



EALC/RELS 0500
East Asian Religions
Fall 2023

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Office: 710 Williams Hall
Office Hours: T 3:30-4:30, or by appointment
Class Meeting: TR 1:45-3:15

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will introduce students to the diverse beliefs, ideas, and practices of East Asia's major religious traditions: Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Shinto, as well as Popular Religion. As religious identity in East Asia is often fluid and non-sectarian in nature, these religious traditions will not be investigated in isolation. Instead, the course will adopt a chronological and geographical approach, examining the spread of religious ideas and practices across East Asia and the ensuing results of these encounters. The first part of the semester will be dedicated to the emergence and spread of religious ideas and practices in ancient China. The second part will focus on a movement that originated in India but later became the most popular and influential religious tradition in Asia: Buddhism. With its complex cosmological, eschatological, and ritual systems, it fundamentally changed the ways in which people in China and Japan come to terms with life and death, ethical decision-making, and the relationship between the individual and their community. The third and final part will be devoted to China and Japan's popular religions, as well as the place of religion in modern societies. Topics will include the relationship between religion and the modern nation-state, the reception and interpretation of East Asian religions in the West, and the current state of religion in China and Japan. The class will be conducted mainly in the form of a lecture, but some sessions will include a discussion component. No previous knowledge of East Asian languages is necessary, and all readings will be available in English on the Canvas site in PDF form.

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

Class Attendance and Participation: 20%

Weekly Quizzes: 35%

Response Papers: 45% (15% each)

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Class attendance is part of the learning process. Every student will be permitted to miss up to **three** lectures without their grade being adversely affected. Missing additional lecture times will impact your grade. In addition, class attendance means participation. There is a discussion component to this course, so you must come prepared, after having completed all assigned readings, and be ready to talk about them in class.

WEEKLY QUIZZES

Starting from week two, students will be expected to submit their answers to short quizzes posted on the Canvas website, based on the weekly readings. The quizzes must be completed by 10:00 AM every Tuesday.

RESPONSE PAPERS

On weeks Seven (10/10), Ten (11/2), and fourteen (11/30) students will submit a short paper (~1000 words), in which they will be asked to analyze a documentary film against the backdrop of the materials discussed in class. The prompt will be provided a week before the assignment is due. The submission dates are clearly marked on the syllabus. **There will be no quizzes during those weeks.** As these are short assignments, there will be **no extensions**, except for unusual circumstances.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS

Week One, *East Asia and the Question of “Religion”*

8/29 – Course Introduction

8/31 – Religion, Religions, Religious

Readings:

Adam Yuet Chau, “Modalities of Doing Religion,” in: *Chinese Religious Life*, 67-84.

Week Two, *Of Gods and Ancestors: Ancient China’s Religious Foundations*

9/5 – Oracle Bone Divination and the Shang Divine Pantheon

9/7 – Myth and Sacrifice in Zhou Religion

Readings:

Introducing Chinese Religions, 1-25.

“Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions,” in: *Religions of China in Practice*, 41-51.

“Birth to the People,” in: *The Book of Songs*, 243-247.

Week Three, *Forming a Triad with Heaven and Earth: Religion and Philosophy in Early China*

9/12 – Confucius and the Birth of Classical Chinese Thought

9/14 – Coming to Terms with What Lies Beyond: Heaven, Humanity, and the Way

Readings:

Introducing Chinese Religions, 26-46.

“Mozi,” in: *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 86-100

“Xunzi,” in: *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 260-271.

Week Four, *Religion, Medicine, and the Culture of Self-Cultivation in Early Imperial China*

9/19 – Body and Wellbeing in Early Chinese Religion

9/21 – The Son of Heaven: The Making of Chinese Imperial Religion

Readings:

Michael Stanley-Baker, “Health and Philosophy in Pre- and Early Imperial China,” in: *Health: A History*, 7-42.

“Heaven, Earth, and Man” and “Yin and Yang in Medical Theory,” in: *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, 57-59, 77-79.

[“The Diagram of Guiding and Stretching”](#)

Week Five, *Daoism: China’s Unofficial High Religion*

9/26 – Celestial Masters Communities and the Rise of Daoist Religion

9/28 – Immortality Pursuits, Visualization Meditation, and Internal Alchemy

Readings:

Introducing Chinese Religions, 65-102.

“The Demon Statutes of Lady Blue,” in: *Norton Anthology of World Religions: Daoism*, 240-243.

“Body Gods and Inner Vision,” in: *Religions of China in Practice*, 149-155.

Week Six, *Buddha, Dharma, Sangha*

10/3 – Buddhism: Cultural Context and Doctrinal Foundations

10/5 – Bodhisattvas and Lay Believers in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Readings:

Introducing Japanese Religions, 104-121.

“Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion,” in: *Norton Anthology of World Religions: Buddhism*, 177-181.

“Monks in the Mahāyāna,” in: *Buddhist Scriptures*, 269-277.

Week Seven, *Buddhism Comes to China: Challenges and Adaptations*

10/10 – Growing Pains: The Sinification of Buddhism

PAPER #1 DUE IN CLASS

10/12 – NO CLASS (Fall Break)

Readings:

Introducing Chinese Religions, 103-141.

“How a Monk Freed his Mother from Hell,” in: *Buddhist Scriptures*, 329-334.

To the Land of Bliss (dir. Wen-jie Qin, 2002)

Week Eight, *Buddhism Travels East*

10/17 – The Impact of Buddhism and Confucianism on Japanese Politics and Society

10/19 – The Emergence of Esoteric Buddhism in the Heian Period

Readings:

Introducing Japanese Religions, 122-168.

“The 17-Article Constitution of Prince Shōtoku,” in: *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. 1, 50-55.

“Buddhahood in this Lifetime,” in: *Buddhist Scriptures*, 436-443.

Week Nine, *Swordsmen, Preachers, and Prophets: The Varieties of Japanese Buddhism*

10/24 – The Popular Buddhism of the Pure Land and Nichiren Sects

10/26 – The Unfettered Mind: Zen Ideas and Practices

Readings:

Introducing Japanese Religions, 169-244.

“Avoiding Hell, Gaining Heaven,” in: *Buddhist Scriptures*, 69-77.

“Dōgen: How to Practice Buddhism,” in: *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. 1, 315-326.

Week Ten, *Humans and the Natural World in East Asian Buddhism*

10/31 – Human-Animal Relations in China and Japan

11/2 – Shugendō and the Pursuit of Green Living

PAPER #2 DUE IN CLASS

Readings:

“Freeing Birds and Fish from Bondage” and “Against Animal Sacrifice,” in: *Buddhist Scriptures*, 394-401.

“En the Ascetic,” in: *Religions of Japan in Practice*, 343-353.

Shugendō Now (dir. Jean-Marc Abela and Mark Patrick McGuire, 2010)

Week Eleven, *Kami and Ghosts: Shinto and Chinese Popular Religion*

11/7 – Ancestors, Gods, and Demons: The Syncretic World of Chinese Popular Religion

11/9 – Shinto Rituals and Festivals

Readings:

Introducing Chinese Religions, 157-182.

Introducing Japanese Religions, 74-103.

“Spellbinding,” in: *Religions of China in Practice*, 241-250.

“Shinto Prayers,” in: *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. 1, 31-39.

Week Twelve, *Religion and Nationalism in Modern East Asia*

11/14 – The Meiji Restoration and State Shinto

11/16 – Opium of the People: Religion in 20th Century China

Readings:

Introducing Chinese Religions, 236-249.

Introducing Japanese Religions, 281-309.

“State Shinto,” in: *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. 2, 790-797.

“Mao Tse-tung Overthrows Religious Authority,” in: *Chinese Religion: An Anthology*, 303-308.

Week Thirteen

11/21 – Museum Visit

11/23 – NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

Week Fourteen, *New Age Spirituality and the Mindfulness Movement in the West*

11/28 – East Asian Religions in the West

11/30 – The Mindfulness Revolution

PAPER #3 DUE IN CLASS

Readings:

David L. McMahan, “Buddhist Modernism,” in: *Buddhism in the Modern World*, 159-176.

“Mindfulness” (60 Minutes with Anderson Cooper, 2014)

“Misuses of Mindfulness: Ron Purser and David Loy’s ‘Beyond McMindfulness’ (2013),” in: *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Sources*, 221-227.

Week Fifteen, *Religion, Media, and Popular Culture in Contemporary East Asia*

12/5 – Guest Lecture TBA

12/7 – The Post-Mao Renaissance and the Changing Chinese Religious Landscape

Readings:

Stefania Travagnin, “From Online Buddha Halls to Robot-Monks,” *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 7 (2020): 120-148.