

# From Three-in-One Doctrine to the Religion of Three-in-One: Lin Chaoen's syncretic religion

**Author:**Zhejia Tang<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Marxist Religious Studies in New Era, Hangzhou City University, Hangzhou, China

**Corresponding author:**

Zhejia Tang,  
1540526128@qq.com

**Dates:**

Received: 05 July 2023

Accepted: 31 Aug. 2023

Published: 16 Nov. 2023

**How to cite this article:**

Tang, Z., 2023, 'From Three-in-One Doctrine to the Religion of Three-in-One: Lin Chaoen's syncretic religion', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(5), a9210. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i5.9210>

**Copyright:**

© 2023. The Author.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

In the middle and late Ming Dynasty, Lin Chaoen, who was also called the 'Two heresies of Minzhong' with Li Zhi, was famous for advocating the thought of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' and establishing the Religion of Three-in-One. In the past, the study of Lin Chaoen and the Religion of Three-in-One was basically based on religious study, and his identity as a scholar was ignored. Therefore, this article mainly analyses Lin Chaoen's thought of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' from the field of philosophy and reveals the close relationship between his theory of three religions and the formation of the Religion of Three-in-One. Lin Chaoen's thought originated from Yangming's mind philosophy; thus, the emergence of the Religion of Three-in-One also means that the traditional Confucianism has the possibility of becoming a folk religion.

**Contribution:** This article examines Lin Chaoen's thought of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' from the perspective of philosophical theory, and reveals that the essence of his thought of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' is Yangming's mind philosophy. Moreover, this article analyses the transformation process from the thought of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' to the Religion of Three-in-One, and reveals that the Religion of Three-in-One is a new type of folk religion developed from an academic group.

**Keywords:** Lin Chaoen; Religion of Three-in-One; Three-in-One Doctrine; Yangming's mind philosophy; folk religion.

## Introduction

Lin Chaoen (1517–1598), a Ming Dynasty Confucian scholar of Putian County, Fujian Province, is a thinker who integrates Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. He advocated the idea of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' all his life, and founded the Religion of Three-in-One. He was honoured by his disciples as the Master of the three religions and the Lord of the Religion of Three-in-One. Lin Chaoen's thought of the 'Three-in-One Doctrine' had a profound impact, and the Religion of Three-in-One he founded is still in circulation in many regions today. According to He Shanmeng's survey, there are still 1285 churches of the Religion of Three-in-One in the Putian area of Fujian Province.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the author also visited the Association of the Religion of Three-in-One in Putian City and the Lin Longjiang Cultural Research Association in July 2022, and learned that there are currently no less than 1816 Churches of the Religion of Three-in-One in Putian City, with more than one million worshippers. In addition, the Religion of Three-in-One also exists in Taiwan Province of China and some countries in Southeast Asia. According to Fu Kangwu's research, there are many churches of the Religion of Three-in-One in today's Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, et cetera. The Religion of Three-in-One was introduced to Southeast Asia by the late 19th to early 20th centuries and spread rapidly, with tens of thousands of followers (Wukang 1972:18–30). It is evident that Lin Chaoen's thought of the 'Three-in-One Doctrine' and the Religion of Three-in-One he founded had an influence that could not be ignored, both in China and in other countries in Southeast Asia.

During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in China, the theory of the three religions was popular, and many thinkers had related theories. Lin Chaoen belongs to the typical representative of integrating the three religions into Confucianism with Xinti 心体. Tang Jingqin pointed out that, 'Although Lin Chaoyen also placed emphasis on Confucianism, his fundamental presupposition has been that the three religions are one and not be categorically separated, which is different from the theories held by other scholars' (Tang Jingqin 2011:85–133). Fundamentally, Lin Chaoen's

1. For details, see He Shanmeng (2011:2).

**Note:** Hangzhou City University Section: Cross-cultural Religious Studies, sub-edited by Chen Yuehua and Ishraq Ali (Hangzhou City University, China).

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

'Three-in-One Doctrine' [三教合一] is essentially a 'heart-based' statement of the three religions in Confucianism, and has a strong practical character. In this way he established a new kind of folk religion, namely the Religion of Three-in-One.<sup>2</sup>

As a scholar of Yangming's mind philosophy, how did Lin Chaoen construct the theory of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' with mind philosophy? What is the connection between mind philosophy and the religious turn of Confucianism? In this article, I will briefly analyse the philosophical origin of Lin Chaoen's theory of 'Three-in-One Doctrine', and discuss how Lin Chaoen established the Religion of Three-in-One based on his theory. I take the Religion of Three-in-One as a typical case to illustrate the possibility of Confucianism becoming a religion.

## Lin Chaoen's thought of 'Three-in-One Doctrine'

Lin Chaoen's thought of the 'Three-in-One Doctrine' took the 'sincere heart' [真心] as its core and put forward the ideological system of 'the three religions are based on the heart' [三教以心为宗]. As Zheng Zhiming pointed out, 'In terms of its overall conception, it can be classified as a system of philosophy of the Lu-Wang school' (Zheng Zhiming 1988:165). Firstly, Lin Chaoen connected 'mind' [心], 'Tao' [道], and 'teaching' [教], and he used the 'Tao' to unify the three religions and argued from an ontological perspective that the three religions have the same origin. Secondly, Lin Chaoen also used 'sincere heart' to unify 'Tao' and incorporates the objective 'Tao' into the subjective 'mind', thus constructing the theory of 'mind' as the core of the three religions and clarifying the view that they are not different.

According to Lin Chaoen, the 'Tao' is muddled and unnamed. He emphasises that there is no name for Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism above the 'Three Dynasties of Tang Yu' [唐虞三代], but only the 'Tao' which is all in one. Ma Xisha thought Lin Chaoen's 'One Tao Three Religions' [道一教三] emphasised that there was an eternal 'Tao' before the emergence of the three religions, and 'Tao' is the origin of the three religions (Ma Xisha 1996:25-28). In the Three Dynasties of Tang Yu, 'Tao' prevailed between heaven and earth; therefore, there is no distinction between Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism. He proposed:

The reason why I say that the three religions are one and the same is because there is no Confucianism, there is no Taoism, there is no Buddhism before Tao. (Lin Chaoen 2016:17-18)

Before the emergence of the three religions, there existed a mixed 'Tao', like a big tree with an undivided trunk of branches and leaves, and the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism were like the trunk of the tree divided into three major branches. His theory of 'One Tao Three Religions' believes that the 'Tao' was the essence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism; therefore, the

<sup>2</sup>The Religion of Three-in-One [三教] is also called Xiaojiao [夏教].

'teachings' are the different manifestations and roles of the 'Tao'.

The 'Tao' is inseparable, and since the three religions come from the same source, they are to some extent intertwined. As 'Tao' is an integral whole, how can it be separated into Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism? Lin Chaoen elaborates on the evolution of the 'Tao' with a historical perspective, especially distinguishes the relationship between 'One Tao' and 'Three Religions' by the above and below three Dynasties of Tang Yu. He proposes that 'in the Three Dynasties of Tang Yu, the teachings came out of one. Since the Qin and Han dynasties, the names of the three religions appeared, and Tao was then split' (Lin Chaoen 2016:25). After the Three Dynasties, heretical ideology emerged, so the 'Tao' was divided into three, namely Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. As for the distinction between Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, it was produced in order to meet the practical needs of 'setting up subjects to preach people' [设科教人]. Therefore, he considered that the three religions differed only in their different methods of edification because of their different social functions:

The 'Tao' is the origin of the teaching; the teaching needs to understand the Tao. But if the ordinary people does not know the difference between the Tao and the teaching, and think that the teaching is the Tao, does it not mean that there are three different Tao and three different teachings. (Lin Chaoen 2016:10)

Lin Chaoen made a clear distinction between 'Tao' and 'teaching', and that 'Tao' is the root of the three religions, while 'teaching' is reflected in the difference in their functions. Since it is clear that the three religions were all born from the 'Tao', thus he believed that the learning of three religions is all based on nature and life: 'The study of Confucius is the study of mind and nature; and study of Huangdi Laozi is also the study of mind and nature; the study of Shakyamuni is also the study of mind and nature' (Lin Chaoen 2016:1032). Since the three religions are all based on the 'Tao' and all have nature and fate as the main themes of their learning, they are fundamentally the same. The reason for the differences between Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism is that the three religions have different teaching methods and different functions.

Although Lin Chaoen covers the origins of the three religions by saying 'One Tao Three Religions', the essence of his theory is still mind philosophy, and his so-called 'Tao' of the essence of the three religions is not external to man but equivalent to 'sincere heart'. As Chen Zhongyu points out, 'Lin Chaoen has stated the true origin of the three religions and perceived the purpose of them, believed their true nature is the Tao' (Lin Chaoen 2016:20). Here is something very straightforward: the 'Tao' that was born before the three religions is the 'sincere nature' [真性]. And Lin Chaoen has also said clearly: 'But teaching is based on Tao, and Tao is based on nature. As long as we know that the Tao is generated from the nature of our body, then we can know the Tao of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism' (Lin Chaoen 2016:3), 'One heart one

Tao, but the teachings are three' (Lin Chaoen 2016:18). In general terms, the concepts of 'mind' and 'nature' are distinguished from each other especially in Song and Ming philosophy. However, under the view of Yangming's mind philosophy, the proposition of 'mind is nature' indicates that the two are synonymous. Therefore, there is a problem of mixing 'mind' and 'nature' in Lin Chaoen's thought. Tang Jingqin pointed out that Lin Chaoen uses the Xinti to refer to the essence of sainthood of the moral subject, although he does not use the essence of nature, he uses nature and self-nature to express the meaning of the noumenon. And there is no difference between the above concepts in Lin's doctrine (Tang Jingqin 2009:95–138). Therefore, the 'Tao' is actually the 'sincere heart'. Regarding the convergence of the three religions in the late Ming Dynasty, Du Weiming argues that 'Tao' and 'mind' were originally a homogeneous and inseparable correlation, and the correlation between the two is also possible in the intermediate side of the generation of the territory (Du Weiming & Zhang Guangzhi 2017:100). Lin Chaoen's use of 'sincere heart' as 'Tao' is undoubtedly based on the intrinsic connection between the two. 'One Tao Three Religions' can become the constructive model of 'the original of the three religions is the heart' [三教本心] under the transformation of 'One Heart One Tao'.

## The establishment of the Religion of Three-in-One

In 1551, at the age of 35, Lin Chaoen founded the Religion of Three-in-One and publicly advocated the 'Three-in-One Doctrine'. But at this time the Religion of Three-in-One was still only an academic group of mainly scholars, but not related to religion.

First of all, since the year of Jiajing 30 (1551), Lin Chaoen officially recruited disciples, marking the birth of the Religion of Three-in-One as an academic group. And the initial disciples of the Religion of Three-in-One were Confucian students. According to the record in the *LinZi Benxing Shilu*: 'Huangzhou and Lin Chaoen were friends, and each time he looked at his words and actions, his heart was pleased and willing to become a disciple to be taught' (Lu Wenhui 2019:31). Huangzhou is a prestigious Confucian student around Putian, and in the following years, Lin Chaogao, Huang Daben, Huang Yang, Lin Chaoju, Lin Chaoqiong and other students followed. For the year of Jiajing 37 (1558), the Religion of Three-in-One has had a certain scale; *LinZi Benxing Shilu* recorded that 'at that time, the number of people who come from far and near to pay homage to Lin Chaoen is increasing every day' (Lu Wenhui 2019:42). At this time, Lin Chaoen mainly played the role of a teacher, and the knowledge he taught in the Zongkong Hall on Dongyan Hill in Putian was still based on the mind philosophy, emphasising return to Confucianism. In addition, the reason so many students followed Lin Chaoen is also because Lin has a high reputation among Confucian students. Although Lin Chaoen himself had abandoned his political career, he was a prominent Confucian scholar until the age of 30. In addition

to teaching his 'Three-in-One Doctrine', Lin Chaoen was more concerned with supervising the students in the Zongkong Hall, and in the 33rd year of the Jiajing, he established 19 rules to manage the students. The content of these rules is as follows:

One has to write an essay. Four days or nine days for the date of submission, each time to write a text, starting at Chenshi [辰时] and stopping at Wushi [午时]. Each student has studied different scriptures, so on the day of submission, they will write a text related to *the Four Books* [四书], and the scriptures will be written randomly.

One should read books. Every day, in the morning, read *the Four Books*, and in the afternoon, read the scriptures. Each should read a page and a half. When reading the book, you should read and recite the text by heart, and the commentary should also be recited by heart.

One should study books. Every 10 days, read two articles, read Lun [论], Ce [册], Biao [表], each one.

If there is a sutra that you cannot explain, you should ask your teacher or someone else who has written a treatise on the sutras, or who has read *The Five Classics* [五经], for advice.

One should quit the bad habit of inviting outsiders to the private school and discussing people's rights and wrongs and strengths and weaknesses (Lin Chaoen 2016:93–94).

Because of the large amount of content, only some of the disciplinary rules are listed here. The content of these disciplinary rules, including writing essays, reciting scriptures, asking difficult questions and lecturing, was basically formulated around the content of the Ming Dynasty imperial examinations. The Religion of Three-in-One took the organisational form of just meeting and lecturing, which was quite a common phenomenon in the late Ming Dynasty, such as the Ying She [应社], Zhongjiang She [中江社], Haimen She [海门社], and Putao She [蒲桃社] at that time. Thus, the Religion of Three-in-One was more of an academic group, and Lin Chaoen's identity was only that of a reclusive hermit.

It seems that Lin Chaoen's own reputation is limited only to the community of scholars and not enough to make the general public accept his 'Three-in-One Doctrine'. However, the special social situation of Puxian area broke this situation and laid the foundation for Lin Chaoen to establish the image of a religious leader. The southeast coast of the Ming Dynasty has been plagued by Japanese invaders, especially after the 31st year of Jiajing (1552), making the southeast coast of the Japanese disaster worse and worse because of the Ming government's corruption and incompetence, making the local people's living conditions extremely difficult. According to *Linzi Benxing Shilu*, between the 37th year of Jiajing (1558) and the 43rd year of Jiajing (1564), the Putian area was repeatedly plundered by Japanese invaders. However, the disaster was not only caused by the Japanese invaders but

also coincided with the plague epidemic, which undoubtedly dealt a devastating blow to the people's livelihood. Therefore, the people in despair naturally hoped for a saviour to appear. And, Lin Chaoen stepped forward and donated all his family's assets to help alleviate the difficulties in Putian. On the one hand, he organised the militia to fight against the Japanese invaders, and on the other hand, he organised his disciples to collect the corpses<sup>3</sup> and treat the plague.

Based on these righteous deeds, Lin Chaoen gained great reputation among the people, and his righteous deeds were praised by many scholars. After these events, Lin Chaoen's reputation was no longer limited to the scholarly community but really reached the people, which laid the foundation for his later transformation into the Master of the Religion of Three-in-One.

## The transformation of the Religion of Three-in-One

However, between the 43rd year of Jiajing (1564) and the 45th year of Jiajing (1566), the nature of the Religion of Three-in-One gradually changed from academic group to folk religion.<sup>4</sup> From the theory of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' to the practice of the Religion of Three-in-One, there are two important links that make Confucianism transform into religion. Firstly, the members of the Religion of Three-in-One were no longer limited to the original scholars but expanded to the whole social class. Secondly, the initiation ceremony with religious nature and the establishment of churches built to worship Lin Chaoen. These two changes caused the Religion of Three-in-One to shift from an academic group to a folk religion.

Since the 45th year of Jiajing (1564), Lin Chaoen changed his previous practice of receiving students cautiously, and the objects of his preaching were no longer limited to the former scholars, according to the *Min Book*, vol.129, *Lin Chaoen Biography*: 'From the senior officials in the government, down to the people at the bottom, there is no limit to receiving' (Lin Guoping 1992:114). With the continuous expansion of disciples, the Religion of Three-in-One changed from the original Confucian association to the development of folk religion, Lin Chaoen also changed from the original teacher to a religious leader. In the 45th year of Jiajing (1564), Lin Chaoen went to Fuzhou and stayed in Jinshan Temple, Dazhong Temple, Hualin Temple, Xuefeng Temple and other places. In the 1st year of Longqing (1567), Lin Chaoen took the initiative to bid farewell to the original Confucian teaching responsibility and began to travel around the world to promote the thought of 'Three-in-One Doctrine', and his

3. It was recorded in *The Chronology of Lin Chaoen* that in the 40th years of Jiajing, Lin Chaoen organised disciples Huang Shiqin, Wu Sanle and others to collect more than 2000 bodies. In the 41th years of Jiajing, he sent his disciples to collect corpses outside Putian City and collected a total of about 5000 bodies (Lu Yongfang 2016:55-56).

4. In his book *Lin Chaoen and the Religion of Three-in-One*, Lin Guoping argued that the change of the Religion of Three-in-One began in the 45th year of Jiajing (see Lin Guoping 1992:116), while He Shanmeng pointed out that *the Heart of the Holy Spirit* written in the 43rd year of Jiajing marked the establishment of Lin Chaoen's religious theory (see He Shanmeng 2011:16). There are some slight differences between the two, which will not be discussed here, and the transformation of the Religion of Three-in-One roughly occurred during this period.

scope of activities was no longer limited to the Putian area. In the process of the subsequent development and expansion of The Religion of Three-in-One, its religious characteristics became increasingly obvious. According to the records of *The Chronology of Lin Chaoen* and *Linzi Benxing Shilu*, Lin Chaoen's missionary activities after 45th year of Jiajing (1564) were summarised as follows:

In the year 1564, he went to Fuzhou, stayed in Hongtang Jinshan Temple, Dazhong Temple, Hualin Temple and Xuefeng Temple, and returned in September. In the year 1567, in February, he went to Fuzhou, where he stayed in Hongtang Jinshan Temple, once visited Xuefeng Temple, and returned in August. In December, he went to Wuyi and Jianyang and returned in March of the following year. In the year 1568, in April, he went to Fuzhou and returned in July. In the year 1569, in February, he went to Wannian, Jiangxi, and returned in August. In the year 1570, he went to Danyang and Nanjing and returned in September. In the year 1571, in October, he went to Fuzhou and returned in December. In the year 1572, in April, he went to Qiaoyang and returned in September. In the year 1573, in February, he went to Jiangxi and returned in May. In the year 1576, in February, he went to Fuzhou and Yanping, and returned in June. In the year 1577, in October, he went to Xianyou. In the year 1578, in May, he went to Xin'an, then to Hangzhou, and returned in September. In the year 1579, in spring, he went to Fuzhou and returned in April. In the year 1580, he travelled to Mount Gu, then to Wuyi, Ninghua, Fuzhou, and returned in August. In the year 1581, he travelled to Mount Nang. In the year 1583, he went to Min Qing. In the year 1585, in May, he went to Wuyi and Jianning, then returned to Wuyi and returned in December.

All the missionary activities listed are those of Lin Chaoen himself, not counting the missionary activities of his disciples. It can also be seen from the above passage that Lin Chaoen's missionary work basically expanded northward, from Fujian to Jiangxi, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and other provinces in more than 20 years. In this process, the popularity of the Religion of Three-in-One continued to expand, and the number of its disciples also increased sharply, which also caused the Religion of Three-in-One to shift from the original academic community to a folk religion.

Firstly, the worship of Lin Chaoen with a religious nature began to appear among the people. *Linzi Benxing Shilu* records that in the 4th Year of Longqing (1570), when Lin Chaoen went to Jinling, 'those who had heard the name of the Lord burned incense and worshipped on the left side of the road. When Lin Chaoen arrived in Jinling, he lived in the Xishan Monastery of Chaotiangong and received many visitors. Later, he lived in the Puhui Temple outside the city and received more visitors than ever before' (Lu Wenhui 2019:69). In the 6th year of Longqing (1572), Fujian followers regarded Lin Chaoen as a god, and everyone worshipped his portrait at home. Until the Wanli years, the Zhejiang scholar Fuluan drew a diagram of 'Three-in-One Doctrine' and said: 'Recently, the gods saw the Jade Emperor in heaven, and the

Jade Emperor is Lin Chaoen' (Lu Wenhui 2019:122). This eventually led to a change in Lin Chaoen's identity, and by the 15th year of Wanli (1585), he was called the 'Master of the Religion of Three-in-One' by his disciples.

Secondly, religious ceremonies began to replace traditional Confucian teaching. When the Religion of Three-in-One grew to a certain size, its membership became more complex, with a claim of 800 sages,<sup>5</sup> even though the original group of scholars was replaced by merchants, peasants, monks, Taoists and other lower masses. On such a large scale, the original form of lectures could not meet the development of the Religion of Three-in-One. Lin Chaoen then adopted the introduction of religious ceremonies. *Linzi Benxing Shilu* records: 'At the first meeting, the disciple carried a pair of Guorzhuo [果酌] offered Yiqian [一钱] or Wufen [五分], and then wrote his name on the entry book, burned incense and wrote charms, and obtained a portrait of Lin Chaoen. It is necessary to eat vegetarian food every day and to inform the disciples not to tell others' (Lu Wenhui 2019:109). From the content of burning incense, writing charms and offering portraits, it seems to have absorbed rituals form of Buddhism and Taoism, and it can be said that the Religion of Three-in-One really had the characteristics of a religion. At the same time, as a place for religious activities, the churches were gradually established. According to Lin Guoping's research, the earliest church of the Religion of Three-in-One appeared in Putian in the 12th year of Wanli (1582), and until the 26th year of Wanli (1598), about 19 churches were established (Lin Guoping 1992:115). These churches are divided into three types: The sacrificial object of the general churches is Lin Chaoen, while the slightly larger churches will also have the statues of Confucius, Lao Zi and Shakyas, and the largest churches will also have the statues of Zhang Sanfeng, Zhuo Wanchun and other people. Thus, the Religion of Three-in-One has already possessed the important elements of a folk religion and basically realised the steps of transforming Confucianism into a religion.

## Conclusion

Confucianism itself also advocates the concepts of 'worship of Heaven and ancestors' and 'the throne is given by Heaven'. Therefore, although it does not have a complete religious form, it can be said that it contains a strong religious element. The religious shift of Confucianism in the late Ming Dynasty originated from Yangming's mind philosophy:

Wang Yangming paid attention to the main body cultivation of the mind and established the Confucian mind system through the enlightenment work achieved from the lower learning, but Yang Ming's gongfu was simple and straightforward; because of his talent and practical learning, under the reflection of life practice, conscience can be truly

5. In the *Records of Linzi Menxian*, written by Dong Shi (1624–1688), 217 persons with names, deeds and questions and answers were recorded. He Shanmeng has done relevant research and believes that the number of 217 is still not reliable, and he considered 142 disciples among them were relatively reliable in his *Studies on the Religion of Three-in-One* (see He Shanmeng 2011:22–26). Of course, this record is only for those who have names, and there should be more people without names and surnames.

presented. But if the later learning only paid attention to the mind work, it's easy to walk into metaphysical ivory towers. (Cai Renhou 1983:19)

The Taizhou School, a later study of Yangming, further promoted this trend. Peng Guoxia (2002:54–62) claimed that conscience [良知] as the object of belief was just emerging in Yangming, but it had become one of the important components of his thought in Wang Longxi (1498–1583). His conscience belief theory represented the basic form and main orientation of the religious shift of Yangming's mind philosophy. If Wanglongxi's conscience belief still belongs to the 'inner religion' [内在宗教], then Yan Shannong (1504–1596)'s mysticism of Confucianism and Cuihehui [萃和会] have already touched the outer form of religion, or what can be called the 'outer religion'<sup>6</sup> [外在宗教], and finally developed until Lin Chaoen's the Religion of Three-in-One, which basically completed the religious form of Confucianism. As Han Bingfang has pointed out, Lin Chaoen's thought is a sub-branch that diverged from the ideological dispute of the left wing of mind-learning and went on to become a representative of religion (Han Bingfang 1995:101–117).

Beilin once commented:

Lin Chaoen is not an intellectual genius or a very creative thinker; he has just adopted the ideas that have long been popular in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. His contribution was to transform these borrowed ideas into an integrated religious doctrine and a clear system of learning and practice that was easy for himself and others to understand and follow. (Berling 1980:3)

Lin Chaoen's 'Three-in-One Doctrine' is a theory of three religions returning to Confucianism, which is the internal judgement of the three religions. On the other hand, Lin Chaoen established the Religion of Three-in-One to inherit the principles of the three religions. As a religion, the Religion of Three-in-One is different from Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The fundamental basis for the integration of the three religions in Xia Jiao lies in the 'sincere heart'. Therefore, Lin Chaoen's mode of understanding the 'Tao' with 'heart' and judging 'teaching' with 'heart' provides a theoretical possibility for the deep integration between the three religions and also provides a model for the integration and communication between different religions.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

6. Kierkegaard divides religion into two different types: inner religion and outer religion. The former is also called 'Socratic' religion. This kind of religion is self-centred, that is, the cognition of self is the cognition of God. The latter is also called 'Jesus Christ' religion, that is, the external God or God is the center of the establishment of the external object of faith.

## Author's contributions

Z.T. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed in the article are my own and not an official position of the institution in which the research was carried out, and the publisher.

## References

- Berling, J.A., 1980, *The syncretic religion of Lin Chaoen*, Columbia University Press, Columbia.
- Bingfang, H., 1995, 'From Wang Yangming to Lin Chaoen – On the theory of mind and Trinity teaching', *Journal of Religious Philosophy* 1(2), 101–117.
- Chaoen, L., 2016, *Linzi sanjiao zhengzong tonglun*, Religious Culture Press, Beijing.
- Guoping, L., 1992, *Lin Chaoen and the religion of Three-in-One*, Fujian People's Publishing Press, Fuzhou.
- Guoxiang, P., 2002, 'Wang Ji's theory of conscience and belief and the religialization of Confucianism in late Ming Dynasty', *History of Chinese Philosophy* 11(3), 54–62.
- Jingqin, T., 2009, 'Discussion on Lin Chaoen's view of Xinti', *Legis Semi-Annual Journal* 42(6), 95–138.
- Jingqin, T., 2011, 'On the views of Xinti were based on Confucian thought to merge with Buddhism and Taoism by Wang Long-xi and Lin Chaoen in the Late Ming Dynasty', *Legis Semi-Annual Journal* 44(6), 85–133.
- Renhou, C., 1983, *Wang Yangming philosophy*, Sanmin Book Press, Taipei.
- Shanmeng, H., 2011, *Studies on the religion of Three-in-One*, Zhejiang University Press, Hangzhou.
- Weiming, D. & Guangzhi, Z., 2017, *Transformation and innovation: Towards a civilization of dialogue*, Sino-Culture Press, Beijing.
- Wenhui, L., 2019, *Linzi Benxing Shilu*, Religious Culture Press, Beijing.
- Wukang, F., 1972, 'Some remarks on the Three-in-One Doctrine and its manifestations in Singapore and Malaysia', *Oriens Extrenus* 27(1), 18–30.
- Xisha, M., 1996, 'Studies on Lin Chaoen's Three-in-One Doctrine', *Studies in World Religions* 3(2), 25–28.
- Yongfang, L., 2016, *Compilation of Lin Longjiang's chronology*, Guangming Daily Publishing House, Beijing.
- Zhiming, Z., 1988, *Study of the master of the religion of Three-in-One in Ming Dynasty*, Taiwan Student Book Company, Taipei.