mean to bring peace and prosperity to people. If get to the bottom of the religions, it is not beyond the scope of the mind that is shared by all religions. The mind and principle are applicable everywhere. Different paths they may take but the same destination they would reach.....If we put the fundamental before the incidental, will stay out of the confusion caused by different paths, and delve into the origin of the mind, known as benevolence, we would find that they all without exception arrive at the same end by different means.⁴³

The aim of the three religions is to encourage people to achieve perfection. The patriarch of Quanzhen Taoism, Wang Chongyang also advocated that all three religions regarded eradicating people’s delusions and saving people from stupidity as their responsibility, and saving all living creatures from suffering as their goals: “The three religions are clear, they all aim to save people from sufferings”.⁴⁴ The differences of the three religions lie only in their forms of expression, emphasis and division of labor. There is no difference between the three religions in the fundamental function of saving human life and educating society. All the three religions guide people to be virtuous. Here, we take the people of the world as an entry point and analyze the three religions’ propositions and their integral practices in guiding people towards benevolence.

1. Mahayana spirit of Buddhism: Chinese Buddhism attaches utmost importance to Mahayana spirit and calls it the spirit of Chinese Buddhism. Mahayana spirit is the spirit of relieving people of their distress by exhibiting infinite compassion and mercy. The Sutra on Contemplation of Amitayus records that “*What Buddha harbors is infinite compassion and mercy.*”⁴⁵ Theravada lays stress on egoism by saving oneself from suffering, while Mahayana devotes much attention to altruism by saving all living beings from suffering. The essence of Mahayana spirit is the dual destiny of compassion and wisdom. Wisdom refers to seeking of Bodhisattva for achieving liberation; Compassion means extending help and sharing happiness with all living beings; mercy signifies extricating them from all sufferings. Comparing with pleasure, kindness and relieving people from suffering is called compassion. Combination of seeking Bodhisattva for liberation and helping all living beings is equivalent to applying both compassion and wisdom to save oneself and others from suffering and getting oneself liberated and helping others to achieve the same. Mahayana insists that people who attain the enlightenment of releasing from the cycle of rebirth are still deemed selfish and narrow-minded as they ignore the suffering of others and only take the pursuit of personal liberation into consideration. When one gets the enlightenment, he must return to the mortal life full of worries and pains, and liberate everyone from the pain of rebirth with great compassion. This is the true meaning of Zen masters’ life. Such unique deep love and responsibilities borne by Buddhists who practice Mahayana are represented by the fact that they “*neither ascend into rebirth nor Nirvana*”⁴⁶-----“*rebirth amounts to Nirvana*”⁴⁷; that they are able to endure vexation; that they choose to return to the bitter living world for showing mercies and saving all living beings from suffering, including animals like donkeys, horses and other living beings.

The Lotus Sutra says, Buddhists who practice Mahayana will never enter the final Nirvana, instead they will stay among all mortal beings and endeavor to educate and enlighten them. As long as he can contribute to the happiness of all living beings, he will come to the suffering world countless times without any hardship.⁴⁸

2. Benevolence of Confucianism: The Mahayana spirit of Buddhism is closely related to Confucian thought of benevolence. Confucianism is based on benevolence, and the original heart of Confucianism is the heart of benevolence: “*There is no beginning in heaven and earth; everything is unprecedented; human affairs have no beginning; there is no beginning in people’s hearts. And if you fill your heart with original intention, you are regarded nothing but benevolent ones.*”⁴⁹ Benevolence is to love and help others. “*Fan Chi asked Confucius, what is benevolence, Confucius replied: loving others is benevolence.*” [The Analects of Confucius- Yan Yuan Chapter]. “*A benevolent man is one who wants to establish himself and establish others, makes himself prosperous and help others become prosperous*”. [The Analects of Confucius Yongye Chapter]. Benevolence is the original intention of love that always exists in the heart. “*A gentleman even for the space of a single meal, does not act contrary to benevolence. He even in the moments of haste or in destitution, does not leave it.*” [The Analects of Confucius; Li Ren Chapter]. Confucianism advocates the practice of self-cultivation first, and then the practice of benevolence or caring for others: “*To cultivate oneself is to protect others.*” [The Analects of Confucius; Xian Wen Chapter].

⁴³ [XU DENG ZHENG TONG续灯正统], Vol.42; [WAN XU ZANG JING 卮续藏经] Vol.144, p. 984

⁴⁴ Wang, Chongyang & 王重阳 & Bai, Ruxiang & 白如祥 (2005). Wang Chongyang ji (Di 1 ban). Qi Lu shu she, Jinan, p. 336

⁴⁵ [DA ZHENG ZANG大正藏] Vol.12, p. 343

⁴⁶ [DA FANG GUANG FO HUA YAN JING大方广佛华严经], Vol.20, [DA ZHENG ZANG大正藏], Vol.10, P. 106

⁴⁷ [ZHONG LUN中论], Vol.3, [DA ZHENG ZANG大正藏], Vol.30, p. 21

⁴⁸ Wu Yansheng (2011), Jing Dian Chan Yu 《经典禅语》 (Classic Zen Quotes), Dong da Tu Shu Gongsi, pp. 169-188

⁴⁹ [XIAOSHI MEI TING 萧氏梅亭记], [WEN SHAN JI文集], Vol.20

This character of the original intention of Confucianism determines the tendency and behavior pattern of "governing the world through Confucianism" (Words of Song Xiaozong). The Buddha's self-depreciation is essentially the Confucian thought of self-cultivation and peace of mind.

3. Taoist thought of valuing life: The Mahayana spirit of Buddhism is same as the heart of goodness in Taoism. The book of Morals (**Tao Te Ching**) says: "*Benevolence is as good as water, and water is good for all things without any contention, therefore it is equal to Tao.*" Such kind of benevolence and the practice of virtue is the embodiment of Taoism. Extensive benevolence is the Taoist way of entering the world and contributing to the world cause. "*Tao causes all things to come into being, i.e. to reproduce, to grow, to develop, to bear fruit and mature. But It does not take possession of them, it does not rely on them, and does not dominate them. It is called Xuan De.*" [Tao Te Ching, Chapter 51]. To grow and nurture all things, to grow but not to possess, to nurture but not to depend on, to direct but not to dominate, this is the deepest "virtue." Taoism emphasizes that "*if a man wants to be immortal on the earth, he should establish three hundred virtues; if he wants to be immortal on the sky, he should establish two thousand two hundred virtues.*"⁵⁰ It can be seen that good deeds are inseparable from the cultivation of immortals. The first classic of the Taoist Patrology <**Daozang**>, Du Ren Jing, advocates that "**Xian Dao Gui Sheng, Wu Liang Du Ren**", meaning Tao deems all lives precious. Taoism is about eternal life, and believes all lives can achieve eternity. Therefore, all lives are precious and should be respected. Taoism is against killing and suicide. It rescues others from the destination of perish. Since all lives are precious and can reach eternity, the difference is only speed to arrive at the final destination, therefore a Taoist must try to enlighten lives around him." However, people tend to value its carefree side while ignoring its original intention to help the world; we only see the result of retreat, but often ignore the pursuit of success.

Conclusion: Through the analysis of the historical trajectory of the fusion of the three religions, the three dimensions of the integration of the three religions, and the classic cases of the fusion of the three religions, it can be found that although the three religions have their own characteristics, they still can integrate and complement each other. The most fundamental purpose of the three religions is to purify life and improve human character through self-cultivation, altruistic practice of great love, compassion and benevolence, so as to reach the realm of self-evaluation and self-consciousness of ultimate goodness and beauty. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, in the process of fusion of 'there is me in you and you in me', maintain their own characteristics and individuality from beginning to the end. Unity in diversity, harmony without uniformity and togetherness have become the three cornerstones of Chinese thoughts. Exploring the historical experience of the integration of the three religions in Chinese ideological thought has great enlightening significance for the mutual learning of the pluralistic coexistence of civilizations in contemporary world ideological trends.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

50 Ge, Hong. (1985). Baopuzi nei pian. Beijing :Zhonghua shu ju ying yin : Xin hua shu dian Beijing fa xing suo fa hisng

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