

# INTRODUCTION TO CHINESE RELIGIONS

Lesson 18

# Overview



- East Asia is a vast region that includes the peoples of China, Korea, and Japan. This is a very diversified cultural area with many ethnic and linguistic groups that comprise about one-fourth of the world's population. East Asia shares a common religious vision. One key element of this vision is a “functioning harmony of a cosmos filled with sacred forces.”

# Overview



- East Asians believe in a close interrelationship between natural and sacred forces- gods, spirits, kami, and ying-yang forces. The highest good comes from maintaining harmony and balance within this unified cosmos.
- While Jainism and Buddhism were emerging as religions in India, three other religions were developing in East Asia. Taoism and Confucianism grew largely in China, and later spread to Japan and Korea.

# Overview



- Shinto was distinctively Japanese. In time, Buddhism spread to all of East Asia. East Asians may turn to different parts of their religious tradition to answer different needs at different times.
- China is the mother culture of East Asia. China has a continuous historical record extending over three thousand years. In spite of wars, invasions, and revolutions, a distinctively Chinese culture stretched from the first settlements in the Yellow River valley in the second millennium BCE to the present day.

# Outline of Chinese Dynasties

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- Xia Dynasty      The first Chinese Dynasty
- Shang Dynasty      Chinese writing is developed
- Chou Dynasty      Wars. Confucianism & Taoism
- Qin Dynasty      Central Government in China
- Han Dynasty      Confucianism become official
- Three Kingdoms      Buddhism spread in China
- Sui Dynasty      Establishment of Religious Roles

# Outline of Chinese Dynasties

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- Tang Dynasty      Schools of Buddhism in China
- Sung Dynasty      Neo-Confucian developed
- Yuan Dynasty      Mongols. Marco Polo arrived
- Ming Dynasty      Prosperity. Christianity rejected
- Ch'ing Dynasty      Opium Wars, Boxer Rebellion
- Nationalist Party      Republican Revolution
- Communist Rev.      Mao Tse Tung
- Cultural Rev.      Persecution of all religions

# Periods of Religious History



- The Spring, Birth of Chinese Religions.
- The Summer, the Maturity.
- The Autumn, the Reformation
- The Winter, Modern Chinese Religious History

# The Spring, Birth of Chinese Religions



- The earliest recorded Chinese practices begin with the Shang Dynasty (1750 – 1100 BCE).
- Early myths do not have much to say about the origin of things, but legendary heroes are said to have invented fire, iron, fishing with nets, music, and writing. The records are hundreds of thousands of fragments of oracle bones, with divination enquiries. They were addressed to the spirits for guidance.

# The Spring, Birth of Chinese Religions



- The request having been inscribed, the diviner then applied heat to holes bored in the bone, and the resultant heat cracks were interpreted as being either “auspicious” or “inauspicious” responses from the spirits. The spirits of the deceased kings, the spirits of the ancestors, and the deities of the hills and streams were consulted for guidance in matters of conduct and to ensure the fertility of men and women, crops and beasts.

# The Summer, the Maturity



- The period between 206 BCE and 900 CE witnessed the introduction of Buddhism into China from India, the formation of liturgical spiritual Taoism as the priesthood of the popular religion, and the supremacy of Confucianism as custodian of the moral/ethical system of Chinese social culture.
- The rites of passage summarized by the Confucian New Text of the Han period and the grand Taoist liturgies of renewal became standardized for all China.

# The Autumn, the Reformation



- This period covered from the beginning of the Sung dynasty, 960 BCE to the end of the Ch'ing dynasty and the imperial system, 1912 CE.
- During this period a true reformation of the religious spirit of China occurred under Mongol rulers. The Chinese religious reformation was typified by lay movements in both Buddhism and Taoism; a syncretism, even ecumenism, between Buddhist and Taoist spiritual elements; and the growth of local popular cultures.

# The Winter, Modern Chinese Religious History



- With the fall of the empire in 1911, Confucianism suffered a severe blow. The empire cult came to an end.
- In spite of periodic attempts to reinstate Confucian morals, there has been no comeback and communist denounce Confucianism as pure feudalism and therefore a bar to progress. They have even attempted to break up the intense family loyalty which Confucius inculcated and have had a measure of temporary success.

# Characteristics of Chinese Religion



- It is eclectic and not dogmatic, inclusive and not exclusive. Eclecticism means the free selection and borrowing of ideas and beliefs from diverse sources.
- Chinese philosophy teaches that no one can claim to comprehend the whole truth. Therefore many traditional Chinese are animists and Confucianists, who also practice Buddhism and Taoism with no sense of incongruity.

# Characteristics of Chinese Religion



- To the Chinese, the purpose of religion is not primarily to understand the unknown, explain the mysteries of life, or trace the origin of the universe.
- Religion is a formulation of rules and principles for dealing with life here on earth.
- Chinese religion is also humanistic.

# “The Unknown God” of the Chinese

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- The Chinese had early notions of a personal God. According to the earliest records, during the Shang Dynasty, God was conceived as the original or Great Ancestor of the Shang clan, the supreme Ti.
- During the Chou Dynasty, God was spoken of as a personal Being, a High God, under the name Shang Ti (Shangdi).

# “The Unknown God” of the Chinese



- In the past, only the emperor was allowed to worship Shang Ti through a number of sacrifices and rituals.
- Most elderly Chinese believe in the one supreme God who rules the whole universe. This supreme being maintains, sustains and controls the order of the universe.

# Present State of Chinese Religions

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- The term for religion in China, tsung-chiao, refers literally to a tsung (lineage) of Chiao (teacher). The common men and women of China have traditionally admitted three basic teachings:
  - ▣ Confucius – Ethical system for public life
  - ▣ Taoist – Rituals and attitude towards nature
  - ▣ Buddhist – Salvation concepts concerning afterlife.

# Present State of Chinese Religions



- The Chinese Communists have not abandoned their Marxist interpretation of religion; however, great progress has been made in restoring religious activities, including the recovering, repairing, and reopening of churches, temples, mosques, and monasteries.