

## SOME ASPECTS OF PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT IN ANCIENT CHINESE RELIGION: AN ANALYTICAL EVALUATION

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### ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates an ancient system of cosmology as a part of phenomenology of religion that is intrinsic to ancient Chinese philosophic attitude toward life. The ideas of the dynamic balance of opposites i.e. *yin* and *yang* duality, the supernatural force (the *Tao*) relating to the gradual development of events through a process of formulation, and thereby, acceptance of the inevitability of change are taken under consideration. In Chinese tradition, all forms of change are regarded as expressions of the interaction of two auxiliary forces (controlled by the *Tao*), the *yin* and the *yang*, between which equilibrium and harmony are assumed, as well as conflict and opposition. The *yin-yang* principles are regarded as the two major elements of Chinese cosmology: *yin*, being the female

principle, and *yang* the male principle. The combination and interplay of these two opposites is believed by the Chinese to cause all universal phenomena i.e. the principal cause of creation. It is also demonstrated how this ancient Chinese supposition of *yin* and *yang* is used in different ways to serve different purposes. It is sometimes regarded as a system of divination that combines interacting forces designed to work as fortune telling devices. However, it is clarified how these facts – the supreme reality (*Shang-ti*), supreme force (the *Tao*) and the auxiliary forces (*yin-yang*) – work together in order to maintain the apparent harmony and order in nature as a whole. It is also generalized how these facts happened to be of great interest for the ancient Chinese thinkers.

### Introduction

China was the foremost world civilization, and was creating a new synthesis of thoughts and cultures in its religious tradition. The evolution of Chinese civilization underwent a long process of formulation which continued down to the centuries. Therefore, rethinking on ancient Chinese religion may occupy a crucial position in the field of academic study of religion, and thereby it might have become a considerable issue of further research for both the western and eastern scholars. In the present paper, a close attention has been paid to the process of assimilation which includes an account of interactions among the old traditions and their relation to the subsequent development of Chinese religion. As a complex amalgam of ancient Chinese religions, the social and philosophical impacts of those religious elements have become central to be analyzed in order to understand the deep philosophical aspects of ancient Chinese religion and especially its adherents' sense of identity. Hence, it is necessary to study different aspects of Chinese thought and socio-cultural circumstances.

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According to primitive theology, almost all religions include both spirits and impersonal forces. (Kottak, p. 310) Likewise, the supernatural beliefs of the ancient Chinese include beliefs in beings (deities, spirits, souls, demons) and in forces (Tao, Yang, Yin and sacred objects). Though it is non-empirical, mysterious, and inexplicable in ordinary terms, it is accepted on faith. In primitive Chinese societies, however, people believed they could benefit from, become imbued with, or manipulate supernatural forces. However, any statement about when and how religion arose in the Chinese mind, or any description of its original nature, can only be speculative. Although such speculations are inconclusive, they have revealed important functions and effects of religious behavior. They developed a conception of soul on the basis of Yang-Yin duality and had philosophical speculation of life and death on the basis of the *Tao* – the eternal force. The present paper, therefore, makes an attempt to assess ancient Chinese religion in a view of reflecting some deep philosophical aspects on the basis of the following questions: How did the Chinese nourish the gradual development of their religion in the exclusive matrix of Chinese thought and culture over the centuries? What are the basic characteristics of Chinese thought and culture? What are the major factors behind the century old tradition in China that constitutes the root principle of all Chinese thought and culture? How do the Chinese present their recognition of these facts in their popular traditions in various ways? In answering these questions, several concepts will be examined now.

### **1. Cosmology of Ancient China: A Mixture of Faith and Philosophy**

Anthropologically speaking, all religions have concepts about the nature of reality, what kinds of rules it follows, how it came

to be the way it is, and what supernatural beings and powers were involved in its origins. Such beliefs form the cosmology of each religion. (Kottak, pp. 320-21) Similarly, ancient Chinese cosmology deals with the beliefs about the nature of the supernatural beings and their relationships to the early Chinese, and provides answers to questions about the nature of life and death, the reasons for the creation of the universe, and mental satisfaction in diverse modes of worship. However, the early Chinese considered all the processes of heaven and earth a display of fundamental regularity and harmony of operation. They believed that the earth was flat and motionless, with bowed heavens above. They thought that China occupied the central place on the earth's surface that is considered to be the middle kingdom. (Crepò, p. 84) The position of the imperial altars of the emperor's palace is marked as the heart of China. In addition, the altars signify a vertical relationship between the central points of earth and heaven. People looked up into the heavens and viewed "natural piety" i.e. the free gift from a higher power. (Durant, p. 641) They viewed the dome of heavens by day and night and were impressed by the order and harmony of the celestial movements. Each celestial body follows its appointed order and course, from year to year the same. Perhaps, their conviction led them to think that some human crimes or occurrences make troubles for the usual equilibrium and thereby the heaven is disturbed. Out of such disturbances the heaven gets angry and orders the falling stars and thunderbolts to crash to earth. Demonic power becomes heaven's punishing will that cause disturbance, delay or miscarriage. Therefore, floods, earthquake, tornadoes, drought and unseasonable cold or heat have been a common complaint i.e. a loud cry or sorrow. It is because the heaven, earth and humans are so sensitively related to each other that any adverse development affects them all. It is, therefore, believed that the

misbehavior of men or even of the emperors disturbed the whole of the nature and heaven. Here men need to act according to certain accepted standards so that the universal harmony is prevailed. This may be possible if men follow the principle of life i.e. the way of nature – the *Tao*. It is because each and every thing has its own principle, thereby things exist and transform according to that particular principle. (Noss, p. 236)

It is important to mention that the interaction between the Heaven (the absolute), nature (heaven and earth as a whole) and men are not mechanical; rather the parts are as mutually sensitive to each other as the organs within a living system. If we look into the nature on earth we find order with the constant succession of the seasons, the growth of the plants, the upward leap of the flame, the rain fall, down-flowing of water and with thousands of instances of natural process. Therefore, if the earth is left to work out her process without disturbance, there appears order and harmonious functioning everywhere. In this regard, humans should play the crucial role to maintain their proper relation in order to keep the equilibrium the same-adjusting them to their fellow – men, to nature and to the Absolute. (Moore, p. 299) Without any controversy and doubt, the tragic present global climate change and contamination all over the world have resulted from human untoward and suicidal activities that directly correspond to the ancient Chinese thought (mentioned above): the misconducts of human beings disturb the whole of the nature and thereby they are being severely affected.

### 1.1. The Concept of *Yang* and *Yin* and Their Different Usages

From the earliest time, the world is thought in terms of this dualistic principle of *Yang* and *Yin*. *Yang* is the principle of light, warmth, steadfastness, goodness etc. and *Yin* is the

principle of darkness, cold, changeable, evil etc. In a graphic expression (Fig 1), *Yang* is represented in white or some light color and *Yin* is characterized in dark color. *Yang* becomes also an expression of heaven, the celestial body, as a whole and at the same time, *Yin* becomes a term for the earth ( *ti* or *kwen*), the place of changeableness and evil. In addition, *Yang* as a male element, comes to denote man or the male, and *Yin* similarly woman or the female. The two opposite elements form the familiar spherical figures seen in the *tai-chi* (Fig 2) – the absolute points or the points of beginning. In modern speech, they might be called the “primordial cells.” For Chinese scholars, the concept of creation is developed out of this absolute point. Biologically speaking, cell means the basic unit of all living matter in all organisms. The main source of energy for all of the biological processes takes place within a cell. All living beings including humans are embodied in the concept of creation. Out of this substance, the first living being sprang forth. This graphic representation of absolute points in *tai-chi* corresponds to the modern biological concept of the basic unit of any living being. (Lao Tzu, p. x)

#### 1.1.1. *Yang* and *Ying*: the Opponent Forces and Spirits

*Yang* and *Yin* are conceived to be two opponent forces or energy modes or elements in this dualistic principle. They also represent two opponent spirits. The good spirits or gods are personified *Yang* forces while the bad spirits or demons are personified *Yin* forces. The personified *Yang* forces are termed *shen* (gods) while the *Yin* forces *kwei* (demons). Again, human beings are a product of *Yang* and *Yin* forces i.e. they are partly *Yang* and partly *Yin*. Here, *Yang* and *Yin* are used to indicate man’s *shen* (good quality) and *kwei* (bad quality) i.e. good and evil (Fig 3). Later on, *shen* and *kwei* substitute for *huen* (man’s superior essence) and *pho* (man’s inferior essence), respectively. In addition, Chinese thought developed the

proportion of higher and lower essence of human soul. Man has three soul parts that is to say *Yang* forces. On the contrary, *Yin* forces are responsible for the destruction of the body that make human sick and the increasing degree of the illness makes certain that the soul parts are about to leave the body and cause death. (Available: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cell\\_%28biology%29#Membrane](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cell_%28biology%29#Membrane))

### 1.1.2. Divination and the Fortune-Telling Dice

Evidence indicates that forms of fortune-telling were practiced in ancient China, Egypt, Chaldea, and Babylonia as long ago as 4000 BCE. Prophetic dreams and oracular utterances played an important part in ancient religion and medicine. Therefore, old and mysterious calculation became the basis of the system of professing in China since ancient times. Soothsayers used coins as dice in telling fortune. (Smith, p. 5) This system is often called *ch'ien po* meaning to throw coins to learn the play of destiny. The throwing of a kind of dice or coin is the favorite method. The face of the coin bearing the inscription of the *Yang* is counted to be the upper side (convex i.e. curving outward) that denotes happiness and prosperity; while the other is the lower, or *Yin* side (concave i.e. curving inward), denoting misfortune and loss. However, the coins are shaken in a proper manner (once or twice) and thrown on the table. One of the following results is awaited: (1) the three coins falling with upper side up means happiness and good fortune; (2) the three coins falling with lower side up signify misfortune and ill-luck; (3) two falling with upper side and one with the lower side up denotes moderately good fortune; and (4) two showing the lower and one the upper side symbolizes a bad omen (Fig 4). The results are tabulated as follows:

A fairly good cast (throwing of coins or dices) is put down as *Yang* (unbroken lines-happiness).

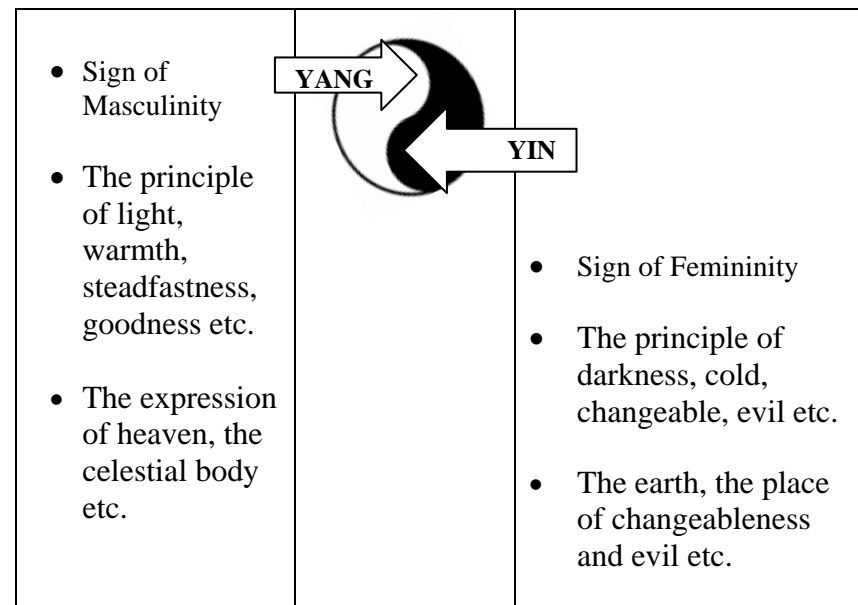
A sort of poor cast goes as *Yin* (broken lines-misfortune).

A good cast changes *Yin* to *Yang* (broken to unbroken-moderately good fortune).

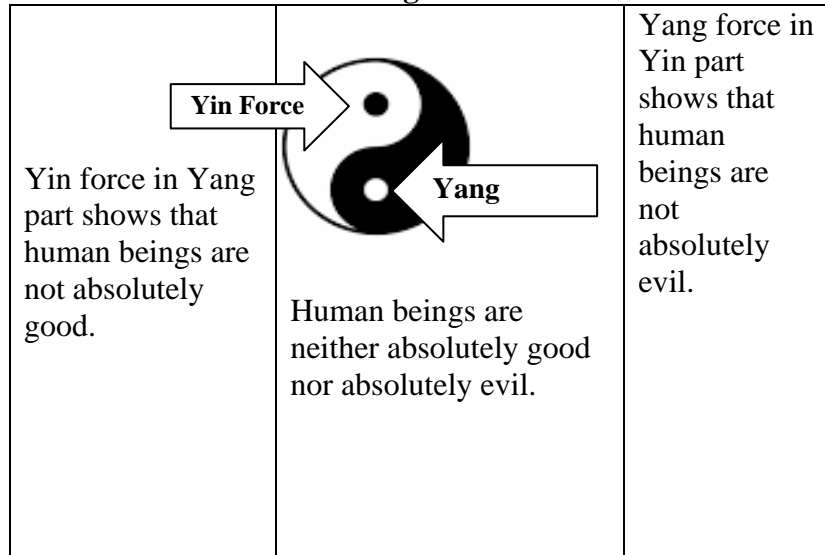
A poor cast changes *Yan* to *Ying* (unbroken to broken-bad omen). (Available: <http://global.britannica.com/topic/fortune-telling>)

Again, two basic elements within *tai-chi* itself are used in order to determine different fate categories. When *tai-chi* is analyzed into *Yang* and *Yin*, two categories are primarily obtained such as unbroken and broken lines. The unbroken line is *Yang* that always designates the stability. The broken line is *Yin*, which is fundamentally the fragile, the shaky.

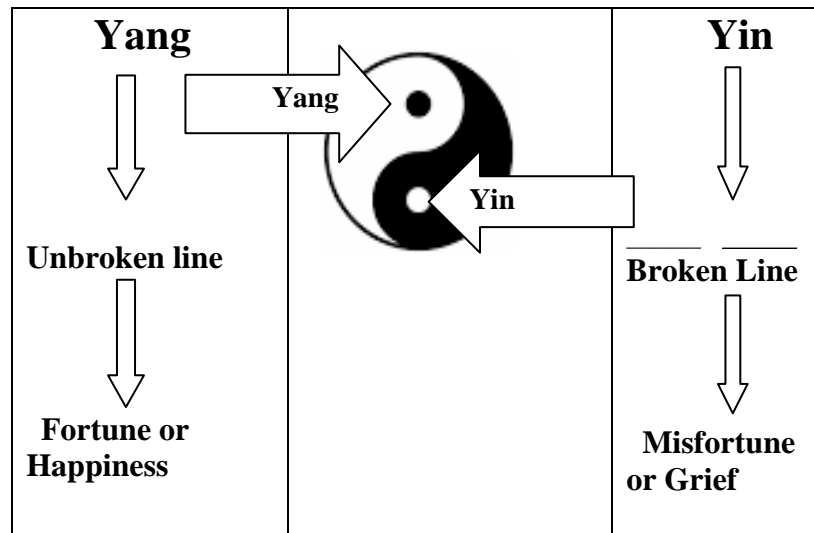
Figure 1



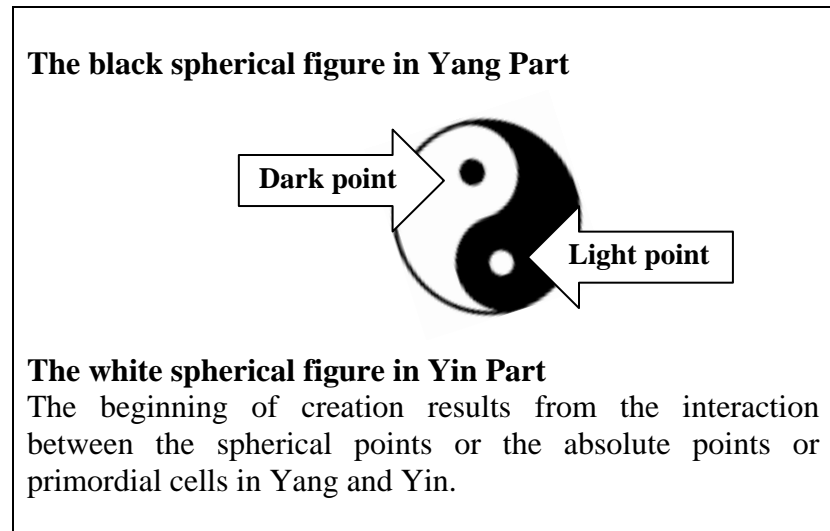
**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**



**Figure 2**



**1.1.3. Yin-Yang and Their Fundamental Interaction**

A whole school of Chinese philosopher is said to have devoted themselves to *Yin-Yang* interactionism from 4000-2000 BCE. Their chief representative was Tsou Yen of fourth century BCE who concentrated on the interaction of *Yin* and *Yang* in the five elements such as earth, wood, metal, fire, and water. They thought about the two principles with thoroughness and care, and distinguished within every natural object two interacting energy-modes, the *Yin* and the *Yang*. According to them, everything exists, is formed by the interaction of these two modes of energy. In fact, a single object shows both *Yang* and *Yin* characteristics in different moments. A dried out log, for example, is wholly *Yin* in character, but if it is put in the fire it will prove to have *Yang* qualities in abundance. Here, the log comes in contact with fire and gets a chemical reaction between the composition of substances and their properties

within the log itself. Furthermore, it happens for their interactions between matter and energy. It is not because the substance has altered; rather its inner activity has changed from one mode to another. With the exception of the sun and earth the same is true for anything else. The *Yang* energy mode, dominant in the ever-fiery sun, is full of *Yang* energy modes while the earth is full of *Yin* energy modes. It should be mentioned that the way the ancient Chinese philosophers regarded the compound objects of nature corresponds to the theories of modern physical science. The Chinese physical world is thought to be a world of action. (Reichelt, p. 25) Though stuffs of things pass from one state to another and they have different properties and different names. Things are always distinguished by the way they act rather than stuffs of which they are composed. However, to the ancient Chinese thinkers, the differences between things consist degree of density (itself a kind of activity) and nature of activity.

### 1.2. The Concept of *Tao*: A Philosophical Overview

The apparent harmony and order in nature as a whole appeared to be a great interest for the ancient Chinese thinkers. They always looked forward to giving reasons for such harmony and order. Each of the reasons gave birth to new questions and all questions are answered in well manner. At the experiential level, a characteristic idea was the goal of experiencing harmony or identity with nature through following the Way of Nature, the *Tao*. (Noss, p. 236) Finally, by the way of answers, they arrived at the concept of *Tao*. The revolutionary term literally means a 'way' or a 'road' or 'rule' or 'order'. The Chinese classics, from China's ancient period, use the term *Tao* always as good and corrective power in the world. These classics also represent *Tao* as the immaterial and impersonal entity. (Smart, p. 107) Philosophically speaking, it refers to the

standard procedure of things, the correct method of their operation or behavior. The ancient Chinese scholars holds that the harmony and orderliness displayed in heaven and earth were the result of the cosmic (everything that exists anywhere) presence of the *Tao*. This is the powerful way of the universe. The ancient Chinese scholars analyzed that the mechanism of the universe runs in the powerful way. To their minds it seemed that the way in which the universe runs must have existed before the universe itself. Here this *Tao* is conceived to be eternal. The *Tao* is definitely a way of harmony, cohesion, integration, and cooperation. Its natural tendency is always toward peace, prosperity and health. The *Tao* is believed to have extraordinary power to lead heaven, mankind and earth to be formed a single, harmonious unit cooperating toward universal well-being. In the Golden Age of ancient China, good Emperors, Yao and Shun, are reported to have ruled their subjects by knowing and following the *Tao* very properly. These emperors (mentioned above) occupy the periods which constitute China's golden age. For Confucius, these emperors manifested real imperial ideal, and therefore, they never hesitate to describe their unselfish and beneficent labors for country and people. As a result, the people lived in peace and happiness. The morale reach so high that "one need not lock the door at night", and "every lost object was left where it was till the owner came for it". (Reichelt, p. 28) Without any question, that was a time of universal happiness and men then lived in an earthly paradise. Such a state of perfection may return to earth if the conditions for restoration are met properly. If the rulers live according to the *Tao*, they may become the earthly instrument of cosmic power making for peace and harmony among men, animals and natural forces, and so prosperity exists throughout their realms.

### 1.2.1. The Regulating Force *Tao*

The *Tao* is considered to be a regulating force. Now let's ask a question: What does it regulate? It is said to regulate and limit the eternal dualistic competition between *Yang* and *Yin* elements or entities or principles, or energy modes. When did then *Tao* start operating? It began operating immediately after the primordial cell (the foremost cell related to creation) began to divide into two fundamentally different entities such as *Yang* and *Ying*. The *Tao* in practical life begins its activity with the first inner tension and outward division of *tai chi* as a force. *Tao*, therefore, comes to have a remarkable correspondence with the concept of physical science. From the perspective of physics, this inner tension refers to a force that produces strain on a physical body; that is to say, the intensity of stress is expressed in units of force divided by units of area. Here *Tao* is always independent and operates the dualistic principles spontaneously. Therefore, this force is termed as the universal law of life for the whole evolutionary process. Through the mediating and corrective activity of *Tao*, nature's two eternal principles must work together that finally results in harmony.

### 1.2.2. The Relation of *Tao* to Heaven and *Shang-Ti*

As it has previously been mentioned that in course of a long time, many Chinese beliefs and practices supplanted the old concepts where, in many cases, the main spirit of themes has remained unchanged. Though there is no doubt on *Shang-Ti* to be the Supreme God, the early prominent emperors placed Heaven next to *Shang-Ti*. Here the concept of *Shang-Ti*, as the Supreme Being, seems to have appeared earlier than that of Heaven. In fact, both of the terms refer to the same Supreme God and they are characterized with the same spirit in different places. However, the ancient emperors might have used the term "Heaven" synonymous with *Shang-Ti*. It has also been

clear that the *Tao* is considered to be the instrument of *Shang-Ti*'s activity in the world as a whole. The *Tao* is conceived as the direct force of *Shang-Ti* and this force is impersonal. On the other hand, according to ancient Chinese classical writings, the spirits or gods in the wider sense are considered to be the auxiliary forces of *Shang-Ti*. (Reichelt, p. 15) Thus, *Shang-Ti*'s forces are divided into impersonal and personal equipments through which His activities are done accordingly in the world. However, *Shang-Ti* and Heaven are just two different names of the same Supreme Being and *Tao* and different spirits works as the instrumental forces of God. The ancient Chinese also hold a clear idea of reward, sin and punishment. Similarly, every good deed has its reward and bad deed its punishment. They believed heaven (*Shang-Ti*) also provided these through the same *Tao*. Demonic spirits are also controlled by Heaven and therefore, without his permission they cannot do any harm to human beings. This concept appears familiar to the Islamic concept of the function of *Satan* who took Allah's permission with a view of doing whatever he desires after he was expelled from his previous position of Archangel.

### 1.2.3 The Place of *Tao* in Worship

The Chinese have never worshiped the *Tao* as they are always concerned about its real characteristic. They believe that the *Tao* works as the real force of the law of life. To some extent, this law (fixed by *Shang-Ti*) is followed by nature as a whole. But the human history, since its beginning, reports that it is too tough to bring human nature under the laws of life completely. For this reason, they find sin and wickedness to be appeared alongside with them. To get rid of evil influences and keep them away from sins they felt the necessity of worshipping gods. They always hoped for victory over the demonic spirits. They also are concerned about the common characteristic of the real good spirits or gods who always act, mediate and assist

in accordance with the *Tao*, the instrument of Heaven or *Shang-Ti*. However, from the earliest time, being impersonal, the *Tao* is not worshiped, rather the owner of this force and auxiliary forces (spirits), being personal, are worshiped to be guided accordingly. However, this concept of *Tao* may be compared with the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Stoic concept of the *Logos* – an intelligent divine force by which humanity can achieve genuine happiness. (Reichelt, p. 28) In fact, both of the forces recommend humanity to live in conformity with them and to bring their life into harmony with this powerful providential wisdom.

### Concluding Remark

All the surface conditions of ancient Chinese religions today tempt the observers to conclude that Chinese society was not built on science but on a strange and unique mixture of religion, morals and philosophy. The beliefs and practices prevalent in ancient Chinese religion seem to be a strange conglomeration of truth and error, of rational faith and irrational superstition. These facts clearly show that there are conflicting phenomena in Chinese religion, particularly with respect to the individual that are more apparent than real. If the fundamental aspects of Chinese religious life and thought are understood, these conflicts may be resolved. However, some aspects seem to have arrived at a higher and pure form of truth than others. Without doubt, the elements (mentioned above) related to popular traditions had served as strong background to more highly developed systems of thought and faith down to the centuries. Consequently, Chinese scholars of Lao-tzu and Confucian ages experienced and enjoyed the fully developed results of about two thousand years old culture. Particularly, based on the huge collection of ancient literature, both Lao-tzu and Confucius rendered an important service to

phenomenology of ancient Chinese religion by criticizing and refining religious beliefs and practices, by separating the essential from the accidental and secondary elements of faith from all admixtures of superstition and crude animism. Finally, this is true that the intellectual discovery of China was one of the achievements of the Enlightenment. Therefore, the Chinese are considered to be superior to all other Asiatics in antiquity, art, intellect, wisdom, policy, and in their taste for philosophy.

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