

The Soul in Chinese and Bahá'í Belief

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Abstract

This article is a preliminary investigation of the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith and their discourses in relation to their beliefs in the presence of a soul, the existence of an afterlife, and the phenomenon of death. In addition, it explores the ideas on the nature of the soul and the human being and relates these ideas to the human being's quest for happiness and meaning in life. Last but not least, the question of free will and its relation to justice is discussed.

Introduction

In all religions, the true nature of man is his soul. As is typical in religions, the Bahá'í Faith teaches that there is a Creator or God, that humanity is His creation and that humanity would ultimately return to the spiritual world. There is reference to the existence of a soul, a unique possession belonging only to the human being and an entity said to exist in a life after death, long after the decay of the physical body. There is, of course, no more difficult a theme to deal with than that of the soul since the soul is a spiritual metaphysical reality which cannot be perceived through the senses, and therefore eludes anyone who relies only upon sensory and intellectual perception.

While the Bahá'í Faith may be quite typical in what may be termed a "religion", the Chinese religion, however, is not so clearly definable. It represents a much older and complex whole, comprising a vast corpus of scriptures and divergent traditions. In the first instance, the Chinese religion is a mixture of shamanism, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These not only co-existed but also were believed and

practised in a variety of combinations. The average Chinese person, as the saying goes, wears "a Confucian crown, a Taoist robe, and Buddhist sandals. I have therefore called it "Chinese religion" rather than "Chinese religions". It is a distinctive religion because of its non-exclusivity; groups and individuals embraced aspects of more than one "religion without necessarily reconciling them. In other words, a Chinese man can claim that he is both a Taoist (a lover of nature), a Confucian (who is serious in his duties), and a Buddhist (deeply aware of the transience of life). Its eclectic nature can be seen in the Chinese temples in Southeast Asia where statues of Confucius, Lao-tzu and the Buddha are set up alongside those of traditional Chinese immortals as objects of veneration. To further complicate the picture, the Chinese religion is actually a little more than this simple trilogy because within each of the three, there are many schools, each a little different from the other. For example, in Singapore, a recent survey found that besides Taoism and Confucianism, there were seven schools of Buddhism (including *Mahayana*, *Theravada*, *Pure Land*, *Ch'an* and the *Japanese Nichiren* school), at least nine syncretic religions including the *Great Way of Former Heaven*, the *P'u T'u Men* or salvation sect, the *Kuei Ken Men* or way of reverting-to-the-first-principle sect and the well known *Red Swastika Society*, and many spiritual medium cults, pure Chinese ones, sino-Malay ones and sino-Indian ones.¹ The historical pattern is one of confluence and overlapping of various strands and religion is held together by patterns of participation rather than any rational overview.

Another "problem with regard to the Chinese religion is that although we may refer to a "Chinese religion", we should note here that there is no Chinese word that corresponds exactly to the word "religion". To the Chinese, there is no difference between religion and education. The Chinese word *jiao* (教), meaning teaching, includes all religions. Both "teaching" and "learning" have the purpose of bringing enlightenment. A great teacher teaches one to understand the great principle of life and the universe, how to reach the good and to appreciate the beautiful. Similarly, Confucian scholars themselves did not consider whether their system of values was a philosophy of religion as it was not a relevant question in their culture. The question of dualistic terminology which plays a large part in Western philosophical consciousness (e.g. "sacred"

¹ Chew, *Life Death and Immortality*, p. 70.

vs “secular”, “salvific” vs “pedagogic”, “spiritual” vs “practical” etc.) is quite alien to the Chinese mind. In the same way philosophy and religion are neither separable nor clearly distinguishable in Chinese civilisation.²

Although the Chinese notion of “teaching” does not indicate an explicit belief in God, it is incorrect to say that the Chinese do not believe in God, or what in their own literature has been referred to as *the Absolute Truth, the Ultimate Reality or the Eternal Ground of Being*. Indeed, sprinkled throughout the *Tao-te ching* and the other major Chinese classical texts are references to the presence of the Great Tao. We know too that there are an abundance of temples and shrines whenever Chinese people are found and what are temples and shrines if they are not the earthly palaces of deities and spirits? How could the Chinese have been described as irreligious people when there were many temples, even in Communist China? Indeed, the study of archaeology and textual philology has yielded us a hierarchy of gods and spirits worshipped in Chinese antiquity, which rivals that of the ancient Near East and the Graeco-Roman world. Even Confucianism, in what is known as the “Chinese Great Tradition”, has a certain openness to the transcendent. The fact that Confucius stressed his love for the ancients and the fact that he was a “transmitter” rather than a “maker” of values symbolises his conscious attempt to provide a transcendental anchorage for human civilisation.

A third “problem” that differentiates the Chinese religion from the other major religions is the lack of a Holy Book or a proclaimed prophet-figure. Instead, part of the essence of traditional Chinese belief is that wise sages (great teachers) from time to time will come to show the path to enlightenment. In a broad sense, the Sage or the *junzi* (君子) in Chinese philosophy can be compared to what is known in Bahá'í theology as “the Perfect man”, or “the Manifestation of God”, who will come to reaffirm what the Chinese have called, *the way*. Throughout the *Mencius*, ancient sage kings are extolled precisely because it was recognised that the sage achieved complete unity and harmony with a higher realm. On the other hand, imperfect man, in his almost total ignorance of reality, realises disharmony and conflict and creates difficulties for himself and for others. In this article, I will therefore

² Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 17.

quote and narrate from the sayings of China's most influential sages since it is only in China that we have the unique case of a religion without a prophet, a religion not quite divine in origin but to all intents and purposes a religion in terms of its aims and depth of spiritual insights. As Chew puts it, "It is a religion without revelation."³

Where the multifaceted Chinese religion is concerned, there is of course a broad range of beliefs and approaches to the nexus of fundamental questions related to the soul, death and the afterlife. This article is a preliminary investigation of the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith and their beliefs in relation to a soul, the existence of an afterlife, and the phenomenon of death. In addition, it explores the ideas on the nature of the soul and the human being and relates these ideas to the human being's quest for happiness and meaning in life. Last but not least, the question of free will and its relation to justice is discussed.

The existence of the soul

All religions teach that the invisible but essential part of man, the soul, will live on long after the body decays. Indeed, the *raison d'être* of the divine religions has been the promise of immortality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith and the interpreter of the Bahá'í Writings, calls the soul "the inner reality of man."⁴ He also describes it as "a pure and unknown substance."⁵ Everywhere the Bahá'í Writings suggest that the "true man" is the soul and therefore the body is of minor importance. It is said: "...the body has to die when its light has come to an end. Therefore of what importance is it?"⁶

In Chinese religion, one of the clearest expositions of the existence of the soul is in the writings of Mencius (371-289 BC), the greatest successor

³ Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 51.

⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 464.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

of Confucian thought. Mencius refers to the soul, as the "essential nature" of man and calls it the "vital spirit":⁷

I know how to nourish my vast vital spirit... it is not easy to describe it in words. For it is a spirit extremely great and extremely strong. When nourished by rectitude and kept integral, it fills up all between heaven and earth. It is a spirit that must be mated to justice and natural law. Without these it would be starved. In fact, it is born of an accumulation of justice, not something which justice invades from outside and takes to itself. Its very life depends upon justice. For whenever your conduct does not satisfy your conscience, the vital spirit suffers starvation.⁸

This "vital spirit", a term reminiscent of the work of Plato, is seen here as a necessary ally of the rational principle (the materialistic rules which human beings operate by) if their unruly desires are to be kept in order. According to Mencius, without the help of the vital spirit, the human being would be like a "powerless monarch", in terms of his true mission in life.⁹ The vital spirit is one which cannot be perceived by the material senses of the physical body but can only be expressed in outward signs and works. The vital spirit is also placeless since placement is characteristic of bodies and not of spirit. As the above extract recounts, the important thing is to inform the vital spirit with the spirit of justice. When one's conduct is bad, the vital spirit suffers starvation. On the other hand, when the vital spirit is nourished by the spirit of justice, it is lifted up to a higher plane, and instead of weakening, will grow immensely.

Another Chinese mystic, Chuang-tzu (c.300 BC), a contemporary of Mencius and the greatest successor of Taoist thought after Lao-tzu,¹⁰ spoke of the spirit or soul of man as the "true man" which could never be destroyed.¹¹ Chuang-tzu explains that this spirit, the "true man", has

⁷ *Mencius*, Bk 2, pt. 1, ch. 2. Art. 11.

⁸ *Mencius*, Bk 2, pt. 1, ch. 2, arts. 12-14.

⁹ Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 90.

¹⁰ It has been said that Chuang-tzu is to Lao-tzu what Mencius is to Confucius.

¹¹ See Berling, *Death and Afterlife*.

existed before man's birth as a human being. When a human being dies, his true self returns home, as it were, to its original state. It continues to exist although its existence is beyond time and space. In addition, another Chinese philosopher, Mo-tzu (c 468-376 BC) upheld the belief that the vital spirit or the true man would continue to live on. He defended the belief of its existence on the grounds that people had actually heard the voices of spiritual beings and that beliefs in spiritual beings was helpful to personal conduct and national peace.¹²

Although proclaiming the existence of the soul, these influential Chinese philosophers are, however, relatively silent as to the origins of the soul or its originator and it is this very silence and impreciseness that has led many Western observers and scholars to believe that the Chinese temperament is more suited to a philosophy rather than a religion.¹³ Here, it is true, however, that the Chinese religion is concerned more with the celebration of life rather than with the clarification of doctrines. Whether there is a soul or many souls, a god or many gods is not a matter of philosophical interest. Two reasons may be postulated at this juncture as to why although there have been mystical experiences, there has been very little talk about the soul. Firstly, for the Chinese to expound on a topic outside space and time would be a transgression of "the mean", which Confucius had warned about.¹⁴ Confucius said: "till you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead" (*Analects* 11:11). The Tao ("omnipotent"), the closest concept in Chinese thought to "God" is not explicitly expounded on, either in the *Tao-te ching* or the Confucian *Analects*. This silence is consistent with Chinese thought for the Tao cannot be described since language is a product of the world and the Tao, logically, is beyond it. The Tao, described as the organic order underlying the world, cannot be named or known, only intuited.¹⁵ The religious autobiography or treatise has not been a popular genre in China literature.

¹² Mei, *Ethical and Political Thoughts of Mo-tzu*, vol. III.

¹³ The writings of Western Sinologues such as Legge and Giles in the 19th and 20th Century helped mould such beliefs. Their students e.g. Derk Bodde also writes in this tradition.

¹⁴ See the *Chung Yung (The Doctrine of the Mean)* which represents the mature thought of Confucius.

¹⁵ See Chew, *The Great Tao*.

The second, and perhaps more important reason, is that while phonetic language leads easily to conceptual abstractions and a separation of the sensible from the non-sensible, (e.g. the Greek language presents a world of meanings in separation from a world of concrete things); an image-language, such as the Chinese language tends to lead to the cohesion of the sensible and non-sensible, for example, religion and philosophy is denoted by the same symbol, *jiao* (教). The languages of revelation in the Bahá'í Faith, ie Arabic and Persian are also phonetic rather than image languages. This has enabled the Bahá'í Faith to be more explicit in its references to the soul. The use of image language explains why the Chinese tradition is less metaphysical than Western traditions. Metaphysics in the Western sense is predicated upon the separation of the sensible from the abstract, the practical from the transcendental.¹⁶

However, this silence or indirectness on metaphysical subjects did not mean that the Chinese do not believe in an ultimate power. Although the Creator and its creation, the soul, is seldom mentioned in Chinese literature, it is always assumed. It is the indispensable backdrop for Confucian and Taoist discourse. In discourses on the *Tao*, there is a worldview that seeks the perfection of an individual through union with an absolute agent or force. In the *Tao-te ching*, the *Tao* is referred to as "the mother of the world" and "the root of all returns".¹⁷ The ultimate is seen in the *Tao*, a divine force so immanent that it is even in the soil and tiles, so much a part of the world that it cannot be separated from its Oneness. Union with the *Tao* is believed to be the birthright of every being, and is closely associated with the belief with a mystical Creator.

While both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith acknowledge the existence of the soul as "a pure and unknown substance", "an inner reality", "a vital spirit", and "the true man", the Bahá'í Faith provides more details on this "essential nature" of Man. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the soul "... is sent forth by the Word of God" and that the soul is "a spirit with which God had endowed him (man) at creation".¹⁸ The soul is "the intermediary between the Supreme Concourse and the lower concourse" suggesting that the soul is the link between the Creator and

¹⁶ Cheng, *Chinese Metaphysics*, p. 167.

¹⁷ See *Tao-te ching*, chapters 25 and 16.

¹⁸ Chew, *The Great Tao*.

the world of creation.¹⁹ For Bahá'ís, the spirit or the soul is the rider, the body is only the steed. The soul acts in the physical world with the help of the body. The soul utilises the body as an instrument through which its qualities may be developed. As the co-ordinator of the physical functions of the body, the soul enables it to function in perfect harmony and with absolute regularity. It is from the Bahá'í Writings that we are able to understand more clearly what Mencius has previously termed as "not easily described in words."

The Existence of life after death.

The scarcity of discourse on the afterlife in Chinese tradition can be attributed to the influence of Confucius. For him, the afterlife is not within one's control and therefore should not be the focus of attention. Once, when he was asked whether men have consciousness after death he replied:

If I say that the dead have consciousness, I am afraid that the pious sons and obedient grandsons will harm their own lives for the dead; if I say that the dead have no consciousness, I am afraid that the unfilial and impious children will abandon the cadavers of their deceased parents and not even bury them. Why are you so eager to know if the dead have consciousness? It is not important now. We will know it naturally later (when we die)²⁰

Despite this stoic detachment on the part of the great Chinese philosophical texts from the belief in a soul, most Chinese, through their daily lives and practices, assume that there is one. They take great care to maintain personal contact with their ancestors not only through ancestral tables in an altar placed in a spirit hall or in their homes, but also by regular visits to the cemetery. There has also been a strong interest in the care of the corpse, both immediately after death and in the grave. From early in Chinese history, those with resources seem to have spent

¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Ibid.*

²⁰ The Home Sayings of Confucius, quoted in Chih, *Chinese Humanism*, p. 415.

lavishly on elixirs and other treatments that would prevent or slow down the process of decay. Families of means invested in watertight and strong coffins to preserve the body as long as possible. Records found in oracle bones dating back to the Shang Dynasty (1751-111 BC) contain numerous references to sacrifices to ancestors, with offerings of food and other daily necessities and luxuries. Daily utensils and, in extreme cases, their bodyguard or even concubines were buried with them so that they could be served. Certainly, a civilisation or culture that focuses so much on ancestor-worship must presuppose some belief in the soul and hereafter.

The Chinese words *gui* (鬼) and *shen* (神) also show a belief in the existence of spiritual beings. Etymologically, *gui* means “to return to the source” and *shen* means “to expand”, but in ancient times, and for the masses, *gui-shen* (鬼神) means merely spiritual beings. Intercessions are offered for the beloved dead. Prayers are said for the forgiveness of sins. The ancestor cult was expressed as a memorial service, held previously at ancestral temples, and after that at gravesides or at home²¹ Wine and food were usually offered with silent prostration in front of tables. Ancestors were alleged to have tasted the food before the whole family partook of the meal. Ancient Chinese literature, especially that of the fourth and fifth centuries BC is fairly rich in essays and poems devoted to recalling the soul. The practice of recalling the soul was widely practised until the Second World War. What is certain is that the soul, *hun-p'o*, survives after death. It is believed that at death the upper soul, *hun*, rises up to heaven while the lower soul, *po*, descends to earth. This is in harmony with the Confucian belief that the human being is compounded of two souls – an upper or intellectual soul called the *hun*, which becomes the spirit (*shen*) and ascends to the world above, and a lower or animal soul, called the *po/po*, which becomes the ghost (*gui*) and descends with the body into the grave.²²

Interestingly, in the Bahá'í Faith, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the soul as “... the intermediary between the Supreme Concourse and the lower concourse. It (the soul) hath two phases – “the higher aspireth to the

²¹ Yeo, Chinese Family Religion *Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review* Vol. 2, p. 111.

²² These ideas are found in the *Tso Commentary (Tso-chuan)* in a recording of a conversation dated 534 BC.

kingdom of El-Abhá and the lights of the mind shine forth from that horizon upon its higher sphere. The other side inclineth to the lower concourse of the material world, and its lowest phase is enveloped in the darkness of ignorance." 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues: "There is a human spirit and a divine spirit, the latter arising through knowledge and belief in God. The human spirit is superior to the body and struggles with it for control of the soul: when it succeeds, the soul becomes heavenly; when the body obtains control, the soul becomes degraded."²³ Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "... the human personality appears in two aspects: the image or likeness of God and the aspect of Satan. The human reality stands between these two: the divine and the Satanic."²⁴ In short, "... man, is endowed with two natures: one tendeth towards moral sublimity and intellectual perfection, while the other turneth to bestial degradation and carnal imperfection."²⁵

Chuang-tzu believed that the only way to salvation was to identify oneself with "the orderly process of all being, the *Tao*." For Chuang-tzu, death is nothing to fear, for man lives as long as his essence, the *Tao*, lives; and the *Tao* is eternal. One of his most well known stories, often referred to as the "most fantastic" story of "a happy excursion" has been variously interpreted by different thinkers. The following interpretation by Fang is relevant to our discussion on the immortality of the soul:

Here, Chuang-tzu asserts that "the supreme man could lead his own spirit up to the primordial reposing blissfully in the realm of Nowhere, doing away with all the petty knowledge and getting free of the bother of lowly things...the spirit can abide with the eternal *Tao*, estranged from the physical world and disencumbered of all material allurings, independent and free from all restraints. Upon entering the gate of infinitude, he experiences supreme bliss and immerses his unique spirit in the light of the celestial. At the attainment of sagehood, he would abandon himself to the vast concord of all perfection. He is now

²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets*, p. 611.

²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 288.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the archetype of man in the full capacity of the omnipotent (*dao*).²⁶

It must be noted here, that not all Chinese people believe that immortality was only possible in "the realm of Nowhere". A sizeable number believed that it could also be sought in the material world. In Chinese thought, there has not been a strict separation of spirit and matter, (just as there has not been the strict separation of the spiritual from the practical and the sacred vs the secular). Thus, many Chinese look forward to the survival of the whole person, including the body. The belief that humans could become Immortals led historically to the practice of alchemical experiments. The popular Taoist tradition is embellished with stories of wondrous drugs and wonder-working immortals, of levitations and bodily ascensions. This is especially described in early treatises such as the well-known *Ts'an-t'ung-ch'i* of Wei Po-yang (2nd century AD) and the *Pao-p'u-tzu*, written by Ko Hung. As Confucianism and Taoism became increasingly institutionalised, we also hear of the "heavenly immortals" that have ascended to celestial regions and of "earthly immortals" that roam about in sacred forests and mountains. After them come those human beings that appear to die, but actually only leave behind their physical frames.²⁷ It must be noted that although there is a pursuit of deathlessness in the popular imagination of the masses, this does not mean that there was no belief in the existence of a soul and in spiritual immortality.

Many Chinese also believe in reincarnation, especially those directly influenced by Buddhist doctrines. There is also a strong belief that the physical and spiritual worlds are interconnected. In Chinese mythology, the journey imagery is seen through the cline of existence. Immortality

²⁶ *The World and the Individual*, p. 247.

²⁷ There is a different story with the intellectuals. In the first century A.D., Wang Ch'ung, one of the more critical and influential philosophers in Chinese history, wrote a treatise to disprove the existence of spiritual beings. Fan chen (b. 450) attacked the Buddhist belief. Later Neo-Confucianists, from the 12th Century on, have unanimously attacked both the Taoist and the Buddhist belief in everlasting life. They believed that "the best course is to establish virtue, the next best is to establish achievement, and still the next best is to establish words. When these are abandoned with time, this may be called immortality."

and mortality is often blurred, and there are degrees of both states.²⁸ A popular belief is the notion that the living being could lighten the suffering of the dead ancestors and lead them to an early and pleasant rebirth – either on earth (as in Mahayana Buddhism) or in heaven (as in philosophical Taoism). In Buddhist terms, this was due to the notion of “transfer of merit” according to which one could do religious deeds for the sake of another. One can do charitable acts, perform religious services or undertake some religious discipline, and intentionally transfer the merit of that act into an account, as it were, for one’s relatives, or for all suffering beings. This corresponds to the Bahá’í belief that once a soul has departed from this physical world, it will behold in that next world whatever was hidden from it here. It will be able to “gaze on his fellows and peers, and those in the ranks above him, and those below”.²⁹ Bahá’ís are encouraged to pray for those who have died in order to assist their spiritual progress. Similarly, souls which have passed into the next world are believed to be able to assist people in the physical world. Thus, both the Chinese religion and the Bahá’í Faith possess a strong belief in the existence of an afterlife and the idea that the dead can help the living and vice versa.³⁰

The Phenomenon of Death

It is important to consider the phenomenon of death since it is the beginning or the end of one’s life, depending on one’s point of perspective. Its inevitability is the essential key to the understanding of human interest in the soul and the life hereafter. It evokes the master emotion of the human race and its occurrence forces us to reflect on the

²⁸ The great premieval gods are presumed to be immortal yet the Flame Emperor, brother of the Yellow Emperor, are all killed and died at death, though parts of them live on in a metamorphosed state. Metamorphosis is also the final destiny of other mythical figures who have died by execution or drowning such as Kun, who became a bear (some other variants are turtle and dragon), Kang-hsiang, who becomes a river god and Chig Wei, who turns into a bird. P’an Ku is transformed into the universe at the moment of death. Some mystical figures exist on the border of life and death, such as woman Ch’ou, who was born a corpse, and the hero Hsing T’ien, who continues to fight after his head has been lopped off (Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 181).

²⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 171.

³⁰ Yeo, Chinese Family Religion, *Singapore Bahá’í Studies Review*, Vol. 2, p. 112.

meaning of life. In the writings of Chuang-tzu, death has been portrayed as the "great awakening", the ultimate end of man which is the unity with the Tao:

When a man is dreaming, he does not realise he is dreaming. Sometimes he even dreams that he is awake and goes on to interpret the dream he has just had. Only when he awakes does he realise that it was all a dream. So, when the Great Awakening comes, one will realise that his life is a Big Dream. Yet fools consider themselves as awake, knowing for sure that "this is the prince and that is the shepard." Oh, what cocksureness! Confucius and yourself are both dreams; and I who say that you are dreams am likewise a dream.³¹

This dream imagery is strikingly similar to the way the Bahá'í scriptures to connote the value of life on the physical plane:

As to material happiness, it never exists; nay, it is but imagination, an image reflected in mirrors, a spectre and a shadow... It is something, which but slightly removes one's affliction... All the material blessings... bestow no delight on the mind, nor pleasure to the soul: nay, they furnish only the bodily wants...³²

For Chuang-tzu and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, life on the material plane is metaphorically only a dream. Therefore, they taught that the human being should value spiritual happiness more than material happiness, since they regard it to be the true basis of all human endeavour.

On another occasion and further on the subject of death, Chuang-tzu described death as the Great return to its creator and suggests that the destiny and well-being of the human being is to cultivate a relationship with the Source of Being. This is an idea not unfamiliar to the other religions, including the Bahá'í Faith:

³¹ Chuang-tzu, ch. 2, p.16 Quoted in Sih, *Chinese Humanism*, p. 76.

³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in McLean, *Dimensions in Spirituality*, p. 177.

Man's life in this world is like the flitting shadow of a white pony on its run as seen through a crack on the wall. A momentary flash, and it disappears! Like jets of water from the bubbling fountain, men spring out and return to their source. By one transformation they are born, by another transformation they die. At the point of dying, all living beings become miserable and men feel sad. But it is only the removal of the bow from the sheath, or the shedding off of a shell. There may be some confusion amidst the yielding to the change, but the spiritual soul and animal soul are taking their leave, and the body will follow them. This is the Great Return!³³

Another favoured metaphor in both Chinese and Bahá'í beliefs is that life is a journey and death a point of transition on that path. Death is only a transformation from one form of existence to another. This suggests to their followers that if human existence is a source of joy, why should death, another form of existence be the source of sorrow? In Taoist belief, human life is depicted as a "journey", a "pilgrimage" of the soul, the journey back to God. In the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to "the pathway of life is the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment."³⁴ In his writings, Chung-tzu also offers a vision of the soul as well as the body traversing different states of existence. His grief is captured in the famous story of the death of his wife.

Chuang Tzu's wife died. When Hui Tzu went to convey his condolences, he found Chuang Tzu sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing. "You lived with her, she brought up your children and grew old," said Hui Tzu. "It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing - this is going too far, isn't it?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not

³³ Chuang-tzu. Quoted in Sih, *Chinese Humanism*. pp. 75-76.

³⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp. 294, 336.

only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change took place and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter.³⁵

Chuang-tzu views the death of his wife as simply another phase of her journey. He recalls that there was a time in the womb and before, a time in this world and after. His reverence is more for the natural processes (the *Tao*) from which she had come and to which she had returned rather than a wish to be physically attached to her. A Bahá'í saying which recalls this viewpoint is the advice: "O Son of the Supreme! I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I have made the light to shed on thee its splendour. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom."³⁶ Death is simply another natural phase of one's journey and excessive grief is uncalled for in light of this perspective.

The Soul and the Nature of Man

Both Chinese and Bahá'í beliefs concur that the human being is the only being with self-consciousness, perception and intelligence, and hence endowed with the capacity for self-improvement and perfection. "All men", says Confucius, "are born righteous" (*Analects* 6:17). Similarly, in the Bahá'í scriptures: "man is the noblest of all beings, the sum of all perfection...."³⁷ For the Chinese, the human being is a species in his own right. He may share many similarities with animals but there is an essential difference between him and the wild beasts of the field. In other words, there is a difference in *kind* between man and animals, not just of *degree*. In the same way, the Chinese also believe that there is a difference in kind and not just in degree between man and God. In addition, some people may be "godlike" but they are not God or "divine man". As Confucius puts it, some men "are divine to man, but ordinary

³⁵ Quoted in Berling, *Death and Afterlife*, p. 184.

³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words, Arabic*, p. 32.

³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 195.

to God.”³⁸ Chuang-tzu develops this idea by adding that “the meanest being in heaven would be the best on earth; and the best on earth, the meanest in heaven.”³⁹ Both religions, although separated by a time of over 2,000 years have a sophisticated understanding of spiritual relativity.

Both Chinese and Bahá'í views concur that Man is different from animals for man is able to intellectualise and to understand abstractions. He is the only creature which can resist nature. For example, man can defy gravity through the invention of the aeroplane. Most important of all, in man can also be found the gift of self-consciousness. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the soul bestows upon man “conscious reflection” and “conscious intelligence.” 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: “God has created such a conscious spirit within him (man) that he is the most wonderful of all contingent beings.”⁴⁰ Animals do not have the self-image that human beings have. It is well known that when a chimpanzee, the most evolved of human primates, sees its own image reflected in a mirror, it often does not recognise itself. In fact the chimpanzee often thinks that it is another animal and tries to look behind the mirror for it. Animals are often incapable of recognising the image of its own body and therefore cannot come to know of itself as an animal. According to the Bahá'í texts, the gift of consciousness has been bestowed on man so that he can investigate the truth for himself, arrive at the choice of good and evil, apprehend the divine teachings, acquire and manifest the bounties of God.⁴¹

The main concern for Confucius was not therefore whether man had a soul or a certain human uniqueness, that was not found in other creatures on this material world, since this was already implicit in their overall understanding of the cosmos. Rather, the emphasis was on a practical focus, that is, how to put this distinctively human quality to good use. Chinese scholars such as Confucius and Mencius felt that since man is essentially noble, law and punishment should not be the main instrument

³⁸ See Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 85.

³⁹ See Chew, *The Chinese Religion*, p. 85. These beliefs are also found in the Bahá'í Faith. See chapters 46, 48 of *Some Answered Questions* by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

⁴⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 258, 17, 58, 51.

⁴¹ cf. MacLean, *Dimensions in Spirituality*, p. 160.

in controlling man's behaviour and actions. What should be emphasised was rather his sense of shame, something which must come from the inner self, the conscience. This sense of shame is probably emphasised more in China than in any other cultural tradition of the world. To label a man "without shame" is to degrade him to the level of animals. Confucius himself said that a sense of shame is more powerful than the fear of punishment. (*Analects* 2:3). Interestingly, the Bahá'í Faith states that the presence of shame prevents man from doing what is unworthy and unseemly but warns that this sense of shame, effective as a deterrent, is confined to only to a few people. By itself, shame is not sufficient to prevent the occurrence of immoral deeds and the Bahá'í Faith advocates that the offender should, in addition, be punished by the relevant authorities.⁴²

A related question at this point is how one may reconcile the intrinsic nobility of man, proclaimed by both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith, with the occurrence of evil deeds? In the Bahá'í Faith, evil results when the soul, originally pure, becomes corrupted. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, "It is like the nose, which at first smells any odour, but after a prolonged exposition to an odour, it no longer perceives it,"⁴³ and moreover, "... every individual is born holy and pure, and only thereafter may before defiled."⁴⁴ "As the soul progresses, they will begin to differ one from the other, some achieving the highest stations, some a middle one, others remaining at the lowest stage of being."⁴⁵ This explanation bears similarity to the ideas of Mencius who explained that the occurrence of bad deeds are chiefly a result of environmental influences.

In good years the young people often acquire a habit of dependence. In bad years, the young people often take to violence. This is not due to the difference in their natural endowments as conferred by heaven. It is due to the different

⁴² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Chapter 74.

⁴³ Consider the words of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith: "In this day the tastes of man have changed, and their power of perception hath altered. The contrary winds of the world, and its colours, have provoked a cold, and deprived men's nostrils of the sweet savours of Revelation" (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 119).

⁴⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 190.

⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 171.

things by which they allow their minds to be ensnared and engulfed.

Take for instance, the barley. Let the seed be sown and covered up. The ground being the same, and the time of planting again the same, it will grow luxuriantly and ripen in the fullness of time. If there be inequalities of produce, it must be due to the thickness and thinness of the soil, to the sufficiency and insufficiency of rain and dew, and to the different ways of farming.

In fact, all things which belong to the same kind of species are similar to each other. Why should we doubt in regard to man, as if he were a solitary exception to the rule?⁴⁶

To summarise, the soul or vital spirit which man possesses, distinguishes him from the other animals in the world. He is a species in his own right. The Chinese view of man as the noblest being in the universe parallels the Bahá'í view. Man is different from the animals for he is able to intellectualise, to understand abstractions and to create something which had not existed before. He is a special being in the cosmos, intrinsically noble. The evil deeds that occur are explained away as a result of habitual addiction or more precisely to the lack of a spiritual education.

The Education of the Soul

There is a perception in the Chinese tradition that life is a journey to the ultimate and that many things will occur along the journey which will alter the end result of the journey for the better or worse. As a result of this perception, moral education becomes a very important enterprise. True education is moral education because it teaches man to differentiate good from bad, the beneficial from the harmful and right from wrong. In the *Book of Great Learning* by Confucius, a man has to be cultivated, "cut and then filed, chiselled and then ground." This makes it, once again, aligned with the Bahá'í Faith. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, "Were

⁴⁶ Mencius, bk 6, pt 1, ch 6 arts. 1-7.

there no educator, all souls would remain savage, and were it not for the teachers, the children would be ignorant creatures.⁴⁷ "The essence of man" writes Bahá'u'lláh "is hidden in his individuality which must appear though the polish of education. This is man's glory, and all else which depends upon other things is not a part of man himself."⁴⁸

The Chinese sages have taught that the moron who is fond of learning is better than an intelligent man who does not exert himself.⁴⁹ In the Bahá'í writings, education is greatly emphasised and encouraged. In the Bahá'í Faith, the fundamental importance and limitless possibilities of education are announced in the clearest terms: "Every child is potentially the light of the world - and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance."⁵⁰ As Bahá'u'lláh puts it, "knowledge is as wings to man's life and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone."⁵¹ We may conclude here then that the erstwhile Chinese sage, just like the prophets of the great religions, reveals to man how he should behave on the material plane. Indeed, the whole Confucian enterprise is directed toward the development of the moral individual. The pursuit of knowledge is inseparable from the quest for moral perfection. The ancient Chinese always believed that morality should be the goal of education because it was morality that moved the universe. This stress on moral education by the great Chinese sages, and which comprises what has been called the "Great Chinese Tradition", is in keeping with the supreme aim of all the founders of the great religions.

However, it must be noted that, while both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith stress education as a means of bringing out true human qualities, there is a distinctive difference. For the Bahá'ís, the prevention of immoral acts will not come just from moral education per se but only through a moral education which begins with the recognition of the existence of God. Bahá'ís believe that man is more self-centred than other-centred. Thus, education is not enough if it is not sustained by the

⁴⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 126.

⁴⁸ "The Federation of the World" In *Star of the West*, xiv, 297.

⁴⁹ cf. Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 130.

⁵⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 130.

⁵¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 51.

fear of God. In other words, man's sense of shame can only be effective when it is sustained and inspired by the school of religion. In the Chinese religion, while education and the cultivation of shame are emphasised, the question of the existence of God takes a back seat. It is always assumed as part of the universe of existence but not explicitly in the foreground as a means of moulding characters.

The Tao of Happiness

If the true man is the soul, how is this related to the perennial quest for happiness in life? In the Great Chinese Tradition, the way to attain true happiness is to follow the way of the Tao. In the *Tao-te ching*:

If I have a grain of wisdom,
I will walk along the great Tao
And only fear to stray (ch 53).

The nature of great virtue is to follow Tao along (ch. 21). In being in harmony with Tao, everything is made whole. This is echoed in Confucius, "A resolute scholar and a man of humanity will never seek to live at the expense of injuring humanity. He would rather sacrifice his life in order to realise humanity (*Analects* 15:8). For Mencius, the way to attain happiness is "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. (*Mencius* 8A:1).

Such injunctions are very familiar to the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Whoso keepeth the commandments of God shall attain everlasting felicity."⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds, "... human happiness consists only in drawing closer to the threshold of the almighty God, in securing the peace and well-being of every individual member, high and low alike, of the human race..."⁵³ Bahá'ís also believe that if the human spirit is attracted to the Kingdom of God, if the inner sight becomes opened

⁵² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 289.

⁵³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p. 60.

and the spiritual feelings dominate, he will see the immortality of the spirit as clearly as he sees the sun.

For the Chinese mystics, simply keeping in harmony with the Tao is not enough. Many have longed for spontaneous oneness with Tao, "to become one with the great thoroughfare."⁵⁴ This mystic attraction may be referred to as the attraction between the lover and his beloved. Bahá'u'lláh writes; "... the lover hath no desire save union with his beloved."⁵⁵ The Bahá'í texts very often describe love through metaphors drawn from the experience of human love between a man and a woman. In the path of the spiritual search, the lover is ready to give up the attributes of his natal self that he may take on divine qualities.⁵⁶

How then does one achieve the Tao of happiness? For the religious Taoist, the main obstacle to this end are the senses and the intellect which continuously support a separate notion of ego through the presence of emotions and desires. Mystics therefore apply techniques e.g. fasting, purification and meditation to empty themselves so as to be one with the Tao.⁵⁷ The following shamanitic passages in the *Chuang-tzu* include the lyrical description of the holy or perfect man, and gives some mystical advice on how to cultivate the soul:

There is a Holy Man living on the distant Ku-she Mountain, with skin like ice or snow... He does not eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, mounts the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond four seas. By concentrating his spirit, he can protect creatures from sickness and plague and make the harvest plentiful (Watson, *Complete works of Chuang Tzu* 33).

(Yen Hui said) "May I ask what the fasting of the mind is?" Confucius said: "Make your will one! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind

⁵⁴ *Chuang-tzu*, 6.

⁵⁵ See Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, Chapter 1.

⁵⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism*.

stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind (Watson, *Complete Works of Chuang-tzu* 57-58).

For the philosophical Taoist, absolute happiness comes with transcending the distinctions between the physical self (the ego) and the universe, by perfect union with the Tao.⁵⁸ In the *Chuang-tzu*, it involves a higher level of knowledge, that of wisdom, which goes beyond the distinction of things, including that of life and death. This may be called mystical knowledge, since it is not acquired by ordinary means. Indeed, it comes only with "forgetting" the knowledge of all things – especially that of the self. The *Chuang-tzu* mentions a requirement of the emptying of the senses and of the mind itself, a preparatory state leading to the presence of the superhuman and divine.⁵⁹

In the Bahá'í Faith, there is an acknowledgement of inner perception or intuitive knowledge. The Bahá'í texts very often refer to an "inner eye and vision", an "inner ear and hearing", as well as "inner mind" and 'Abdu'l-Bahá always mentioned two instruments – mind and heart – as factors of spiritual progress.⁶⁰ The soul can know "through instruments and organs" and without them.⁶¹ The heart might be viewed as the instrument by which the soul perceives spiritual knowledge. This kind of knowledge is immediate, independent of any physical instrument, reflection or reasoning and leads man directly to the "knowledge of being". It is insight or intuition and is a power shared by all mankind. However, because it is seldom used, it has atrophied, "... if the spiritual qualities of the soul, open to the breath of the Divine spirit, are never used, they become atrophied, enfeebled, and at last incapable."⁶² Very few people make a deliberate, conscious and methodical use of their insight.

⁵⁸ Watson, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ See Chew, *Life Death and Immortality*, for an account of Taoist attempts to surmount the physical plane through a variety of practices.

⁶⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 187-270.

⁶¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 227.

⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 227.

The Taoist religion has always acknowledged the power of intuition and much of the history of religious Taoism are actually endeavours to tap this power so as to achieve a mystical unification with Tao. Taoist practice often consists of attempts to empty the ordinary ego-centred mind, a cleansing of sensually-based thoughts and replacing them with doctrines and concepts of its mystical tradition. While the Bahá'í Faith does not encourage such a single-minded preoccupation in the pursuit of the spiritual path, it does prescribe a systematic use of this extraordinary cognitive power, and points to meditation as the specific practice through which this power may be both used and developed.⁶³ "I now assure thee... that if thy mind become empty and pure from every mention and thought and thy heart attracted wholly to the kingdom of God, forget all else besides God and come in communion with the Spirit of God, then the Holy Spirit will assist thee with a power which will enable thee to penetrate all things, and a Dazzling Spark which enlightens all sides, a Brilliant Flame in the zenith of the heaven, will teach thee that which thou dost not know of the facts of the universe and of the divine doctrine".⁶⁴ For Bahá'ís, this "emptiness" and "fasting of the mind" mentioned in the *Chuang-tzu* is primarily the choice of the soul in shutting itself off from the world of material attachment and turning towards the world of the spirit. It is primarily the spiritual progress resulting from the soul's endeavours in making the necessary sacrifices in the material world that will help it grow in the spiritual world.

Free will and the Question of Justice

Spiritual happiness is the path which the human being may choose by the exercise of his free will. For Mencius, "the will is the leader of the vital spirit; and the vital spirit pervades and animates the body. The will is the ruler, and the vital spirit is subordinate to it." His advice therefore is "Maintain firm the will, and do not let the vital spirit grow beyond its control." For as he explains, "when the will is concentrated, it moves the vital spirit. But when the vital spirit is concentrated, it would move the will. The important thing is to inform the vital spirit with the spirit of

⁶³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "You cannot apply the name "man" to any being void of this faculty of meditation; without it he would be a mere animal, lower than the beasts."

⁶⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets*, p. 706.

justice, thus keeping it in the service of will." Mencius taught that when the vital spirit is nourished by the spirit of justice, it is lifted up to a higher plane, and, instead of weakening, it grows immensely.⁶⁵

Mencius' "will" and "vital spirit" may be compared to the concept of free will and the soul in the Bahá'í Faith. In the Bahá'í Faith, the choice of good and evil belongs to man and is called "free will". 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that God himself cannot compel the soul to become spiritual, and that the exercise of human will is necessary.⁶⁶ In explaining this human condition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the analogy of a ship. "... this condition is like that of a ship which is moved by the power of the wind or steam; if this power ceases, the ship cannot move at all. Nevertheless the rudder of the ship turns it to either side and the power of the steam moves it in the desired direction... in all the action or inaction of man, he receives power from the help of God; but the choice of good or evil belongs to the man himself."⁶⁷

The exercise of free will and choice implies also the consequences that must result from one's decision. All religions have taught that reward and punishment are associated with good and bad choices. Since each individual soul will bear the consequences of the actions deriving from free will, the Chinese sages advise the cultivation of qualities which are in harmony with *Tao*. They warned of the soul's journey to either heaven or hell at the point of death.

The basic thrust of the *T'ai-shang kan-ying p'ien* (the Treatise of the Great Exalted One on Response and Retribution), which is part of the Taoist Canon, has exercised widespread influence over the centuries.⁶⁸ It tells of the existence of a superior power who watches over the behaviour of all, to reward good and evil. Accordingly, all human beings are responsible for their own good or bad fortune, as each deed, good or bad will have its retribution, which comes with the judgement of the superior power, the *shen* (diety) in charge of life-span. Taoist texts

⁶⁵ Chew, *Chinese Religion*. p. 90.

⁶⁶ J. M. Grundy quoted in *Ten days in the Light of Akka*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 249-50.

⁶⁸ See the translation by Teitaro Suzuki and Dr Paul Carus, *T'ai -shang Kan-ying P'ien* Chicago: Open Court 1906.

are explicit with how records of one's deeds are kept. Taoist scripture speaks of Gods that reside in the human body, especially of astral deities, in particular one who resides in the human head and keeps a record of good and bad deeds. There are also others, such as those residing in the abdomen, who control the human life span. And, external to the human body, there is the stove god, always keeping silent watch over the household.

What may be the equivalent of heaven is found in *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a chapter dating from the first century BC. It presents one of the earliest and most elaborate descriptions of the earthly paradise of *Kuun-lun*. The highest mountains of *Kuun-lun* in the west were believed to form an epicenter of the universe, where Heaven and Earth meet in perfect equipoise. Like Mount Olympus, it is the place where the gods descend from the sky to that part of the human world, which most nearly replicates the paradisiacal state of Heaven. This earthly paradise is guarded from intrusion by a fierce array of mythical beasts, such as the *K'ai-ming*, which, with its nine heads and feline body, recalls the fabled nine-tailed fox and the nine-headed *Hsiang Liu* monster slaughtered by *Yü*.⁶⁹

Heaven has also become a bureaucracy similar to the imperial bureaucracy on earth. It had a number of bureaus where worthy people could get an "appointment" with immortals who hold official posts in the bureaus.⁷⁰ On the other hand, Taoist descriptions of hell, just as those of heaven, are heavily influenced by Buddhist beliefs. Chinese hells are usually said to be ten in number. Each is ruled by a judge, surrounded by ministers and attendants, who implement his decisions. In these hells, reminiscent of the judicial and prison system of China, justice is impartially meted out and punishments are usually described as corporal, doled out with the assistance of torture instruments. Reminiscent of the

⁶⁹ A different paradise from mountainous K'un-lun is found in the text *Lieh Tzu*, (4th century AD) Here the paradise is in the east and consists of islands inhabited by immortals known as *hsien* and *sheng*, or transcendent beings. These terms emerged in the post-Han era, and a considerable literature, part mythological, part legendary, part lore and part fiction – grew up around the concept of the *hsien*-immortal (See Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 183).

⁷⁰ Berling, *Death and Afterlife*

Catholic purgatory, the soul of the deceased goes through the series of hells until it is ready for rebirth.

Pure Land Buddhists, a popular Buddhist sect with the Chinese, also introduced the notion of rebirth not into heaven or hell, but directly in the Pure Land of Bliss established by Amitabha Buddha. This is not a permanent paradise but a realm devoted to the nurturance of the Buddhist Faith. It was the ideal environment in which to achieve Buddhist enlightenment, and eventually, Nirvana. Although this is quite a sophisticated belief, millions of Chinese believed in the Pure Land as a kind of paradise and fervently hoped for rebirth there.

For the literati, rewards are viewed in a more sophisticated fashion. The question of whether life exists after death is always carefully left out of the discussion. Confucian scholars believe that the sage can organise the various elements in himself to be in perfect harmony with the environment and thus achieve immortality. Immortality here is not a physical one, but in the sense of the influence of the individual. Chinese thinkers do not live for themselves, but as fathers to their children or as sons. Although their bodies may perish at death, many parts of their lives will continue like blood and flesh in their children. Their children will continue their interest, their words and their contributions to society.

It is interesting to note that both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith emphasize that the human being will be judged for their deeds, not beliefs. Both agree that if a human being strays from the path of Heaven, cruelty, deceitfulness, selfishness, fear, anguish will emerge. In short, anarchy will prevail both on a personal and societal basis. Of such souls, Bahá'u'lláh said that they abide in "the abode of dust" or in the "plane of heedlessness".⁷¹ While hell and heaven take on rather concrete forms in the Chinese religion, in the Bahá'í Faith (as with the Chinese literati), it is possible to view Heaven and Hell conceptually rather than literally. Here, hell and heaven are points denoting "nearness" to or "farness" from the Creator when the soul passes the boundary of death.⁷²

⁷¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 4-5.

⁷² In the Bahá'í Faith, Hell and Heaven can also be metaphorically experienced on the physical plane.

Conclusion

What we have seen is a brief overview of the rich panoply of Chinese beliefs and practices regarding the soul and how they compare or contrast with Bahá'í beliefs. We have seen how Chinese practices and beliefs are not always easily reconciled. In the Chinese religion there is no discourse on the nature of Heaven (*Tian* 天) or God but Heaven or God is often in the background. It is Heaven that frames everything that man does. Although there is a belief in the survival of the soul and a life after death, many Chinese people also attempt to seek immortality on the material plane. But while stressing the nobility of man and the kindling of conscience as a deterrent, China's history is full of torture and cruelty. The Confucian scholar will say keep away from spirits but each succeeding Confucian century sees the elaboration of rites connected with ancestor worship. While the Chinese long for the hope of a mystical union with Tao and of journeying to the Western mountains, they also love the good life on earth and will do everything to preserve their life on the material plane. While death is not a favourite topic of discussion either in private or public life, the Chinese makes extensive preparations for their death and the extension of their influence through their progeny. It is this paradoxical diversity that reflects the eclectic nature of the Chinese religion.

On the other hand, there are also consistencies that one can expect in a religion, for example, the concern for well-being, the strong sense of moral justice, the responsibility of the living not just for themselves but for their ancestors, the stress on moral education, the importance of living a life in harmony in Tao for fear of punishment in the next world, and so forth.

To conclude, it is clear that in both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith, a "vital spirit" or a soul exists and it is an unknowable but immortal entity. There is an awareness that death heralds a gateway to something far more significant. The quest for happiness is somehow linked to a devotion to God or related to its proximity with the Tao. Whatever man chooses to do in this world, will affect the progress of his soul in the next world. While man may be born noble, he is apt to stray if he is not guided from birth and both religions have arrived at the conclusion that education is of the utmost importance if the soul is to

progress spiritually. Last but not least, both religions believe in the interconnectedness of souls. The living are surrounded by and connected to the dead; while the dead influence and continue to connect to the living.

There are, of course, differences in the two religions. The Bahá'í Faith has much more explicit references to the soul than the Chinese religion since it has a Holy Book and a prophet figure who has expounded at greater length on the subject. Many of the differences are literal rather than conceptual, for example, they lie in a different terminology such as the "vital spirit" and "the soul". Both believe in the notions of immortality, of the link between a material and non-material world, of a "heaven" and a "hell" although both have embellished their beliefs in distinctively different ways.

The nature of the soul and the life beyond are elusive and exploring the subject on a philosophical or intellectual level is to some degree futile. As Bahá'u'lláh exclaims, "how can a spider snare a phoenix in his web?"⁷³ This reminds us of another saying 2,500 years earlier by Lao-tzu: "If Tao can be taoed, it is not Tao. If its name can be named, it's not its name."⁷⁴ Perhaps that is why in China's rich and long history, few have ventured into this area. All we can say with confidence is the striking fact that there is in both religions a cosmic hunger, a need to be related to all things, including the infinitude of the universe. There is an awareness of the supernatural, the existence of a great overarching power, and the perennial wish to reach and communicate with the Great Unknown despite its remoteness:

O my Master, O my master!
 You mingle and blend all things without being
 ■ harsh:
 You bestow blessings upon endless generations
 without being charitable;
 You are older than the highest antiquity without
 being aged;

⁷³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 33.

⁷⁴ *Tao-te ching*, ch. 1.

You brood and sustain the whole universe and carve
all things into an infinite variety of forms without
resorting to artificial skill.

This is what I call the Joy of Heaven.

*(Chuang-Tzu)*⁷⁵

O Lord! Thou Whose bounty granteth wishes
I stand before Thee, all save Thee forgetting
Grant that the mote of knowledge in my spirit
Escape desire and the lowly clay;
Grant that Thine ancient gift, this drop of wisdom,
Merge with Thy mighty sea.

*(Bahá'u'lláh)*⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Chuang-tzu ch. 6 p. 44, ch 13.

⁷⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 54.

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