

Chapter 18

Religion and Custom

As a Chinese city, followers of Buddhism and Taoism outnumber those of other religions in Hong Kong. However, apart from time-honoured Chinese creeds and customs, other religions are also practised with great fervour — in churches, mosques, temples and synagogues. Freedom to worship openly is enshrined in the Basic Law, Hong Kong's constitution.

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 up a mountain to escape a plague.

Buddhism

Buddhism is one of the dominant religions in China. Lord Buddha Sakyamuni is generally recognised by Buddhists as a key figure. There are more than one million followers and 400 Buddhist monasteries in Hong Kong. The Po Lin Monastery on Lantau Island is famous for its bronze Tian Tan Buddha. The Chi Lin Nunnery on Diamond Hill in Kowloon is another well known temple. It comprises a cluster of temple structures, built in the architectural style of the Tang Dynasty. Both are popular attractions for visitors, especially during weekends and holidays.

The Hong Kong Buddhist Association, founded in 1945, comprises *bhiksus*, *bhiksunis*, *upaskas* and *upasikas*. It is the largest Buddhist organisation in Hong Kong. Its mission is to propagate dharma teaching and culture and to provide charitable and social welfare services to the public, such as medical and general care of the young and old. The Lord Buddha's birthday is observed as a public holiday in Hong Kong. On that day, all Buddhist followers visit Buddhist temples across the city to pay homage.

Taoism

Taoism is an indigenous religion of China with a long history of over 2 000 years. Honouring Taishang Laojun (Li Dan) as the Supreme Patriarch, Taoism advocates simple living and harmony with nature. Different branches of Taoism have emerged over the years, which are now consolidated into two main branches, namely the Orthodox Oneness and the Complete Perfection. There are about one million Taoist followers and more than 300 Taoist temples in Hong Kong, according to the Hong Kong Taoist Association. Some of the temples are open to the public, while others are not. The Hong Kong Taoist Association, formed by representatives of major Taoist temples and Taoists, organises a wide range of activities to promote the Taoist belief of the unity of heaven and man, Taoist scriptures and doctrines, the moral values of loyalty and filial piety, and the idea of cultivating the self to achieve longevity. These activities include the Hong Kong Taoist Festival held around the 15th day of the second lunar month (the birthday of the Supreme Patriarch of Taoism), the triennial Taoist Blessing Ceremony held on the 15th day of the 10th lunar month, lectures on Taoist scriptures and philosophy, Tai Chi classes, Taoist music classes, and others.

Taoist gods are classified under two headings: Prior Heavens and Posterior Heavens. Gods of the Prior Heavens include the Supreme Patriarch Taishang Laojun and Doumu. Mortal gods of the Posterior Heavens group, including Kwan Tai, Lui Cho, Kwun Yum, Wong Tai Sin, Che Kung, Tin Hau, Pak Tai and Hung Shing, are revered for their great virtues and feats in saving mankind.

The Taoist community is committed to promoting the well-being of society, especially the educational, social and charitable services. They run more than 40 schools and kindergartens and subsidise courses offered by universities and tertiary institutions. They provide social and charitable services by operating clinics, homes for the elderly, care and attention homes, child care centres and community service centres in Hong Kong. They also provide strong funding support for education,

poverty alleviation and medical care on the Mainland, and assist in the building and repair of a number of Taoist temples there.

Confucianism

Confucianism is the belief in the teachings of Confucius and the subsequent *ru* school of thoughts. Confucius 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 world's most eminent thinkers, a great sage and educator whose philosophy deeply influenced the political, economic and social systems of China through the ages. He is also hailed as an exemplary mentor. The *Analects of Confucius*, a collection of his philosophical sayings, is the Bible for Confucianism. Other important ancient books and records include the Six Classics, namely the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Songs*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of Music* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Confucianism's main feast day is Confucius's birthday on the 27th day of the eighth lunar month.

Christianity

The Christian community — comprising mainly Protestants and Roman Catholics — numbers about 670 000 followers. 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 about 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.

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 kindergartens, 206 primary schools and 160 secondary schools) and 116 nurseries. In addition, it operates more than 35 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 comments 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 issues that affect Hong Kong society and support emergency relief and development projects in the mainland of China and developing countries. There are currently more than 400 missionaries from Hong Kong serving overseas.

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 Chinese Young Men's Christian Association of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association together manage five international hotel-style guesthouses.

Two ecumenical bodies, the Hong Kong Christian Council and the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Church Union, facilitate co-operative 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 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 350 000 Catholics in Hong Kong served by 291 priests, 68 brothers and 502 sisters. There are 53 parishes, comprising 41 churches, 31 chapels and 28 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 283 Catholic schools and kindergartens catering to about 220 000 pupils. The schools are assisted by the Catholic Education Office. Medical and social services are provided to at least six hospitals, 12 clinics, 39 social and family service centres, 19 hostels, 13 homes for the aged, 20 rehabilitation service centres and many self-help clubs and associations.

Caritas-Hong Kong 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 Kao Po* and the *Sunday Examiner*. The Diocesan Audio-Visual Centre also produces cultural and educational programmes for broadcast on TV and for incorporation in DVDs for distribution. Other media activities are generally co-ordinated by the Hong Kong Catholic Social Communications Office.

Muslim Community

There are about 220 000 Muslims in Hong Kong, of whom 30 000 are Chinese and 120 000 are Indonesians. The others are mostly non-Chinese born in Hong Kong. There are also Muslims from Pakistan, India, Malaysia and Middle Eastern and African countries.

The Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong, a public charity, co-ordinates all of Hong Kong's Islamic religious activities. The trustees, nominated by the Islamic Union of Hong Kong, the Pakistan Association, the Indian Muslim Association and the Anjumane Burhani Hong Kong Dawoodi Bohra Association, manage and maintain the masjids (mosques), two cemeteries and one kindergarten. In addition, the trustees organise Muslim festivals and other religious events, and certify the supply of acceptable religious 'halal' food in Hong Kong. Charity work carried out by members of the Muslim community includes 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 Wan Chai, is the major organisation representing Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong. Apart from carrying out 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 in Wan Chai, managed by the Islamic Union of Hong Kong, 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, 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 Punjab, India, as part of the British Armed Forces in the 19th century. The first Sikh temple, Siri Guru Singh Sabha, was established in 1901 in Queen's Road East, Wanchai. The building was redeveloped in 1938 and renamed Sikh Temple, and is managed by the Khalsa Diwan, a registered charitable organisation. The present Sikh Temple is classified as a Grade III Historic Building. Due to the growing Sikh population in Hong Kong, there is an extension to the old temple, consisting of a kitchen and dining hall on the ground floor, a temple, social hall and staff quarters on the first floor, education and healthcare centre on the second floor and a recreation hall on the third floor.

Religious services are conducted in the temple every morning and evening. Followers of Guru Nanak Dev, founder of Sikhism, gather in the temple in large numbers on Sundays and on main holy days.

The most important religious dates are the birthdays of Guru Nanak Dev and Guru Gobind Singh (the 10th Guru) and Baisakhi (the birthday of all Sikhs).

There are about 10 000 Sikhs in Hong Kong. They work in the private sector, in the civil service and in different professional fields.

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 banqueting, cultural and recreational facilities, and operates a fully kosher supermarket, 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, the United Israel Appeal, the Israeli Chamber of Commerce and the Jewish Historical Society which all combine to create a vibrant Jewish community in Hong Kong.

Other Faiths

People are free to practise all religions in Hong Kong. Other religions that have been established in Hong Kong for many years include the Baha'is and Zoroastrianism.