

Three Teachings; the Harmonious Concept in Mainland China

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This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but is purely based on academic purposes.

Abstract

This research paper explores the concept of the “Three Teachings” in mainland China, referring to Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism as a harmonious aggregate. The paper examines the historical references to the three teachings, their mutual influence, and the complementary aspects of these belief systems. Additionally, it delves into the non-religious philosophy built on this aggregation. The research questions of this study are: 1) What is the historical significance of the “Three Teachings” concept in Chinese philosophy? 2) How have Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism coexisted and influenced each other throughout Chinese history? 3) What are the key principles and teachings of each of the three belief systems? 4) What controversies and debates exist regarding the equal standing and coexistence of these teachings? The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the harmonious concept of the “Three Teachings” in mainland China and shed light on their historical, cultural, and philosophical significance.

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Introduction

The concept of the “Three Teachings” holds a significant place in Chinese philosophy and cultural history. It refers to the harmonious aggregation of Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese Buddhism, which have played pivotal roles in shaping Chinese society, values and belief systems. The term “Three Teachings” has been used by prominent Chinese scholars since the 6th century, emphasizing the coexistence and mutual influence of these three traditions. While the term primarily denotes a harmonious blend of philosophical and religious ideologies, it also encompasses a non-religious philosophy built upon the synthesis of these teachings (Feuchtwang, 2020).

Confucianism¹, rooted in the teachings of Confucius, centers around principles such as ren (humaneness), yi (righteousness), li (propriety/etiquette), zhong (loyalty), and xiao (filial piety), providing a framework for social roles and relationships (Gardner, 2014). Taoism², with its origins traced back to Laozi and Zhuang Zhou, focuses on living in harmony with the Dao (Way), embracing balance, and recognizing the interdependence of all things (Wong, 2011). Chinese Buddhism³, influenced by Siddhartha Gautama's teachings, addresses concepts such as karma, rebirth, and attaining enlightenment.

¹ Confucianism is an ancient philosophy and moral system that originated in China and has had a profound influence on East Asian societies. At its core, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of social harmony, ethical conduct, and the cultivation of virtues in individuals and society. The teachings of Confucius, the central figure of Confucianism, revolve around the concept of ren, which is often translated as "humaneness" or "benevolence." Practicing kindness, benevolence, and empathy towards others is considered essential for maintaining harmonious relationships and a well-ordered society. Confucianism also emphasizes the value of filial piety, which involves showing respect, obedience, and gratitude towards parents and ancestors (Gardner, 2014).

In Confucian thought, there is a strong emphasis on the five key relationships: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. These relationships form the foundation of societal harmony, and each party has specific roles and responsibilities to fulfill. Confucianism also places great importance on education and self-cultivation as means to improve oneself morally and contribute to the betterment of society. Through the observance of rituals, adherence to proper behavior and etiquette (li), and the pursuit of moral excellence, Confucianism aims to create a harmonious and well-ordered society based on ethical principles (Gardner, 2014).

² Taoism, also known as Daoism, is a philosophical and spiritual tradition that originated in ancient China. At its core, Taoism emphasizes living in harmony with the Dao, which can be translated as the "Way" or the natural order of the universe. The teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi, two prominent figures in Taoism, emphasize the cultivation of inner virtue, spontaneity, and embracing the flow of life. Central to Taoist philosophy is the concept of Wu Wei, often translated as "non-action" or "effortless action." Wu Wei refers to the practice of aligning oneself with the natural rhythm of the Dao and allowing things to unfold naturally without force or resistance (Wong, 2011).

Taoism places great value on simplicity, balance, and the recognition of the interconnectedness of all things. The concept of Yin and Yang is a fundamental aspect of Taoist thought, representing the duality and interdependence of opposite forces in the universe. Taoism encourages individuals to embrace the principles of balance and harmony, recognizing that extremes and excesses can lead to disharmony and imbalance. Furthermore, Taoism emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with nature and finding one's place within the natural world. By cultivating a deep connection with nature and embracing its rhythms, Taoism teaches individuals to find inner peace and contentment (Wong, 2011).

³ Chinese Buddhism is a branch of Buddhism that developed in China and has had a profound impact on Chinese culture and religious practices. It encompasses various schools and traditions, including Mahayana Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism incorporates Buddhist teachings and practices with Chinese cultural and philosophical elements, resulting in a unique blend of spirituality and religious observance.

One of the distinctive features of Chinese Buddhism is the emphasis on compassion and the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Chinese Buddhists follow the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, and strive to cultivate virtues such as loving-kindness, wisdom, and ethical conduct. They engage in meditation practices to develop mindfulness and insight, seeking to transcend suffering and attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Chinese Buddhist temples serve as important centers of worship and spiritual practice, attracting devotees who seek solace, guidance, and spiritual growth. These temples often feature magnificent statues of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, intricate artwork, and sacred scriptures. Chinese Buddhism has deeply influenced Chinese society, influencing areas such as art, literature, medicine, and ethics. It continues to be a significant spiritual path for millions of Chinese people, offering a framework for moral conduct, personal transformation, and the pursuit of enlightenment.

This research paper aims to explore the concept of the “Three Teachings” in mainland China⁴, delving into its historical significance, the interplay between Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, the core teachings of each tradition, and the controversies surrounding their coexistence. By examining the literature, historical references, and philosophical foundations, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the harmonious concept of the “Three Teachings” and its impact on Chinese culture, philosophy, and religious practices.

The research questions that guide this study include: 1) What is the historical significance of the “Three Teachings” concept in Chinese philosophy? 2) How have Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism coexisted and influenced each other throughout Chinese history? 3) What are the key principles and teachings of each of the three belief systems? 4) What controversies and debates exist regarding the equal standing and coexistence of these teachings? By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the harmonious concept of the “Three Teachings” in mainland China and its cultural, philosophical, and religious significance.

Basic Principles

The “Three Teachings” encompass Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism, each with its own set of principles and philosophies. Here are the basic principles of each tradition:

Confucianism

- Ren (Humaneness): Practicing kindness, benevolence, and empathy towards others.
- Yi (Righteousness): Upholding moral integrity and doing what is morally right.
- Li (Propriety/Etiquette): Observing proper behavior, rituals, and social norms.
- Zhong (Loyalty): Demonstrating loyalty and devotion to family, society, and rulers.
- Xiao (Filial Piety): Showing respect and obedience to parents and ancestors (Gardner, 2014).

Taoism

- Dao (Way): Embracing the natural flow of life and seeking harmony with the Dao.
- Wu Wei (Non-action): Allowing things to unfold naturally without forcing or interfering.
- Yin and Yang: Recognizing the complementary and interconnected nature of opposing forces.
- Simplicity: Embracing simplicity in thoughts, actions, and lifestyle.

⁴ Within China, there have been scholars who have expressed critiques and reservations regarding the “Three Teachings” (Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism) or the idea of their harmonious coexistence. One notable scholar is Liang Qichao (1873-1929), an influential Chinese thinker during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican era. Liang Qichao advocated for modernization and believed that the traditional Chinese cultural and religious practices, including the Three Teachings, hindered China's progress. In his works such as “New Talks on the Study of Confucianism” (1903) and “On the Relationship Between Buddhism and Taoism” (1904), Liang Qichao criticized the superstitions and outdated elements within these traditions and called for a more scientific and rational approach to knowledge.

Another scholar who challenged the traditional religious practices was Hu Shi (1891-1962), a key figure in the New Culture Movement and a proponent of modern Chinese thought. Hu Shi rejected the mystical and supernatural aspects of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. In his work “Arguments against Superstition” (1921), Hu Shi criticized the reliance on ancient texts and rituals, advocating for a focus on empirical evidence and scientific reasoning.

- Harmony with Nature: Living in harmony with the rhythms and patterns of the natural world (Wong, 2011).

Chinese Buddhism

- Four Noble Truths: Recognizing the truth of suffering, its causes, and the path to liberation.
- Karma: Understanding that actions have consequences and that one's actions shape their future.
- Rebirth: Believing in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.
- Nirvana: Striving for enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of suffering.
- Compassion: Cultivating compassion and loving-kindness towards all sentient beings.

These principles provide a foundational framework for ethical behavior, personal development, and spiritual growth within each of the "Three Teachings." While there are distinct differences in their teachings, they also share common themes such as harmony, virtue, and the pursuit of a meaningful and balanced life. The harmonious aggregate of these teachings reflects the interconnectedness and coexistence of diverse philosophical and religious traditions in Chinese culture.

What Chinese People Perceives about Confucianist Traits within the Three teachings?

In Chinese society, the principles of Ren, Yi, Li, Zhong, and Xiao hold significant cultural and moral importance. Here is a discussion on how Chinese people perceive and value these principles:

Ren (Humaneness)

Ren is highly regarded in Chinese culture, emphasizing the importance of kindness, benevolence, and empathy towards others. Chinese people strive to cultivate Ren in their interactions, valuing harmonious relationships and mutual respect. The concept of Ren is deeply rooted in Confucian teachings and influences various aspects of Chinese society, including family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and social interactions. Practicing Ren is seen as a way to create a harmonious and compassionate society (Chaibong, 2003).

Yi (Righteousness)

Yi emphasizes the significance of moral integrity and doing what is morally right. Chinese people value honesty, integrity, and ethical behavior. Upholding Yi is seen as a way to maintain social order, fairness, and justice. Chinese society encourages individuals to act in a righteous manner and make decisions based on ethical principles. Yi is often upheld in personal relationships, professional settings, and public life (Chaibong, 2003).

Li (Propriety/Etiquette)

Li focuses on observing proper behavior, rituals, and social norms. Chinese people place great importance on maintaining proper etiquette and following established rituals. Li encompasses various aspects of life, including greetings, ceremonies, table manners, and respecting hierarchical relationships. Observing Li is seen as a way to show respect, maintain harmony, and uphold social order. Chinese society values the adherence to appropriate behavior and decorum in different contexts (Chaibong, 2003).

Zhong (Loyalty)

Zhong emphasizes demonstrating loyalty and devotion to family, society, and rulers. Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on filial piety and loyalty to one's family and ancestors. Loyalty to the country and leaders is also highly valued. Chinese people often prioritize the collective over individual interests, emphasizing the importance of unity and social cohesion. Zhong is seen as a moral obligation and a reflection of one's character (Chaibong, 2003).

Xiao (Filial Piety)

Xiao entails showing respect and obedience to parents and ancestors. Filial piety is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture, emphasizing the importance of honoring and caring for one's parents. Chinese people have a strong sense of duty towards their parents and prioritize their well-being. Xiao extends beyond immediate family to include reverence for ancestors and their contributions. Demonstrating filial piety is considered a virtue and a way to maintain familial harmony (Chaibong, 2003).

These principles shape the moral framework of Chinese society, influencing interpersonal relationships, social norms, and ethical values. They reflect the Chinese emphasis on maintaining harmony, respect for authority, and fulfilling societal responsibilities. While the extent of adherence to these principles may vary among individuals, they play a significant role in shaping Chinese cultural identity and values (Chaibong, 2003).

What Chinese People Perceives about Taoist Traits within the Three teachings?

In Chinese culture, the principles of Dao, Wu Wei, Yin and Yang, Simplicity, and Harmony with Nature hold significant philosophical and spiritual importance. Here is a discussion on how Chinese people perceive and value these principles;

Dao (Way)

Chinese people perceive Dao as the natural flow of life and the underlying principle that governs the universe. It represents the ultimate reality and encompasses the inherent order and balance in all things. Embracing the Dao involves recognizing and aligning oneself with the natural rhythms and patterns of existence. Chinese culture encourages individuals to live in accordance with the Dao, seeking inner peace, and finding their place within the larger cosmic order (Wong, 2011).

Wu Wei (Non-action)

Wu Wei is the principle of non-action or effortless action. Chinese people believe in the power of letting things unfold naturally without forcing or interfering. It involves acting in harmony with the Dao and allowing events to occur without unnecessary resistance. Wu Wei does not imply inaction but rather a state of acting in a spontaneous and intuitive manner, guided by the natural flow of circumstances. Chinese people value the ability to find balance and avoid unnecessary struggle or exertion (Wong, 2011).

Yin and Yang

Chinese people perceive Yin and Yang as complementary and interconnected forces that exist in all aspects of life. Yin represents qualities such as darkness, passivity, and femininity, while Yang represents qualities like light, activity, and masculinity. Chinese culture recognizes the dynamic interplay between Yin

and Yang and the need for balance between opposing forces. The concept of Yin and Yang influences various aspects of Chinese life, including medicine, philosophy, and social relationships (Wong, 2011).

Simplicity

Chinese culture emphasizes the value of simplicity in thoughts, actions, and lifestyle. The pursuit of simplicity involves stripping away unnecessary complexities and embracing a more modest and uncluttered way of living. Chinese people appreciate the elegance and beauty found in simplicity and value the ability to find contentment in the essentials of life. The principle of simplicity is often associated with inner peace, clarity of mind, and a harmonious existence (Wong, 2011).

Harmony with Nature

Chinese culture emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with the rhythms and patterns of the natural world. Chinese people perceive nature as a source of wisdom and inspiration. They value the interconnectedness between humans and the environment and strive to maintain a harmonious relationship with nature. This includes respecting and preserving the natural world, aligning with seasonal cycles, and recognizing the influence of nature on human well-being (Wong, 2011).

These principles reflect the deep-rooted philosophical and spiritual traditions within Chinese culture. They guide Chinese people in their quest for personal growth, moral conduct, and attaining harmony within themselves and with the world around them. By embracing these principles, Chinese individuals seek to cultivate a balanced and meaningful life, rooted in the wisdom of the Dao and the harmony found in natural rhythms.

What Chinese People Perceives about Chinese Buddhist Traits within the Three teachings?

Chinese people perceive Chinese Buddhism as a significant spiritual tradition that encompasses the following core beliefs and principles;

Four Noble Truths

Chinese Buddhism acknowledges the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha. These truths include the recognition of suffering (dukkha), understanding the causes of suffering (samudaya), realizing that suffering can be overcome (nirodha), and following the path to liberation from suffering (magga). Chinese people recognize the existence of suffering in life and strive to understand its causes and find a way to transcend it (Yu, 2020).

Karma

Chinese Buddhism emphasizes the law of karma, which states that actions have consequences. Chinese people perceive karma as a fundamental principle that shapes their present circumstances and future lives. They believe that one's actions, intentions, and thoughts create a karmic imprint that influences their future experiences. Understanding the law of karma encourages individuals to cultivate virtuous actions and thoughts, seeking to create positive outcomes for themselves and others (Yu, 2020).

Rebirth

Chinese Buddhism incorporates the concept of rebirth, believing in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Chinese people perceive life as an ongoing process that extends beyond a single lifetime. They believe in the continuity of consciousness and the potential for rebirth in different forms. This belief underscores the importance of moral conduct and spiritual development, as it directly affects the quality of future rebirths (Yu, 2020).

Nirvana

Chinese Buddhism encourages the pursuit of nirvana, a state of ultimate liberation and enlightenment. Chinese people aspire to free themselves from the cycle of suffering and attain a state of peace, wisdom, and transcendence. They perceive nirvana as the highest goal and the ultimate cessation of suffering. The path to nirvana involves cultivating virtues, developing wisdom, and practicing meditation to transcend the limitations of the ego and attain spiritual awakening (Yu, 2020).

Compassion

Chinese Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of compassion and loving-kindness towards all sentient beings. Chinese people recognize the interconnectedness of all life and strive to alleviate the suffering of others. Compassion is seen as a guiding principle in daily life, encouraging acts of kindness, empathy, and generosity. Chinese Buddhists often engage in charitable activities and extend their compassion to both humans and animals (Yu, 2020).

Through the lens of Chinese culture and tradition, Chinese Buddhism is perceived as a path to self-discovery, moral growth, and spiritual enlightenment. Its teachings offer guidance on understanding the nature of suffering, the importance of virtuous conduct, and the pursuit of liberation from the cycle of existence. Chinese people embrace the principles of Chinese Buddhism to find meaning, inner peace, and spiritual fulfillment in their lives (Yu, 2020).

Modern Criticism

According to Philip J. Ivanhoe⁵, a prominent scholar of East Asian philosophy, in his book “Three Streams: Confucian Reflections on Learning and the Moral Heart-Mind in China, Korea, and Japan” (2016), criticisms

⁵ Philip J. Ivanhoe is a renowned scholar of Chinese philosophy and a Professor of East Asian and Comparative Philosophy at City University of Hong Kong. He specializes in Confucian philosophy and ethics, focusing on the ethical dimensions of Confucianism and its contemporary significance. With his extensive research and publications, Ivanhoe has made significant contributions to the field of Chinese philosophy, particularly in promoting cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

Ivanhoe obtained his Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from Stanford University and went on to earn his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Michigan. Throughout his academic career, he has held teaching positions at various institutions, including the University of Michigan, Stanford University, and the University of London. Ivanhoe has also been a visiting professor at several prestigious universities worldwide, further solidifying his international reputation in the field of Chinese philosophy.

His work spans a wide range of topics within Confucian philosophy, including Confucian ethics, moral psychology, virtue ethics, and the role of ritual and “li” in moral cultivation. Ivanhoe has published numerous books and scholarly articles, establishing himself as a leading authority in the field. His works have not only enriched our understanding of Confucianism but also provided valuable insights into the application of Confucian ethics in contemporary contexts.

have been raised regarding the three teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism. Ivanhoe argues that these teachings often face challenges of incompatibility, conflicts, and superficial syncretism. He points out that each tradition possesses its own distinct philosophical and theological foundations, making it difficult to seamlessly integrate them into a coherent and unified whole. Moreover, Ivanhoe discusses how throughout history, certain teachings have enjoyed dominance over others, resulting in tensions and clashes rather than a true harmonious coexistence. By highlighting these critical perspectives, Ivanhoe contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse and diverse interpretations surrounding the three teachings in Chinese society (Ivanhoe, 2016).

Acceptance of “Three Teachings” in Buddhists’ Populated Countries

The acceptance and perception of the three teachings—Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism—vary across different countries where Buddhism is commonly practiced, such as Vietnam, South Korea, North Korea, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and others. In Vietnam, for example, the influence of Confucianism has historically been strong, shaping social norms and hierarchical structures. Confucian values such as filial piety and respect for authority are deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture. Taoism, with its emphasis on harmony with nature and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, also finds resonance among the Vietnamese people (Rogge, 2021).

In South Korea, Confucianism has played a significant role in shaping the country's ethical and social values, with an emphasis on respect for elders, familial obligations, and hierarchical relationships. Buddhism, influenced by both Chinese and Korean traditions, has also been widely practiced and integrated into Korean culture. The teachings of Buddhism, such as the pursuit of enlightenment and compassion, resonate with many South Koreans (Rogge, 2021).

In North Korea, due to its political ideology of Juche and emphasis on the Kim family cult, religious practices, including the three teachings, have been restricted and tightly controlled by the state (Rogge, 2021).

In countries like Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, where Theravada Buddhism is prevalent, the three teachings may have less prominence compared to Buddhism itself. These countries have their own unique interpretations of Buddhism, which often incorporate local beliefs and practices. While Confucianism and Taoism may have had some historical influence in these regions, their significance may not be as pronounced as in China or East Asia. It is important to note that the acceptance and influence of the three teachings can vary within different regions and communities within these countries. Cultural, historical, and political factors all play a role in shaping the reception of these teachings (Rogge, 2021).

Conclusion

The three teachings; Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism have a rich and complex history, with varying acceptance and influence in different countries where Buddhism is commonly practiced. These

Philip J. Ivanhoe's academic career and contributions have played a significant role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and promoting the understanding of Confucian philosophy, both within academia and in public discourse. His expertise and scholarship continue to shape the field of Chinese philosophy, making him a highly respected figure in the study of Confucian ethics and Chinese intellectual traditions.

teachings have shaped the cultural, social, and ethical fabric of societies, promoting values such as humaneness, righteousness, harmony with nature, and the pursuit of enlightenment.

In Vietnam, South Korea, and other countries where Buddhism is prevalent, the three teachings have found their place alongside local traditions, enriching the spiritual landscape and influencing societal norms. While Confucianism has emphasized social order and filial piety, Taoism has emphasized harmony with nature and spiritual enlightenment. Chinese Buddhism, with its teachings on suffering, karma, and liberation, has provided a spiritual path for many. However, the acceptance and perception of these teachings are not uniform across all countries and regions. Political ideologies, historical factors, and local cultural practices have shaped the reception of the three teachings differently. It is essential to consider the nuances and complexities of each country's cultural and religious landscape when examining the acceptance and influence of the three teachings. Therefore, the three teachings represent a harmonious aggregation of philosophical and spiritual traditions that have enriched the lives of millions of people and continue to shape the cultural and ethical values in the countries where Buddhism is commonly practiced.

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