

# **Defining 'religion' in Chinese: Key themes and concepts in the study of ancient Chinese religions**

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## **Lecture 1**



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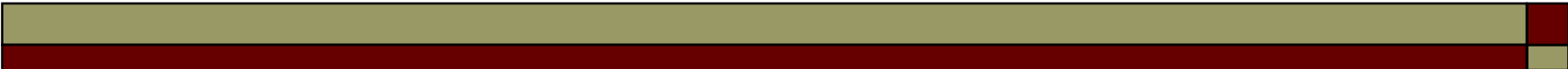
Section 1

# **THE QUESTION OF TRANSCENDENCE**

# Subjectivity in Chinese Culture

- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) maintains that morality depends on “subjective freedom” rather than from past models
- subjectivity was something fundamentally absent from Chinese culture
- Instead, China is in the grip of “substance”, the unquestioned authority of tradition
- Absence of inwardness of conscience and morality
- Consequence: China cannot become “modern” unless it imports the principle of free subjectivity





# Hegel on Subjectivity in Chinese Culture

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“Together with more free reflection, the ethical separates from the legal. Then the constitution rests on the legal which brings forth laws while the ethical is left to the **individual**. [...] Nothing should appear in the laws what is free inside and has its being in the subject. In our modern consciousness we have the idea that the **inner life of the human being** should be respected. This demand expresses itself in the form of honor. It refers to the unimpeachable realm of **what I am for myself**. [...] It is a never-ending injury for me if someone touches this sphere in a hostile manner. This honor presupposes the sanctity of **my being for myself**. However, if someone rules over me morally, then my being for myself is not respected, and there is no room for honor here, and likewise not for the productions which come from my inwardness. That this is the case in China remains to be concretely shown.” (G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen zur Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* [Leipzig: Meiner, 1920], p. 300; translation by Heiner Roetz (2020), p. 5)

# Immanence vs Transcendence

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- Hegel posits religious source for lack of subjectivity → a world-immanent form of religious with transcendence; an “absolute secularization of the religious principle” (F.W.J Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*) → religious aura of worldly institutions, esp. the imperial institution → “where everything is holy, there is no leeway for subjectivity to develop” (Roetz [2020], p. 6), as everything is too dense, too compact
- Modern intellectual Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 traced back his generation’s “submissiveness, parochialism and denial of independent thought” to a “form of thought” characterized by “lack of transcendence”: **“My tragedy is that I do not have transcendent values, it is the tragedy not to have a god.”** (Liu Xiaobo 劉曉波, *Zhongguo dangdai zhengzhi yu Zhongguo zhishifenzi* 中國當代政治與中國知識分子 (Taipei: Tangshan, 1990), 156)

## The Hegel–Weber Paradigm

**'Immanent' Religion (IR)**

**Typical case: Confucianism**

**This-worldliness = adaptation to the world**

**'Transcendent' Religion (TR)**

**Typical case: Puritanism**

**Other-worldliness = tension to the world**

**Consequences for the actor-world relations through absence (IR) or presence (TR) of 'leverage'**

**Subject – Object (natural world)**

Unbroken unity with nature

Disenchantment and subjugation of nature

**Subject – Co-subjects (social world)**

Reification of the given order

Questioning of the given order

**Subject – Subject (inner world of the self)**

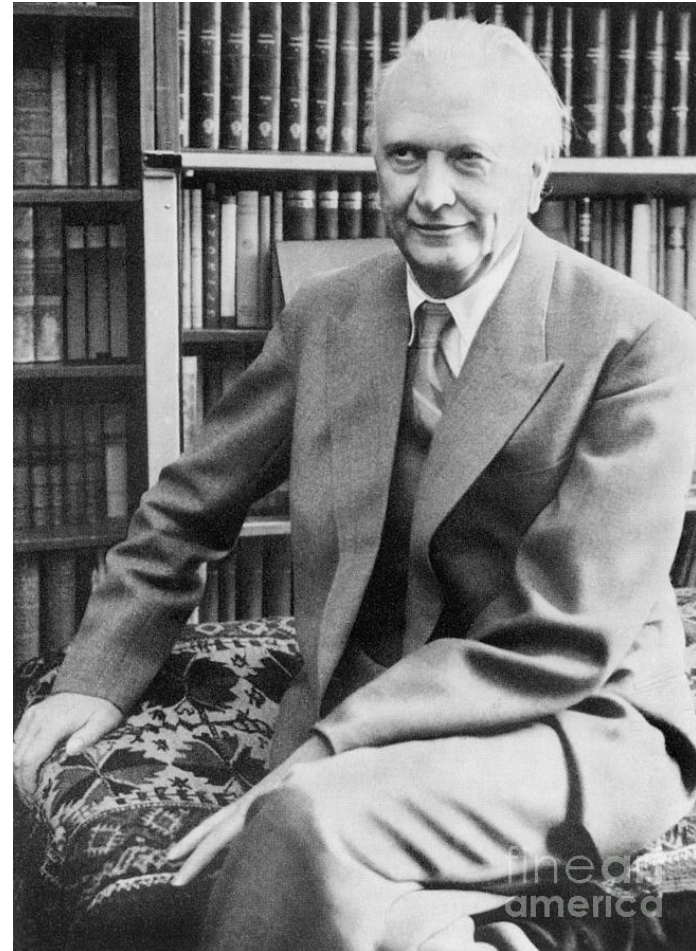
Collective identity

Development of subjectivity

Source: Roetz (2020), p. 8.

# Critique of Hegel

- Karl Jaspers (1883–1969)
  - Thesis of the Axial Age, which is characterised by
    1. Breakthrough through the unquestioned presence and closedness of Life; humankind “transcends the world and himself.”
    2. Calling into doubt what Hegel calls “substance”: “Opinions, customs, conditions that had been unconsciously accepted were now scrutinized, questioned, dissolved.”
    3. Development of personhood and self-consciousness – of what Hegel calls “subjectivity.”
    4. Steps towards critical, detached thinking (second order reasoning).
    5. Steps towards the universal by reaching beyond oneself and “recognizing oneself in the other” rather than reifying what is one’s own.
- Chinese culture is one of transcendence (understood as a structural rather than ontological difference)



# Roetz, Disenchantment and subjectivity

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- ❑ Heiner Roetz, German sinologist, put Jasper's thesis on an empirical footing by studying the relationship between humans and nature in ancient China
- ❑ Roetz argues that from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, "Heaven" (*tian* 天) the highest deity of the Zhou dynasty, lost its religious aura and "secularized to the notion of dysteleological 'nature'"
- ❑ The human world is no longer under the sway of gods and spirits → this becomes a source for subjectivity to develop
- ❑ This shift in the relationship between Heaven and humans, this disenchantment, signals a breakthrough through "substance" towards personhood and self-consciousness.
- ❑ Roetz agrees with Hegel that a recourse to subjectivity is hardly possible in a compact world where everything is sacred. However, he argues that transcendence is possible even within a world-immanent culture like the Chinese. Transcendence: "a kind of standing back and looking beyond, a kind of critical, reflective questioning of the actual and new vision of what lies beyond" (Benjamin Schwartz, "The Age of Transcendence", *Daedalus* 104, no. 2 (1975)).



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Section 2

# **RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION**

# Chinese Religious System

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- All encompassing, non-exclusive system that embraces “...all forms of religious practice, whether personal (meditation, salvation techniques, body techniques including martial arts, access to knowledge and revelation through possession and spirit-writing) or group (worship of local saints or ancestors, death rituals)...” (Goossart 2005, p. 13)
- Most common form: worshipping community with a temple, dedicated to a local saint
- No overarching church structure or dogmatic authority
- Only the exclusive monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) were not included in Chinese religious system

# The Three Teachings

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- Three institutionalized forms of Chinese religion: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism
- Defined by four elements: a priesthood, a liturgy, a canon (defining orthodoxy) and education centres – monasteries, academies (*shuyuan*) → Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in the strict sense to be found only in these centres
- Most common people's allegiance was not to these three religions but to local worship communities; communities based on locality, lineage or professional guilds or voluntarily groups, e.g. pious associations or sectarian groups

# ‘Religion’

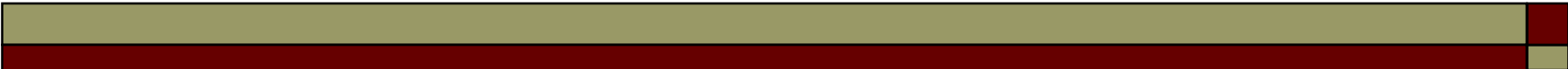
- There is no precise Chinese equivalent for the modern western concept ‘religion’
- Neologism, *zongjiao* 宗教, was adopted from Japanese, to translate the western concept of ‘religion’; this occurred around 1900.
- ‘Religion understood as a structured system of beliefs and practices, separate from society, which organizes believers in a church-like organization
- Introduction of western notion of ‘religion’, in combination with the complementary idea of ‘superstition’ (*mixin* 迷信) a powerful ideological tool that shaped and motivated a brutal policy of destruction and repression
- ‘Religion’ is thought of as acceptable while ‘superstition’ (most popular religious expressions) is condemned



# *dao* 道, *fa* 法 and *jiao* 教 metaphors

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- *dao* 道 (path, way) analogous to what we would call “religions”
- “People seek, travel, follow, abandon, or deviate from *daos*, rather than simply being contained in them; the verbs are verbs of doing, not copulae” (Company 2003, p. 305)
- *Fo fa zhi mie* 佛法之灭 “When the Law of Buddha was suppressed. . . .” → *fa* is praxeological rather than creedal, regulations concerning what to do
- *jiao* 教 = “the teaching of X” → verbal use; mostly not to be understood as “doctrine”



# Question (and a suggestion)

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- ❑ What metaphors do we use to speak about religions?
- ❑ How do we imagine the communities we implicitly believe to be involved in religious practices?
- ❑ One can avoid reification by treating religious practices as “repertoires of resources”
- ❑ How and in what circumstances is any given piece in the repertoire performed, on what occasion and by whom?