

EAST ASIAN religions

CONFUCIANISM

After Confucius died, his ideas and writings were so revered in China that they became a religion. In the 1st century BCE, this became the state religion, and it held its place until the 20th century. Confucianism is still followed by millions in Asia.

Confucius, 552–479 BCE

Main teachings

Based on principles of harmony, tolerance, and excellence, Confucianism offers guidelines for creating successful people, families, and societies. Confucius wanted people to love and respect others (especially elders and superiors), to do good, and to honor tradition. He recommended two ways of achieving these things—the principles of *ren* (humane behavior) and *Li* (manners, ceremony, and ritual).

TAOISM

Taoism is based on the writings of two philosophers, Laozi and Zhuangzi, who taught that Tao (“the Way”) is the principle controlling the universe. It became a religion in the 2nd century BCE, and later absorbed other sects and practices.



Taoist leaders

The key teachings

Taoism is an inward-looking faith, but it also focuses on ritual worship and divination. Like Confucianism, it's concerned with yin and yang, and stresses the importance of harmony with the universe, and consideration for others. Taoists believe its practices not only enhance life, but also help people reach Heaven, where they become immortals.

SHINTO

Shinto, practiced only in Japan, is part of the country's identity. This ancient religion doesn't have a founder; it's a blend of rituals and beliefs dating back to prehistory. After Buddhism arrived in Japan around 550 CE, the old beliefs were given the name “Shinto” so they wouldn't get mixed up with the new ideas.



Legend says the Sun goddess Amaterasu founded Japan—hence the red Sun on the national flag.

The way of the gods

Shinto means “the way of the gods”—followers believe there are *kami* (gods, spirits, ancestors, and natural forces) around us all the time—as a Japanese poem says, “as many spirits as blades of grass.” Some are well-known, others are obscure; some are good, and some can be bad. There's a connection between humans and *kami*, and humans who do important things are often worshiped as *kami* after death. Historical figures may have their own shrines and they're also treated as *kami*.

In China and Japan, there are *many different* gods and spirits, and a lot of different traditions mixed together. The best-known belief systems are *Confucianism* and *Taoism*, which originated in China, and *Shinto*, from Japan. *Buddhism* (see page 34) is also important in east Asia.

What about GOD?

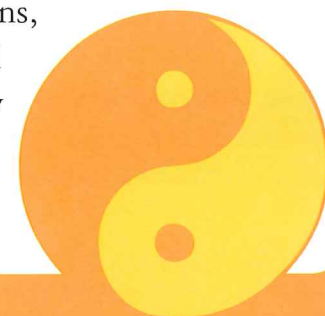
Confucianism doesn't have a single God-like figure—it suggests the existence of an ultimate, unknowable force called *Taiji*, which controls the universe and the human spirit. But there are lots of lesser gods, spirits, and ancestors who live in Heaven. These are worshiped by the people, who turn to them with requests—for fruitful harvests, for example, or recovery from illness.

CHINESE POPULAR RELIGION

This blend of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism is practiced by the Chinese around the world. It stresses community festivals, the worship of immortals, and rituals like temple offerings and incense burning.

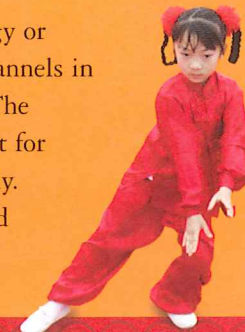
YIN/YANG

Many Asian faiths teach the principle of yin (dark, moist, soft, cold, feminine) and yang (light, dry, hard, warm, masculine). Everything has yin and yang qualities in different proportions, and the ultimate goal is to achieve harmony by keeping them in balance.



T'ai chi

Taoism helps people understand the energy or life-force (*chi* or *qi*) that flows through channels in the body and connects all living things. The graceful movements of t'ai-chi are not just for exercise, but also to help the *chi* flow freely. When this happens, all inner strength and energy are brought together and released.



Shinto practices

People visit *kami* shrines at holidays, or to make a wish. The focus of Shinto is to ensure a happy relationship between people and *kami*—when all is well, *kami* keep the world running smoothly. Many similar practices are carried out at Buddhist temples.

Shinto teachings

A key Shinto teaching is *wa*—harmony. Japan is the land of *wa* and it's vital for people to live in harmony with the world, and be happy and productive. The *kami*'s role is to help humans achieve this, but humans have a duty to worship and look after the *kami*.

Sumo wrestling



Sumo, whose origins are linked to Shinto, dates back many centuries. Early matches took place at Shinto shrines to please the *kami*, and they were sponsored by the court to ensure good harvests.

MIX and match

Shinto is mainly concerned with this life, but in Japan, Buddhism deals with death. This is a good example of how different religions work together—the Japanese combine Shinto, Buddhism, and folk traditions in every part of the life cycle. When they're born, babies are blessed at a Shinto shrine and placed under the *kamis*' protection; at the end of life, death is subject to Buddhist rituals. So, most Japanese are “born Shinto and die Buddhist.”