

In China, all of the “three religions” (Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism) emphasise the nourishing of life. Compare and contrast their approaches to this issue.

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China has a rich history of religion - the three most important being Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. They have been widely acknowledged to be interchangeable in Chinese cosmology, with writers of different sects influencing each other and working together, although in China's 5000 year history this hasn't always been the case, with different governments choosing one over the other. However, due to this, many works on their effects on mental and physical nourishment, have been written with writers contributing new ideas over the years. This in some ways has not just accumulated in physical treatments (as in TCM, Chinese traditional medicine) but also “nourishing” could also refer to how the state is run. With the great three religions following as a guide to life for the citizens of the Chinese empire as for the average person each respective message would have impacted a person's life greatly, depending on what period of rule they lived in.

Chinese religion is also hard to compare with western ideas of “nourishment of life” due to many factors. This is not just because of the “cultural differences” made wider by history or language but also factors in China such as the cultural revolution (by way of extermination of old ideas) or the new culture movement of the 1910s (which was bringing in Western ideals for China to adapt

to.) With these events, Chinese have only recently began to research into the “nourishment of life” again.

This has lead to a huge religious resurgence in China since the 1980s. For example, the growing number of people looking into Daoism has lead the qigong movement of the 1980s and 90s and spawned numerous cults. Confucianism has been revived, although the idea of a “Confucian church” (organised Confucian religion) has been widely criticised, while Buddhism has seen a huge explosion of popularity across China again, with the older generation perhaps finding it problematic. For these reasons this essay will compare and contrast the different methods of how these religions teach their followers how to live a healthy life and to live in harmony. Since “nourishment” can be quite a hard concept to pin down, I will define it as “Foster, cherish, nurse, (feeling, hope, etc.) in one’s heart.”¹ This means that I can cover nourishment in more ways rather than the simple scientific definition.

Confucianism and Nourishment

Confucianism for all the debate about whether or not it is a religion, does share a religious style of teaching for its followers when it comes to nourishment. Confucius lived from 551-479 BC and in his early life he suffered many hardships, with his father dying at age 3 and his mother following suit at age 17.² Family troubles plagued the Kong family, including his parents separating when he was an infant and his mother never showing the boy the Kong family grave plot.³ Something of which the adult Confucius would stress is extremely important to one’s spiritual well-being. Despite this harsh upbringing by a young single mother, Confucius in legend is said to have

¹ H.W. Fowler, The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Nourish (ment), 1964, Oxford University Press, Pp 824

² Haiming, Chinese Philosophy, 2010, China Intercontinental Press, Pp 20

³ Price, The Way Of Confucius, 2010, Compendium Publishing, Pp 27

enjoyed “Playing ritual” rather than “playing soldiers” and liked to attend the shrine in his home.⁴ If we take this story as true (which we should always be sceptical of due to the age of the sources, we can learn that even a young Confucius found that he got his personal nourishment from performing simple ritual. Around age 30, Master Kong began to acquire his first disciples.⁵ and he showed them his ideals. He also told followers that humanity had lost understanding of the “*Ru*” ritual and that personal nourishment came from study and self cultivation. His followers transcribed his words into a collection of sayings which is now known in the west as “The Analects”

Confucius advocated that one can achieve self nourishment by acting as a “君子-Junzi” or “Gentleman” this required certain steps. For example being well educated and adhering to ritual and kind to your fellow men. These rules are applicable to life and inner nourishment can be achieved by overcoming obstacles that would lower a lesser man’s character. The master’s rules for being a “Gentleman” can be summed up into 9 points towards the end of the Analects:

“16.10. Confucius said: “A gentleman takes care in 9 circumstances,

- When looking, to see clearly;
- When listening, to hear distinctly;
- in his expression, to be amiable;
- in his attitude, to be deferential;
- in his speech, to be loyal;
- when on duty, to be respectful;
- when in doubt, to question;
- when angry, to ponder the consequences;
- when gaining an advantage, to consider if it is fair.⁶

⁴ Price, The Way Of Confucius, 2010, Compendium Publishing, Pp 27

⁵ Haiming, Chinese Philosophy, 2010, China Intercontinental Press, Pp 20

⁶ Leys/Confucius, The Analects, 2014, Norton, Pp 53

With this quote, we can understand that these teachings show that Confucius takes not just ritual but also politeness and manners into the nourishment of the human character. Using this we can see that in a very early and archaic form that Confucius sees that a healthy social life and good character will bring self nourishment along with spiritual health. Which reflects his views on heaven too.

Heaven and the afterlife are far different in Confucianism from Buddhism or Daoism. Confucius was famously indifferent towards cosmology.⁷ During his time, many considered 天 *tian* (or Heaven) as a God in its own right, who, if they worshiped, they would receive spiritual nourishment. However, Confucius simply defined it as nature and the Dao too.⁸ He saw humans as having to achieve their destiny that the Dao and nature gave them. So only through inner nourishment (performing ritual, acting like a gentleman, filial piety and being mindful of one's own role in the Dao and the universe) one can truly look after and provide nourishment to their life.

Social standing is also very important in Confucianism with interpersonal relationships being the backbone of the Confucian ideal. Humanity has 5 relationships and nourishment can come in adherence to these. The 5 relationships are as follows; *There is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son. (Analects XII)*⁹

With this quote we can see that via the right relationships, a person can truly form a balanced personality and become a Confucian "Gentleman". Hence nourishment is a social goal rather than a more physical one which differs it from Daoism. Nor does it take on the dietary concerns of religions such as Buddhism.

⁷ Haiming, Chinese Philosophy, 2010, China Intercontinental Press, Pp 22

⁸ Zhang, Confucius on Heaven: The Source of Everything, 2016, Xinhua News, Date Accessed 28/4/2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/culture/2016-01/25/c_135084565.htm

⁹ Leys/Confucius, The Analects, 2014, Norton, Pp 33

Daoism and Nourishment

Nourishment In Daoism on the other hand is a completely different subject. Unlike Confucianism where a person's social life is an important factor in somebody's wellbeing, Daoism is far more inwards looking and stresses physical health along with social standing. To Daoists, ideas such as "Wu-wei" are important due to its philosophy that if one does not exert effort then the person can conserve that energy for later and for better use. Alan Watts compares this to the Japanese martial arts such as Judo or Aikido where "an opponent is defeated from the force of their own attack."¹⁰ One could also say that Daoism teaches nourishment via many means. Many Daoists believe that "The Science of Vitality Cultivation" (or 养生学) is the key and first step to a human being improving their own health.¹¹ Daoists believe that before one can improve their way of thinking they should improve their physical body first. They can do this via exercises and a change to their diets.

Daoists call this act "Yang Sheng" or "The art of Nourishment" - with practice one can lift themselves out of ill health with a combination of Qigong, a healthy diet, meditation and sleep that correspond to the Daoist calendar. ¹² As a human gets older, Daoists believe that one's qi (or life power) can slowly drain and one's health will suffer. When it comes to Yangsheng body philosophy a human must nourish their body with Shen rather than qi. This Shen can only be made and

¹⁰ Watts, Tao: The Watercourse Way, 1979, Pelican Books, Pp 76

¹¹ Lishchyna, What "nourishing of life" is ?, 2018, The Dao School, Date Accessed 29/4/2018, <https://zhendaopai.com/nourishing-of-life/>

¹² Stefan, Yangsheng, 2018, Britannica Online, Date Accessed 29/4/2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yangsheng>

cultivated via life experience and adherence to Daoist meditation practices.¹³ These include dietary changes, a switch from western medicine to TCM (Chinese traditional medicine) and physical exercise. Only then ones qi and Shen will rise and one can extend their own life (Yang). Hence the term “Yangsheng” or nourishment of life force.

Other exercises can be practiced by followers of the Yangsheng ideal, such as the art of sleeping or drinking.

Self cultivation practices are also found in Confucianism, however. Due to Confucianism’s view on cosmology its less likely for a Confucian to take up body exercises due to the more less spiritual nature of Confucianism. However, a Daoist may argue their health and happiness comes from Yangsheng cultivation. Later Confucians have argued that the Yangsheng ideal can be selfish and egotistical. Mencius was known most for critical views on the practice too.¹⁴ For Confucianists however, egoism from obsession with social standing can also be a negative quality. Mencius himself also notes this in Book V.¹⁵ With Mencius advising that for some men, even becoming an emperor would not quell a man’s anxiety if he didn’t have inner happiness. Which is were a follower of Yangsheng would argue the case that if the man did practice true self cultivation then he would be able to to not only quell his anxieties but also live longer and take more enjoyment out of that longer life.

Mencius although critical of Yangsheng ideas in some respects also does note the good work it can do in self cultivation, an example is Mencius book 4 part B (16) where he says “*Let princes seek by his excellence to nourish men, and he will be able to subdue the whole empire.*”¹⁶ However, it is debatable if he meant this in a truly Daoist sense or a Confucian sense where he is talking about the study of the classics. He also notes it in the early section two that self cultivation of qi can lead to attractive qualities such as courage for generals.¹⁷ With this we can see that

¹³ Stefon, Yangsheng, 2018, Britannica Online, Date Accessed 29/4/2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yangsheng>

¹⁴ Zhao, Yangzhu’s “Guiji” Yangsheng and It’s Modern Relevance, 2014, David Publishing, Pp173

¹⁵ Mencius, The Mencius, 2004, Penguin Classics, Pp 99

¹⁶ Mencius, The Mencius, 2004, Penguin Classics, Pp 90

¹⁷ Mencius, The Mencius, 2004, Penguin Classics, Pp 31

Mencius, although a Confucian and sometimes critical of the yangsheng is developed by people who via self cultivation don't just help their own bodies but also help the state as a whole. This was a famous ideology of how the government ran. Yangsheng also covers self preservation. The Confucians saw this as an extension of filial piety, the Daoists on the other hand saw this as a way to keep body from decaying as one gets older.¹⁸

Using this example, we can see that nourishment in Daoism above all stresses the survival of the physical tissue of a human before any other quality.

Buddhism and nourishment

Buddhism is not a religion that is native to China and was imported from India sometime in the Han dynasty via the silk road, leading to a huge number of Chinese converting. However Chinese (or Han) Buddhism gradually became influenced by the traditional Chinese beliefs such as Confucianism and Daoism. Knowing this, we can see that Han Buddhism now has its own culture when it comes to self cultivation and nourishment.

Many Buddhist works on self cultivation and nourishment come from the monk "Bodhidharma" A Buddhist monk who may have been of either Chinese or Indian origin and is best known for transmitting Chan Buddhism (Zen) to China during the Liu-Song dynasty (Although it could have been as late as the Liang.¹⁹ Chan saw it's most popular period during the Tang - regarded as a high point in Chinese culture and the time when the famous Shaolin Monks were established.

Buddhists are also known (like Daoists) to follow certain diets to improve their own spiritual wellbeing. For example, vegetarianism is extremely important in Buddhism along with the foundations of non-violence (ahimsa). Around the world, estimates put half the global Buddhist population as vegetarian.²⁰

¹⁸ Indiana University Northwest, 2018, Daoism/Taoism, Indiana University Northwest, Date Accessed 1/5/2018, <http://www.iun.edu/~hisdc/h425/Daoism.htm>

¹⁹ Buswell, 2004, Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Macmillan, Pp 57

²⁰ Editors of Dhammawiki, Vegetarianism and Buddhism, Dhammawiki, Date accessed 1/5/2018

However, most schools of Buddhism do teach that this is not only just optional but in fact ,depending on where you live, you can adjust your diet. For example, due to the steep and mountainous climate, its almost impossible to grow vegetables in Tibet, so many Tibetan monks still eat meat. Famine situations are obviously the same.

Diet and nourishment is often a common topic of Buddhist preachers and scholars. The German born Nyanaponika Thera wrote a large amount on the topic. Thera's anthology of texts. "The Four Nutriment of Life" discusses in great detail how one's diet can affect the world around you. Thera is quoted to say that diet affects you on four levels:

*"The laws of nutriment govern both biological and mental life, and this fact was expressed by the Buddha when speaking of four kinds of nutriment: edible food, sense-impressions, volitions, and consciousness. It is hunger that stands behind the entire process of nutrition, wielding its whip relentlessly. The body, from birth to death, craves ceaselessly for material food; and mind hungers as eagerly for its own kind of nourishment, for ever new sense-impressions and for an ever expanding universe of ideas."*²¹

Using Thera as a guide we can see that in his interpretation of the Buddha's teachings all of a human's senses in fact come from ones edit and is affected by it greatly. Hnese "food" in a buddhist sense isn't just edible food but one also attains nourishment from study. Using Thera's example we can see that the Buddhist example is quite closely related to Confucianism in the sense that one doesn't just achieve nourishment via food but also study. Following this "diet" can lead to better spiritual nourishment and a happier life. Thera backs this with the quote:

*"Change, or Impermanence (anicca), is at the very root of the nutritive process which cries for constant replenishment of the food consumed. The bottomless gaping hole has to be filled again and again as long as the being lives. And it is no different with our mental hunger that craves for change and variety."*²²

²¹ Thera, 1981, The Four Nourishments of Life, Buddhist Publication Society, Date Accessed: 1/5/2018, <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel105.html>

²² Thera, 1981, The Four Nourishments of Life, Buddhist Publication Society, Date Accessed: 1/5/2018, <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel105.html>

“The bottomless gaping hole” could not just be seen as our own physical hunger but also the craving of knowledge that all humans deep down have. Making not just dietary concerns a Buddhist issue but simultaneously a Daoist and Confucian issue as well.

Conclusion

Once Buddhism had taken hold in China much of the general public had a choice of three religions to adopt. Buddhism took hold of China relatively quickly and became the largest religion in China.²³ Gradually these three belief systems merged and fused with local beliefs such as Chinese folk religion. Gradually these religions merged and became interchangeable within the Chinese identity. For example, a Confucian can perform sacrifice at a Buddhist temple for the sake of ritual and rites. Another example would be the fusing of both Daoist and Buddhist views on nourishment. All three of these religions have their own key to it. Confucianism believes that performing rites, keeping traditions alive and keeping good social standing is nourishment enough for a human being. It could be said that could nourish a person who wants to become more extraverted . However Daoists and Buddhists have a very different view where a person’s diet and exercise nourish a persons soul more, so both these faiths require a certain amount of self reflection, hence this may teach followers to be more introverted, Although that doesn’t mean that these religions have no common ground. Nor does it mean the labels that I’m applying to them are set in stone. For example: Analects 2:15 says “To study and not think is a waste. To think and not study is dangerous”²⁴ . A Buddhist or Daoist could interpret this quote as meaning “One should self reflect and digest what they have learnt” or simply just to stop and meditate and to think about the world around them. These types of inter-faith interpretations are the glue to why the three religions are so close.

However, nourishment is the difference between the three. With dietary concerns and the physical being most important in Buddhism, the spiritual Yangsheng practice of Daoism and the self-

²³ Editors of the CIA World Fact Book, CIA World Fact Book, 2018, China/Religion, CIA, Date Accessed 1/5/2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>

²⁴ Leys/Confucius, The Analects, 2014, Norton, Pp 6

cultivation of Confucianism. However, this does not mean that any follower of these faiths is bound to just one way of living their lives. All three embrace spiritual, educational and physical nourishment deeply within their framework.

Word count: 3,046

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