East Asian Religions

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Comes from the experience of teaching within the Graduate Theological Union, a consortial program in graduate theological and religious studies in Berkeley, California; an entry-level graduate course, taught as a 3 hours/week (36 hours/term) seminar; and enrolled approximately 10 students.

This is a straightforwardly-designed survey of themes in traditional Chinese, Korean, and Japanese religions, with a special emphasis on 6 key themes: ancestors, self-cultivation, festival, sagehood, religion-state relations, and religion and food. Because it is taught for theological students, it includes theological as well as historical and anthropological questions and concerns, and also makes room for the exploration of East Asian Christian movements as well as Asian-American religious expressions, including Christian ones. Essential to the course's design is the assumption that neither a blow-by-blow historical survey nor a "tradition per week" survey will adequately convey the richness and inter-relatedness of these religious cultures -- hence the focus on theme, rather than chronology or "tradition." Historical and cultural backgrounds are provided, however, in weekly lectures which preface the completion of assigned readings.

Course description

Each of the two Chinese characters provided above (with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese pronunciations given beneath each character) are used, in various ways, to translate the Western concept of "religion." One of our goals in this course is to absorb what these characters, and the concepts they represent, might mean in themselves.

Through primary (in translation) and secondary texts, videos, field trips, and seminar discussions, we will introduce ourselves to the rich, living treasures of the East Asian spiritual heritage in China, Korea, and Japan (Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist, Shinto, folk, etc.) -- its past, as well as its present and future. We will also give some of our time to the consideration of Christianity as an East Asian religion, and to the situations of East Asian religions in North America. Historical, sociological, anthropological, and theological questions all will play a part in our common exploration.

- No background in East Asian languages, history, or religions required
- Can be used to fulfill CDSP M.Div. Multicultural Requirement -- ask!
- All M.A. and M.Div. students welcome
- All assigned readings in course reader (2 copies on GTU Library reserve)

Course requirements

- assigned readings and discussion participation (weekly, in class)
- short e-mail journal entries in response to readings (weekly, by 9 a.m. Thursday)
- one short (3-5 pp.) research prospectus (due 4 November)
- one longer (15-20 pp.) research paper (due 16 December)

Course calendar

Week One (9 September) INTRODUCTION TO EAST ASIAN CULTURES

(no preparation required)
Introductory comments on history, geography & languages of East Asian cultures

Week Two (16 September) VENERATING THE ANCESTORS

How ought human beings to honor their dead? What is the role of ancestor veneration in traditional East Asian religious cultures? How should Christians interpret their own participation in such rituals?


Laurel Kendall, "Korean Ancestors: From the Woman’s Side," in *Korean Women*, pp. 97-112


Excerpts from film, *The Funeral* (Japan; Juzo Itami, director; 1984) -- IN CLASS --

Week Three (23 September) CULTIVATING THE SELF

How have various East Asian religious traditions understood the self and its potential for spiritual development? What distinctive paths for self-cultivation are offered by these traditions? What might Christians learn from them?


Week Four (30 September) RITUAL AND FESTIVAL

How is religion "done" in East Asian cultures? What do people expect in return for their religious actions? How do different religious rites and celebrations fit into one’s life? Is any of this familiar to us?


Excerpts from video on traditional Korean music and ritual -- IN CLASS --

Week Five (7 October) SAGEHOOD AND SALVATION
What models of sanctity, sageliness, or virtue exist in traditional East Asian religious cultures? Have men and women had different options for becoming "holy," "wise," or "righteous"? Can these be compared with Christian traditions?


Livia Kohn, "Immortal Personality," in *The Taoist Experience*, pp. 279-302

Laurence G. Thompson, "Most Holy Former Master, the Philosopher K’ung," in *The Chinese Way in Religion*, pp. 139-143


Week Six (14 October) **SPIRITUALITY AND THE STATE**

What kinds of relationships have existed between the state and religious institutions in East Asian religious cultures? Is there a positive role for the state in religious life, and *vice versa*? How should Christians (especially Anglicans) feel about these relationships?


Week Seven (21 October) **RELIGION AND FOOD** (*prospectus DUE*)


Livia Kohn, "Drugs and Diets," *The Taoist Experience*, pp. 148-153

Ch’en Ts’ao-An, poems & commentary, in Seaton, *The Wine of Endless Life*, pp. 29-33, 53-56

Excerpts from film, *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Taiwan; Ang Lee, director; 1994) -- IN CLASS --

28 OCTOBER: NO CLASS -- FALL BREAK

Week Eight (4 November) "**NEW" EAST ASIAN RELIGIONS: JAPAN"
What is "new" about so-called "new religions" such as Tenrikyô? What is their relationship to "old" religions? What is their role outside of East Asia?


Thora E. Chinnery, *Religious Conflict and Compromise in a Japanese Village*, pp. 5-23

Excerpts from *Ofudesaki*

Video, *Tenrikyô: The Teachings for the Joyous Life + GUEST SPEAKER -- IN CLASS --*

Week Nine (11 November) **EAST ASIAN RELIGIONS IN AMERICA**

How have East Asian religious practices and institutions been affected by their introduction to North America -- and *vice versa*? How do Western converts to these religions negotiate the "Asian-ness" of their newfound religious commitments? How do Christians of East Asian descent negotiate their religiously-plural backgrounds and communities?

Rick Fields, "The Other Zen & The Pure Land," in *How The Swans Came to the Lake*, pp. 339-358


Amy Tan, "Grand Auntie Du’s Funeral" (Tweed & Prothero, *Asian Religions in America*, pp. 357-360)


Excerpts from film, *My America* (USA; Renee Tajima-Peña, director; 1997) -- IN CLASS --

Week Ten (16 November) **FIELD TRIP #1: Berkeley Buddhist Monastery**

Week Ten (18 November) **FIELD TRIP #2: Church of Our Saviour, Oakland**

**25 NOVEMBER: NO CLASS -- THANKSGIVING**

Week Eleven (2 December) **EAST ASIAN RELIGIOUS CULTURES TODAY**

How does the contemporary East Asian religious landscape resemble/differ from the traditional patterns we have seen thus far? What is the relationship between traditional and new religious movements? Where do Christian communities fit into this mosaic?

Edward W. J. Chung, "Confucianism & Women in Modern Korea," *Annual Review of Women in World Religions* III, pp. 142-188


Philip L. Wickeri, "The Church in China on the Eve of the 21st Century" (WCC document)

Week Twelve (9 December) PRESENTATIONS OF STUDENT RESEARCH

Week Thirteen (16 December) WRAP-UP (paper DUE)