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The Formation of Religious Institutions and Religious Syncretism as a Compensatory Mechanism in the Social System of Ancient China

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the formation and transformation of religious institutions in ancient China through an institutional approach, focusing on the role of religion not only as a tool of the state but also as a compensatory mechanism in response to systemic crises. Using a qualitative-historical method and document analysis of primary sources from the Shang, Zhou, and Han periods, as well as secondary scholarly literature, the data were analyzed through institutional theory and comparative historical approaches. The findings reveal two main phases in the development of religion: first, the early phase, characterized by ancestral cults and the concept of the *Mandate of Heaven*, which reinforced political institutions based on redistribution; second, the transformative phase, when Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism evolved into adaptive ethical-philosophical systems in response to social upheaval. These three teachings formed a unique syncretic configuration—Three Teachings Harmony (*san jiao he yi*, 三教合一)—that functioned as an institutional balancing force in a highly hierarchical society. This study highlights the important role of religious syncretism as an ideological and socio-political balance and proposes that this model explains the continuity of religion in China despite official secularization efforts. The originality of this research lies in its institutional approach to religious history, demonstrating that syncretism in China is not merely cultural but structurally shaped by its redistributive political economy. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the adaptability of religion in hierarchical societies and offers an analytical framework for religious pluralism in other Eastern contexts.

Keywords: Ancient China; Confucianism; Daoism; Buddhism; religious syncretism.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pembentukan dan transformasi institusi keagamaan di Tiongkok kuno melalui pendekatan institusional, dengan fokus pada peran agama yang tidak hanya sebagai alat negara, tetapi juga sebagai mekanisme kompensatoris dalam menghadapi krisis sistemik. Menggunakan metode kualitatif-historis dan teknik studi dokumen terhadap sumber primer dari era Shang, Zhou, dan Han, serta literatur sekunder ilmiah, data dianalisis dengan teori institusi dan pendekatan komparatif historis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan dua fase utama dalam perkembangan agama: pertama, fase awal yang ditandai oleh kultus leluhur dan konsep *Mandate of Heaven* yang memperkuat institusi politik berbasis redistribusi; kedua, fase transformasi ketika Konfusianisme, Daoisme, dan Buddhisme berkembang sebagai sistem etis-filosofis yang adaptif terhadap gejolak sosial. Ketiga ajaran ini membentuk konfigurasi sinkretik khas—*Three Teachings Harmony* (*san jiao he yi*, 三教合一)—yang berfungsi sebagai penyeimbang institusional dalam masyarakat yang sangat hierarkis. Studi ini menyoroti peran penting sinkretisme keagamaan sebagai penyeimbang ideologis dan sosial-politik, serta mengusulkan bahwa model ini menjelaskan keberlanjutan agama di Tiongkok meskipun ada upaya sekularisasi resmi. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada pendekatan institusional terhadap sejarah agama, menunjukkan bahwa sinkretisme di Tiongkok tidak hanya bersifat kultural, tetapi juga dibentuk secara struktural oleh ekonomi politik redistributif. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pemahaman lebih dalam mengenai daya adaptasi agama dalam masyarakat hierarkis serta menawarkan kerangka analisis untuk pluralisme keagamaan di konteks Timur lainnya.

Kata kunci: Tiongkok Kuno; Konfusianisme; Taoisme; Buddhisme; sinkretisme agama.

1. Introduction

Major transformations in the modern global landscape have drastically increased the potential for socio-political conflict and underscored the need for an in-depth examination of the dynamics of social system development. In this context, China represents a highly relevant case because of its unique historical trajectory and strategic role in the current global order. Although the Chinese economy has undergone significant liberalisation toward market reforms in recent decades, this shift has not been accompanied by political democratisation. On the contrary, the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has become increasingly centralised, particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Since 2015, the CCP has advanced the policy of Sinicization of religion, which seeks to align religious practices and institutions with Chinese culture and socialist ideology (Religa, 2020; Zhe & Fang, 2024). This policy reflects a significant evolution in the CCP's approach to religious governance, moving from a model of tolerance and limited autonomy to one of direct regulation and control (Chang, 2018; Vermander, 2019). Institutional changes, such as the incorporation of the State Administration for Religious Affairs into the CCP's United Front Work Department in 2018, further strengthened the Party's ability to monitor, categorize, and discipline religious groups (Lavicka & Chen, 2023). The CCP's tripartite framework divides religious traditions into antagonistic (Christianity), accommodating (Islam), and cooperative (Buddhism and Daoism), thereby shaping state responses that range from suppression to selective cooperation (Hu & Mauldin, 2024). In practice, this framework demonstrates the Party's attempt to embed religion into its ideological agenda, making religious syncretism both a cultural phenomenon and a mechanism of state control (McCarthy, 2025).

In line with these developments, data from Gallup International and The Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research (WIN) in 2017, cited by World Population Review, indicates that China is home to the largest population of atheists in the world, with 91% of its total population identifying as atheists. However, this statistic remains uncertain as many individuals do not consider themselves part of any religious community, yet they engage in certain rituals and practices tied to specific religious beliefs. With a population of approximately 1.45 billion, China hosts a diverse array of religious affiliations. According to a report by the Council on Foreign Relations, traditional Chinese religions, often a blend of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, are practiced by a significant portion of the population. The Pew Research Center's 2012 report found that over 294 million people, or 21% of China's population, adhere to folk religions, which include practices associated with these traditions. By 2020, this percentage rose to 30.8%. Buddhism, the most widely followed religion in China, has deep historical roots, having spread from India to China as early as the first century CE. The shared spiritual practices between Buddhism and Taoism facilitated Buddhism's acceptance in Chinese society, and these three traditions have been central to Chinese cultural and social life. In 2020, approximately 16.6% of China's population identified as Buddhists. Christianity, which entered China around 635 CE, is also a significant religion, with an estimated 67 million adherents by 2010, predominantly Protestant. By 2020, Christians made up 7.4% of the population. Islam, introduced to China over 1,300 years ago, is practiced primarily in regions such as Xinjiang, Ningxia, Gansu, and Qinghai, with Muslims accounting for 1.8% of the population in 2020, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

Academic studies on religious syncretism in China can be categorised into three major approaches. The first is the anthropological, ethnographic, and historical approach, represented by Feuchtwang (1992), Overmyer et al. (1995), Wolf (1978), and Zhang et al. (2021), which has effectively mapped the dynamics of religious practice in Chinese society and the syncretic character of its teachings. Nevertheless, this body of work has yet to conceptualise syncretism as a distinct social institution, nor does it sufficiently link it to the broader structure of the social system. The second approach engages with political-economic analysis, particularly through rational choice theory, as developed by Stark, Finke, and Iannaccone (1994). This approach views religion as the product of rational individual choice and applies economic terminology to explain religious phenomena, yet it is heavily rooted in Western contexts and does not adequately account for the persistence of syncretism in non-Western societies such as China. The third is the civilisational-cultural approach, which interprets syncretism as a culturally embedded phenomenon, as discussed by Stewart (1999), Karlsson (2018), and Bezklubaya

(2021). However, this perspective fails to investigate the structural determinacy of syncretism or its relationship to economic and political systems. Thus, a conceptual gap remains in understanding religious syncretism as part of the institutional architecture of Chinese society.

This study aims to address that gap by offering an institutional explanation for the phenomenon of religious syncretism in China, particularly during the early stages of state formation (the Shang, Zhou, and Han Dynasties). Using the institutional approach, enhanced by the Theory of Institutional Matrices (TIM), this study considers religion not merely as a belief system, but as a social institution embedded within the broader structure of the social system—comprising economic, political, and cultural subsystems. The main focus of this research is on how the dominance of redistributive institutions within China's institutional matrix shaped—and was shaped by—its syncretic religious configuration. By tracing the dynamics of institutional imbalance and the religious responses to such crises, the study demonstrates that religion has functioned as a compensatory and stabilising mechanism within a constantly evolving social system.

Based on this framework, the research argues that religious institutions in early China played a crucial role in reinforcing the dominance of redistributive institutions within the broader institutional matrix. Key institutions, such as public ownership, centralized political authority, and hierarchical social structures, were vital for maintaining the stability and cohesion of Chinese society. Instead of fostering a singular dominant religion, this institutional configuration facilitated the emergence of a syncretic religious system. This system, serving a compensatory function, is adapted to the changing socio-political landscape, reflecting not only cultural acculturation but also a structural response to the imbalances and dynamics of institutional development in Eastern societies. In contrast to Western models, religious syncretism in China is understood as a product of the unique interplay between religion and the broader institutional framework, ensuring social stability and continuity across various dynastic periods in Chinese history. This argument is examined through historical inquiry and textual analysis of religious institutions across key dynastic eras.

2. Method

This study examines the institution of religion within the broader framework of the social system in Early China, focusing on the dynastic periods of Shang, Zhou, and Han (Pulleyblank, 2000). The unit of analysis in this research is the institutional matrix (*matriks institusional*) of Early Chinese society, with particular attention given to the evolving structure and function of the religious institution within it. Religion is analysed not in isolation, but as an integrated component of the economic, political, and socio-cultural subsystems that constitute the overall social system.

The research adopts a qualitative historical design, drawing on the institutional approach and employing the *Theory of Institutional Matrices* (TIM) (Nowakowski, 2013). This methodological framework was selected because it allows for a systematic analysis of how religious forms and functions are conditioned by the dominant institutional logic of a society. Compared to economic or purely cultural explanations, the institutional approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the structural role of religion. Importantly, it permits a comparative lens that highlights differences between Western and Oriental societies without reducing them to market-based models.

Primary data sources consist of classical philosophical and historical texts from the pre-imperial and early imperial periods of Chinese civilization (Keightley, 2023). These include foundational Confucian, Daoist, and Legalist writings, along with dynastic chronicles. Digital access to these sources was made possible through the Digital NYU Shanghai Library, particularly the Chinese Text Project (https://ctext.org/pre-qin-and-han). In addition, *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* was utilised as a key reference for understanding the institutional development across the Shang and Zhou periods (Tung-tsu, 2022). Secondary materials from recent academic studies provided supplementary interpretative frameworks and historical context.

The data collection process relied on textual analysis of these documents, both in their original form and in English translation where applicable. Texts were selected based on their relevance to institutional themes—such as political authority, ritual structures, and the cosmological basis of

governance—and were coded for patterns that indicate institutional function, transformation, and interaction with other societal subsystems. Attention was given to the emergence and evolution of religious practices within these sources, particularly as they relate to the legitimisation of political power and social hierarchy.

Data analysis was conducted through interpretative textual analysis, with reference to the conceptual categories of the institutional matrices theory. This involved identifying dominant redistributive or market institutions in the texts and tracing their interrelation with religious narratives or practices. The analysis also incorporated comparative interpretation by distinguishing the institutional configurations found in Chinese sources from those documented in Western societies. Through this method, the study sought to explain the structural logic underpinning religious syncretism and its compensatory role in the Early Chinese social system (Kern, 2009).

3. Results

Evolution of Religious Institutions in the Context of Redistributive Systems in Ancient China

This study investigates the interconnection between redistributive systems and the formation of religious institutions in Ancient China, particularly during the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties. The prevailing redistributive system was rooted in the nature of agriculture, which necessitated collective coordination within a classical hydraulic society (Wittfogel, 1963). During the Shang period, land was entirely controlled by the state and managed through the *Well-field* system, wherein each unit of land was divided into nine plots: eight cultivated individually by families and one reserved for collective labour. Private ownership was prohibited; land rights were usufructuary and passed down through genealogical lines (Jiang, 2023; Keightley, 2023; Michael, 2019).

In the religious context, the Shang developed a distinct ancestral cult alongside the concept of *Heaven* (*Ti*, meaning the supreme deity or celestial order) as a source of royal legitimacy. The *wang* (king) acted as high priest, leading sacrifices to ancestors and divine spirits. There existed no separate priestly hierarchy; religious functions were carried out by bureaucrats, diviners (who interpreted cracks on oracle bones), shamans (who mediated with spirits), clan leaders, and scribes (Schwartz, 1985).

Entering the Western Zhou period (1050–771 BCE), the structure of land ownership began transitioning from public to private property. The Zhou king remained the supreme landholder but distributed *fiefs* (land grants) to nobles as rewards for political allegiance and military service (Feng, 2003; Haixia, 2023). Inheritance, political adoption between clans, and oversight by royal inspectors extended the feudal power structure while retaining the redistributive principle.

Significant ritual reforms took place in the late Western Zhou. The Zhou government strictly regulated the use of bronze ritual vessels, specifying the number and decoration according to noble rank. These vessels served as instruments of both political and religious legitimacy, with inscriptions reinforcing the importance of virtuous rule and symbolising a contractual relationship between the king and regional lords (Kern, 2009). The *Mandate of Heaven* (*Tianming* 天命)—the divine right to rule based on moral virtue—became the foundational principle of authority, replacing the purely genealogical legitimacy of the Shang.

Table 1. Comparison of Land Ownership between the Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties:

	Shang Dynasty	Western Zhou Dynasty
Supreme Ownership	The king held sole ownership of land; authority was sanctified through ancestral and religious rites.	The Zhou king held the *Mandate of Heaven* and granted *fiefs* to *zhuhou* (regional lords) as rewards for loyalty.
Type of Control	Land was managed by clan-based regional elites on behalf of the king.	Regional lords were given full administrative rights; the king acted as mediator between overlapping territories.

Agrarian Organisation	Communal farming without private ownership.	State-directed *Well-field* system persisted; privatisation and centralised bureaucracy began to emerge.

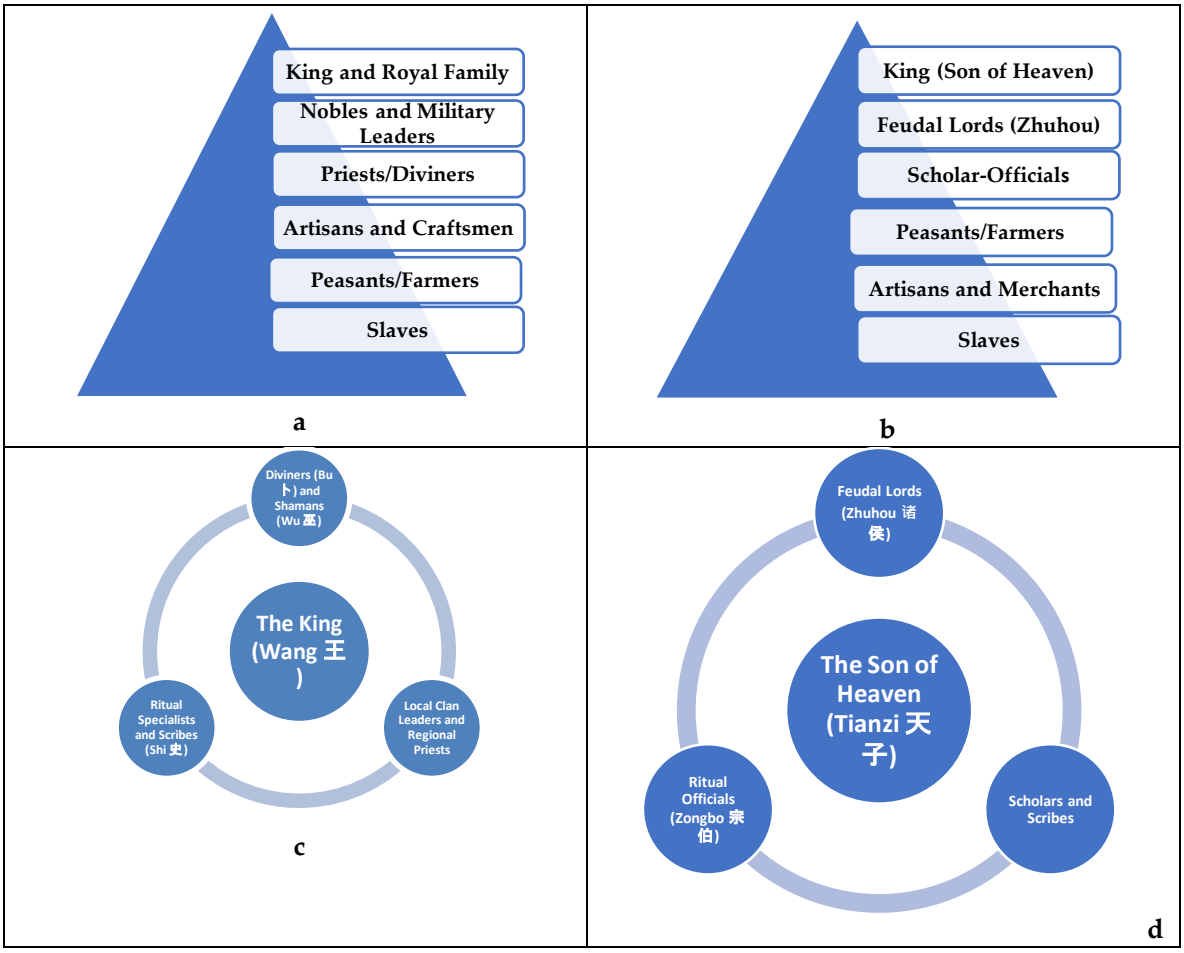

Figure 1: Social (up) and religious (down) hierarchy in the Shang (left) and Zhou (right) periods.

The diagram presented illustrates the evolution of the social and religious hierarchy during the Shang and Western Zhou periods in ancient China, emphasizing the distinct structure and interrelation of religious and political powers. The Shang period (c. 1600–1046 BCE) is depicted with a hierarchical system where the king, as the supreme ruler, also played the role of the high priest, overseeing sacrifices to ancestors and divine spirits. This dual role of political and religious authority was key in maintaining social order, where no distinct priestly class existed, and religious functions were managed by bureaucrats, diviners, and clan leaders. The structure represented a centralized, redistributive system where the state controlled land, and agricultural labor was organized around the Well-field system.

As the diagram transitions to the Western Zhou period (c. 1046–771 BCE), the depiction highlights a shift towards a feudal system where land was granted to regional lords in exchange for loyalty and military service, signifying the beginning of private land ownership. This period introduced significant ritual reforms, where the use of bronze ritual vessels became more regulated, symbolizing both political and religious legitimacy. The Zhou king, holding the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*), reinforced this new order, where political legitimacy was tied to moral virtue rather than solely ancestral lineage, marking a significant transformation in the political-religious structure. The redistribution of land and power among feudal lords symbolized the emergence of a more complex governance system that integrated religious authority within a broader feudal framework, further solidifying the interconnection between religion, land ownership, and political authority.

The redistributive system in Ancient China not only governed economic and agrarian activities but also played a critical role in shaping religious institutions. In both the Shang and Western Zhou periods, religion did not emerge as an independent or autonomous institution but was intricately intertwined with the structure of state power. The king, who held both political and spiritual authority, functioned as the supreme mediator between the people and the divine, overseeing ritual sacrifices and maintaining sacred connections. Unlike other civilizations where religious institutions developed separately from political systems, Ancient China maintained a unique model where ritual practices were the responsibility of state functionaries, local elites, and clan leaders, with no distinct religious hierarchy (Childs-Johnson, 2019). This configuration reinforced the notion that religion was primarily a tool of state control, ensuring the legitimacy of the ruler and the cohesion of society.

As political and economic decentralization began to take shape, the state responded by tightening control over religious systems to safeguard social-political stability. This response highlighted the adaptive role of religious institutions in times of political transition. The analysis reveals four key tendencies that characterized religious practices during these periods. First, there was a notable integration of political and religious power: the king functioned as both sovereign and high priest, consolidating political and spiritual authority in one figure. Second, the nature of royal legitimacy transitioned from ancestral lineage in the Shang to political morality in the Zhou, with the Mandate of Heaven becoming the central doctrine that tied royal authority to virtue and governance. Third, although the Zhou dynasty introduced elements of feudalism and private land ownership, the redistributive mechanisms of the Shang persisted through the regulation of religious rites and symbols, notably bronze ritual vessels that reinforced political hierarchies. Lastly, religion assumed a compensatory function, stabilizing society in the face of decentralization and social changes. The state responded by standardizing ritual practices, using religion as a mechanism to reaffirm its authority and stabilize the shifting power dynamics. These four tendencies demonstrate that religion in Ancient China was not merely an expression of spirituality but a strategic instrument used to consolidate political power and stabilize the socio-political order.

The study further suggests that in agrarian societies like Ancient China, religious institutions played a functional, structural role beyond their spiritual significance. They were tools of statecraft, used to legitimize leadership, encode moral values, and maintain societal harmony. As emerging market-oriented political and economic systems exerted pressure on traditional structures, religion became a domain of enhanced state control. This heightened regulation of religious practices was a strategic response to ensure that religion continued to serve as a balancing force in times of political instability. The elasticity of religious institutions, subject to regulation depending on the needs of the state, illustrates the interdependence between religion and political authority. This finding aligns with the broader hypothesis that, in many agrarian societies across Asia and Africa, religion often functions as a stabilizing force amid political transitions and shifts in authority (Kern, 2009; Wittfogel, 1963). Thus, in Ancient China, religion was not simply a reflection of spiritual beliefs but a vital component of the redistributive system, reinforcing political legitimacy and helping to navigate the complexities of governance during times of change (Kern, 2009; Wittfogel, 1963).

The Role of Religion in Social Crisis and Institutional Transformation

This study reveals that as redistributive institutions weakened during the Eastern Zhou period and the subsequent Warring States period, Ancient China experienced a deep transformation of its political, social, and religious structures. Central authority deteriorated as local rulers—entrusted with vast landholdings—began to ignore royal decrees and pursue independent agendas. The result was widespread decentralisation, increased taxation, bureaucratic extortion, social disparity between aristocrats and peasants, and aggravating natural disasters such as droughts and floods (Jiang, 2023; Schwartz, 1985). These crises, compounded by invasions from nomadic groups like the Jurchen and Xianbin, led to the decline of the Western Zhou dynasty and the emergence of the Eastern Zhou.

This period saw a transition from labour-based obligations to a system of land taxation, thereby facilitating the privatisation of land and the emergence of individual ownership (Tung-tsu, 2022).

Aristocrats began transferring land to peasant families, who could now inherit, mortgage, or sell land—a definitive marker of private property. Simultaneously, a market economy expanded with the introduction of bronze currency and the rising socio-political influence of merchants. In the state of Zheng, for example, merchants maintained special relations with the state, offering intelligence in exchange for protection.

Institutional crises prompted the rise of major philosophical and religious schools, which responded to the disintegration of the clan-based redistributive order. Legalism, Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism emerged as systematic doctrines that proposed new ethical and political models. Legalism (from *fa jia*, literally "school of law") promoted the supremacy of law, administered by a powerful bureaucracy, and upheld with severe punishments to ensure order (Bell, 2023; H. Zhou, 2011). In contrast, Confucianism focused on moral education, social rituals (*li*, meaning norms of proper behaviour), and humaneness (*jen*, the subordination of self to the social order) as foundations for social harmony (Schwartz, 1985).

Mohism, founded by Mo-tzu, rejected the family as the social nucleus and proposed a militarised, meritocratic hierarchy where order could only be achieved through coercion and strong leadership (Schwartz, 1985). Meanwhile, Daoism (from *Dao*, meaning "the Way") offered a naturalistic, intuitive, and radically anti-authoritarian response: it rejected state-imposed law and knowledge, and proposed *wu wei* ("non-action")—a life in accordance with spontaneous natural order—as the ethical ideal (Joshi, 2020). These movements signified the transformation of religion from primitive ancestral worship into comprehensive moral-philosophical systems aimed at resolving institutional imbalance.

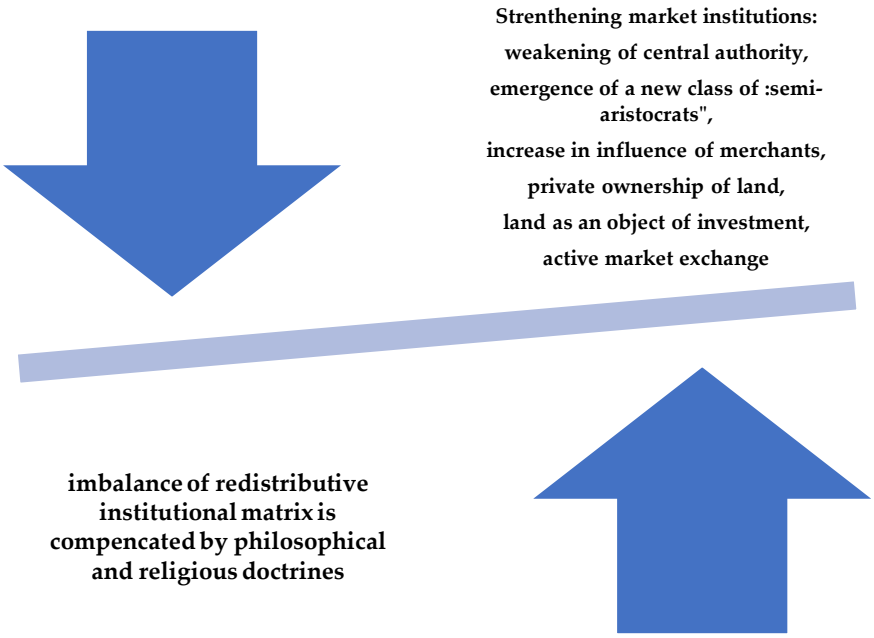

Figure 2: The institutional imbalance owing to strengthening market institutions and the response to it.

Figure 2 illustrates the growing institutional imbalance that emerged in Eastern Zhou society as market institutions increasingly supplanted the older redistributive order. The diagram likely visualises how the erosion of centralised authority, privatisation of land, the rise of merchant classes, and the expansion of economic freedoms contributed to a systemic shift. These developments disrupted the equilibrium between state control and societal structures, leading to social tensions and weakening traditional governance. In response, various schools of thought—particularly Legalism, Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism—emerged to propose alternative frameworks for social cohesion and political legitimacy. Thus, the figure captures both the decline of established institutions and the ideological responses that sought to restore balance in a rapidly transforming society.

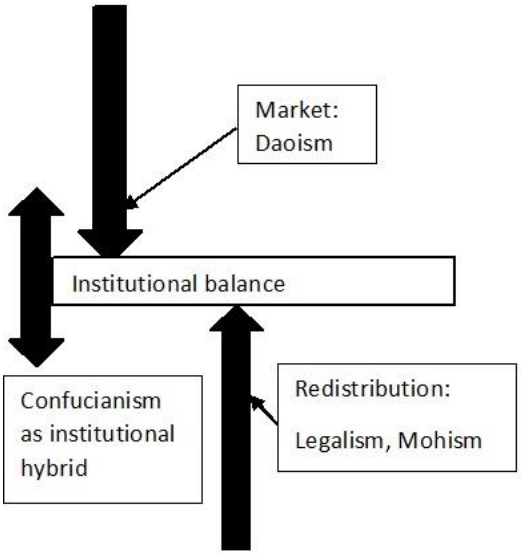

Figure 3: The achievement of the institutional balance using main philosophical and religious doctrines.

Figure 3 presents a conceptual schema of how major philosophical and religious traditions in Ancient China functioned as mechanisms for institutional rebalancing during and after the crisis of the Zhou period. It likely maps the interrelation between each doctrine—Legalism, Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism—and the specific institutional domains they sought to address, such as governance, morality, law, family, and cosmic harmony. By proposing distinct yet interwoven paths to restore societal order, these doctrines did not merely replace the crumbling redistributive model but redefined the foundations of social and political life. The figure thus underscores the compensatory function of religion and philosophy in restoring a coherent institutional framework amidst fragmentation and change.

Table 2. Characteristics of Legalism, Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism in the institutional context

Philosophical/ Religious Doctrine	Redistributive Characteristics	Market Characteristics
Legalism	The primary aim is to maintain public order and the ruler's power through a centralised, bureaucratic administration.	—
Confucianism	Advocates a strict cosmic and social hierarchy; promotes order through moral roles and state paternalism.	Emphasises family as the independent nucleus of society, separate from the state.
Mohism	Endorses military-like discipline and power structures; rejects family-based ethics.	—
Daoism	—	Rejects hierarchy, laws, and structured power; values intuition, spontaneity, and individual alignment with nature (*Dao*).

Table 2 delineates how each doctrine either reinforced hierarchical state structures (as in Legalism and Confucianism) or introduced decentralised, anti-authoritarian elements (as in Daoism), while Mohism offered a pragmatic, militaristic middle ground. The table provides a clear, structured overview of the different ideological responses to the Zhou-era crisis, demonstrating the extent to which each doctrine engaged with and redefined the balance between state authority, individual agency, and social ethics. It is a critical tool for understanding the hybrid nature of institutional responses during one of China's most transformative historical periods.

The evidence shows that as central state institutions eroded and market forces intensified, philosophical-religious systems emerged as societal responses to institutional crises. *Legalism* called for rigid control through law and punishment. *Confucianism* provided a cosmic model of hierarchical order centred on the moral authority of the ruler and the family. *Mohism* rejected familial loyalty in favour of militarised organisation and leadership based on merit. *Daoism*, meanwhile, challenged both law and power by advocating harmony with the ineffable *Dao*, intuitive knowledge, and a minimalistic, decentralised society.

The data reveal four interrelated patterns that characterise the transformation of Ancient China's institutional landscape during the Eastern Zhou period. First, the decline of central authority facilitated the rise of a powerful bureaucratic apparatus and the emergence of new social strata—such as the *shih* (semi-aristocrats), merchants, and landowners—who gradually displaced the hereditary clan system and restructured social mobility (Haixia, 2023). Second, a shift from *corvée* (compulsory labour) to land taxation marked the beginning of agrarian capitalism, enabling peasants to acquire, inherit, and trade land, thereby establishing the groundwork for a market-oriented rural economy (Tung-tsu, 2022). Third, the institutional instability triggered the rise of philosophical and religious doctrines—Legalism, Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism—which offered ideological frameworks ranging from strict reaffirmation of hierarchical control to subversive critiques of state authority. Fourth, religion itself underwent a profound transformation, evolving from ritual-based ancestral worship into systematic moral-philosophical traditions that addressed governance, ethics, and cosmic harmony, signalling a shift from spiritual authority to sociopolitical functionality in times of structural crisis.

This evidence demonstrates that during periods of institutional instability, religion and philosophy in Ancient China played a crucial compensatory role. As redistributive state mechanisms faltered and market dynamics advanced, philosophical-religious systems emerged not only as ideological critiques but also as functional frameworks for social reorganisation. These systems—*Legalism*, *Confucianism*, *Mohism*, and *Daoism*—offered distinct visions for restoring order and balance, ranging from authoritarian control to individual spiritual liberation. Importantly, this suggests that religion was not merely a top-down instrument of state ideology but also arose *from below* as a dynamic response to crisis. Religion and philosophy became arenas for negotiating ethical legitimacy and institutional renewal. This supports broader theories that view religious transformation as both a reaction to and a participant in systemic change, especially within agrarian societies where the balance between redistribution and market structures is particularly fragile (Kern, 2009; Wittfogel, 1963).

Religious Syncretism and Institutional Balance in the Imperial Era

During the Han Dynasty, especially under Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE), *Confucianism* (the school of thought rooted in *Ru*, or scholarly moral cultivation) was institutionalised as the state ideology. Confucian principles shaped the imperial bureaucracy, examination systems, legal frameworks, and the emperor's legitimacy as the *Son of Heaven*. The founding of the Imperial University, where Confucian classics were taught, confirmed its pivotal role in state consolidation by emphasising filial piety, hierarchical order, and moral governance.

Concurrently, *Daoism*—with its market-oriented institutional characteristics such as individual harmony with *Dao* (the ineffable cosmic path), spontaneity, and rejection of artificial constructs—evolved into a more structured religion. It manifested in movements such as the Yellow Turban Rebellion (184 CE) and the *Five Pecks of Rice* sect, which combined Daoist ideas with millenarianism and responded to social unrest and epidemics with healing and communal care. Although Confucianism

remained the orthodoxy, emperors, including Wu and Zhang (75–88 CE), personally practised Daoist rites, showing the duality between public ideology and private belief.

Buddhism, arriving from India, gradually took root by adapting to the Chinese context. The *Mahayana* (literally "Great Vehicle") tradition, with its emphasis on universal compassion and individual spiritual salvation, proved more compatible with Chinese culture than the more monastic *Hinayana* ("Small Vehicle") model. Through *geyi* (格义, "matching meanings"), early translators aligned Buddhist concepts with Daoist terminology—e.g., *nirvana* with *wuwei* (non-action), and *Dharma* with *Dao*. Initially embraced by merchants and urban elites, Buddhism remained peripheral until the end of the Han, when it gained traction amid political disintegration and moral doubt. Its emphasis on suffering, detachment, and community support contrasted with Confucian familial duty and provided solace during crisis.

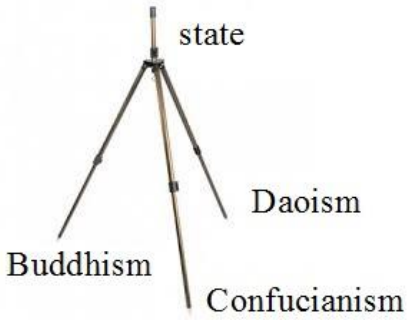

Figure 4: Model of balance between religious system (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism) and the state.

Figure 4 illustrates the institutional model of balance among *Confucianism*, *Daoism*, and *Buddhism*, where each tradition plays a complementary role in maintaining social and political order. It reflects a dynamic equilibrium: *Confucianism* offers state structure and ethics; *Daoism* provides existential and spiritual alternatives; and *Buddhism* contributes moral universality and social compassion.

Table 3. Differences in the approach of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in view of the state, primary contribution, and key tensions:

	Confucianism	Daoism	Buddhism
View of State	Central to governance, the state as a moral entity	Ambivalent; state as unnatural or corrupt	Detached but accommodating
Primary Contribution	Unified bureaucracy, social stability	Counterbalance to Confucian control	Moral/universal ethics, social welfare
Key Tensions	Rigidity, spiritual inadequacy	Rebellious potential, weak institutionalisation	Foreignness, monasticism vs. familial obligations

The data show that during the Han dynasty, China's religious landscape evolved into a syncretic system that balanced the strengths and limitations of three major traditions: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism shaped the ideological and bureaucratic structure of the empire; Daoism transitioned into popular religious movements that responded to social crises; and Buddhism, adapted through Daoist language and imagery, began to provide ethical and spiritual refuge. The coexistence of these traditions did not generate major theological conflict but allowed for fluid overlap—where emperors could uphold Confucian governance while privately engaging in Daoist alchemy or Buddhist rituals. Religion thus became both a means of state control and a flexible system for societal adaptation.

The findings reveal four interrelated patterns that characterise the role of religion in maintaining institutional balance during the Han Dynasty. First, the institutionalisation of Confucianism under

Emperor Wu marked the formal integration of moral philosophy into the machinery of state through education, legal codes, and civil examinations, thereby reinforcing imperial authority and ethical governance. Second, religious practice during this period was marked by fluidity and pragmatic syncretism, as emperors and elites often blended Confucian state orthodoxy with Daoist rituals or Buddhist contemplation, reflecting a flexible spiritual landscape rather than rigid doctrinal adherence. Third, both Daoism and Buddhism emerged as social compensators in times of crisis, offering solace and community through millenarian hope, healing rites, and teachings on suffering—especially appealing during episodes of rebellion, natural disaster, or waning confidence in Confucian values. Lastly, these dynamics coalesced into a syncretic equilibrium, embodied in the *san jiao* (三教, "Three Teachings") framework, where each tradition offset the others' limitations, fostering cultural resilience and ideological adaptability within a diverse and evolving imperial context.

These findings underscore that religion in imperial China was not solely a top-down mechanism of state control, but also an adaptive, multifaceted response to institutional and societal needs. The Han dynasty's religious environment exemplified *syncretic governance*, wherein Confucianism established state authority, Daoism addressed individual and communal existential concerns, and Buddhism offered moral and metaphysical depth for navigating suffering and impermanence. The model of *Three Teachings in Harmony* prefigured later religious pluralism in China and demonstrated how institutional balance could be achieved not by enforcing uniformity, but by managing ideological diversity. This confirms that religion in agrarian civilisations functions not only to reinforce power but to absorb shocks, reconfigure social order, and restore legitimacy in times of crisis.

4. Discussion

This study reveals how religious syncretism in ancient China, particularly in the context of the dynamics between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, functioned as a balancing mechanism in the face of social, political, and institutional crises. The main findings show that during the Han Dynasty, these three teachings formed a syncretic system that supported social and political stability by addressing the tensions arising from changes in social structure. Confucianism provided the moral structure and state bureaucracy, Daoism offered existential and spiritual alternatives, while Buddhism provided moral depth and spiritual calm amidst social uncertainty. In this context, religious syncretism not only acted as a tool for state control but also as an adaptive response to social instability.

The research shows that religious syncretism in ancient China occurred due to a strong interdependence between religion and the socio-political structure. When the redistributive system began to degrade during the Eastern Zhou period and the Warring States period, the institutional crises faced by China triggered the emergence of more adaptive religious teachings and philosophies. The presence of syncretism as a balancing mechanism was a response to the need to stabilize a disintegrating society. By integrating elements from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, society was able to maintain balance between moral hierarchy, spiritual life, and social well-being.

The findings of this study align with and expand upon previous research on the development of religious institutions in China, particularly in terms of the relationship between state power and religious adaptation. Previous studies, such as those by Chirkov (2024) and Klass & Weisgrau (2018), note the difficulties that religions like Christianity have had in integrating with Chinese culture, in contrast to Buddhism, which successfully adapted to local spiritual traditions. Post-1949 studies highlight the dominant role of the Chinese Communist Party in managing religious life through fluctuating policies, including suppression during the Cultural Revolution and the limited resurgence of religion during the reform era (Ownby, 2011; Ying, 2014). However, this research offers a new dimension by focusing on the adaptive function of religious syncretism—dynamic blending of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—as a mechanism for maintaining institutional balance in response to systemic crises. Unlike earlier research, which often focuses on individual religious traditions or external religious influences such as Christianity, this study places *"San Jiao He Yi"* (Three Teachings in Harmony) as a unique feature of Chinese religiosity, providing resilience through complementary moral, spiritual, and ethical resources (Barakhvostov, 2023).

This study is interpreted in three aspects. First, historically, religious syncretism in ancient China reflects a long process of integration between various religious traditions within a cohesive socio-political system. This syncretism materialized in the concept of Three Teachings Harmony (Tiga Ajaran dalam Harmoni), which combines Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism as complementary elements in societal life. These religions did not develop separately but merged with the state structure to support national morality and political autonomy, creating stable harmony amidst social and political changes. This syncretic process also involved local elements and foreign influences, such as the arrival of Buddhism, which, despite originating from outside, successfully adapted to Chinese traditions through matching meanings between Buddhist concepts and Daoist terminology (Maliavin, 2022; Zhao, 2021). This syncretic practice is evident in communal rituals at Wudang Mountain and the Mulian drama, which blends all three teachings (DeBernardi, 2009). Overall, religious syncretism in ancient China played a crucial role in maintaining social order, ensuring the continuity of political order, and responding to social changes through flexible and adaptive integration.

Second, socially. Socially, religious syncretism in China played a key role in shaping a coherent social identity by enabling religious pluralism and supporting the integration of spiritual elements relevant to the social needs of society. Religious practices outside institutional frameworks, such as family rituals, deity worship, and divination, demonstrate a dispersed and non-centralized religiosity, often led by family heads, mediums, or feng shui experts, and generating alternative social sects that provide options beyond major religions (Jochim, 2006). The research also shows that this syncretism strengthens social trust, particularly within family and community groups, although religious diversity may lower trust in general groups. The sinicization of foreign religions, such as Christianity, contributed to the integration of religions within the context of contemporary Chinese culture, enriching social diversity (X. Zhou, 2022). Thus, religious syncretism helps to overcome social polarization and enables the integration of traditional beliefs with incoming new religions, reinforcing social harmony in diversity (Lu & Gao, 2018).

Third, ideologically. Ideologically, religious syncretism in China supports state legitimacy by combining moral values from Confucianism, individual freedom in Daoism, and universal compassion in Buddhism, creating a more flexible system to respond to the challenges of social and political change. The research shows that this syncretism not only harmonizes seemingly conflicting teachings but also provides a strong ideological foundation for the state to manage religious and cultural diversity without creating open conflict (Maliavin, 2022). The concept of *Three Teachings Harmony* allows the state to integrate these elements within a broader framework, reinforcing the hierarchical structure of Confucianism with the moral values of Daoism and the compassionate teachings of Buddhism to support social and political stability (Zhao, 2021). In this context, religious syncretism functions as the state's ideology, responding to social tensions by integrating various worldviews while maintaining strong state control over the moral and social narrative (DeBernardi, 2009).

Based on the three aspects of interpretation above, this study can be reflected upon in terms of both function and dysfunction. The function of this research is to demonstrate how religion serves not only as a spiritual expression but also as a balancing mechanism that mitigates social and political tensions. In the context of ancient China, religious syncretism acted as a response to the structural crises occurring in agrarian society, where changes in economic and social systems could trigger instability. Religion became a tool used by the state to maintain legitimacy and stability, counterbalancing the changes taking place at the grassroots level.

On the other hand, dysfunctionally, this study emphasizes that religious syncretism has the potential to cause internal tensions arising from the differences between the elements contained in the syncretized traditions. While it does not create large-scale conflicts, ideological tensions often emerge regarding morality, state authority, and individual freedom, as seen in the doctrinal inconsistencies that frequently arise in syncretism (Junsongduang et al., 2020). Cultural differences and perceptions regarding the purity of religion further exacerbate these tensions, as reflected in the practice of religious syncretism in various regions, including the blending of Islam with local practices in Chuvashia, which created internal tensions within that community (Yagafova, 2011). The flexible nature of religious

syncretism can lead to confusion in reconciling conflicting values, as discussed in the study of Christianity influenced by racial views and colonial impact (Bevans, 2022). This dysfunction highlights the complexity of syncretism as a phenomenon that requires adjustments between differing traditions, yet continues to pose significant ideological and social challenges (Sigalow, 2016).

Based on these findings, the policy recommendation to address the existing dysfunction is to encourage a more constructive dialogue regarding religious pluralism and syncretism as tools for achieving social stability in modern societies. In China, the state should avoid policies that impose a strict separation between religions and, instead, support a system that allows religious diversity to develop inclusively and adaptively. This will prevent potential internal tensions arising from the unclear distinctions between different religious teachings. Additionally, policies in religious education that emphasize harmony among different traditions, introducing the concept of syncretism as a pragmatic solution to address differences, could strengthen social integration in an increasingly pluralistic context. In this way, religious syncretism would not only function as a state control mechanism but also as a source of social resilience and innovation in facing contemporary social challenges, ultimately reducing ideological tensions and improving alignment among groups.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the formation of religious institutions in China unfolded through two key stages. The first stage, rooted in ancestral cults and the Mandate of Heaven, supported the legitimacy of state authority within a redistributive institutional framework. In this phase, religion was deeply embedded within the bureaucratic structures of the state, reinforcing political centralisation. This period, however, was also characterized by institutional dualism, where hierarchical and non-hierarchical religious structures coexisted, allowing for adaptive reforms during times of institutional crises. The second stage witnessed the transformation of these primitive beliefs into formalized doctrines—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—which not only provided explanations for cosmic order but also became instruments for social reorganization and ethical guidance. This evolution illustrates that religion, beyond serving as a tool of statecraft, was also a responsive mechanism to societal upheaval.

The key contribution of this research lies in its institutional approach to religious syncretism in China. Unlike previous studies that focus on isolated religious traditions or external religious influences, this study demonstrates that the concept of Three Teachings Harmony (*san jiao he yi*, 三教合一) was not a coincidental development but was structurally conditioned by a redistributive institutional matrix. The syncretic coexistence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism enabled the formation of a decentralized yet resilient spiritual system, where each tradition fulfilled a distinct moral, spiritual, and ritual role within society. This model offers a new theoretical lens to explain how religious traditions can overlap, adapt, and cooperate in hierarchical societies with low social mobility. Furthermore, it provides insights into contemporary syncretic movements across other Asian societies, showcasing the adaptability of religious systems in response to social changes.

Nevertheless, this study faces several limitations. Its primary focus is on the formative periods of the Shang, Zhou, and Han dynasties, and it does not extend to the later evolution of the *Three Teachings*. The influence of external religions such as Christianity and Islam, as well as the ongoing presence of folk and shamanistic beliefs during the syncretic integration, has not been addressed. Additionally, the scarcity of primary sources from the Shang era and the dominance of Confucian historiography in subsequent periods may have influenced the interpretive framework. Future research could expand this institutional approach by incorporating comparative studies with other civilizations or by examining the post-Han development of religious syncretism under different political and social regimes.

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