

Yale-NUS Travel Fellowship Application



Lives Well Lived

An **Epic Journey**

into **Chinese Spirituality,**

through the looking glass of the

Yale-NUS Common Curriculum

• Chongqing, Xi'an, Qinghai, Tibet, Chengdu •

Applicants:

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Ng Yi Ming

Yeo Rui Qi

Abstract

A 4-week humanistic immersion into the nature of spiritual institutions and the universal allure of epic traveling - through the lens of Chinese spiritual culture and traveling through the natural landscapes of China. This project builds upon the methods of philosophical inquiry, anthropological study, and literary appreciation introduced by the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum, now put to task to study the quintessential human question of what it can mean to “live a well-lived life” - thus a quest for life in Asia, for the World.



*“To see the world, things dangerous to come to,
to see behind walls, draw closer, to find each other,
and to feel. That is the purpose of life.”*

- Walter Mitty

Project Details

Overview: Inspired by the quintessential human concern of what to do in life, aided by the concepts and investigative methods introduced to us by the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum, we propose an epic 27-day circuit around Western China. This journey will offer a cultural and religious landscape for understanding spirituality in the context of both natural and urban environments, where we will experience the interplay of nature and spirituality, observe social phenomena of religion, and gain new perspectives on lives well-lived through interactions with others along the way. We plan to embark on this journey to five key Chinese cities (in order): Chongqing, Xi'an (Shaanxi), Xining (Qinghai), Lhasa (Tibet), and Chengdu (Sichuan).

Who: The four of us got together due to our shared hunger to understand the nature of the human experience. Religion has historically played a dominant role in human fulfilment, and thus holds key insights into this inquiry. The four of us are a devout Buddhist, a nominal Buddhist, a former Christian turned Confucian, and a secular humanist - united in the quest to understand the fundamental mechanisms of spirituality. Given that our personal affiliations are primarily related to Chinese spirituality, language, and culture, we felt that going to China would generate the greatest learning experience for us, to see familiar institutions in new light. Yi Ming has gone on self-charted journeys to Nepal and Myanmar over the past 2 years, and this project represents a formalization of his personal explorations about life. Joseph is currently enrolled in the *Neo-Confucianism & Chinese Buddhism* Philosophy course, and is eager to put his theoretical knowledge to test. Zi Gi grew up in a devout Buddhist family and wishes to experience the differences between Singaporean Buddhism and Chinese spiritual practices. Rui Qi, whose parents are nominally Buddhist, seeks to better understand what Buddhism, and religion in general, can add to one's life. Overall, the prospect of journeying and working together for four weeks presents a great learning experience for the four of us.

Academic Foci: This encompasses three parallel academic nodes of Philosophy (Philosophy & Political Thought), Sociology (Comparative Social Institutions), and Literature (Literature & Humanities), that all lead up to the central theme of “lives well lived.” Appreciating the significance of the Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS, we seek to incorporate what we have learned into a single journey. First, we will explore the central concepts of Chinese spirituality and philosophy introduced to us in PPT, namely the “Three Teachings” of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Beyond philosophical concepts, the physical journey grants us firsthand experience and observation of rituals and social interactions, thus allowing us to build upon social theories learnt in CSI into our understanding of the nature of spiritual institutions. The undertaking of a difficult journey is a recurring theme in LH - we seek to discover the essence of travel, and simultaneously gather opinions on what other humans think is a life well-lived. Travelling is a timeless, universally human mode towards enlightenment and self-discovery, hence we think the Summer Travel Fellowship is the best avenue for us to understand the essence of life.

Research Methodology: As we came in unfamiliar with anthropology, we are approaching the trip as an opportunity for personal development. We have established contact with 7 faculty members specialising in Philosophy, Anthropology, and Psychology, who have provided valuable advice on structuring our research and furthering our understanding. Collectively, they have recommended about 25 readings to us. To investigate the well-lived life, we will dive into:

1) Philosophical textual analysis of Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist texts

via academic reading, understanding key religious concepts on the nature of things & suggested rituals, and cross-referencing these concepts across the 3 religious institutions

- *Building on PPT texts on Confucius, Daoism, and Buddhism*

2) Anthropological study of the psychology, sociology, and phenomenology of religion

via semi-structured conversations with practitioners, participant observations of sacred architecture and social structures in religion, and ethnographic immersion in spiritual rituals

- *Building on CSI concepts of social institutions, forces, and the nature of power*

3) Ethnographic immersion into travelling & the human experience

via daily group sharing of personal reflections, travel journaling, audio & visual photographic capture, & conversations with spiritual leaders, practitioners, locals, and travellers, around the nature of the epic journey, spiritual experiences, and living.

- *Building on LH concepts on the human existence & the epic travel (Odyssey etc.)*

The specific research questions and reading list associated with each academic focus are attached in the *Appendix*. We will continue to engage with faculty in the time leading up to the trip (refer to follow-ups).

Location Rationale: We are heading to China as it is the birthplace of Confucianism and Daoism. While Buddhism originated from India, 2 key modern variations were developed in China. The key cities we will be visiting are Xi'an (Shaanxi), Lhasa (Tibet) and Chengdu (Sichuan), all spiritually and culturally significant cities. Not only was Xi'an the capital of China until the Ming Dynasty, it is also the birthplace of 6 out of 8 schools of Chinese Buddhism and is close to Mount Hua, one of the most sacred Daoist mountains. Tibet, meanwhile, is home to Tibetan Buddhism, widely considered the purest form of Buddhism; insights on the especial significance of Tibet and pilgrimages to Tibet in Buddhism are thus worthy of being established. Mount Emei in Chengdu is one of the four sacred Buddhist mountains in China and a place of enlightenment for Buddhists and Daoists alike. When possible, we will go on foot, to simulate the famed spiritual journeys of those before us as well as to allow room for spontaneity when we see something of interest.

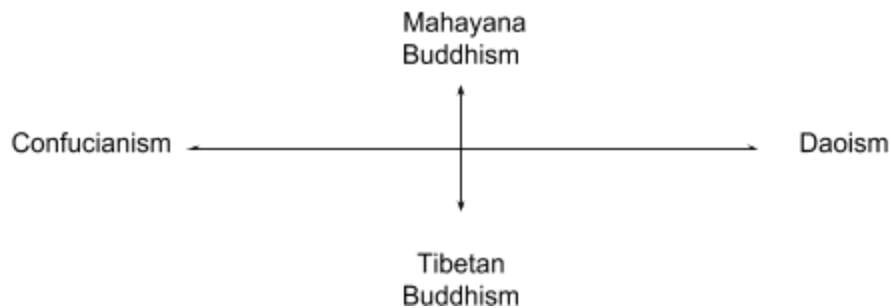
Within these cities, sites of interests have been carefully picked to maximise our exposure to different religious practices and physical environments, thus allowing us to gain multiple perspectives on a life well-lived. By experiencing a diverse sample of environments to apply our research methodologies to, we can cross-reference the impact of the physical environment or religious institutions on spirituality. We have simplified these variations into the following three dichotomies:



Significance: Scenic natural sites often bestow spiritual significance. The civilisation of an urban environment brings with it speed, noise, and materialism. As a counterpoint to the frenetic pace of urban life, therapeutic landscapes evoke gentle feelings of calm and relaxation. What better setting for insight and self-discovery? The dichotomy is also highly reminiscent of the debate between Confucianism, which embraces the human community, and Daoism, which seeks to retreat from it.



Significance: Our thoughts, opinions, and very worldviews are shaped and altered by our surroundings. The bustle of a cosmopolitan city differs drastically from quiet life in a small town or village. Religion is fluid and evolves according to the cultures and perspectives of its adherents. How can the differences in environments and lifestyles affect people's views on religion?



Significance: Are the difference in beliefs and rituals across the religions binaries or on a spectrum? How do they express the differences in values? How have the teachings of these three religions clashed with and influenced each other in the rich philosophical dialogue of Chinese history? Where do we see evidence of cross-pollination and syncretism?

DESTINATION CLASSIFICATION				
A Classification of Destinations by Religion & Environment				
Spiritual Institution		Globalised / Modern Urban	Developing / Isolated Urban	Nature
	Mahayana Buddhism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2x Chongqing Temples • Ci'en Temple (Xi'an) • 3x Chengdu Temples 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Famen Temple (Xi'an) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mount Emei (Chengdu) • Huayan Temple Scenic Area (Chongqing)
	Tibetan Buddhism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guangren Temple (Xi'an) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kumbum Monastery (Xining) • 8x Tibet Monasteries & Nunneries • Potala Palace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yamdrok Lake • Drak Yerpa Cave Hermitage
	Confucianism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dujiangyan Confucius Temple (Chengdu) 		
	Daoism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3x Chengdu Temples • Baxianan Temple (Xi'an) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mount Hua Temples (Xi'an) • Louguantai (Xi'an) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mount Hua (Xi'an) • Mount Qingcheng
	Secular Historical / Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People's Assembly Hall • Museums • Urban Parks • Downtown CBDs • Old Streets • Panda Centre • Chengdu, Chongqing, Xian, Xining 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terracotta Warriors • City of Lhasa • Du Jiang Yan Ancient Irrigation System (Chengdu) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qinghai Lake • Tibetan Nomadic Family Visit • Wulong Karst Mountain Park (Chongqing) • Qinghai-Tibet Railway Scenery

On the Chinese Political Environment:

Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all contain profound political implications. Thus, philosophy and religion in China have always been linked to politics. Since the unification of China by the Qin, the ebb and flow of religious power has fluctuated with the favour of the Imperial Court. Our examination must take political factors into account - specifically, the promotion and censorship of religion by the Chinese government to achieve political ends. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution and its anti-religious legacy, China remains one of the world's

most atheist countries despite its deep spiritual roots. Religious activities are often highly regulated, with sanctions on churches and temples and restrictions on ceremonies. Of particular interest to us are the Tibetan Buddhists, whose distinct cultural identity (among other things) has helped inspire a growing separatist movement in Tibet.

Awareness of these factors must translate into effective engagement on the ground as we hope to explore the complex relationship between religion and politics in China. Specifically, we must carefully tiptoe the line of political correctness. This means gradual, open questioning, adopting political euphemisms, and reading between the lines to infer more information. In addition, we hope to compare and contrast the political experiences of the different religions – for example, recent years have seen the promotion of Confucianism as a state ideology whereas Tibetan Buddhism has been suppressed.

Community Relevance & Return: This project lies close to the heart of the college community as it harnesses the Common Curriculum towards unearthing fundamental questions about life. On the journey, we will strive to capture the essence of our experience by sharing our research findings, audio-visual capture of the environments (audio clips, photographs, and videos), and travel writing, on a daily basis via Facebook, Instagram, and the Travel Fellowship blog. We will post both our findings as a group and our individual writings on the experience. The findings will then translate into a special project feature article in the Octant, plus an immersive experience session (project talk) for the college community by Sep. 2018, to share with everyone the newfound possibilities of “lives well lived”.