

Relief Systems in China



A Unit of Study for Grades 6-12

JOEL ROTHBLATT



National Center for
History in the Schools
UCLA



Belief Systems in China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism 581 BCE – 1368 CE

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The electronic version of this teaching unit is available at



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Introduction

I. WHY THIS UNIT?

This teaching unit explores the three main traditional belief systems, that is, religions or philosophies of China: Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism), and Buddhism. It provides background on each of these systems, including how, when, where, and by whom they were developed and diffused throughout China. Using translations of primary sources, students will examine the major tenets of each belief system, their specific differences, and their importance in the historical development of China. Students will understand the significance of belief systems in helping to establish a sense of belonging and building social cohesion, focusing on China in the premodern era. Students will also be encouraged to reflect on the impact that their own belief systems have on their lives.

Teachers may present material from this unit in a variety of classroom contexts, including the following:

- An example of the power of belief systems in shaping the views of individuals, as well as helping to forge a country's cultural identity.
- A case study of how and why belief systems are important, transmitted, and accepted in a society.
- A basis for comparison with other belief systems.
- Part of a general study of East Asia in the medieval centuries.

II. UNIT OBJECTIVES

Upon completing this unit, students will be able to:

1. Explain the meaning of "belief systems" and give examples.
2. Trace the spread of the three main belief systems in China over time and assess their impact on the politics, economy, society, and culture.
3. Identify the similarities and differences between Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism.
4. Draw inferences about the effects of a particular belief system on a society residing in a geographic region.

5. Describe how and why Buddhism spread in China during the period of the Tang dynasty.

III. TIME AND MATERIALS

This unit will take three to four 50-minute class periods (150-200 minutes in class).

Materials required: pencils, overhead or computer projector, transparencies, and history textbooks with glossaries or dictionaries.

IV. CORRELATIONS TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY

Era 4: Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter, 300-1000 CE.

1B: The student understands the expansion of Christianity and Buddhism beyond the lands of their origin.

3A: The student understands China's sustained political and cultural expansion in the Tang period. Therefore the student is able to assess explanations for the spread and power of Buddhism in Tang China, Korea, and Japan.

Era 5: Intensified Hemispheric Interactions, 1000-1500 CE.

1B: The student understands developments in Japanese and Southeast Asian civilization.

Era 6: The Emergence of the First Global Age, 1450-1770.

3A: The student understands the extent and limits of Chinese regional power under the Ming dynasty. Therefore the student is able to compare the role of Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in Chinese government and society.

V. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As anyone who witnessed the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing can attest, the Chinese continue to take great pride in their three main belief systems: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. These three belief systems continue to exert tremendous influence over life in China. Thus, by examining this unit, students can appreciate the connection between the past and the present in China.

Both belief systems indigenous to China that are covered in this unit originated during the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. The founders of these belief systems—Laozi

(Lao Tzu) and Confucius—lived during the violent and chaotic “Warring States Period” of the eastern Zhou dynasty. This occurred nearly three centuries before China was first united into an empire by Shi Huangdi in 221 BCE. This “Warring States Period” was a time when the line of succession within each state was murky at best, since rulers would often have children with wives and concubines; many of the progeny of these unions would try to claim their rightful place on the throne. Bitter, rejected “wannabe” rulers often joined forces with rival states to seek justice and revenge and attempt to clear the heir, so to speak, in their own states. In addition, these Chinese states often united in common cause against a more powerful state (or states) in order to preserve a balance of power between them.

In military terms, this period saw a move away from the aristocrat-led, chariot-based, and chivalrous battles to large-scale armies, cavalry, walled fortifications, and use of the crossbow. These developments caused battles to be larger in scale and intensity than ever before, requiring the skills of well-organized generals. Iron-making technology, developed in the early Zhou period, promoted economic expansion. The economic growth of the late Zhou period is evident in the appearance of cities all over northern China. In the fourth century BCE, rulers of city-states in China began attempting to conquer neighboring states. Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of the third belief system—Buddhism—discussed in this unit, also lived around 500 BCE in India.

Chinese societies were in closer contact with Indian societies than they were with other ancient civilizations given the geographic proximity to each other. However, early India differed from ancient China in many ways due, in large part, to its climate: India was farther south, closer to the equator, and warmer year round. India also had closer relationships to other early Indo-European societies, such as Persians and Greeks, than did the early Chinese. Within two centuries before Siddhartha, records indicate that philosophers in India began questioning the meanings of sacrificial rituals and pondering the role of humans in the cosmos. Ancient Indian beliefs envisioned endlessly-repeating cycles of birth and death. Those who lived good lives would be reborn into a better life, and those who did bad deeds would be reborn as lower beings. This led some to seek a more mystical understanding of the universe—and attempt to perform good deeds only—by practicing asceticism and retreating from society. It is from this environment that the philosophy of Buddhism emerged. The spread of Buddhism both inside and outside of India was greatly supported by the Indian King Ashoka who became a Buddhist after recognizing—and agonizing over—the carnage he inflicted when he defeated his enemies in a bloody battle in 261 BCE.

By 100 CE, the economy of the cities of Inner Eurasia was becoming dependent on east-west trade along the silk roads. During the powerful Han dynasty, the Chinese controlled much of eastern Inner Eurasia, although trade continued after the Han fell.

Thus, the message of Buddhism was first introduced into China by foreign merchants. Soon after, missionaries also carried the teachings of Buddhism to China. The spread of Buddhism deepened when the sutras (Buddhist holy writings) were translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by both Inner Eurasian and Chinese monks.

After the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, China disintegrated into the “Period of Division.” The territory was broken into competing states until 589 CE. At one point non-Chinese were able to control parts of northern China. This was due in large part to the invention of the stirrup about 300 CE. This device gave advantage to cavalry in warfare and favored the superior riding ability of northern tribes. During this disunity, Buddhism spread in China and connected Chinese society with societies throughout Asia. At the same time, Daoism emerged as a rival to Buddhism, and Daoists wrote their own sacred texts and instituted monastic rites as a way to become more accepted into higher society and political circles. Finally, in 589 CE, the Sui dynasty defeated the last of the southern dynasties and China was politically reunited. The Sui founder, Wendi, presented himself as a Buddhist king and spread the teachings of Buddhism across China. At the same time, the Sui selected government officials based on their scores on civil service examinations which stressed knowledge of Confucianism. However, the costly (in terms of money and casualties) battles the Sui waged to regain China’s control over Vietnam and Korea—as the Han had done—caused the Sui dynasty to fall after only two generations.

The Tang dynasty, which took over in 618 CE and lasted until 907 CE, continued the civil service examinations. Eventually there were two main examinations: one tested knowledge of the Confucian classics, and the other tested the candidates’ ability to answer political questions and compose poetry. The Tang dynasty rivaled the Han in terms of territorial control, and the Tang elite was perhaps even better educated than the Han elite. For example, the Tang elite continued to prepare for and take the civil service exams as a matter of personal prestige. As we will see in the lessons in this unit, all three belief systems—Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism—flourished under the Tang and Song dynasties (roughly 960-1279 CE).

According to Confucius, there are five basic relationships. In each relationship, people have certain duties or obligations to each other. If people understand and carry out these duties, then there will be order and peace. These are the five relationships and their duties:

1. **Parents-Children.** Parents should love and care for their children. Children should respect and obey their parents. The children's respect and devotion for their parents is often called filial piety.
2. **Ruler-Subjects.** A ruler should care for the people he governs. The people he rules (the subjects) should obey a ruler who takes care of them.
3. **Older brothers-Younger brothers.** Older brothers should care for younger brothers. Younger brothers should respect and obey older brothers.
4. **Husband-Wife.** Married people should live in harmony. A wife should obey her husband.
5. **Friend-Friend.** Friends should trust each other and treat each other well.

Do you notice a pattern? Those in power must take care of those who are weaker. Those who are weaker must respect and obey those who are in power. Those who are equal should treat each other equally. The primary and most important relationship is between parent and child. Children who understand their roles and duties to their parents will then be able to go into the world and understand their positions in society. It will be very difficult, however, for those who do not fulfill their primary duties (to their parents) to lead a successful life.

These relationships are based on traditional Chinese values, such as respect for elders (older people) and ancestor worship, which existed before the time of Confucius. This was an important reason why Chinese people were able to embrace the teachings of Confucius: they were already familiar with many of these ideas. The teachings of Confucius were rooted in things that the Chinese already believed in and practiced.

On the other hand, Confucianism also placed greater importance on learning, or scholarship. According to Confucianism, people can become government officials to help rule the land if they study hard, are just and fair, and can pass difficult exams. Under his philosophy, it is not as important which family you are born into; it is much more important how smart and just you are. Therefore, Confucianism gives everyone the opportunity to become more powerful.

The main writings of Confucius are in the *Analects*, the sayings of Confucius. In addition to his own words, the ideas of Confucianism were developed by many other

people who were the disciples of Confucius. These people accepted and spread his teachings. The most famous of these was Mencius. He was born almost 100 years after Confucius died. He tried to convince rulers in China that they should accept the teachings of Confucius.

In Confucianism, memorizing the sayings of Confucius was one of the most important rituals. That way, if someone spoke the first part of a saying of Confucius, the other people in the group (Confucians) would be able to complete it. If they could not, they would not be considered to be part of that group of well-educated people or leaders.

Some of the sayings of Confucius were about the five relationships, but many others were examples of the way people should behave in order to keep harmony in society. These sayings often talked about people who were superior or inferior.

Here are two examples of famous sayings by Confucius:

- “What is a superior person? One who acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions.”
- “Good government results when those who are near are made happy, and those who are far are attracted to it.”

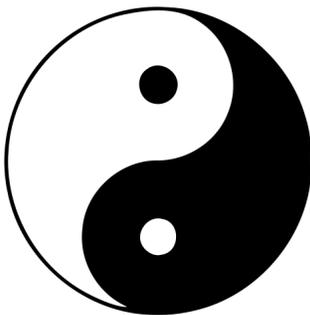
Laozi (Lao Tzu), Fourth Century BCE

We do not know if Laozi was a real person or not. The name in Chinese means “Old Philosopher” or “Old Master.” This name may actually have represented several different writers who contributed to the *Daodejing*, or *The Way and Integrity Classic*, which was the earliest set of teachings associated with Daoism. This person or persons lived during a period when China was divided into many small states, each with its own lord. This time is known as the “Warring States Period,” because the different states were always fighting, or warring, with each other and their lords. There were many attempts to overthrow the lords because they were often cruel to the people they ruled. It was a period of great chaos and suffering among the people.

Like other people during this difficult and dangerous time, Laozi looked for ways to improve society and help comfort people. According to legend, he wanted to leave the problems in China in order to live out the end of his life in peace and quiet in Central Asia (west of China). A border guard asked him to write down his teachings before leaving China, and so Laozi composed the *Daodejing*, which lays out the main ideas of what later became known as Daoism.

According to Daoism, people have problems because they do not understand the natural world they live in and how it behaves. Therefore, the basic goal of Daoism is for people to understand the Dao (the way) of nature and behave according to it. Those who follow the Dao achieve mental clarity, power, and inner peace.

It is difficult to describe the Dao in words. In fact, when we put things from nature into words, we remove ourselves from the experience of reality, according to Daoism. Therefore, Daoists (people who practice Daoism) say that instead of using words, the best way to experience nature is by observing it and being in tune with it. For example, when we watch waves at the beach, we do not judge waves and say, “This one is right and beautiful” or “That one is wrong and ugly.” Nature is just what it is; it does not make mistakes. There is no good or bad in nature. These are ideas that people made up to describe how things affect them.



Therefore, it is easier to explain Daoism with the yin yang symbol. Many people (especially in Western countries) tend to separate ideas in nature into opposites like good and evil, black and white, or life and death. Daoists see nature as being whole (the complete outside circle in the yin yang symbol), and everything inside of it as being connected and as part of the whole. The yin is represented by the black in this symbol. It also represents water, the moon, and earth, as well as the quiet, soft, and feminine qualities. The yang is represented by

the white in the symbol. It also represents fire, the sun, and heaven, as well as the dynamic, hard, and masculine qualities. Nature is always moving and flowing, and the yin and yang work together. For example, black and white are only seen in relation to the other, part of each other, and flowing into each other.



The yin yang symbol is seen everywhere in a Daoist monastery near Chongqing, China. But even here, the concept of yin yang can be understood in food combination, such as sweet and sour.

Photo by J. Rothblatt



Statues of gods in a Daoist monastery near Chongqing, China

Photo by J. Rothblatt

The Daoist belief system was accepted in China (in part) because it reflected earlier philosophies and legends. For example, according to a very famous legend, one of the mythical founders of China faced a problem about how to deal with a huge dam that was leaking. Rather than trying to block it, he formed channels to naturally drain the water away, thus creating China's landscape.

Aside from Laozi's writings in the *Daodejing*, the philosophy of Daoism is based on the ideas of other people who accepted and spread the teachings of Daoism. The most famous of these was Zhuangzi (or Master Zhuang), who was born perhaps 100 years after Laozi died and who wrote *Zhuangzi*.

In Daoism, meditation and tuning into nature are the most important rituals. Daoists also memorize the main writings of Daoism, especially the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. That way, if someone begins speaking the first part of a saying from one of these books, the other people in the group (Daoists) are able to complete it. If they cannot, they are not considered to be part of that group of Daoists.

Examples of two famous Daoist sayings:

- “Who can make the muddy water clear? Let it be still and it will gradually become clear.”
- “That which goes against the Dao will come to an early end.”

The Buddha (born Siddhartha Gautama), 563-483 BCE

Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince in Northern India. According to legend, it was predicted at Siddhartha's birth that he would become either a great ruler or a great teacher. His father, the king, wanted Siddhartha to succeed him as ruler. For this reason, his father tried to prevent him from seeing or experiencing anything sad, which might cause him to become religious and teach others. Therefore, Siddhartha enjoyed his early years in the palace in luxury without knowing about things such as old age, sickness, or death. Eventually, the young prince decided to go outside of the palace. There, for the first time, he saw an old person with wrinkled skin who had difficulty walking. Siddhartha understood that he himself would also become old. He also saw a sick person and a dead person. All this made Siddhartha feel much suffering. During another trip, he saw a holy man who appeared to be happy and at peace. Siddhartha learned that this person had given up his home and everything he owned. The holy person was trying to find wisdom and peacefulness by living a pure and simple life.

From then on, Siddhartha searched for a way to end suffering and become happy. He decided to follow the path of a holy person. He gave up everything he owned. He left his wife and young child and a life of luxury in the palace. He traveled around India for years, but he still did not find a way to end suffering. Finally, he decided to sit under a tree and meditate (become quiet and relaxed and clear his mind of thoughts) until he became enlightened (understood the truth about the world and such things as why there is suffering and how to end it). After meditating for several hours, he became enlightened and became known as the "Buddha," or the one who knows the truth.



**Two Golden Statues of
Buddha in a Temple
Shanghai, China**

Photo by J. Rothblatt



**Buddhists burn incense and chant
in a temple
Shanghai, China**

Photo by J. Rothblatt

In order to share with others the truths he found, the Buddha became a teacher. (Remember: this is one of the career paths predicted for him at birth and the one that his father did not want him to take.) There are two main beliefs of Buddhism, that is, the teachings of the Buddha and his followers.

One belief is the “Four Noble Truths,” which the Buddha discovered when he meditated beneath the tree. These truths are:

- Life is full of suffering from birth to death.
- People suffer because they desire (try to get) things that do not last, for example, money and possessions.
- The way to end suffering is to stop desiring things.
- The way to get rid of desire is to follow the “Eightfold Path.”

According to Buddhism, the “Eightfold Path” means to lead a good life. People who follow this path are freed from suffering and gain happiness. These steps are:

- Right understanding. It is important to be certain that you understand the teachings of the Buddha correctly.
- Right thought. Think thoughts that are pure and good.
- Right speech. Speak words that are truthful and not harmful.
- Right action. Treat people well, as you would like to be treated.
- Right work. Do not harm others as you earn a living.
- Right effort. Keep trying to become a better person; stop bad habits.
- Right mindfulness. Be mindful (or aware) of what you are doing and what is going on around you; always think about how you live.
- Right meditation. Meditate correctly each day to clear your mind of desires and be able to find peace and truth.

When and why did Buddhism arrive in China? Buddhism probably first entered China along the “silk roads,” that is, the system of trade routes that connected China to lands farther west extending to the Mediterranean sea and Europe. Trade on the silk roads goes back thousands of years. By about 100 BCE, Buddhist missionaries began traveling on the routes along with traders. Trade routes opened contact and communication between people and places. In addition to goods, people and ideas spread along the trade routes.

By 68 CE, a Chinese Han emperor asked some advisers to visit India to learn more about this western religion, that is, Indian religion. They returned to China with Buddhist monks. New religions and beliefs often become popular during difficult times when people are searching for answers to why there is suffering. When dynasties were ending in China there was much unrest, and the Chinese tended to embrace Buddhism more. For example, at the end of the Han dynasty, Buddhism became more popular.

Worksheet on Your Group's Belief System

1. Name of belief system:
2. Name of the founder of the belief system:
3. When did the belief system begin?
4. When did it arrive in China?
5. Describe how this belief system views the world (is it sweet, sour, or bitter?)

6. Describe why this belief system views the world this way (your answer to number 5 above):

7. List the main goals of this belief system. What is it trying to achieve? Why do people practice or believe in this belief system?

8. According to this belief system, how should people treat each other?

9. Using four words or less (or a symbol), describe this belief system.

The Three Belief Systems of China

1. Name of belief system	
2. Founder	
3. When it began/came to China	
4. Basic outlook on life	