

Chinese Traditional Religions

With around 400 million adherents Chinese folk religion is the third major religion in the world comprising about 6% of world population. In China, more than 30% of the population adheres to Shenism or Taoism. In Taiwan, Shenism is highly institutionalised and adhered to by 33% of the population. In Singapore about 8.5% of the total population is Taoist, and 10% of the Chinese Singaporeans identify as Taoists. In Malaysia, 0.6% of Chinese Malaysians are Shenists-Taoists, corresponding to 3% of the whole country population. In Indonesia, Taosu Agung Kusumo, leader of the Majelis Agama Tao Indonesia claims there are 5 million Taoist followers in the country as at 2009.

Chinese folk religion retains traces of some of ancestral primal religious belief systems such as animism and shamanism, which include the veneration of (and communication with) the Sun, the Moon, the Earth, the Heaven and various stars, as well as communication with animals. It has been practiced by the Chinese people for thousands of years, and since the start of the Common Era alongside Buddhism, Taoism and various other religions.

Rituals, devotional worship, myths, sacred re-enactment, festivals and various other practices associated with different folk gods and goddesses form an important part of Chinese culture today. The veneration of secondary gods does not conflict with an individual's chosen religion, but is accepted as a complementary adjunct, particularly to Taoism.

Some mythical figures in folk culture have been integrated into Chinese Buddhism, as in the case of *Miao Shan*. She is generally thought to have influenced the beliefs about the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin. This bodhisattva originally was based upon the Indian counterpart Avalokiteshvara. Androgynous in India, this bodhisattva over centuries became a female figure in China and Japan. Guanyin is one of the most popular bodhisattvas to which people pray.

There are many free folk religion texts such as [Journeys to the Underworld](#) distributed in temples, or sold in gods, material or vegetarian shops. Temples for Shenist worship are different from Taoist temples and Buddhist monasteries, being administered by local managers associations and worship communities.

Shenist temples can be distinguished into miao (廟), called "joss houses", "deity houses" or simply "temples" in English, and ci (祠), called "ancestral halls" or simply "temples" in English. Both the terms actually mean "temple" in Chinese, and they've been used interchangeably many times. However *miao* is the general Chinese term for "temple" understood as "place of worship", and can be used for places of worship of any religion. In Chinese folk religion it is mostly associated to temples which enshrine nature gods and patron gods. Instead *ci* is the specific term for temples enshrining ancestry gods, human beings apotheosized as gods.

"Joss" is a corrupted version of the Portuguese word for "god", *deus*. "Joss house" was in common use in English in western North America during frontier times, when joss houses were a common feature of Chinatowns. The name "joss house" describes the environment of worship. Joss sticks, a kind of incense, are burned inside and outside of the house.

Shenist temples are distinct from Taoist Temples (观 *guan* or 道观 *daoguan*) and Buddhist Monasteries (寺 *si*) in that they are established and administered by local managers, associations and worship communities; only few or none priests stay in folk temples. Shenist temples are usually small, very colourful (by contrast with Taoist temples which by tradition should be black and white in color, and Buddhist temples which are characterised by a prevalence of yellow and red tones), and decorated with traditional figures on their roofs (dragons and deities), although some evolve into significant structures. Other terms associated to templar structures of Shenism and other religions in China are 宮 *gong* ("palace"), often used for large temples (even if mostly Taoist) built by imperial officials, and 院 *yuan*, a general term for "sanctuary", "shrine".

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