# ‘SELF-POWER’ AND ‘OTHER POWER’ IN CHINESE SPIRITUALITY[1]

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**Introduction**

What is Chinese spirituality? There is no ready answer for us to give. The difficulty of defining Chinese spirituality is threefold. Firstly, the diversity of religion in China is much greater than in many other cultures, which manifests itself in several religious traditions such as Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and folk religion. This phenomenon of a single environment, locality and culture encompassing a number of diverse spiritual beliefs and practices has added enormous difficulties to the formation of a single form of spirituality. Secondly, to each tradition many streams are attached that develop in different directions. Although sharing the basic principles, these streams or strings do not always converge towards one set of spiritual pursuits, which have placed more weight on divergence rather than convergence.

Thirdly, since the very beginning there have been two layers of religious life in China, one at the level of the intellectuals or upper classes, and the other of ordinary people. People living at these two levels do not always think in the same way in terms of religious faiths and practices. What appeals to ordinary peasants, manual workers and artisans would probably have been simply brushed aside as superstitions or ignorant beliefs by the educated. Fully aware of the problems in defining Chinese spirituality precisely, this paper attempts to examine the most representative aspects of religious practices concerning the approaches that have been taken in Chinese religions in order to attain the spiritual goal and the implications that each of these approaches would have for religious followers.

**Questions and Terms**

It is obvious that whatever tradition or sub-tradition one starts to follow, a devotee would first have to ask whether ‘in spiritual practice we should solely rely on our own efforts or on the deliverance by a being or power that is beyond ourselves’. In other words, do people already have within them the potential to reach their spiritual goal, or must the powerless individual turn to a power or being that is external to the self? These questions and the possible answers to them are well summarised in two terms, ‘self-power’ and ‘other-power’. The terms used for ‘self-power’ (自力, pronounced as *zi li* in mandarin Chinese) and ‘other-power’ (他力, pronounced as *ta li* in mandarin Chinese) are borrowed from Pure Land Buddhism[1]. However the spiritual content which these two terms imply was found much earlier than the arrival of Buddhism in China, and their impact or effect on religious beliefs and practices is far more thorough than merely within the scope of Buddhism. They represent two different types of religious mentality, two contrasting methodologies or approaches concerning spiritual practice.

The 'other' used here has two dimensions, the spiritual and the social. The first dimension of the 'other' is the 'spiritual other', which includes all spiritual beings or powers such as the Buddha, the Enlightened, the Person who has embraced Dao, the immortal, the sage, all of whom are above humans and whom believers must obey and follow. The second dimension of the 'other' is that which is external to an individual's self, referring to all that is not within one's own reach, in other words all the external bonds or disciplines such as laws, rituals, books etc. that are necessary as individuals journey along the spiritual path.

What is meant by the 'self' also has two dimensions, the human self in contrast to spiritual beings, and what is within the self, primarily the heart/mind or self-consciousness. Thus the other-self relationship to be examined, includes two kinds of relationship: the first is the relation between the spirits (gods/goddesses) and human beings, and the second is that between what one cannot reach by oneself and what one can do within. In the other-directed practice, people believe that the spiritual realm is far beyond our comprehension, and spiritual perfection can be completed only through the help of external resources. In the self-directed practice, however, no separation is conceived between the spiritual and the mundane realm, and each practitioner holds the key to unlock the spiritual mystery and to reach his/her own destiny.

A dynamic relation between the self and the other is the key to Chinese religions. Between self-reliance and other-reliance a tension arises, which explains, at least partly, the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in China. It should also be noted, however, that no effort has ever been spared in the attempt to reconcile them in all forms of Chinese religions, including Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and folk religions, which accounts, again at least partly, for the cohesion of diverse religions in China. The self-other conflict and its reconciliation characterise and underlie the religious life of the Chinese people. How to understand and deal with the tension between the self-power and the other-power, and how to synthesise them are the two constant questions in Chinese spirituality. In an attempt to investigate the true character of Chinese spiritual practice, we are going to examine three aspects of the self-other relationship: the 'otherness' in different forms of religion, the spiritual journey from the other to the self, and the synergy of the self and the other[2].

**The Other-Self Tension in Chinese Spirituality**

It is not difficult for us to observe that ordinary Chinese people are fundamentally directed to the other-power in religious practices. Anyone who visits a Chinese temple or shrine, either Daoist or Buddhist or even Confucian, can see that a great number of people prostrate themselves in front of, and pray to, statues of beings in the spiritual realm. These statues may be giant or small, and are frequently golden figures They are representations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, Daoist gods, goddesses or immortals, Confucian sages or cultural heroes, local deities such as dragon gods and gods of medicine, and symbolise the spiritual other-power that is far beyond our reach. Prostrating before them, burning incense or praying to them indicate an admission and recognition that we humans are powerless, weak, incapable of saving ourselves from life's problems, and must look to the spiritual power for help and salvation.

The 'spiritual others' indicate that Chinese spirituality is primarily pantheistic, although mono-theistic faith also plays a role. Among the most popular gods worshipped by the ancient Chinese, were celestial gods of wind, rain, thunder and lightning; terrestrial gods of earth, grain, river and mountain; and family deities such as ancestors spirits, or gods of doors and kitchen, who are believed to play a decisive role in the fortune and misfortune of the human world. However, above these gods, there is one supreme god, who is named Shang di 上帝, the Lord on High[3], or simply *Tian*, the Lord of Heaven. The Lord on High demands obedience from people, protects and rewards those who have conformed themselves to his laws, but will punish those who dare to violate his will. This belief is reflected in Confucius' attitude toward Heaven (*tian*, originally meaning 'sky above us'). In the Confucian tradition Heaven is primarily the spiritual power that determines human destiny. Confucius (551-479 BCE) retained the traditional belief in the power and Mandate of Heaven, believing that his mission to transmit ancient culture was from Heaven, and arguing that if a person offended against Heaven, there was nowhere he could turn to in prayer. Asked why few people understood him, Confucius replied:

> I do not complain against Heaven, nor do I blame humans. In my studies, I start from below and get through to what is up above. If I am understood at all, it is, perhaps, by Heaven (*Analects*, 14: 35).

Based on this belief Confucius was convinced that it was up to the Will of Heaven whether or not the harmonious Way could prevail in the human world. However, does this mean that Confucianism requires people to sit and wait for whatever will happen? No. Confucians are very much involved in social and political activities, and believe that the Will of Heaven must be manifested through human efforts. In this way a tension arises, between reliance on the spiritual Heaven and reliance on humanity.

Confucian 'otherness' is also represented by the 'transcendental sage' who has fundamentally transformed history. For most Confucian believers, the ultimate goal of one's spiritual journey is to become a sage. 'Sage' (*sheng ren*) in the Confucian tradition is not merely a wise man, but one who represents the transcendent with magnificent spiritual power. For Confucius, a sage must have satisfied two criteria: one is to confer wide benefits upon the people, and the other is to encompass the salvation of the whole state (*The Analects*, 6: 30). *The Doctrine of the Mean*, one of the key Confucian texts, states that as an ultimately spiritual being, a sage 'stands as the equal of Heaven', because his influence extends

> to the furthest reaches of the works of man, wherever Heaven spreads its protective canopy, wherever the Earth bears up its charge, wherever the sun and moon shine and the frost and dew descend[4].

Thus the sage becomes the other for human beings, who must follow the teachings of the sage in their spiritual practices.

The 'other power' in Daoist philosophy is Dao. 'Being one with Dao' or 'embracing Dao' is the Daoist ideal. In the *Daode Jing*, Dao is said to be the mother or origin of the myriad things, and the reason and cause of the world[5]. It was already there before the existence of Heaven and Earth, totally independent, and without change[6]. Separated from Dao, humans are short-lived, and only by becoming part of Dao can humans last long. The *Book of Zhuangzi* pays much attention to individual freedom and calls for the cultivation of Dao within oneself. But at the same time the goal of the spiritual journey seems far beyond one's reach. The spiritual person (*shen ren* 神人), perfect person (*zhi ren* 至人) and true person (*zhen ren* 真人) are totally separated from the lives of ordinary people, and there is no evidence to be found in the book that these spiritual beings were transformed from ordinary people[7]. The tension or at least difference between gods (*shen* 神) and immortals (*xian* 仙) is apparent in Daoist religion. While gods represent what humans cannot reach and are the predominantly other-powers, immortals and humans are harmonious and interdependent, and can be mutually transformed under certain conditions.

Since its introduction into China in the first century CE, Buddhism has spread throughout the country and gripped the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. Chinese Buddhists have found themselves very much strained over the issues of other-deliverance or self-enlightenment, swinging between salvation by buddhas or bodhisattvas and emancipation through one's own efforts. The tension was illustrated in Pure Land Buddhist teachings. For Pure Land Buddhists, the present time was the worst period, in which not only did the people suffer from the five afflictions五蘊, but in addition, there was no hope for them, as true Buddhism had disappeared, and false Buddhisms flourished. There appeared many (84,000) different approaches or methods for believers to escape from chaos and to become emancipated. In the eyes of Pure Land Buddhists, all these approaches can be classified into two categories. The first is to look for salvation by one's own efforts, including all traditional Buddhist practices, such as reading sutras, philosophical reflection, meditation and moral deeds. However, due to the obstacles, afflictions and immorality of society, it is very difficult, if not totally impossible, to be saved by these means. The second way is to seek for salvation by the power of the Buddha Amitabha's vow, which is thus called the 'easy way'. The 'easy way' confirms that all beings have the same nature as the Buddha, and everyone, good or evil, intelligent or ordinary, can be reborn in the Pure Land by the wish and vow of Amitabha[8].

**From the Other to the Self: An Inward Spiritual Journey**

The turning of Chinese spiritual practice from other-relied to self-relied began in the Spring and Autumn period (771-475 BCE), the beginning of the so called 'rational age', and has continued through the history of Chinese religion and culture. Not only did this turning generate the tension between other-relied and self-relied beliefs and practices, but it also resulted in a new spirituality concerning human destiny and concerning the relationship between humans and their spiritual journey.

This turning was first reflected in changing views concerning the nature and function of the supreme gods. None of the supernatural deities worshipped in ancient China was the same as the Judeo-Christian creator God:

> No god or gods in China created, *ex nihilo* or *in vacuo*, Heaven, Earth, people, or animals[9].

Although efforts were made in later times to account for the creation of the world and to accredit the coming into existence of things and humans to a Lord (Di 帝), or 'Heaven' (Tian 天), the so-called creation was more or less explainable by natural or organic processes. Since gods or deities were not the sole reason for the existence and change of the world, people began to explain things from a human point of view, and historical and cultural heroes became the focus of religious and political life. These heroes

> enjoy supernatural birth,

and sometimes aided by protective animals

> become sage rulers or otherwise perform great deeds for mankind[10].

If those heroes had obtained a divine or semi-divine status through their own efforts, then by means of logic it was reasoned that every ordinary man and woman would at least potentially have such a prospect[11]. Some rational thinkers went so far as to wonder if there was something innate in every human being which enabled each of us to reach our divine destiny. Instead of worshipping gods and praying for salvation, they contemplated their own nature and heart, by which practice they believed that they would be able to reach the other shore. Thus the responsibility of religious salvation gradually devolved upon the shoulders of every human.

When Chinese communities were devastated by natural disasters and state mismanagement, which resulted in famine and political chaos, and when all traditional ways of sacrifices, prayers and pleas met with no response, their faith in the world order was fundamentally shaken. People became uncertain about the power of the Lord, Heaven and other minor gods: Where was the Mandate of Heaven? Why did the Lord on High not keep his promise to protect and bless good people? Uncertainty led to doubt and doubt to tension between belief and rationality. Although some people were still convinced that humans were powerless and must look to the gods for protection and blessing, a significant number of leading thinkers turned away from external gods to humans themselves, and reasoned that they could no longer simply rely on an external power for their spiritual and material well-being. Instead they must search for spiritual resources within themselves. This turning within the human self for spiritual benefit represented a refutation of the traditional reliance on gods and initiated a new era in the religious history of China.

The turning also transformed the nature of spiritual others in China, distinguishing them from the spiritual other in different religions and cultures. History and folklore tell us that most of these gods/goddesses, buddhas/bodhisattvas or spirits/supernatural beings were originally ordinary humans, who through cultivating or leading a virtuous life or by a miraculous encounter, gained spiritual power. This enabled them not only to save themselves from death or bad reincarnation, but also to bring (both spiritual and material) benefits to many people. Because of their great contributions to the people and the nation, people would build temples or shrines for them, worship and sacrifice to them, thus turning them into deities with spiritual power. The gods were therefore intended to look after human welfare, as a return for the worship people offered them.

Confucius turned much of his attention from ‘sacrifice to deities’ (*ji shen* 祭神) to the exploration of the human potential to reach perfection by means of wisdom and virtue. When queried about what wisdom was, Confucius said that wisdom was to

> devote yourself earnestly to human duties, and respect spiritual beings (*gui* 鬼and *shen* 神), but keep them at a distance (*Analects*, 6:21).

When asked about the meaning and value of death and spirits, Confucius replied that if we were not yet able to understand life and to serve humanity, how could we understand death and serve spirits? (*Analects*, 11:12) With an emphasis and focus on human affairs and confidence in human abilities to secure spiritual well-being, Confucius opened up the journey to the spiritual ultimate by one’s own efforts, in the face of the tension between the spiritual other and the spiritual self. While claiming that he was not certain whether or not a human could become a sage by his own efforts, and could not see a real possibility that any of his contemporaries would be regarded as a sage or even as a good man (*shan ren*)[12], Confucius did manifest a strong confidence in humanity and in the possibility of becoming good by oneself. Later, most Confucians believed that it was up to each individual self to become good or bad, and it was possible for each human to become a sage. However, this did not exclude the tension between sagely achievement (*wai wang*) and self-cultivation (*nei sheng*) which was manifest in the debate concerning whether or not an individual has within him/herself all that is needed to reach the spiritual goal. Instead of searching for external resources, Mengzi (372?-289? BCE) championed the cause that all people could become sages simply by the self-realisation of the innate nature. Mengzi strongly supported the selfcentred approach and launched an inward journey in spiritual practice: all humans are born with a good nature; by cultivating one's nature and nourishing one's heart, anyone can know the Will of Heaven and thus become a sage[13]. Arguing that humans are born with an evil nature, and must be trained and disciplined through the teachings of the sages, educated under the guidance of teachers and restricted by *li* (moral codes or laws), Xunzi nevertheless admitted that people are able to control their selfish desires and eventually reach the highest ideal[14]. Different as they were in terms of their views of external and internal sources, Mengzi and Xunzi championed self-power in their search of ways to obtain a sagely character. They laid down two fundamental principles for Confucianism: there is no essential difference between the nature of the sage and that of an ordinary person[15], and it is possible for anybody to become a sage by his own efforts. These two principles also became the corner stones of Chinese spirituality, and turned all forms of Chinese religion into essentially self-power practices[16].

In the early writings of Daoism the tendencies from the other to the self are also shown as strong and attractive. Having made Dao a mystic reality, the *Daode Jing* nevertheless seeks to engage us and to offer guidance in how we ought to follow the Way to interact with nature, other humans and phenomena. The *Zhuangzi* states that

> The Way is made in the walking of it[17],

and that without personal engagement no Way can be found or practised. In its early stages, Daoism was more a sequence of thoughts and practices seeking a 'natural' way of life and a means of prolonging human life, and only gradually developed into an 'immortality cult'. It was only towards the end of the second century CE that Daoism became recognised as a religious organisation. In early religious practices, natural deities and spiritual beings (*shen* 神) were the chief gods who were able to deliver people from hardship and life-threatening dangers. Zhang Daoling 张道陵 (34-156 CE) who founded a religious movement based on *Daode Jing*, *Zhuangzi*, primitive religious beliefs and practices etc., raised the possibility for all people to become immortals through self-cultivation. Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343 CE) explicitly outlined the methods or paths to the spiritual goal, and made them the foundation of Daoist religion. For him three categories of people could become three different kinds of immortals. The people who had superior capabilities would rise to the sky and become heavenly immortals; the people who had medium capabilities could rove over sacred mountains and become earthly immortals; and the people who had lower capacities could leave the body behind upon death and become immortals freed from the physical corpus. In this teaching we find two important ideas behind the development of Daoist religion: first, the transcendent destiny of humans is related to their own nature and capacities; and secondly, whatever kind of nature we have, we are all able to reach eternity. This marked a fundamental shift from the god-centred to the immortal-centred, and from other-reliance to self-reliance in the spiritual journey.

Daoists laboured hard to explore how to reach immortality by their own efforts. At an early stage they believed 'external alchemy' to be an effective and efficient path, and looked for magic herbs and refined minerals to make the pills of immortality. While herbs did not do much harm to the body, pills through refining poisonous materials such as lead, mercury, cinnabar and sulphates frequently caused death among Daoist practitioners. This gradually turned Daoists from the external to the inner alchemy during the Song period (960-1279 CE)[18].

In the first stage, Chinese Buddhists relied heavily on the translated Indian sutras as their spiritual source, and Mahayana Buddhism made the worship of buddhas and bodhisattvas an important path to salvation. However, the tension between the self and the other power also penetrated Buddhism, and in the struggle to balance the two sides, a significant majority of Chinese Buddhists opted for the self-powered journey. It was Chan Buddhism that reached the peak of self-reliance in spiritual practice and gave one's own heart/mind full responsibility for one's own enlightenment[19]. The heart/mind (xin, 心) occupies a central place in Chan Buddhist teachings, and is where one's spiritual experience starts and ends. In fact the heart/mind is not only the way to seeing one's Buddha-nature, but also the only reality of the world, and the cause of all phenomenal events. Everyone has his/her own Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature, and spiritual experience is essentially to see this mind and to realise one's nature (*jian xing* 见性) in order to be suddenly enlightened (*dun wu* 顿悟) and become a Buddha (*cheng fo* 成佛). The intrinsic nature of humans is enough. Not to be enslaved to either good or evil, is all that a human engaged in spiritual cultivation needs to do. As one of the Chan masters put it,

> Students today must have faith in themselves and must not seek things on the outside[20].

The meaning of spiritual practice is to discover, by looking into one's own heart/mind, the germ of Buddhahood, which lies latent in every human being. As soon as this discovery is made, the enlightened one attains the status of a Buddha in this life without the necessity of further reincarnation. Some extremist Chan Buddhists discarded all intellectual methods because they were believed to be useless and harmful for one's becoming a Buddha. There is no other power, no beings external to our heart/mind, such as buddhas or sutras to which we can turn. We must see our own heart/mind by our own efforts and through our own experience[21]. The sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism and the actual founder of Chinese Chan, Hui Neng's 慧能 (638-713 CE) recommendation exemplifies this:

> Let us train ourselves, practise it by ourselves, and attain Buddhahood by our own effort[22].

**The Self-Other Synergy**

Although the self and the other were polarised in Chinese religions and a general tendency can be observed from the other-power to the self-power in spiritual pursuits, there is never a lack of effort in bringing these two dimensions together and in seeking the synergy of the two kinds of practice. This has become one of the most colourful aspects of religious life in China. Under the influence of a syncretic philosophy, all forms of religion were said to be of one unity, growing from one root and aimed at the same goal. How to combine Confucian moral virtues, Daoist mystical experience and Buddhist concerns about the life after death, and how to make them mutually supplement rather than contradict each other became central to a great number of religious texts. Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist theorists provided argumentation to justify that different as they were, religious practices must be based on the same principle and would lead to the same spiritual goal. As a famous Daoist master of the Song dynasty (960-1279), Zhang Borui 张伯瑞 (983-1082 CE) explained:

> 'Although there are three separate religions (teachings), their Dao is the same'.[23]

Chinese myths and popular beliefs are concerned with the relation between gods and humans, and between the Heavenly realm and the human realm. It is believed that Heaven and earth were originally connected but then separated into two realms. According to Chinese myths, communication between gods in Heaven and people on earth did not necessarily lead to moral life and good order. During the reign of Zhuan Xu (a legendary ruler), for example, prayer to gods by shamans or priests was used to stir up chaos among the Miao苗people, a minority in the south, famous for their barbarian style of life:

> Out of pity for those who were innocent, the August Lord … had the Miao exterminated. Then he charged two gods Chong 重 and Li 黎 to cut the communication between Heaven and Earth so that there would be no descending and ascending. After this had been done, order was restored and the people returned to virtue[24].

Broken as the communication between gods in heaven and humans on earth was, Chinese people have never given up in their efforts to search for ways to restore it and to find paths to heaven in order to gain spiritual power or immortality. In folklore we frequently encounter such stories as that a man, honest and virtuous, was given a bean by an immortal or god. Having planted it in the backyard the bean grew up rapidly into a huge tree. Climbing up it the man reached heaven and became a god-like being and enjoyed an immortal life[25]. Searches for legendary islands of immortality, rewards of a long and happy life for virtuous men and women given by immortals, and unexpected encounters of humans with gods or immortals are constant themes in popular religion and folklore.

Dao in Confucianism and Daoism is fundamentally the other, predetermining human destiny and fortune/misfortune. In the powerful inward journey, however, Dao is also internalised as internal resources and power. Confucius said that it is humans that can make Dao great, not Dao that can make humans great, and the *Doctrine of the Mean* puts it clearly:

> Dao is not far from humans. If people pursue Dao while distancing themselves from others, then what they pursue is not Dao (Chapter 13).

On the surface, Dao in Daoism seems to be independent of humans, and humans must conform to Dao in order to live forever (*chang jiu* 长久). However the seemingly eternal Dao cannot be embraced unless an individual cultivates it in his/her own self, family and country:

> Cultivate it in your person, and its virtue will be genuine; cultivate it in the family, and its virtue will be more than sufficient; cultivate it in the hamlet, and its virtue will endure; cultivate it in the state, and its virtue will abound; cultivate it in the empire, and its virtue will be pervasive. (*Daode Jing*, Chapter 54).

Religious Daoists searched in spiritual practice for a middle way between externality and internality, and more concretely between external alchemy and inner alchemy. For example, Ge Hong believed that practising external alchemy (which means that humans should rely on external ingredients for longevity) was the royal path to immortality, but he also insisted that humans must make full use of the rich resources within to realise immortality:

> Physical techniques, external and internal, must be accompanied by the correct mental attitude to be effective in prolonging life … stilling the mind, minimizing desire, regulating the emotions and doing good deeds are all integral to cultivating longevity[26].

Moral deeds gradually became essential for gaining immortality. It is argued that the real wisdom of Dao is cultivated by doing good deeds and practising virtue, and that since the seeds of the wisdom of Dao cannot be planted unless one has practised good deeds and acquired virtues, those who fail to assist others and meditate solely for selfish reasons, will have attained no more than a bit of extra knowledge. In *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, *The Master who has Embraced the Simplicity*, the author stated that

> Those who want to become immortals must be based on the virtues of loyalty, filial piety, harmony, obedience, benevolence and trustfulness.

He also specified that

> To become a celestial immortal, 1,200 merits are necessary. To become a terrestrial immortal, 300 are necessary. And these good actions must have been done continuously, without being interrupted by a bad action, which would result in the destruction, by the Governor of

> Destinies, of all the preceding good actions. And their number must be complete; whoever has only done 1199 good actions, will not become a celestial immortal. And all these good actions must have been done solely for the love of good. If one has sought praise or profit, the action does not count as good.[27]

In the later part of Chinese history, two Buddhist schools, the Pure Land and the Chan, dominated the spiritual practice in China. Pure Land and Chan Buddhists uphold two basic principles that make them distinctive. The first principle is that everybody can be saved or become a Buddha, which differentiates them from the so-called Hinayana schools which, arguably, contend that only a small portion of human beings are able to reach the highest state of spiritual cultivation. The second is that those who have chosen and followed a spiritual path do not have to go through a very difficult and long journey to reach this goal. This differentiates them from other Mahayana Buddhist schools, which preach the way to the Buddhahood through painfully slow progress in study and practice. However, there is a fundamental difference between them: Pure Land Buddhism relies on the other-power for spiritual deliverance while Chan Buddhists opt for self-reliance for enlightenment. The tension between these two spiritual paths was gradually reduced and attempts were made to merge them.

The advantage of the Pure Land teaching is its popularity, simplicity and attractiveness to ordinary people, while its disadvantage is the lack of doctrinal depth, making it less attractive to the minds of more sophisticated people. On the other hand, the advantage of Chan Buddhism is in its profound understanding of Buddhist philosophy, while its disadvantage is in its abstraction, complexity and difficulty to be understood and accepted by common people. Religious synergy found its effect in merging these two Buddhist schools into one spiritual current. In fact, as early as the end of the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), the convergence between Pure Land and Chan was already deliberately sought and elaborated. This integration had been completed by the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE), and in modern times, it is almost impossible to separate Pure Land and Chan in China's monasteries, in which *nian-fo* 念佛 or ‘chanting Amitahba’s name’, meditation, gradual and sudden realisation of one’s Buddha-nature are all parts of Buddhist practices. The ‘Pure Land’ is no longer imagined as a realm outside of human beings, but as another name for one's true mind or enlightened nature. The reliance on the power of the Buddha and the reliance on one’s own efforts are skilfully merged in the teachings that ‘No mind, no Pure Land’, and that ‘Pure Land is the true mind, and the mind is the true Pure Land’.

**Concluding Remarks**

It is difficult to define spiritual practices in China in distinctive Western terms. Due to the effects of history, culture and language, Chinese spirituality demonstrates some features quite different from those of Western, or more precisely, Judeo-Christian spirituality. As examined in this paper, although a significant element of other-relied beliefs and practices is present, in spiritual practices the Chinese pursue an inward journey in which the human self is held to be responsible for each individual’s own destiny, and the spiritual other and the human self are skilfully combined in synergic movements. It is recognised that internal cultivation such as meditation and practising moral virtues, and the other-relied practices such as prayer and burning incense to gods or immortals, are of the equal importance for human spiritual well-being. Under the heavy influence of Confucian ethico-spirituality, tension and synergism between self-reliance and other-reliance are explained away in terms of ethical virtues, so that self-cultivation (xiu shen, 修身) is a necessary ingredient in one’s preparation for spiritual transcendence.

Returning to the question of what Chinese spirituality is, raised at the beginning of this paper, it may be tempting to say that Chinese spirituality is a kind of 'secularised spirituality' or 'this world spirituality' or 'moralised spirituality' or 'humanistic spirituality', due to the fact that Chinese religious practices are primarily concerned, directly or indirectly, with the human self and rely on a human being's own efforts in social and moral areas to reach the spiritual goal. Whether or not these terms can be justified, the one thing which is clear, is that while the Chinese practise their religious beliefs in relation to the 'spiritual other', they never totally separate the 'other' from the 'self'. This explains why the religious world of China is largely a reflection of the secular world, in which gods perform the functions of human society, but in the spiritual realm. Blessed by the gods, a significant majority of religious people concentrate implicitly or explicitly on this-life achievements which they believe are the only guarantee for a good entry into the life after death, or directly into eternal life. This closely related and mutually transformable 'self-other relationship' is the key feature of Chinese spirituality.

## NOTES

1. This paper was read at the Annual Conference of the Religious Experience Research Centre (2003), and the author wishes to thank Anne Watkins for proof-reading.
2. Pure Land Buddhism (Ch. *Jin tu zong*, Jn. *Jodosho*), is also called Amidism, because it takes as its main Saviour Buddha Amitabha (*a mi tuo fo*), the Buddha of Unmeasurable Long Life (*wu liang shou fo*). It became one of the established Buddhist schools in China during the Tang dynasty (618-906 CE).
3. By synergy I mean that by combining a focus on self-power with a focus on other-power we can achieve a synthesis which is greater than simply adding the two together.
4. There are debates concerning whether Shang di was a natural god or was transformed from a human deity, probably a royal ancestor. If he was a great royal ancestor, then the whole theist system in China would be essentially humanised, and the balance of the other-self would be significantly turned towards the self end.
5. *Ta Hsueh and Chung Yung*, tr. by Andrew Plaks, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 52.
6. '*Dao* engenders one. One engenders two. Two engenders three. And three engenders the myriad things. The myriad things shoulder *yin* and embrace *yang*, and mix the *qi* to achieve harmony' (*Daode Jing*, Chapter 42).
7. 'There is a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and earth. Silent and void, it stands alone and does not change. It goes round and does not weary. It may be conceived as the mother of the world. I do not know its name, so I style it 'Dao'. If forced to give it a name, I shall call it 'Great'… Humans conform to the earth, the earth to Heaven, Heaven to Dao, and Dao to its own nature' (*Daode Jing* 道德经, Chapter 25)
8. *The Book of Chuang Tzu—A new, complete translation of the classic Taoist text*, tr. by Martin Palmer with Elizabeth Breuilly, Arkana Penguin Books, 1996. The spiritual person's 'skin is like ice and pure snow, and his manner is like a shy virgin. He does not eat the five grains, but lives off the wind and dew. He climbs the clouds and rides the dragons, and travels beyond the boundaries of the known world (chapter 1, p. 4); 'The perfect man is purely

spiritual. He does not feel the heat of the burning deserts nor the cold of the vast waters. He is not frightened by the lightning which can split open mountains, nor by the storms that can whip up the seas. Such a person rides the clouds and mounts upon the sun and moon, and wanders across and beyond the four seas' (chapter 2, p. 18).

9. 'The "difficult path" refers to the fact that it is difficult to seek the stage of non-retrogression in an age where there is no Buddha present and the world is afflicted with the five turbidities… Because it is analogous to travelling overland on foot, it is called "the path that is difficult to traverse'… The expression "path that is easy to traverse" refers to the vow to be born in the Pure Land through recourse to faith in the Buddha [Amitabha]. One puts forth the great determination [to achieve Buddhahood], establishes merits, and undertakes various practices. Then, through the power of the Buddha Amitabha's Original Vow one is born in the Pure Land…Because it is likened to travelling by boat down a river, it is called "the path that is easy to traverse"'. Daochuo: *Anle ji*, in *Sources of Chinese Tradition (Volume One From Earliest Times to 1600)*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary & Irene Bloom, second edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 486-487.

10. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (ed.): *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 65.

11. Derk Bodde: 'Myths of Ancient China', in *Mythologies of the Ancient World,* ed. Samuel Noah Kramer, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961, p. 370.

12. For example, Mengzi stated that it would be indeed a matter of anxiety if one could not achieve what the sage Shun had done: 'Shun was a man; I am also a man. Shun set an example for the Empire worthy of being handed down to posterity, yet here am I, just an ordinary man' (*Mencius*, 4B: 28, Translated with an introduction by D.C. Lau, Penguin Books, 1970, p. 134.

13. 'A Divine Sage I cannot hope ever to meet; the most I can hope for is to meet a true gentleman'… 'A faultless man I cannot hope ever to meet; the most I can hope for is to meet a man of fixed principles' (*The Analects of Confucius,* 7: 25. *Confucius: The Analects*, translated with notes by Arthur Waley, Wordworth Classics of World Literature, 1996, p. 46).

14. 'For a man to give full realisation to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. By retaining his heart and nurturing his nature he is serving Heaven. Whether he is going to die young or to live to a ripe old age makes no difference to his steadfastness of purpose. It is through awaiting whatever is to befall him with a perfected character that he stands firm on his proper destiny' (*Mencius*, 7A: 1, translated with an introduction by D.C. Lau, Penguin Books, 1970, p. 182)

15. 'If men have no teachers to instruct them, they will be inclined towards evil and not upright…In ancient times the sage kings realized that man's nature is evil, and that therefore he inclines toward evil and violence and is not upright or orderly. Accordingly they created ritual principles and laid down certain regulations in order to reform man's emotional nature and make it upright, in order to train and transform it and guide it in the proper channels. In this way they caused all men to become orderly and to conform to the Way' (Xunzi, 23: 2*. Hsun Tzu* in *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsun Tzu and Han Fei Tzu*, tr. by Burton Watson, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967, p. 158).

16. 'The sage and I are of the same kind' (*Mencius*, 6A: 7).

17. The Confucian inward spiritual journey is vividly manifested in one of the greatest Confucian scholars, Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Having been taught that one could achieve sagehood through external investigation, young Wang Yangming proceeded to investigate the principle of bamboo, working day and night until the seventh day he fell ill through mental and physical exhaustion without achieving anything. However, he did not completely reject the external pursuits till he was 35 years old when he was in exile. One night he suddenly acclaimed that

there was nothing for him to search external to his own self: 'the Way of the Sage is complete in my own nature. It has been wrong to seek it through the principles of external things' in *Wang Yangming Quanji* 王阳明全集 (*The Complete Works of Wang Yangming*, Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1992, vol. 2, p. 1223 and p. 1228).

18. *Zhuangzi*, Section 2, English tr. by Wang Rongpei and Ren Xiuhua, Hunan Renmin Chubanshe, 1997, p. 27.

19. It is generally held that the basics of the Inner Alchemy are already explored and explained in *Zhouyi Cantong qi* 周易参同契by Wei Boyang 魏伯阳 (151-221 CE), but it is in *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 by Zhang Borui 张伯瑞 (983-1082) that the doctrines of the Inner Alchemy are fully established. The school of *Nei dan* 内丹, or the Inner Alchemy, believes that the human body consists of three treasures, vitality (*jing* 精), energy (*qi* 气) and spirit (*shen* 神), and that by cultivating these three treasures one can hope to achieve health, happiness, long life and eventually immortality.

20. Although Chan as an approach/method to Buddhahood existed in early Indian Buddhism, it did not become a school before it was introduced into China. Chan is the Chinese way of pronouncing the Sanskrit term dhyana, which designates a state of mind roughly equivalent to contemplation or meditation, although without the static and passive sense that these words sometimes convey. Dhyana denotes specifically the state of consciousness of a Buddha, one whose mind is free from the assumption that the distinct individuality of oneself and other things is real. Chan was later introduced to Japan to become a major Buddhist sect which is known to the West as 'Zen'.

21. Yixuan (d. 867 CE) in *Linji Huizhao Chanshi Yulu*, tr. in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, p. 508.

22. One story well illustrates this point where a monk asked the Chan master of Zhaozhou 赵州禅师 how to sit meditating to understand the Way. Having heard of this, the Chan master stood up saying that he wanted to go to the toilet. He then stopped and said to the monk: 'You see, even this kind of thing I must do myself!'

23. *The Sutra of Hui Neng*, Hong Kong Buddhist Books Distribution Press, 1998, p. 52.

24. 'Sanjiao suifen, dao nai guiyi 三教虽分, 道乃归一'. Zhang Borui: *Wu zhen pian jian jie* 悟真篇简解, Beijing: Zhonghua shujiu, 1990, p. 2. Here Dao refers both to the doctrines and to the paths adopted in different religions.

25. *Shang Shu*, *Zhou Shu*, 'Lu xing' 吕刑. *Book of History Shang Shu*, Hunan Chubanshe, 1997, p. 266.

26. The stories of a spiritual tree are common to all sub-cultures in China. The tree found in the village of Sanxingdui (at an archaeological site in Sichuan province) in southwest China is 3,000 years old. It represents a religious culture quite different from that in the central kingdom and is composed of a base and the tree itself. The base consists of three kneeling guards and the branches of the tree are luxuriant, laden with leaves, flowers, fruits, birds and bells, symbolizing the spiritual road to Heaven (see *Sanxingdui and The Ancient Shu Culture*, China Travel & Tourism Press, 2001, p. 54-55).

27. Eva Wong: *The Shambhala Guide to Taoism*, Boston and London: Shambhala, 1997, p. 72.

28. Wang Ming 王明: *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子内篇校释, Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1985, p. 53.

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