

CHINESE RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN MACAU

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I address the phenomenon of syncretism with respect to Chinese religions. An analysis of the syncretism that takes place between the three major Chinese religious traditions is first done in its personal and social dimensions. The social structure of Chinese religion is then used as a framework to understand how Buddhism and Daoism were made compatible with Confucianism. All this will serve as a background for the case study of Macau, where Chinese religious syncretism is very much alive. Three popular religious festivals are celebrated annually and simultaneously on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, namely, *zuilongjie* (醉龍節) Feast of the Drunken Dragon, *tangongdan* (譚公誕) Tam Kung Festival and *fodanjie* (佛誕節) Feast of the Buddha.

KEYWORDS: Chinese religion, syncretism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Macau

INTRODUCTION

This paper contains an attempt to uncover several approaches to the problem of religious diversity by studying the phenomenon of syncretism in Chinese religions. Macau is chosen as a case study as it contains a striking example of religious syncretism in the public celebration of three different religious festivals which take place together every year. Research in how various religious traditions are to relate to each other is becoming more urgent given our growing awareness of differences among the various religious traditions in an increasingly globalised world.¹ The phenomenon of religious syncretism is examined in its personal and social dimensions. To illustrate this difference, examples from Hong Kong and Singapore are included for comparison. To allow for a better understanding of the local situation in Macau, a brief overview of the state of religious belief in the region is also provided.

The *personal* dimension of religious syncretism is analysed in terms of the individual religious act. The *social* dimension of religious syncretism is analysed in terms of the interaction between the major Chinese religious traditions. Max Weber's framework of world religions is utilised and several key events in the history of Chinese religions are highlighted. An overview of their main goals is presented in order to account for the evolution of Buddhism and Daoism in China, especially on how

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¹ S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Religious Diversity and Interfaith Relations in a Global Age," *Quest: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Asian Christian Scholars* 2 (2003): 1-17.

they interacted with popular religion. All this leads to a study of the social structure of Chinese religion to understand how Buddhism and Daoism were made compatible with Confucianism. The paper ends with a case study of the unity and variety among the modern Chinese religious movements in contemporary Macau.

METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

The methodology adopted in this paper consists of the phenomenological approach to religious studies. The phenomenological approach can be characterised as being empirical, descriptive, historical and non-reductionistic. On this account, the aim of the phenomenological approach is to produce an objective and scientific investigation of religious beliefs and practices.² The field of religious studies has always been fairly inter-disciplinary in using data from other fields of study, including even cultural studies.³ The phenomenon of syncretism will be analysed in its personal and social dimensions. The personal dimension is investigated using data from the field of social anthropology and the social dimension is investigated using concepts from classical sociological theory. The development of Chinese religions will be considered from the historical point of view. The study of religious syncretism in Macau will begin with phenomenological description followed by conceptual analysis. There is already a small collection of work studying the state of religious life in contemporary China, including greater China.⁴ However no study on syncretism in Chinese religious life specifically focussed on the region of Macau has been done yet. Thus this study represents an attempt to fill a gap in the existing scholarship on religious studies about China.

Two important clarifications are necessary before proceeding further. In this paper I address the aspect of syncretism in Chinese religions within the context of Macau, focussing on Buddhism and Daoism. I omit a consideration of the interaction between the Chinese traditions of Buddhism and Daoism and the monotheistic traditions of Christianity and Islam. Although Christianity has existed in Macau as a significant minority religion for centuries, no discernible evidence of syncretism has been found between the Christian traditions and the Chinese traditions. Furthermore Islam arrived in Macau only in the twentieth century and remains a relatively insignificant minority religion. In addition, although I maintain that *syncretism* is an accurate characterisation of the Chinese religious phenomena under study, it must be admitted that an alternative characterisation is certainly possible. For instance, a

² Ian S. Markham, "A Religious Studies Approach to Questions About Religious Diversity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad Meister (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.

³ Wai Ching Angela Wong, "Between Religious Studies and Cultural Studies: An Intellectual Reflection," *Quest: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Asian Christian Scholars* 5 (2006): 25-36.

⁴ David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive and Philip L. Wickeri, eds., *Chinese Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

small number of scholars have argued that Chinese religious belief should be understood in terms of *multiple religious participation* instead of syncretism.⁵ However, as I am not convinced that the two terms are even mutually exclusive, I will follow the majority of scholars in continuing to use the term ‘syncretism’ without arguing for it.

The main religious traditions of the local people in Macau consist of popular or folk religion, Buddhism and Daoism. The three main Chinese religious traditions are actually more like three components of one dynamic religious system than three separate religious systems. On this account ‘syncretism’ refers to a certain combination of religious beliefs or practices that changes the original features of the religious traditions involved. Chinese religious syncretism is a phenomenon very much alive in Macau. Three different religious festivals are celebrated annually and simultaneously on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month: *zuilongjie* (醉龍節) Feast of the Drunken Dragon, *tangongdan* (譚公誕) Tam Kung Festival and *fodanjie* (佛誕節) Feast of the Buddha or *yufojie* (浴佛節) Feast of the Bathing of Lord Buddha.⁶

RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN HONG KONG AND SINGAPORE

The following examples of religious syncretism from Hong Kong and Singapore are included because these are regions which are comparable to Macau in terms of physical size, population composition and religious practice. By comparing the examples from Hong Kong and Singapore, one can get a clearer picture of the difference between the personal and social dimensions of religious syncretism.

Evidence of religious syncretism can be found just next to Macau in the region of Hong Kong. Wong Tai Sin Temple is found in the Kowloon area. The temple is almost a hundred years old and it is extremely popular. Wong Chuping, who lived in the fourth century, was from Zhejiang (浙江) province. He decided to devote his life to Daoism when he was fifteen years old and is said to have achieved immortality when he was fifty-five years old. He was named Wong Tai Sin (黃大仙) as the title refers to the great immortal Wong. His birthday is celebrated on the twenty-third day of the eighth lunar month. As the titular deity is from the Daoist tradition, Wong Tai Sin Temple may be considered a Daoist temple. But, in reality, it is a temple for the three traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Inside the temple there is a hall dedicated to Confucius and there is a shrine dedicated to the Buddha.⁷ Like the case of Macau, this instance of religious syncretism in Hong Kong reflects its social dimension since syncretism occurs on the part of the religious organisation itself.

⁵ For examples, see: Chenyang Li, “How Can One Be A Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian? – A Chinese Illustration of Multiple Religious Participation,” *International Review of Chinese Religion & Philosophy* 1 (1996): 29-66 and Judith A. Berling, “Why Chinese Thought on Religious Diversity is Important,” in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, eds. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 27-37.

⁶ For instance, in 2017 these celebrations take place on 3 May.

⁷ “Wong Tai Sin Temple,” Sik Sik Yuen, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www1.siksikyuen.org.hk/en/wong-tai-sin-temple>.

There is evidence of religious syncretism in Singapore as well. In the Bugis area there are two temples in very close proximity. Sri Krishnan Temple is a Hindu temple and nearby is Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple (also known locally as Simalu Guanyin Temple) on Waterloo Street. The main deity of the Hindu temple is *Krishnan* while the main deity of the Buddhist temple is *Guanyin* (觀音), who is also known as the Goddess of Mercy. Both temples are well established in Singapore as they are over a hundred years old. It has been noticed that both Hinduism and Buddhism have several deities and some similarities. So it is common for believers who pray at one temple to pray at the other temple too, although it is more likely for the Buddhists to visit the Hindu temple. In Singapore the Buddhists tend to be Chinese while the Hindus tend to be Indian. Believers especially visit the temples on the first day of the month (of the Lunar calendar) to mark the new moon and the fifteenth day of the month to mark the full moon. Interestingly, although the Hindus follow the Tamil calendar while the Buddhists use the Lunar calendar, the dates usually coincide.⁸ Unlike the cases mentioned in Macau and Hong Kong, the instance of religious syncretism found in Singapore reflects its personal dimension since syncretism occurs on the part of the religious believers themselves. After the two dimensions of religious syncretism are made clear, it is possible now to examine its characteristics in some detail.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

In order to understand the nature of Chinese religious syncretism, it is first useful to consider the general worldview found in the minds of Chinese religious believers. From the historical perspective, the concept of God or the divine was not of great importance in the development of Chinese religions. Religion primarily had to do with the *dao* (道), which can refer to 'way' or 'teaching.' It can be described as a power present in the world and the aim of human life is to learn to understand the *dao* through the process of self-cultivation. The concept of *dao* probably originated from the concept of 'change' as found in the *Yijing* (易經) Book of Changes. The reading of the Book of Changes gradually gave rise to the concept of *dao* as a naturally occurring power which creates and transforms the things in the world. The concept of *dao* as a natural creative power gave rise to Daoism while the concept of humanity as co-operative creative power gave rise to Confucianism. On this account, the spirit of Chinese religion can be expressed in terms of unity in diversity. This spirit is shown in how the three religious traditions are understood. Daoism expresses the notion of *dao* (道). Confucianism expresses the notion of *de* (德), understood as 'virtue' or 'power.' Buddhism expresses the notion of *wu* (悟), which can be defined as 'awakening' or 'realisation.' So the three religious traditions are actually different ways of expressing the concept of change found in the *Yijing*, and the *Yijing* itself is a record of the Chinese understanding regarding the nature of ultimate reality.⁹

⁸ Cheryl Faith Wee, "Religious Melting Pot in Waterloo St," *The Straits Times*, August 15, 2014, B6.

⁹ Cheng, "A Chinese Religious Perspective," 354-356.

The relationships between Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism are also marked by a great deal of inter-connection and inter-penetration. In the history of Chinese religious development, Daoism and Buddhism enjoyed a strong mutual exchange of ideas. Texts from the Buddhist tradition were translated into Chinese with the aid of Daoist philosophers. Similarly, the production of various Daoist texts was influenced by Buddhist texts. From the historical perspective, the three Chinese religions tended to complement and reinforce each other.¹⁰ In contrast, between the great monotheistic religions there is an evident lack of syncretism. An illustrative example can be found in the tense relationship between Christianity and Islam in contemporary Malaysia. In 2007, the Malaysian home ministry forbade a Catholic newspaper from using the Malay word *Allah* (God), stating that the word should be exclusively used by Muslims. In the Malaysian constitution, Islam is stated as the official religion of the country. It should be noted that the majority of Malay-speaking Christians in Malaysia do use the word *Allah* to refer to God and about sixty-four per cent of Christians in Malaysia only use Malay in their worship and sacred books. After the ministry's decision, the former Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur filed a lawsuit against the prohibition by the government. In 2009, the High Court decided to nullify the government prohibition. However, in 2013, the government appealed against the decision and succeeded in getting the prohibition back in place.¹¹ In 2014, the High Court rejected the first appeal of the Catholic Church against the decision of 2013.¹² In 2015, the High Court rejected the second appeal of the Catholic Church, thus bringing an end to the legal case.¹³ The great difficulties faced by the great monotheistic religions for fostering unity among themselves due to doctrinal reasons, even for the sake of a common ethical stance, has been well noted.¹⁴ Now that the characteristics of syncretism have been clearly explained, the next step is to examine the strategies for syncretism.

STRATEGIES FOR CHINESE RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

Each of the three Chinese religions developed a syncretistic attitude as a strategy for dealing with the problem of religious diversity. Already in the early Confucian tradition, there was a slight tendency towards borrowing concepts from the Daoist tradition. It has been observed that Confucius himself employs the Daoist concept of 'non-action' in describing the virtuous conduct of the Emperor Shun. Subsequently

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 356-357.

¹¹ "High Court hears Allah case in Malaysia," *Sunday Examiner*, March 16, 2014, 3.

¹² "Top Malaysian court dismisses 'Allah' case," *Aljazeera*, June 23, 2014, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2014/06/top-malaysian-court-dismisses-allah-case-20146232448487953.html>.

¹³ Kate Mayberry, "Catholic Church 'Allah' appeal shot down in Malaysia," *Aljazeera*, 21 January 2015, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/01/catholic-church-150121100311536.html>.

¹⁴ John A. Titaley, "Globalization and Religions: The Tension between Global Ethic and the Cosmology of Abrahamic Religions," *Quest: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Asian Christian Scholars* 5 (2007): 73-77.

Xunzi also employs the Daoist concept of yin-yang in his cosmological theory. Yao elaborates:

Syncretism was already embedded in the early Confucian views of doctrinal differences. Interchange with other teachings started with Confucius who openly appreciated certain Daoist values. In the *Analects*, for example, Confucius made good use of a typical Daoist virtue of nonaction (*wu wei* 無為) to praise Shun 舜, one of the paramount sage-kings in the Confucian golden past, as an ideal politician and to define the best state strategy as nonaction: “If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action [*wu wei*], it was perhaps, Shun. There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south” (*The Analects*, 15.5). In the later Warring States period, Confucians took into their own doctrine the concepts of yin-yang and the Five Elements or Agents (*wu xing* 五行). While in Mencius we have not seen the use of yin-yang as an important concept, Xunzi 荀子, in particular in a chapter on “Discourse on Nature,” applies yin-yang widely to explain the natural evolution of the world. By the time of the Western Han dynasty, yin-yang and the Five Elements theory had become an integrated part of the Confucian discourse.¹⁵

Daoism has been described as an extremely local Chinese religion which manifests the important characteristic of openness. Not only does Daoism tolerate other religions, it also tends to integrate with them. The probable underlying reason is that Daoists believe that there is essentially only one path in the universe. As a result all the religious traditions of the world are attempts to speak about and to manifest the single path.¹⁶ It has been observed that Daoism borrows a great number of ideas and practices from Confucianism, popular religion and Buddhism. Kohn explains:

Finding them helpful and appropriate for their goals and visions, Daoists of each kind have adopted numerous techniques from different religions over the millennia. From Confucian thinking and state cult, they have integrated virtues and political vision, basic forms of hygiene and self-preservation, as well as organizational structures and rituals. From popular religion and Chinese medicine, they have imported a vast pantheon of nature gods, demons, ghosts, and ancestors as well as divination methods, ritual patterns, and the entire complex of understanding, treating, and improving body and mind. From Buddhism, they have absorbed the doctrine of karma and rebirth, the notion of multiple heavens and hells, the idea of savior deities, and the entire complex of

¹⁵ Xinzhong Yao, “Confucian Approaches to Religious Diversity,” in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, eds. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 70.

¹⁶ Livia Kohn, “One Dao – Many Ways: Daoist Approaches to Religious Diversity,” in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, eds. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 53.

sophisticated philosophical analysis and theoretical speculation. In addition, they have integrated Buddhist forms of chanting, rites of repentance, and the complete system of monastic organization, as well as the techniques of insight and other forms of meditation.¹⁷

A Buddhist approach to religious pluralism is based on the notion of *panjiao* (判教) judgement on teachings. Originally it referred to the evaluation of Buddhist doctrines from diverse sources in order to classify them into a coherent system. The purpose of this approach was to resolve the differences within a religious tradition. Subsequently this approach was used to resolve the differences between religious traditions by Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 (780-841) in his text *Yuanrenlun* (原人論) Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity. In this treatise, Zongmi argues that Confucian and Daoist teachings are lower than Buddhist teachings because Confucianism and Daoism are unable to adequately account for humanity's origins. Buddhist teachings should be classified as higher than Confucian and Daoist teachings because Buddhism provides a more comprehensive account of human nature. Even though Buddhism is superior to Confucianism and Daoism, all three traditions have their proper place. Zongmi argues that Confucianism and Daoism should be considered preliminary stages of human development while Buddhism teaches the highest stage of human enlightenment.¹⁸

Shi emphasises that Zongmi created a soteriological framework to classify the three Chinese religious traditions. He writes:

No doubt Zongmi was the exemplar *par excellence*, and his "Inquiry into the Origin of Human Nature" is a genuine effort to integrate Confucianism and Daoist classics into a unified soteriology that nonetheless reiterates the superiority of Buddhist teachings. His open assertion of Buddhist supremacy over even Confucianism indicates the extent to which Buddhism is now a religious presence in ninth-century Chinese society.¹⁹

The notion of a soteriological classification of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism will be extremely relevant to my argument later that Buddhism can be considered the *official* religion while Daoism can be considered the *popular* religion among the Chinese religions in Macau. After the major strategies of religious syncretism have been accounted for, it is now possible to examine its personal dimension.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁸ Zhiru Shi, "Contextualizing Buddhist Approaches to Religious Diversity: When and How Buddhist Intellectuals Address Confucianism and Daoism (3rd-9th C)," in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, eds. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 88-91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

PERSONAL DIMENSION OF CHINESE RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

The majority of anthropologists who study Chinese religion do not treat it as a theological phenomenon. Rather, they treat it as a cultural phenomenon. On this account, religion is the cultural setting for the celebration of various developmental stages in the life of an individual within a Chinese community. Religion thus defines the notions of space and time of a Chinese worldview for an individual who undergoes various religious rites of passage.²⁰ Chinese religion is traditionally classified under the four traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and popular religion. Anthropologists have also criticised this classification as being mistaken and Western. Rather, Chinese religion should be understood as a form of syncretism which combines all the four traditions.²¹

Before continuing, it would be useful to have a working definition of religion. Liu explains the meaning of religion in the anthropological context:

Religion is any human behaviour that relates humans to the supernatural world. Religion includes not only the ritual practices and organization, but also gives people a way to understand their world and the universe. People organize themselves as they organize religious activities; religion also explains for people the implications of their past, present and future.²²

There is a great deal of freedom with regards to how Chinese religious festivals are celebrated in Macau. This is because the nature of the religious celebrations depends largely on the customs, the mentality and the means of the people living in the particular region. This accounts for why popular religious movements utilise resources from various religious and civic groups. According to Liu:

It is common to see local and individual variations in the celebration of the same festival as local religious activities are organized by local leaders with participants coming from diverse social backgrounds. The forms of religious expression are determined by local traditions, leadership and the availability of financial resources. Although lacking a unifying institution, local religion makes good use of elements coming from other religions and socio-cultural institutions.²³

In Macau, the Chinese religious practices of the local people normally consist of making regular visits to temples. They may make annual temple visits to mark the

²⁰ Michael Saso, "Chinese Religions," in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London: Penguin, 1985), 344.

²¹ T. H. Barrett, "Chinese Religion in English Guise: The History of an Illusion," *Modern Asian Studies* 39 (2005): 509-533.

²² Tik-sang Liu, "A Nameless but Active Religion: An Anthropologist's View of Local Religion in Hong Kong and Macau," *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 374.

²³ *Ibid.*, 374.

birthdays of particular deities they are devoted to or they may make more regular temple visits to seek the blessing of particular deities. They may also visit the temple to seek the help of particular deities when they are in difficulty and they usually continue with the visits until they find a resolution to their difficulty. The actual religious practices of the believers mainly consist of performing a set of rituals at a public temple or at an altar in a private residence.²⁴ Liu elaborates:

Some name their religious activities Buddhism or Daoism, as similar elements can be found in formal Buddhist or Daoist rituals. Professional Daoist priests or Buddhist monks and nuns are always hired to perform life cycle and communal rituals. To ordinary people, there is no clear boundary between Buddhism, Daoism and local religious practices.²⁵

There appears to be no fixed name for these religious practices, but they are commonly referred to as *baishen* (拜神) or *mixin* (迷信). *Baishen* is commonly understood as “worshipping deities” and *mixin* is to be understood as “superstition.”²⁶ However, to understand *baishen* as “worshipping deities” can be misleading. Goh explains:

To *baishen* is to engage one *shen*, and only one *shen*, using specific embodied practices (the moving clasped hands) at any moment in time in a communicative event, which may be an interlocution that involves the exchange of favours and offerings, that speaks thoughts and inspires ideas, that expresses sentiments and evokes feelings, or that articulates reverence and reaffirms sociality. The key significance here is that in Chinese religion *shen* is an almost-empty sign, a signifier referring to nothing else except the meaning of “the spiritual other.” Practitioners can, therefore, fill the sign with selected concrete meanings, the possibilities of which are bounded by the historical discursive conditions of Chinese religion in a specific social context. It is therefore syncretic, in the sense that an alien deity or personage and the associated meanings may be imputed by practitioners into the sign when they *baishen* with the embodied performance.²⁷

Thus to *baishen* does not actually refer to worshipping deities. Instead to *baishen* is to direct one’s attention to some spiritual being or reality in a religious act. *Baishen* is a religious act which has many possible applications in Chinese religion. According to Goh, the concept of *baishen* is syncretic precisely because it can have multiple meanings. Multiple meanings are possible as *baishen* is a concept, which does not have any specific reference or meaning in itself. Rather the reference or meaning is given by the religious practitioner.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 373.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 373.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 373.

²⁷ Daniel P. S. Goh, “Chinese Religion and the Challenge of Modernity in Malaysia and Singapore: Syncretism, Hybridisation and Transfiguration,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37 (2009): 112.

Furthermore syncretism in Chinese religions can be distinguished from syncretism in non-Chinese religions. Goh explains:

Two dimensions of contrast may thus be drawn between Chinese religion and any other religion. The specific embodied performance of baishen distinguishes it from other syncretic religions such as Hinduism – Hindus and Chinese religionists may “pray” to the same image, but they do it differently and the difference defines their separate identities. The syncretic effect of the almost-empty sign shen in the performance of baishen distinguishes Chinese religion from non-syncretic religions, such as Christianity, in which the sign “God” in the performance of worshipping God is an almost-full sign laden with symbolic meanings established by theological acts.²⁸

Hence Chinese religious syncretism can be distinguished from Indian religious syncretism in the following way. On the one hand, Chinese religion is syncretic in the sense that the Chinese religious act does not contain any particular meaning. The meaning of the religious act is specified by the religious practitioner. On the other hand, Hinduism is syncretic in the sense that it allows for multiple deities to co-exist within its religious worldview. The Hindu religious act is about worshipping deities because specific religious acts are prescribed for the worship of particular deities. Chinese religious syncretism can also be distinguished from non-syncretic religions. As already mentioned, Chinese religion is syncretic in the sense that the Chinese religious act does not have any fixed meaning or reference. On the other hand, Christianity is a non-syncretic religion in the sense that it only allows for the existence of one God within its religious worldview. The Christian religious act has a fixed meaning and reference. It is an act of worship which is directed to one God. Now that the examination of the personal dimension of religious syncretism is completed, the next step is to continue with the social dimension.

WEBER'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF RELIGIONS

The sociological concepts needed for this section of the study will be derived from Max Weber. He lists six world religious traditions: Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. For him, religions refer to transcendent belief systems that regulate the lives of its members. On this account, religious actions have transformative goals and thaumaturgical goals. On the one hand, *transformative* goals refer to radical changes which take place within society or to individuals. On the other hand, *thaumaturgical* goals refer to deliverance from social or personal

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

difficulties.²⁹ In addition, the *supramundane* refers to the transcendent or supernatural dimension while *soteriology* refers to the salvation which cannot be achieved in the mundane dimension of existence.³⁰

A distinction is also made between elites and masses. *Elites* are the members who embody the highest values or occupy the highest positions of authority of a particular religious tradition. According to Weber, elites who embody the highest values of a particular tradition are called *virtuosos*. Furthermore, elites who occupy the highest positions of authority are called *hierocrats*. In the major religious traditions, monks tend to be considered virtuosos while priests or clerics are usually considered hierocrats. The vast majority of non-elite are referred to as the masses. Thus, the religion of the virtuosos and hierocrats is called elite religion while the religion of the masses is called popular religion.³¹

DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE RELIGIONS

The three main Chinese religious traditions under study are Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. However, as mentioned earlier, they are actually more like three components of one religious system than three separate systems. In the history of China, Confucianism is associated with being the official or state religion while Buddhism and Daoism are associated with popular religion. In reality, Confucianism is a ritual system which citizens were expected to practise for the good of the country. The system of rituals originated from Confucius and is perpetuated by temples dedicated to him. Thus the popular religion of the Chinese people is actually a combination of doctrines and practices from Buddhism and Daoism and the state religion.³²

The history of Chinese religions can be divided into three major periods. The early period is the time before the second century. During this period, Buddhism and Daoism were being established in China. The classical period is from the second to the tenth century. During this period, all three religious traditions took on their main features. The medieval period is from the eleventh to the eighteenth century. This is the period before China was greatly affected by Western influence.³³ In the early period, Confucianism became the official state cult during the Han dynasty (in the first century). In the classical period, Confucian temples were established throughout the country during the Tang dynasty (in the seventh century). Buddhism and Daoism also received official recognition as Buddhist and Daoist monasteries received state sponsorship during this time.³⁴ In the medieval period, the three traditions were considered a unity during the Ming dynasty (in the sixteenth century). During this time,

²⁹ Stephen Sharot, *A Comparative Sociology of World Religions: Virtuosi, Priests, and Popular Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 4-5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10-12.

³² Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 106.

³³ Smart, *The World's Religions*, 108.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 121-124.

the Confucian *Lin Zhaoen* 林兆恩 (1517-1598) famously produced an intellectual synthesis of the three religions.³⁵

The three traditions have different religious goals. Confucianism can be described as an ethical system without a soteriology. It is primarily concerned with self-cultivation and education. The goal is to achieve success in this life and a good reputation after one's death. On the other hand, Daoism is a religious system with a soteriology. It is concerned with attaining union with the transcendent *dao* (way). However, it does also have a worldlier dimension of seeking personal immortality. Buddhism as a religious system has a clear soteriological purpose. It teaches that the phenomenal world is impermanent and causes suffering, so one needs to escape suffering by attaining *nirvana* (enlightenment) through meditation.³⁶ But there are different religious goals for elites and masses. Usually it is only monks who seek *nirvana* while laypeople aim for reincarnation into a deified state or, at least, a rebirth under more favourable circumstances as a human being.

EVOLUTION OF BUDDHISM AND DAOISM

At the elite level, there is interaction between Buddhism and Daoism. Among the Daoist virtuosos, the mystics strive for union with the transcendent *dao* while others aim for immortality. Mystical virtuosos use Buddhist meditation techniques in order to achieve union with the *dao*. The quest for immortality can take the form of alchemy or the search for a medicinal plant. Under the influence of Buddhism, the non-virtuosos tend to be concerned about the afterlife. The Daoist hierocrats are more concerned with religious services for the community. For instance, Daoist priests are considered necessary for the blessing of temples and statues, celebration of festivals and leading ceremonies and processions. It is worthy to note that Buddhist monks also serve in religious services, even with Daoist priests.³⁷

In order for Buddhist elites to survive in China, their teachings had to undergo some accommodation. For example, the ideal for monks is detachment from all worldly ties. However, this soteriological worldview did not suit the Confucian focus on the family and society. Buddhist monks had to make some accommodations with the family by teaching filial piety and the need for parental permission before one could become a monk. The monks also accommodated to the thaumaturgical goals of the laypeople. They served in rituals to pray for rain, healing or exorcism. In the

³⁵ Mircea Eliade and Ioan Couliano, *The HarperCollins Concise Guide to World Religions* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 237-238. The classic study of Lin's project of religious syncretism is: Judith A. Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). More details regarding the evolution of various religious traditions in China from the historical perspective can be found in: David A. Palmer, "Religion in Chinese Social and Political History," in *Chinese Religious Life*, eds. David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive and Philip L. Wickeri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 155-171.

³⁶ Sharot, *A Comparative Sociology of World Religions*, 38.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

evolution of Buddhism and Daoism in China, the hierocrats of both traditions even developed ritual specialisations. Daoist priests were in charge of protecting people against evil spirits in this life while Buddhist monks were in charge of looking after souls in the next life.³⁸

The flexibility of the Daoist elite in appropriating elements of the other two religions contributed a great deal to the syncretism of Chinese religions. As already mentioned earlier, Daoism absorbed the practice of ancestor veneration from Confucianism, the funeral rituals from Buddhism and also incorporated the worship of local gods into their liturgy. As a result, Daoism gave a proper structure to the pious practices of popular religion. On the other hand, the Buddhist elite produced a coherent categorisation of the supramundane beings. The two main categories of beings are the buddhas who have escaped reincarnation and the others who are still trapped in the cycle of reincarnation. This provided a system of categorisation for the supramundane beings of popular Chinese religion. For instance, the Buddhists used their categories to understand the existence of ghosts. There is evidence that Buddhist supramundane beings were transformed and popularised as well.³⁹ For example, *Guanyin* was originally a merciful bodhisattva who became a mother figure of compassion in popular religion.

Under this analysis, it can be said that Daoism provided a suitable liturgical structure for the worship of supramundane beings while Buddhism provided a doctrinal framework for understanding the differences among these beings. Therefore, the *liturgical* contribution of Daoism and the *doctrinal* contribution of Buddhism worked together to provide a sense of unity to Chinese religions.

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF CHINESE RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

An important contributing factor for the possibility of Chinese religious syncretism lies in the notion of Confucian orthodoxy. In Confucianism, orthodoxy is understood as the acceptance of received traditions and the proper interpretation of the Confucian classics. This orthodoxy is manifested as orthopraxy in the form of rituals in state temples. Confucians who wanted to become officials had to sit for an imperial examination to ensure they had proper foundations in official doctrine. But Confucianism does not seem to have a strict sense of orthodoxy. The Confucians themselves certainly did not understand orthodoxy in the sense of an obligation to believe in a set of clearly defined beliefs. They generally agreed in the official interpretation of the Confucian canon, but also regarded the examinations as a formality. So they did not always feel bound by the official interpretation of Confucianism.⁴⁰

This lenient view of orthodoxy helps to explain why Confucians tolerated Buddhist and Daoist participation in religious rituals. There was toleration as long as the Buddhists and Daoists did not attack political authority, violate social morality or commit

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-93.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

ritual impropriety. Also Buddhist and Daoist practitioners had to manifest their loyalty to the emperor and preserve hierarchical relations in society and in family life by practicing filial piety. Even though there was great tolerance in Confucianism for Buddhism and Daoism, they were always subject to political supervision. Popular religious movements were persecuted if they were regarded as politically dangerous. But generally religious traditions were not attacked for their teachings as long as they were not perceived as being subversive towards the state.⁴¹

A famous example of a contemporary local religious movement facing state persecution in China is *Falun Gong* (法輪功). The movement's teachings include a mixture of Buddhist and Daoist practices, and aims at thaumaturgical goals like attaining peace of mind and physical well-being.⁴² In accord with the social structure of Chinese religions, the state probably has no issues with the movement's practices. But the government refuses to tolerate the movement because it has a history of threatening social and political stability.⁴³ Now that the general social structure of the different traditions is clear, the next step is to apply it specifically to the case study.

STATE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN MACAU

Before going into an examination of the Chinese religions in some detail, it will be helpful to first have a general picture of the state of religious belief in Macau. The People's Republic of China officially recognizes five religious traditions: Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam. Under its local laws, the people of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Macau enjoy the right to religious freedom. In this regard, the government does not officially take any particular religious tradition to be a state religion. This means that the government is effectively neutral towards all religious traditions in Macau. The region also officially practises religious diversity. The main religious traditions of the local people are popular religion, Buddhism and Daoism. Other important religious traditions of the local people include Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam.⁴⁴

Buddhism is probably the most significant religion for the local people in Macau. At the same time, it is widely recognised that they have rather vague beliefs about Buddhism. In the minds of the people, beliefs about Buddhism usually co-exist with beliefs about Confucianism and Daoism. There is often no strict distinction between the three religious traditions. Local Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Buddhism. As the majority of local people are ethnic Chinese, many of them experience

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴³ More details regarding the organisation of various religious groups in China from the sociological perspective can be found in: Vincent Goossaert, "The Social Organization of Religious Communities in the Twentieth Century," in *Chinese Religious Life*, eds. David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive and Philip L. Wickeri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 172-190.

⁴⁴ Chi Ping Victor Chan, ed., *Macao Yearbook 2015* (Macao: Government Information Bureau of the Macao Special Administrative Region, 2015), 457.

a strong affinity towards Buddhism. Evidence of this can be seen in the many Buddhist communities and an important Buddhist Association in Macau. In addition, there are over forty Buddhist temples and there are many small village temples dedicated to Buddhist deities. The Buddha's Birthday is a public holiday in Macau and it is celebrated on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month.⁴⁵

Catholicism was officially established in Macau in the sixteenth century and the Catholic diocese of Macau was the first centre for missions in East Asia. In Catholic terminology, a diocese refers to a particular group of Catholic believers, which is looked after by a bishop with the assistance of a group of priests. The diocese of Macau was given to oversee the missions in China, Japan, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries. The diocese currently has one cathedral, six parishes, three quasi-parishes, five churches and eight chapels. According to the statistics from 2014, there are over thirty thousand Catholics living in Macau. Over fourteen thousand are permanent residents while over fifteen thousand are temporary residents. The diocese also runs thirty-one institutions which provide education to over twenty-eight thousand students and twenty-one institutions which provide various forms of social services to over one thousand and six hundred people.⁴⁶

Protestantism was first established in Macau during the nineteenth century and the missionaries were mainly from the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The major Protestant denominations founded in Macau during the early twentieth century were the Baptist Church, the Church of Christ in China and the Anglican Church. Other important Protestant denominations currently found in Macau include the Christian Missionary Alliance, the Conservative Baptist Church, the Assemblies of God, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Free Church. Since 1990 the various Protestant churches and organisations are grouped under the Union of Evangelical Christian Churches and Associations in Macau. The Protestant groups currently have around eighty churches with more than eight thousand believers being served by around one hundred and fifty pastors. The Protestants in Macau also run nine institutions which provide various levels of education and around sixty institutions which provide various forms of social services.⁴⁷

Islam was officially established in Macau in the early twentieth century. Although Muslims are a small minority, there is an Islamic Association of Macau. There are plans to build a mosque and religious centre for around six hundred believers. Baha'i was first established in Macau in the middle of the twentieth century. Even though the number of Baha'is is even fewer than the number of Muslims, there are Baha'i centres in Macau, Taipa and Coloane. Since 1989 the three centres are grouped under the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Macau. The Baha'is run one school with kindergarten, primary and secondary sections.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 457-458.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 458-459.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 459-460.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 460.

The most recent data on the state of religious belief of Macau residents available at the time of writing is based on a series of surveys done from 2005 to 2009. The data shows that over fifty per cent of people in Macau declare that they do not believe in any religion. About twenty-five per cent of people in Macau declare that they believe in Chinese folk religion. About ten per cent of people in Macau declare that they believe in Buddhism or Daoism. About five per cent of people in Macau declare that they believe in Catholicism or Protestantism.⁴⁹

BUDDHISM AND DAOISM IN MACAU

Chinese religious syncretism is very much alive in the region of Macau. This can be seen in the annual celebration of three popular religious festivals which occur simultaneously on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month. The first is the Feast of the Drunken Dragon which is also celebrated at Zhuhai (珠海) and Zhongshan (中山) city in Guangdong (廣東) province. Its origin can be traced to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) when a group of villagers met with an incurable plague. The villagers staged a procession with a statue of the Buddha to ask the gods for aid. A python appeared and interrupted the procession, but a drunken monk cut up the snake, danced and threw it into the river. The python's blood turned the sea red and the snake flew into the sky, causing the villagers to believe that the python was actually a dragon sent from heaven. Then they ate the red sea grass which cured their illness. The feast is celebrated with a Drunken Dragon Parade made up of a procession of fish traders which stops at each fresh food market. The members of the parade pour Chinese rice wine into each other's mouths and they spit the wine in the air as high as they can.⁵⁰

The second is the Feast of Tam Kung, a Daoist deity. The feast commemorates the birthday of Tam Kung who is associated with the sea and is known to bless and protect fishermen. The celebration includes a thaumaturgical aim of praying for prosperity in society. The festival includes a Chinese opera staged for five consecutive days outside the Tam Kung Temple in Coloane and a parade made up of devotees dressed up as Chinese traditional characters. Chief Executive Edmund Ho was invited to the parade in 2008.⁵¹ The chief executive refers to the head of the government of Macau.

The third is Vesak Day which marks the birthday of *Gautama Buddha*, the founder of Buddhism in ancient India. Macau honours the Buddha's Birthday with a public holiday. The celebration includes a visit to the Po Tai Monastery in Taipa to read

⁴⁹ Victor Zheng and Po-san Wan, "Religious Beliefs and Life Experiences of Macau's Residents," *Modern China Studies* 17 (2010): 91-130.

⁵⁰ Natalie Leung, "Fish traders soaked in wine to celebrate Dragon Feast," *Macau Daily Times*, May 13, 2008, 3.

⁵¹ Anni Lam, "Coloane residents get a taste of Chinese opera shows," *Macau Daily Times*, May 13, 2008, 5.

Buddhist scripture, offer incense to different statues of the Buddha, eat vegetarian food and to take part in the “Buddha Bathing” ritual. The ritual is conducted with a statue of the Buddha in a ceremonial basin. Devotees scoop water from the basin to pour it over the statue to signify that the devotee’s body and soul are purified. The open “Buddha Bathing” ritual held in Tap Seac Square was attended by the Chief Executive in 2008.⁵²

This case study of the three festivals reveals the syncretism of Buddhism and Daoism among the religious traditions and the interaction between the official and popular religions in Macau. For instance, there is a comfortable unity among the three traditions. The different celebrations all take place in various public areas of Macau on the same date every year. The Feast of the Drunken Dragon has a clear Buddhist connection, given that the Qing Dynasty villagers were Buddhist devotees, and the Feast of Tam Kung has Daoist origins. Among the three festivals, the Feast of the Drunken Dragon and the Feast of Tam Kung celebrate thaumaturgical religious goals while Vesak Day celebrates transformative religious goals.

There may be an underlying reason for the subtle distinction made between the popular religious celebrations with thaumaturgical goals and the official religious celebrations with transformative goals. Buddhism is accorded a certain supremacy among the three Chinese religious traditions as the public holiday formally marks the Buddha’s birthday. Further evidence for this thesis can be seen in the media report that the Chief Executive was invited to attend the parade for the Feast of Tam Kung without mentioning his attendance while it was reported that he attended a “Buddha Bathing” ritual. Consequently it can be said that various religious traditions can be practised together without tension, although only one receives official recognition.

CONCLUSION

It was shown that Chinese religions express the spirit of unity and variety due to the process of their origination. The Chinese understanding of the nature of ultimate reality is expressed in the concept of ‘change’ found in the *Yijing* and the three religious traditions are actually different ways of expressing the same concept. Each of the three religious traditions developed their own strategies for dealing with the problem of religious pluralism. The strategy of Confucianism is to utilise Daoist teachings for its own use. The strategy of Daoism is to adopt doctrines and rituals from Confucianism, Daoism and popular religion. The most relevant strategy for understanding religious syncretism in Macau comes from Buddhism. Zongmi used the notion of *panjiao* to unite the three traditions into a common soteriological framework. On this account, Confucianism and Daoism are considered preliminary stages while Buddhism is considered an advanced stage of human development. The notion of a soteriological classification of the three traditions presents a historical precedent

⁵² Natalie Leung, “‘Buddha’s Bathing’ ritual purifies pilgrims’ souls,” *Macau Daily Times*, May 13, 2008, 5.

where Buddhism was accorded a higher status compared to Confucianism and Daoism. This helps to explain how Buddhism came to be conferred a kind of official status in the context of Macau.

In this paper I first provided an account of Chinese religious syncretism in its personal dimension by examining the religious act of *baishen*. To *baishen* means to attend to a spiritual being and the act can be applied in many ways. The concept of *baishen* is syncretic in the sense of having many possible meanings because it does not contain any particular reference or inherent meaning in itself. The reference or meaning of the act is supplied by the religious believer. This helps to explain how beliefs about Buddhism can co-exist with beliefs about Confucianism and Daoism in the mind of the religious believer. This develops into an understanding of religion that does not involve strict distinctions between different traditions.

In this paper I have also discussed the social dimension of syncretism in Chinese religions. The chief reasons for the syncretism of the three Chinese religions seem to lie in the nature and evolution of the traditions themselves. Confucianism does not have a strict view of orthodoxy nor rigid religious doctrines, and so is open to harmonising with Buddhist and Daoist traditions to form a unity. However, this union can only take place provided there is no disruption to social and political stability. Buddhism and Daoism have also evolved to allow interaction between each other and enrichment to popular religions. This syncretism and interaction between these two religious traditions can still be seen in the modern Chinese society of Macau. Therefore I suggest that the simultaneous celebrations of the different Buddhist and Daoist festivals indicate their peaceful co-existence. Social harmony in the face of religious diversity is maintained by a demarcation between the official religious celebration and the popular religious celebrations which is implicitly upheld by the local government.

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