

# 8. Traditional Chinese

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## Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese Folk Religion: Overview FAQ

### 1. When, where, and how did Chinese religions originate?

Three main religious traditions can trace their origins to China: Chinese folk religion, Confucianism, and Taoism. They all evolved from ancient East Asian cultures and developed into unique belief systems. Many practitioners identify with more than one tradition: someone may practice both Chinese folk religion and Confucianism.

- ✎ **Chinese folk religion** is not based on particular founders, creeds, theologies, or organizations. Rather, it is a series of beliefs and rituals that have been transmitted from generation to generation by the Chinese people. As such, it dates back thousands of years to ancient Chinese spiritual practices and does not have a single date of origin.
- ✎ **Confucianism** developed from the teachings of the Chinese sage and philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE). Though his teachings were not accepted during his lifetime, Confucianism was adopted as China’s State Philosophy and the code of ethics for the Chinese people in the first century BCE. Note that while many Chinese value Confucian virtues and strive to practice them, it is uncommon for someone to self-identify as “Confucian.”
- ✎ **Taoism** has evolved throughout Chinese history. While its roots can be traced to prehistoric Chinese religions, many consider the origin of its philosophy to be the composition of the *Tao Te Ching* in the late fourth-early third century BCE, while the religion formally developed in the second century BCE.

In addition to these three Chinese belief systems, it is also important to note that Buddhism has also long been practiced in China. For more information, see the Buddhism chapter.

## 2. Do Chinese religions have sacred texts? What are they called?

☞ **Chinese folk religion** has no official sacred texts, although some believers view Confucian and Taoist texts as sacred.

☞ **Confucianism's** sacred texts are the *Five Classics* and *Four Books*. The first volume of the Four Books is the *Lun Yu* (Analects of Confucius). It is the most revered Confucian text and contains his principal teachings as compiled by the second generation of his followers.

The other three volumes are the *Chung Yung* (Doctrine of the Mean), *Ta Hsueh* (Great Learning), and *Meng Tzu* (Mencius). In addition, Confucian tradition teaches that there are Five Classics that were revered by Confucius: *Shu Ching* (Classic of History), *Shih Ching* (Classic of Odes), *I Ching* (Classic of Changes), *Ch'un Chiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), and *Li Chi* (Classic of Rites).

☞ The most important **Taoist** text is the *Tao Te Ching* (The Way and Its Power). Its origins are debated; some contend that it was written by Lao Tzu during the sixth century, while others believe that it was written by anonymous authors over several centuries. Most Taoists consider the *Tao Te Ching* to be the essential guide to living a full spiritual and ethical life.

There are also additional Taoist texts on which different sects choose to focus. These are often revealed transmissions from perfected beings, saints, and avatars who now live in higher realms and reveal the secret workings of the cosmos.

## 3. What are the core beliefs of Chinese religions?

☞ **Chinese folk religion** is largely *animistic* (i.e., it teaches that objects found in nature, like trees, rivers, rocks, and mountains have souls). Ancestors may also be considered sacred, as may famous cultural heroes, either from myth or history; on occasion, nature deities are also revered. The religion is based on the assumption that the spirit world influences the course of human events.

The natural phenomena are understood as the product of the cosmological forces of *yin* (dark, feminine) and *yang* (light, masculine). When yin and yang are balanced, there will be harmony, manifested in social and familial stability and prosperity. Also necessary for balance are proper relationships between the earth and the *ch'i* (immanent powers); heaven and the *shen* (spirits); and humanity and the *kuei* (ghosts).

☞ **Confucianism** teaches that humans must try to align their behavior with the *Tao* ("the way of nature"). Like Chinese

folk traditions, Confucianism also believes in the forces of yin and yang, and teaches that the tension between yin and yang results in an endless process of change, which is the natural order. The goal of practitioners is to flow with this process and align their behavior and society as a whole with the natural order.

Confucianism also emphasizes the importance of relationships and of sympathizing with others, especially during times of suffering. For many Confucians, the highest virtue is *Ren*, or benevolence toward others. Confucianism teaches that in order to achieve the ultimate personal and social harmony in life, one must maintain the five proper relationships: ruler to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, older to younger, and friend to friend.

- **Taoists** have a hierarchy of deities, which include gods and goddesses, immortal humans, and ancestors. There are also deities for every occasion and element of nature. Presiding over the entire pantheon are *San Ch'ing* (“The Three Pure Ones”), the highest deities.

The concept of Tao is arguably the most important belief in Taoism. However, it is believed that Tao cannot be described in words. Tao is the ultimate, inexpressible, indefinable source of creation that gives rise to all beings and influences the natural order. Taoist theology focuses on the doctrine of non-action (*wu-wei*), the goal of which is a state of perfect accord with the Tao, or *p'u* (simplicity).

#### 4. What are the core practices of Chinese religions?

- **Chinese folk religion** is often characterized as ritualistic — emphasizing proper external devotion over internal worship. Through offering incense, paper talismans, or food, practitioners draw the gods near to ward off negative influences, ask for future blessings, or give thanks for blessings received. Before rituals, it is common for believers to dress in clean clothing or to alter their diet or fast to enter a state of moral correctness and ritual purity.
- It is difficult to codify the core practices of **Confucianism** because it is primarily an ethical system whose practices vary depending on the believer. However, it is often argued that the central purpose behind Confucian practices is to uphold harmony in the “Five Relationships”: ruler to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, older to younger, and friend to friend. For example, a parent owes a child education, care, and moral guidance, while a child owes a parent obedience, respect, and care in old age. Though obedience and deference are demanded from subordinates in all five relationships, harmonious relationships are viewed as mutually beneficial.

- ☞ True understanding of **Taoist** practice can only be obtained through study with a Taoist master because many of the religion's practical elements are taught through an oral tradition. However, there are some practices that are common and well-known. Recitation of the Tao Te Ching is an important spiritual practice for many Taoists. Reciting the words is believed to have the power to banish evil spirits, bring good luck, prolong life, and cure sickness. Meditation is a prominent practice, and it is thought to give the believer mental space to know the Tao directly. Controlled breathing is also an important practice, as it is the most easily observed form of the flow of energy in the universe.

### 5. What are the Chinese religions' important holidays? How are they celebrated?

- ☞ The most important holiday celebrated in **Chinese folk religion** is the New Year. The Chinese New Year is celebrated over a period of two weeks at the beginning of the Chinese lunar year (which falls in late January-early February). Celebration includes rituals, which may include the worship of Heaven and Earth, worship of gods important to the family, and veneration of ancestors. At the conclusion of these rites, it is common to hold a family feast to reaffirm the family's unity. The celebration ends with a lantern festival, in which people hang glowing lanterns in temples and carry them in an evening parade. Additionally, it is customary to wear red, as that color symbolizes fire and is believed to drive away bad luck.
- ☞ Two important holidays for **Confucianism** are Confucius Day and the Chinese New Year (see above). The former celebrates the birth of Confucius and has been celebrated for thousands of years. On this day, Confucian ritualists perform commemorative rituals in temples or halls following a strict 37-step ceremonial sequence, including elaborate dances and a memorial service. In China, Confucius Day coincides with National Teacher's Day in honor of Confucius' pedagogical contributions to civilization.
- ☞ The most widely celebrated holiday in **Taoism** is the Chinese New Year (see above). Taoists celebrate the Three Pure Ones with an offering of sweets, an exchange of gifts, and a feast. On the first day of the festival, there is a Dragon/Lion Dance, which celebrates immortality and union with the spirits. There are other festivals throughout the year which celebrate the birth of deities and the solstices. Of particular importance is the celebration of Lao Tzu's birthday on the 15th day of the second lunar month; it is considered to be the most important Taoist holy day.

## 6. How many adherents of Chinese religions are there in the United States?

### Are they located in a particular region?

There are an estimated 3.6 million Chinese Americans, however, it is unknown how many practice Chinese religions. Additionally, there is no estimate for how many non-Chinese Americans practice these religions. The cities with the largest Chinese American populations are Boston, New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and Houston.

## 7. What are the main sects or denominations within Chinese religions?

- Though **Chinese folk religion** and **Confucianism** are extremely diverse, there are no formal divisions within these traditions.
- **Taoism** has no central organization or hierarchy, which makes naming sects within the tradition tenuous. Some divide Northern Taoism (practiced in mainland China) from Southern Taoism (practiced in Taiwan and South China). Others divide the religion into three different organizations: literati, communal, and self-cultivation. Literati Taoists are often members of the educated elite who focus on Taoist ideals expressed by ancient thinkers' classical texts. Communal Taoists include members from all levels of society and have priestly hierarchies and regular rituals. Self-cultivation Taoists focus on personal well-being, peace of mind, and spiritual immortality. However, none of these divisions are rigid.

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## Intersections with Health Care: FAQ

### 1. Do these religious traditions have a particular view about what causes illness?

#### Are there illness-related rituals?

Traditionally, Chinese medicine teaches that health is a state of spiritual and physical harmony with nature. For Confucians, harmony is disrupted if someone fails to observe the five basic relationships of society. In Taoism, harmony results from a proper balance between humans and nature. In all three traditions, a disruption of this harmony can manifest itself in illness.

Taoism and Confucianism also teach that the body is composed of five solid organs (*ts'ang*, the liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys) and five hollow organs (*fu*, the gallbladder, stomach, large intestine, small intestine, and bladder). These organs have a complex relationship that helps maintain harmony within the body.

Illness-related issues should be discussed with great sensitivity. According to Chinese tradition, discussing problems and negative events aloud can bring bad luck.

**2. Do these religious traditions prescribe a particular type of dress for men or women?**

Patients may have amulets that protect their health and ward off evil spirits. Amulets usually contain a charm painted with an idol or Chinese characters. Amulets may be worn in the hair, pinned on clothing, hung over a door, or hung on a wall. Jade is also thought to have a positive correlation with health and patients may wear jade charms.

Neither the amulets nor jade charms should be removed without the patient's consent. If consent is given, they should be treated with extra care.

**3. Are there any prayer, ceremonial, or health-related rituals that are likely to occur during the patient's stay?**

Healing practices are highly ritualized, often involving clergy who preside over the manipulation of written texts. Rituals may also include water, plants, tree species, swords, seals, talismans, and mirrors.

Traditional Chinese medicine employs acupuncture, in which the body is punctured with special needles by a trained practitioner. The needles are inserted into 365 points on the skin. By inserting needles into the proper points, the acupuncturist can unblock the flow of *q'i* (the vital energy that gives life to all living matter), which restores health. Given the strong Chinese influence in Taoism and Confucianism, patients of these religions may also choose acupuncture treatment.

Traditional Chinese medicine also uses *moxibustion* to restore the balance; it is believed to be particularly useful during labor and delivery. In moxibustion, a properly trained healer heats pulverized wormwood and applies it directly to the skin on certain key points.

Another Chinese traditional healing practice called *cupping* may also be performed. The practitioner burns the oxygen out of a small glass (thus creating a vacuum) and applies the glass it to the patient's skin. This is believed to increase circulation and is often done to treat lung congestion. Cupping may leave bruise-like marks on the patient's body.

Medicinal herbs are also important in Chinese medicine. The most widely used is ginseng, which is believed to stimulate digestion, work as a sedative, help faintness after childbirth, and restore health to frail children. It is used in many forms, including powder, in broth or a brew, or raw. If a provider believes that the herbs will interfere with a patient's Western medical treatment, communication between the patient and provider is essential.

**4. Do these religious traditions have hygiene or washing requirements?**

No, Chinese folk religion, Confucianism, and Taoism do not prescribe particular hygiene or washing requirements. Adherents will most likely follow the cultural customs.

**5. Are there any dietary restrictions?**

Diet is more likely to be based on culture rather than religion. However, those following a strictly religious diet will balance foods that are *hot* and *cold*. Whether a food is considered hot or cold is not based on temperature, but on type. For example, most fruit and vegetables are cold, while red meat and spices are hot. Certain ailments may require avoiding one or the other type of food.

**6. Are there any medications, treatments, or procedures that adherents of these traditions cannot accept?**

For cultural reasons, practitioners of Chinese religions may resist having blood drawn and, because of its unfamiliarity, traditional Chinese physicians do not use blood samples in diagnosis, but rely on external evaluation.

Health care providers may not know when a patient is unsatisfied with a particular practice or situation; some patients of Asian backgrounds may choose to remain stoic and not voice complaints. This does not necessarily mean that nothing is wrong, but providers may need to ask more questions to ensure that the patient is satisfied.

**7. Can patients from these traditions see providers of the opposite sex?**

Many patients will not resist seeing a provider of the opposite sex; however, each should be asked for their preference.

**8. Can adherents of these traditions donate organs or accept donor organs?**

Given the resistance to drawing blood and the reluctance to have intrusive surgical procedures, there may be a cultural objection to organ donation and reception. The patient should be asked for his/her preferences.

**9. Should I consult anyone other than the patient when seeking informed consent or other patient decisions?**

Patients that practice Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk medicine are likely to have strong bonds with their families. For many, maintaining the hierarchy of their family structures will be extremely important. Thus, family elders will often be involved in decision making.

**10. What are these religious traditions' views on reproductive health and family planning? Are contraceptives okay? What about abortion? Voluntary sterilization?**

Family planning decisions are often made on cultural, not religious grounds. Contraceptives are allowed; the most common form of birth control in China is the intrauterine device. Oral contraceptives are available at no cost to Chinese citizens and sterilization is common.

There are a range of religious beliefs in Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese folk religion on abortion. However, these are often overridden by its cultural acceptability.

**11. Are there particular beliefs or rituals concerning pregnancy and birth? What about postpartum women? What about women who have miscarried?**

There are a variety of folk beliefs around pregnancy. Some Chinese women believe that talking about their pregnancy in the first trimester may attract bad luck. The expectant mother's diet is also thought to be very important in ensuring a healthy pregnancy. Pregnancy, particularly the second and third trimesters, is traditionally regarded as a hot condition, and expectant mothers may cut back on those foods (see Dietary Requirements). After birth, a mother is considered to be in a cold condition, and therefore might cover herself with extra clothing and eat hot foods; cold foods to avoid during this period include salads, cold drinks, steamed food, green vegetables, and ice cream.

In Chinese tradition, postnatal women are also encouraged to rest for the month after giving birth. In China, a mother typically stays in the hospital for five to seven days after delivery; reasons for a shorter stay may need to be explained to the family. Women may also use traditional Chinese medicines to encourage postbirth recovery.

Some mothers may be reluctant to bathe their children until the umbilical cord stumps have fallen off, fearing infection. Infants of Asian origin might develop harmless patches of bluish skin known as Mongolian spots; those unfamiliar with them may assume the spots are bruises.

In traditional Chinese culture, men are not present during labor or birth; the women are attended to by their mothers or other married female relatives. Since some believe that laboring women are particularly susceptible to sickness, they may prefer to have the windows closed at all times. Some families may wish to take the placenta home to bury it; each family should be asked for its preference.

Those practicing Taoism and Confucianism often believe in astrology, which is also an important part of Chinese traditional belief. For those for whom astrology is important, it is necessary to know the exact time of birth so that the child's horoscope is accurate.

In case of miscarriage, stillbirth, or neonatal death, most parents are unlikely to have any objection to a health care provider washing and wrapping the baby's body. However, each family should be asked for its preference.

## 12. Are there end-of-life rituals or beliefs I need to know about?

Death rituals vary considerably depending on culture.

In traditional Chinese culture, there are five funeral stages. Taoist or Confucian priests will likely be called to assist in these stages, depending on the religion of the deceased:

1. In the first stage, the dying person sees every member of his/her family before dying. This is a **familial obligation**, and the patient should be provided with a private room to accommodate the potentially large number of visitors if possible.
2. The second stage is **announcement** of the death to the community.
3. The third stage is **bathing** the body with fresh water so that the deceased can pass into the next world comfortably; providers should ask ahead of time to determine whether or not the body should be washed in the hospital.
4. The fourth stage is called "**the Lamp to Light the Way**," in which family members place a plant-oil lamp at the feet of the corpse as mourners gather.
5. The fifth stage is **burial**. Traditionally, the deceased is not buried until resting in his/her house for three days.

Confucius did not believe in life after death. However, his *Book of Rites* contains strict rules for postdeath rituals and explains in great detail how the body should be arranged, how mourners should behave, what mourners should wear, and more.

In contrast to Confucianism, Taoism teaches that the deceased can become supernatural if s/he cultivates his/her moral character during life. Taoist funerary rites have four main components: chanting scriptures and litanies, water and land rituals, the lighting and disposal of lanterns, and the feeding of hungry ghosts. The extravagance of these ceremonies is dependent on the family's wealth.

### **13. What should be done with the body after death?**

Many Chinese and Chinese Americans mix elements from multiple religions into funeral rites. Thus, each family should be asked for their preference on how to handle the body.

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## **Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese Folk Religion: Intersections with Health Care**

Religion in China is a complex, multifaceted landscape, with a variety of overlapping religious traditions, including Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, ancestor worship, and folk religion; many Chinese combine elements of two or more of China's religious traditions. In addition, China is home to a number of rich cultural and philosophical traditions, like Confucianism, that also meld with its religious tapestry. Belief systems based on the philosophical traditions of China have spread beyond the nation and are manifested throughout Asia.

Although there is a tremendous amount of diversity, there are some broad concepts shared across traditions, which exert a strong influence on how patients will understand health and illness. First, most traditional Chinese belief systems are not monotheistic, instead seeing the divine in nature, relationships between people, and the spirit world. Second, many have an emphasis on balance and harmony, both within the individual and between the natural and spirit worlds.

Quick answers for many questions that arise when caring for a Taoist, Confucian, or followers of Chinese folk religion may be found in the FAQ. For more in depth explanations, consult the appropriate section below.

### **CAUSES OF ILLNESS & HEALING RITUALS**

Traditionally, Chinese medicine has taught that health is a state of spiritual and physical harmony with nature.

For Confucians, harmony is disrupted if someone fails to observe the five basic relationships of society, which are understood to be reciprocal relationships:

1. Ruler to subject;
2. Parent to child;

3. Husband to wife;
4. Older to younger; and
5. Friend to friend.

In Taoism, harmony is a result of the proper balance between humans and nature. Disruption is also thought to occur when there is an improper balance between yin and yang. Yin and yang are cosmic forces that are believed to animate all of nature. They are interdependent, complementary forces that can only exist in relation to one another.

In both the Confucian and the Taoist traditions, the disruption of harmony often manifests itself through illness. The inside of the body and its front are considered yin, while its surface and back are yang. Thus, yin is believed to store the vital strength of life, while yang protects the body from outside forces. If either the yin or the yang is out of balance, the other is put at risk.

In addition to the forces of yin and yang, Taoism and Confucianism teach that the body is composed of five solid organs (called *ts'ang*: the liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys) and five hollow organs (called *fu*: the gallbladder, stomach, large intestine, small intestine, and bladder). It is believed that the organs have a complex relationship that maintains harmony within the body; parts of the body that are considered yin must work in tandem with those considered yang in order for an individual to be healthy.

Taoism also teaches that illness and health do not occur only on the individual level, but also on the cosmic, universal level. One's health is not just dependent on harmony within the body, but is related to one's harmony with his/her ancestors, one's community, and with natural forces. Yin and yang dictate the harmony of all life; thus, for a proper balance of yin and yang, a sick individual must look beyond his/her individual body to seek balance in the surrounding world.

Traditional Chinese religion has many of its own healing practices, many of which have spread to the other Asian religious traditions:

- ☞ Chinese folk medicine employs acupuncture, an ancient practice in which the body is punctured with special needles by a trained practitioner. By inserting needles into the proper points, the acupuncturist can unblock the flow of *q'i* (the vital energy that gives life to all living matter), which restores health. *Q'i* is thought to run through the body along different channels, which a practitioner can access at 365 different points on the skin.
- ☞ Moxibustion is another traditional method of healing used to restore the proper balance of yin and yang; it is customarily done when it is believed that there is an excess of yin and is believed to be particularly useful during labor and delivery. In moxibustion, a properly trained healer heats pulverized wormwood (also called mugwort) and applies it directly to the skin on certain key points.

- ☞ A healing practice called cupping may also be performed. Cupping draws blood and lymph to the surface by burning the oxygen out of a small glass (thus creating a vacuum) and applying it to the person's skin. This is believed to increase circulation and is often done to treat lung congestion. Cupping may leave bruise-like marks on the patient's body that are sometimes mistaken for signs of abuse, especially in children.

Medicinal herbs are also important resources used by traditional Chinese healers. The most well-known herb used is ginseng, which is believed to stimulate digestion, work as a sedative, address faintness after childbirth, and restore health to frail children. It is used in a variety of ways: it can be rubbed on as a powder, prepared in broth or tea, or eaten raw. There are many other particular herbs and plants used for specific ailments that a patient may have. For providers to assess whether the use of herbs will interfere with a patient's Western medical treatment, communication between the patient and provider is essential.

#### **PRAYER & RITUAL OBSERVANCES**

In both Taoism and Confucianism, healing practices are highly ritualized and most often involve clergy presiding over manipulation of written texts. This may take the form of ritualized movements of either a writing brush or sword; this is believed to create harmony between the mind and body. Rituals may also include purification with water.

Patients of all three traditions may also have amulets to both protect their health and ward off evil spirits, a typical Chinese cultural practice. The amulets typically contain a charm with an idol or Chinese character painted in red or black ink on yellow paper. These amulets may be worn in the hair, pinned on clothing, hung over a door, placed on a wall, or placed inside of a red bag, as red symbolizes good luck, courage, loyalty, and honor. Jade is also positively correlated with good health, and Chinese patients may wear jade jewelry.

Neither the amulets nor jade charms should be removed without patient consent. If consent is given, they should be handled with respect; the jade charms should be treated with extra care. Some believe that if the jade is broken, they will be met with misfortune.

#### **DRESS & MODESTY**

Patients who do not wear Western clothing will most likely dress in accordance with their cultural backgrounds; Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religion have no traditions requiring specific types of dress.

#### **GENDER & MODESTY**

Most patients will not resist seeing a provider of the opposite sex. However, each patient should be asked for his/her preference. There are no religiously imposed restrictions or guidelines.

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**HYGIENE & WASHING REQUIREMENTS**

Chinese folk religion, Confucianism, and Taoism prescribe no particular hygiene or washing requirements. Adherents will most likely follow their cultural customs.

**DIETARY REQUIREMENTS**

Diet is more likely to be based on culture rather than religion. However, those following a strictly religious diet will balance foods that are considered to be hot and cold. Yin food is considered “hot” while yang food is “cold”. Whether a food is considered hot or cold is not based on temperature, but on type. For example, most fruit and vegetables are cold, while red meat and spices are hot. Additionally, boiled and steamed foods may be considered cold, while fried foods are hot.

How balance is achieved varies according to the health of the individual. For example, it is believed that a woman is prone to coldness postpartum. Thus, cold foods like fruits and vegetables are generally avoided. Because the list for yin versus yang foods is vast, the health care provider should discuss diet carefully with the patient.

Milk and dairy products are typically not consumed by most Chinese except those in the northern part of the country; the rate of lactose intolerance among Asians is higher than that of many other populations.

Rice is a staple of nearly every meal in Chinese cooking. Peanuts, soybeans, tofu, fried rice noodles, and pork are also popular in the Chinese diet. It is common for relatives to bring these foods to the patient; this should be allowed, if possible, as it will likely bring great comfort to the patient. However, health care providers should be aware that Chinese food often has a high sodium content. If this endangers the patient’s health, the reasons for barring these foods should be explained.

**MEDICATION, PROCEDURE, OR TREATMENT RESTRICTIONS**

Those who practice Chinese religions may resist having blood drawn due to unfamiliarity stemming from the lack of this practice in traditional Chinese medicine (however, drawing blood was and is common as a result of some forms of acupuncture). Traditional Chinese physicians do not take blood to make a diagnosis, but rather examine the patient externally. This may also make some reluctant to have intrusive surgical procedures (anything that requires cutting into the body). However, this is more often a cultural rather than religious decision. If blood tests or surgical procedures are necessary, providers should be sure to clearly explain why and what it will entail.

**INFORMED CONSENT & DECISION MAKING**

Patients practicing Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religion are likely to have strong bonds with their families. For many, maintaining the hierarchy of their family structures will be extremely important. Thus, patients will often want the elders of the family to be involved in decision making.

The main exception to this practice is regarding issues of sexual health. Traditionally, sexual health, contraception, and contraceptives are not discussed openly (although this does not mean that they are not being used).

Regardless of who is involved in the decision making process, matters of health and illness should be discussed with great sensitivity. According to Chinese tradition, discussing problems and negative events aloud can bring bad luck. The health care

provider should aim to present information in positive terms rather than negative (e.g., discuss the positive effects of a treatment in order to prevent negative effects of the illness rather than centering a conversation on the negative aspects of the illness or a negative prognosis).

Because of an Asian cultural emphasis on stoicism, health care providers may not know when a patient is unsatisfied with a particular treatment or resolution; patients may choose not to voice complaints. This does not necessarily mean that nothing is wrong, so providers may need to delve more deeply.

### **REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & FAMILY PLANNING**

Reproductive health and family planning decisions are most often made on cultural, not religious grounds. The most common form of birth control in China is the intrauterine device. Oral contraceptives are available at no cost to Chinese citizens and sterilization is common.

There are a range of religious beliefs in Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese folk religion on abortion, which are usually secondary to cultural or political norms. Neither Taoist nor Confucian ethical codes explicitly forbid abortion, although it is generally viewed as a necessary evil to be chosen only as a last resort. However, because there are no strict religious rules outlawing it, patients have the option to decide for themselves whether or not it is ethical.

### **PREGNANCY & BIRTH**

There are a variety of Chinese folk beliefs surrounding pregnancy.

Some traditional Chinese women believe that talking about their pregnancy in their first trimester may attract bad luck.

The expectant mother's diet is also thought to be very important in ensuring a healthy pregnancy. Pregnancy, particularly during the second and third trimester, is traditionally regarded as yang (a hot condition). Thus, those who eat a traditional diet may cut down on yang foods (e.g., red meat and fried foods). After birth, a mother is considered to be in yin (a cold condition) and therefore might cover herself with extra clothing and eat foods considered yang (hot) for at least a month. Foods to avoid during this period include salads, cold drinks, steamed food, green vegetables, and ice cream.

During labor, some Chinese women may be concerned about their vulnerability to illness caused by climate (e.g., wind, cold air) or ghosts, and may prefer to have all windows closed to lessen the possibility of sickness.

In Chinese tradition, postnatal women are encouraged to rest for the month after giving birth. In China, the mother traditionally stays in the hospital for five to seven days after delivery; if a shorter stay for normal births is typical in a particular facility, this may need to be explained to the family. Some women may also wish to use Chinese herbal medicines to encourage postbirth recovery or may choose to bathe themselves with a sponge for the month following birth.

Some mothers may be reluctant to bathe their children until the umbilical cord stumps have fallen off, fearing infection. Infants of Asian origin often develop harmless patches of bluish skin known as Mongolian spots; they are congenital birthmarks, but those unfamiliar with them may assume the spots are bruises.

In traditional Chinese culture, men are not present during labor or birth. Rather, the women are attended to by their mothers or other married female relatives. Some families may wish to take the placenta home to bury it; each family should be asked for its preference.

Practitioners of Taoism and Confucianism follow a wide range of beliefs in astrology, which is an important component of Chinese traditional belief. For those for whom astrology is important, it is necessary to know the exact time of birth so that the child's horoscope can be accurately prepared.

In case of miscarriage, stillbirth, or neonatal death, most parents are unlikely to have any objection to the health care provider washing and wrapping the baby's body. However, each family should be asked for its preference.

### **ORGAN DONATION**

Given the resistance to drawing blood and the reluctance to have intrusive surgical procedures, there may be a cultural objection to organ donation and reception; however, there is no religious restriction on either donating or accepting organs. The patient should be asked for his/her preferences.

### **END OF LIFE**

Death rituals vary considerably depending on culture.

In traditional Chinese culture, there are five funeral stages:

1. In the first stage, the dying person sees every member of his or her family before death. This is a *familial obligation*, and the patient should be provided with a private room to accommodate the potentially large number of visitors if possible.
2. The second stage is *announcement* of the death to the community.
3. The third stage is *bathing* the body with fresh water so that the deceased can pass into the next world comfortably; providers should ask ahead of time to determine whether or not the body should be washed in the hospital.
4. The fourth stage is called "*the Lamp to Light the Way*," in which family members place a plant-oil lamp at the feet of the corpse as mourners gather.
5. The fifth stage is *burial*. Traditionally, the deceased is not buried until resting in his/her house for three days.

Taoist or Confucian priests will likely be called to assist in these stages, depending on the religion of the deceased.

Confucius did not believe in life after death; he explained that because people cannot know what happens after death, they should concentrate their efforts on the living and rituals to be performed. His *Book of Rites* contains strict rules for rituals to be

followed after death and explains in great detail how the body should be arranged, how mourners should behave, what mourners should wear, and more. The main purpose of Confucian rites is to secure peace for the soul of the deceased and to separate the living from the dead; this separation is necessary to protect the living and help the dead join their ancestors. Practitioners should discuss plans with the family to see which rites, if any, they wish to observe.

In contrast to Confucianism, Taoism teaches that the deceased can become supernatural if s/he cultivated a moral character during life. Taoist funerary rites have four main components, designed to help the deceased make his/her way in the afterlife:

- ☞ *Chanting scriptures.* The chanting of scriptures is arguably the most important funeral ritual; it is believed that this will release the dead from their suffering. The most common scriptures used during funerals are the *Book of Salvation*, the *Book of the Jade Emperor* and the *Book of the Three Officials*.
- ☞ *Water and land rituals.* The water and land rituals traditionally last seven days. During this time, an altar is built and elaborate rites are performed in order to pardon the guilt of the deceased; it is believed that this helps him/her to ascend into heaven or to have a good reincarnation.
- ☞ *Lighting and disposing of lanterns.* Traditionally, lanterns were lit at an altar, symbolizing the enlightenment of the deceased's soul; the lights were also believed to guide the deceased out of the realm of death. In honor of this tradition, Taoists may choose to light an oil lamp at the feet of the corpse. During the funeral, mourners may also place paper lamps in rivers or lakes. Taoist tradition teaches that people must pass through a dark river after death, and the water lanterns are believed to help the deceased pass over the river.
- ☞ *Feeding hungry ghosts.* Lastly, there are rituals for the feeding of hungry ghosts. Taoism teaches that there are some people who do not find everything they need to survive in the afterlife. If not fed, these hungry ghosts will feed off the energy and fear of the living. In order to placate them, a feeding ritual is performed that includes praying, chanting, and food offerings. The extent and extravagance of these ceremonies often depends on the wealth of the family.

Many Chinese and Chinese Americans mix elements from multiple religions into the funeral rites of the deceased. Thus, each family should be asked for their preference on how to handle the body.

**FOR MORE READING: CHINESE FOLK RELIGION,  
CONFUCIANISM, AND TAOISM**

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