

INDIGENIZATION OF IMPORTED RELIGIONS IN CHINA:  
THE CASE OF ISLAM AND THE HUI PEOPLE

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Confucianism, like Daoism, Legalism, and other schools that came to exist in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods (770–221 BC), is not a “religion” in the strict sense, as that term is usually understood in Western civilization. First, these schools provide no story of the creation of the world by God. Second, they contain no concept of reincarnation nor do they imagine a final judgment and the end of the world. Third, there is no human representative of a god or gods in these secular schools, such as Jesus Christ in Christianity, Mohammed in Islam, or Sakyamuni in Buddhism. The leaders of these schools were considered “master teachers” and they were mainly concerned with the ethics and moral norms that men should follow in their daily lives.

Confucianism, which became dominant in Chinese culture during the Han Dynasty and had its status reinforced through the imperial examinations (*ke-ju*), shows a very open-minded tolerance toward other schools of thought and various kinds of religions. For example, during the Tang Dynasty, as the historian John K. Fairbank argues, “The revived Confucian bureaucracy was remarkably tolerant of foreign creeds. Foreign visitors brought with them all the variety of medieval religions: Judaism, the fifth century Christian heresy known as Nestorian Christianity, and Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism from Persia.”<sup>1</sup> The main content of Confucian classics centered on social philosophy and addressed the question of how to be a good person in a secular society—as a son or a father in a family, or as a king or a gentleman in a society, and so forth. These works said little about

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<sup>1</sup> John K. Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 64.

the sacred world of gods, demons, and ghosts. Beginning with the Qin Dynasty, many emperors and commoners practiced Daoism in order to achieve longevity. But this did not threaten the dominant position of Confucianism. The emperors might search for the elixir of immortality themselves, but they needed soldiers, workers, and farmers to fight and work hard to maintain the empire. Therefore they paid respect to Taoists while continually supporting Confucianism as the source of moral principles in secular societal life. After Buddhism came to China around the time of the Han Dynasty, both Daoism and Confucianism borrowed some ritual forms from Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Those rituals made Confucianism appear to be a “religion,” but the basic spirit and principles of Confucianism were not altered: they concerned only the affairs of secular society. Because Confucianism maintained a tolerant attitude toward other schools or religions in general, the latter managed to develop in Chinese society.

Because Confucianism always occupied the central, leading position in Chinese cultural and social tradition, the attitude of this school toward other schools of thought and religions, whether they were native-born or adopted from other cultural traditions, might explain how the distinctive Chinese cultural tradition of “religious” coexistence originated, and why this pattern endured for about twenty centuries from the Han to the Qing dynasties. One example of the treatment of imported religions was the encounter with Buddhism. The Chinese sect of Buddhism (*Chan*) was regarded as “Confucianized Buddhism.”<sup>3</sup> Many of the ideas and ethical tenets of Confucianism and Buddhism were blended together, with the result that Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism became three coexisting and interacting faith systems in China. Visitors can see these three systems practiced in the same temples in central and coastal China. To a certain extent, Buddhism was indigenized and integrated into the Chinese cultural system. While religious competition has been one of the major causes of strife in Europe and the Middle East throughout history, wars of religion are rarely mentioned in the Chinese historical record.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Taoist church as an organization in China was influenced profoundly by Buddhism.” Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 125.

<sup>3</sup> “The process of indigenization of Buddhism in the Tang dynasty took two steps. The first one is ‘*xuan xue hua*’ (metaphysicization), the second step is ‘*ru xue hua*’ (Confucianization).” Fan Wenlan 范文澜, *Zhongguo tongshi jianbian* [Short Course of Chinese History] 中国通史简编, vol. 2, rev. ed. (Beijing: Remin chubanshe, 1964), 614.