

Chapter 18

Religion and Custom

Hong Kong's hectic lifestyle might lead some people to think religion takes a back seat in this city. The opposite is true. Hong Kong people follow a wide range of spiritual beliefs and religious customs. As a Chinese city, Hong Kong's dominant religions are, not surprisingly, Buddhism and Taoism. But other religions are also practised — in churches, mosques, temples and synagogues. Moreover, freedom of religion is enshrined in the Basic Law.

Hong Kong residents enjoy religious freedom under the Basic Law and relevant legislation. Religions practised in Hong Kong include Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism. Some religious bodies also run schools, and health and welfare facilities.

Traditional Festivals

The Lunar New Year is the most important date in the Chinese festival calendar. It is celebrated during the days of the first new moon of the year, an auspicious time for friends and relatives to visit each other and to exchange gifts while children and unmarried adults receive *lai see*, or 'lucky' money in red packets.

The Dragon Boat Festival is celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month to honour an ancient Chinese poet, Qu Yuan, who killed himself by jumping into a river rather than compromise his honour. Dragon boat races and the eating of rice dumplings, wrapped in bamboo leaves, are the highlights of this festival.

For the Mid-Autumn Festival, on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month, grown-ups and children gather under the full moon with colourful lanterns and eat mooncakes, a traditional festival delicacy.

The Ching Ming Festival in spring and the Chung Yeung Festival in autumn are marked by visits to ancestral graves. To observe Chung Yeung people climb hills to recall the dramatic story of how a family in ancient time fled to a mountain to escape a plague.

Buddhism

Buddhism is one of the dominant religions in China. It has many followers in Hong Kong who worship in hundreds of temples across the city. The major Buddhist festival takes place on Buddha's birthday, on the eighth day of the fourth month in the lunar calendar. Followers pay respect to Sakyamuni Buddha, Kwun Yum (the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy) and other Buddhas and Bodhisattva.

The Po Lin Monastery on Lantau Island is famous for the Tian Tan Buddha, a majestic bronze statue of Buddha, in a seated position, believed to be the largest outdoor Buddha statue of its kind in the world. It is a popular attraction for visitors, especially during weekends and holidays.

Other notable Buddhist temples include the Chi Lin Nunnery on Diamond Hill, which is a cluster of temple structures built in the architectural style of the Tang Dynasty.

Taoism

Taoism has many followers in Hong Kong. Taoist Day, the birthday of Lao Zi, is celebrated on the 15th day of the second month of the lunar year.

Taoist gods are classified under two headings: Prior Heavens, and Posterior Heavens. The gods commonly worshipped by Taoists as patron spirits are those of the Prior Heavens, including Senior Lord Taishang, Jade Emperor and Doumu (Mother of the Dipper). Mortal gods of the Posterior Heavens group, such as Lui Cho, Kwan Tai and Che Kung, are revered for their great virtues and feats in saving mankind. Tin Hau, the Queen of Heaven and Protector of Seafarers, is worshipped widely, particularly during the Tin Hau Festival, which falls on the 23rd day of the third month in the lunar calendar. Worshippers pay homage at the famous Tin Hau Temple at Joss House Bay on the Clear Water Bay Peninsula on that day. Other leading deities include Pak Tai (Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heaven and local patron of Cheung Chau Island) and Hung Shing (God of the South Seas and a weather prophet).

Notable temples include the Wong Tai Sin Temple, named after a Taoist deity, in the Wong Tai Sin District of Kowloon, the Che Kung Temple in Sha Tin in the New Territories, and the Man Mo Temple in Hollywood Road on Hong Kong Island.

Confucianism

Confucianism is a belief in the teachings of Confucius, who lived in ancient China from 551 to 479 BC. His teachings are based on a moral code for human relations which emphasises the importance of tradition and rites. He was one of the most eminent thinkers of the time, a great sage and educator whose philosophy has deeply influenced the political, economic and social systems of China through the ages. He has also been hailed as an exemplary mentor for all ages. Confucianism's main feast day is Confucius's birthday, on the 27th day of the eighth lunar month. The Confucian Academy, a leading Confucian organisation in Hong Kong, is staging a campaign to make this day a public holiday.

Christianity

The Christian community — comprising mainly Protestants and Roman Catholics — numbers about 660 000 people (including 100 300 Filipino Catholics). The Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches maintain a spirit of fellowship with the Hong Kong Christian Council, the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia (based in Hong Kong) and the Roman Catholic Diocese. They get together on special occasions.

Protestant Community

The Protestant movement in Hong Kong began in 1841 and has a current membership of 320 000 followers. The Protestant community is composed of more than 50 denominations within 1 400 congregations. Most of the major international denominations and former mission agencies have ecclesial branches in Hong Kong, such as the Adventist, Anglican, Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Evangelical Free, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Salvation Army. There are also many indigenous denominations such as The Church of Christ in China (representing Presbyterian and Congregational traditions), the True Jesus Church and the Local Church (commonly known as the Little Flock) in Hong Kong. A large number of their members are young people.

The Protestant community runs three post-secondary institutions: the Chung Chi College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University and Lingnan University. It also runs more than 630 schools (273 kindergarten, 206 primary schools and 160 secondary schools) and 116 nurseries. In addition, it operates more than 30 theological seminaries/Bible schools, 30 Christian publishing houses and 70 Christian bookstores. There are two Christian weekly newspapers, the *Christian Times* and *Christian Weekly*, which present news and comment from a Christian perspective, half a dozen Christian media agencies which broadcast Christian TV programmes regularly and four weekly Christian radio programmes on Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK).

More than 250 para-church agencies and different Christian action groups attend to the needs of the Protestant community, respond to some issues that affect Hong Kong society and support emergency relief and development projects in Mainland China and developing countries.

The Protestant community runs seven hospitals and 18 clinics. Sixty social welfare organisations provide a wide range of services at more than 250 community (family/youth) service centres, 75 day care centres, 17 children's homes, 35 homes for the elderly, more than 100 centres for the elderly, 47 training centres for the mentally handicapped and disabled, 25 drug rehabilitation centres, and chaplaincy services for prisons, hospitals and the airport. There are also 15 campsites. The YMCA and YWCA manage five international hotel-style guesthouses.

Two ecumenical bodies, the Hong Kong Christian Council and the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Church Union, facilitate cooperative work among the Protestant churches in Hong Kong. The Chinese Christian Church Union was established in 1915 and has a current membership of more than 300 congregations. The Hong Kong

Christian Council was formed in 1954 and is a member of the World Council of Churches. Its core members — major denominations, ecumenical service agencies and the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia — are committed to building a closer relationship among all churches in Hong Kong, the Mainland and overseas. The Council also encourages local Christians to play an active part in the development of Hong Kong society. It seeks to serve the wider community through its affiliated organisations such as the Hong Kong Christian Service, Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee, United Christian Medical Service, Christian Family Service Centre, and Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital.

Roman Catholic Community

The Roman Catholic Church in Hong Kong was established as a mission prefecture in 1841; became a vicariate apostolic in 1874; and a diocese in 1946. There are about 243 000 Catholics in Hong Kong served by 289 priests, 72 brothers and 508 sisters. There are 52 parishes, comprising 41 churches, 34 chapels and 27 halls for religious services conducted in Cantonese; three-fifths of the parishes also provide services in English and, in some cases, *Tagalog*, the Filipino language. The diocese has its own administrative structure while maintaining close links with the Pope and other Catholic communities around the world with which it shares the same creed, scripture, liturgy and organisation.

Along with its apostolic work, one of the prime concerns of the diocese is the well-being of the community as a whole. The diocese has 309 Catholic schools and kindergartens catering to about 250 000 pupils. The schools are assisted by the Catholic Education Office. Medical and social services are provided to at least six hospitals, 14 clinics, 38 social and family service centres, 18 hostels, 13 homes for the aged, 20 rehabilitation service centres and many self-help clubs and associations. Caritas is the official social welfare arm of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong. These services are offered to everyone and, indeed, 95 per cent of those who have benefited from them are not Catholics.

The diocese publishes two weekly newspapers — *Kung Kuo Po* and the *Sunday Examiner*. It also produces cultural and educational programmes for broadcast on TV and for incorporation in DVDs for distribution. Other media activities are generally coordinated by the Hong Kong Catholic Social Communications Office.

Muslim Community

There are about 90 000 Muslims in Hong Kong, of whom some 30 000 are Chinese. The others are mostly locally born non-Chinese but there are also Muslims from Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Middle Eastern and African countries.

The Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong, a public charity, coordinates all of Hong Kong's Islamic religious activities. A board of trustees, nominated by the Islamic Union of Hong Kong, the Pakistan Association, the Indian Muslim Association and the Dawoodi Bohra Association, manages and maintains the *masjids*, two cemeteries and one kindergarten. In addition, the trustees organise Muslim festivals and other religious events. Charity work carried out by

members of the Muslim community, include providing financial aid to the needy, medical facilities and education assistance, and is done through different Muslim organisations.

The Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternity Association, established in 1922 in Wanchai, is the major organisation representing Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong. Apart from conducting religious activities, the association manages and maintains five non-profit educational facilities: one college, two primary schools and two kindergartens. The association also gives a helping hand to Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong and on the Mainland.

Five principal *masjids* are used for daily prayers, the oldest being the Jamia Masjid in Shelley Street on Hong Kong Island, which was built in 1849 and rebuilt in 1915 to make room for 400 worshippers.

The eight-storey Masjid Ammar and Osman Ramju Sadick Islamic Centre, managed by the Islamic Union of Hong Kong in Wan Chai, houses a masjid on two floors, community hall, library, medical clinic, classrooms and offices, and can accommodate between 700 and 1 500 people.

The imposing Kowloon Masjid and Islamic Centre, with its distinctive white marble finish, is a major landmark in Tsim Sha Tsui. With three prayer halls, community hall, medical centre and library, the masjid can accommodate 3 500 worshippers. There is also a masjid inside Stanley Prison.

There are two Muslim cemeteries, one in Happy Valley and the other, which also has a masjid, at Cape Collinson, in Chai Wan.

Hindu Community

The religious and social activities of the 40 000-strong Hindu community take place mainly in the Hindu Temple in Happy Valley. The Hindu Association of Hong Kong is responsible for the upkeep of the temple, which is used for meditation, spiritual lectures and community activities, including yoga classes and observance of major Hindu festivals such as *Diwali*, *Dussehra* and *Holi*. Engagement and marriage ceremonies (in accordance with the Marriage Ordinance) are performed in the temple according to Hindu rites. Other important services include the administration of last rites, making arrangements for cremation and related ceremonies and the maintenance of the Hindu crematorium at Cape Collinson.

Devotional music sessions and religious discourses are held every Sunday morning, followed by a free community meal which is also served on Monday evenings.

Sikh Community

The Sikhs came to Hong Kong from the Punjab, India, as part of the British Armed Forces in the 19th century.

There are now about 8 000 Sikhs in Hong Kong who conduct their religious and social activities in the Sikh Temple in Queen's Road East. The temple, which was

established in 1901, provides daily religious services as well as free meals and limited accommodation for overseas visitors of any faith. It also houses a specialist library containing books on the Sikh religion and culture as well as a kindergarten for four to six year-olds.

The most important holy days and festivals observed by the Sikh community are the birthdays of Guru Nanak (founder of the faith), Guru Gobind Singh (the 10th Guru) and Baisakhi (the birthday of all Sikhs).

Jewish Community

The settlement of the Jewish community in Hong Kong dates from the 1840s and comprises families drawn from different parts of the world. There are three main synagogues — Ohel Leah Synagogue (Orthodox) providing daily, Sabbath and festival services, the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong (Reform) with Sabbath and festival services, both of which share the same premises in Robinson Road; and the Chabad Lubavitch, which has daily services, in MacDonnell Road. All fulfil an important role in the religious, cultural and social life of the Jewish people in Hong Kong.

The Ohel Leah Synagogue was built in 1901 on land given by Sir Jacob Sassoon and his family and includes a *mikvah* (ritual bath). There is also a Jewish Cemetery, built in 1857 in Shan Kwong Road, Happy Valley.

The site adjoining the Ohel Leah Synagogue, which contains a residential complex, also houses the Jewish Community Centre, serving all three congregations. The centre offers its 400 member families supervised kosher dining and banquet, cultural and recreational facilities, a wide range of activities and classes, and a specialist library covering all aspects of Judaica. The centre functions as the focal point of social and cultural life for the community.

The community also operates the Carmel School and other supplementary religious educational classes. There are several charity organisations and cultural societies, including the Jewish Women's Association, United Israel Appeal, Israeli Chamber of Commerce and Jewish Historical Society, which all combine to create a vibrant Jewish community in Hong Kong.

Other Faiths

All religions and faiths are free to practise in Hong Kong. Others that have been established in Hong Kong for many years include the Baha'is and Zoroastrianism.