



Religion and Custom

Religious freedom is one of the fundamental rights enjoyed by Hong Kong residents. It is protected by the Basic Law and the relevant legislation. There are a large variety of religious groups in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), including Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism. All of these groups have a considerable number of adherents. Apart from offering religious instructions, many major religious bodies have established schools and provided health and welfare facilities.

Buddhism and Taoism: Buddhism and Taoism are traditional Chinese religions. These two religions have a considerable number of adherents in Hong Kong and there are more than 600 Chinese temples in the HKSAR. The history of some of these temples can be traced back to more than 700 years ago, while some others have been built in recent years.

Religious studies are conducted in monasteries, nunneries and hermitages. Virtually all monasteries are open to the public, as are the temples, which are especially crowded at festivals and on the first and 15th days of lunar months.

Taoist and Buddhist organisations help to meet welfare, educational and medical needs in Hong Kong, either directly or by contributing to charitable organisations. Many temples have donation boxes to collect money for charities, schools or hospitals.

Buddhism: 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 Nin Nunnery in Diamond Hill, which is a cluster of temple structures built in Tang Dynasty's architectural style. It is open to the public following the completion of its redevelopment in 2000.

Taoism: 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 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.

Since Hong Kong has always depended on the sea – originally for fishing and then for trade – the most popular deities are those connected with the sea and the weather. Tin Hau, the 'Queen of Heaven' and protector of seafarers, is said to be worshipped by 250 000 people. There are at least 24 Tin Hau temples in Hong Kong, the first and most famous being the one at Fat Tong Mun in Joss House Bay. This temple is particularly crowded with worshippers paying homage during the Tin Hau Festival, which falls on the 23rd day of the third month in the lunar calendar. Due to land reclamation, many of the Tin Hau temples which were originally near the sea are now some distance inland.

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 the Hong Kong Island.

Other leading deities include Kwan Tai, God of War and the source of righteousness; Pak Tai, Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heaven and local patron of the island of Cheung Chau; and Hung Shing, God of the South Seas and a weather prophet.

Confucianism: Confucianism is a belief in the teachings of Confucius who lived in ancient China from 551 to 479 B.C. His teachings were based on moral code for human relations with emphasis on 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. He has also been hailed as an exemplary mentor for all ages. The major festival of Confucianism is the birthday of Confucius that falls on the 27th day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar.

Confucians in Hong Kong have been deeply involved in education. They run a number of local schools with an objective of promoting the teachings of Confucius.

Christianity

The Roman Catholic Community: The Roman Catholic Church in Hong Kong was established as a mission prefecture in 1841 and as vicariate apostolic in 1874. It became a diocese in 1946.

About 355 000 people are Catholics. They are served by 291 priests, 68 brothers and 502 sisters. There are 53 parishes, comprising 41 churches, 31 chapels and 28 halls for religious service. Services are conducted in Cantonese, with three-fifths of the parishes providing services in English and in Tagalog in some cases.

The diocese has established 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. The assistant secretary-general of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference has his office in Hong Kong.

Along with its apostolic work, one of the prime concerns of the diocese has been the well-being of the community as a whole. In education, there are 283 Catholic schools and kindergartens with about 220 000 pupils. The schools are assisted by the Catholic Board of Education. Medical and social services include six hospitals, 12 clinics, 39 social and family 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 Church in Hong Kong.

These services are open to all people. Indeed, 95 per cent of those who have benefited from the wide range of services provided by the diocese are not Catholics.

To reach people through the media, the diocese publishes two weekly newspapers, *Kung Kao Po* and *The Sunday Examiner*. In addition, the Diocesan Audio-Visual Centre produces films and videos for use in schools and parishes, while the Hong Kong Catholic Social Communications Office acts as an information and public relations channel for the diocese.

The Protestant Community: The presence of the Protestant community dates back to 1841. About 320 000 Protestant Christians live in Hong Kong. The Protestant Church is made up of 1 400 congregations in more than 50 denominations. The Baptists form the largest denomination followed by the Lutherans. Other major denominations are Adventists, Anglicans, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Evangelical Free, Church of Christ in China, Methodist, Pentecostal and Salvation Army. With their emphasis on youth work, many congregations have a high proportion of young people.

The Protestant churches are also deeply involved in education, health care and social welfare. Protestant organisations operate three post-secondary institutions: Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University and Lingnan University. They run 160 secondary schools, 206 primary schools, 273 kindergartens and 116 nurseries. In addition, they operate more than 35 theological seminaries and Bible schools, 30 Christian publishing houses and 70 Christian bookshops.

They run seven hospitals with about 3 750 beds, 18 clinics and 60 social service organisations that provide a wide range of social services including 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 15 camp sites. Five international hotel-type guest houses are managed by the YMCA and YWCA.

The church supports emergency relief and development projects in the Mainland and developing countries. Two weekly newspapers are published, *The Christian Weekly* and *The Christian Times*.

Two ecumenical bodies facilitate co-operative work among the Protestant churches in Hong Kong. The older one, dating from 1915, is the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union. The second co-operative body is the Hong Kong Christian Council, formed in 1954. The core membership of the Council – major denominations, ecumenical service agencies and the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Hong Kong and South East Asia – is committed to building closer relationships among all churches in Hong Kong, the Mainland and overseas. It also 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.

The Muslim Community: Hong Kong has about 90 000 Muslims. of which some 30 000 are Chinese, with the rest

mainly from Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Middle Eastern and African countries. Five principal masjids are used daily for prayers. The oldest is the Jamia Masjid in Shelley Street on Hong Kong Island, which was built in the 1840s and rebuilt in 1915. The Kowloon Masjid and Islamic Centre in Nathan Road, opened in 1984, can accommodate 3 500 worshippers. The Masjid and Islamic Centre at Oi Kwan Road in Wan Chai was opened in September 1981 and can accommodate from 700 to 1 500 people depend on requirement. The other two masjids locate at the Cape Collinson Muslim Cemetery and the Stanley Prison.

The Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong co-ordinates religious affairs and manages the masajids, two Muslim cemeteries and a kindergarten in Hong Kong. The constituent bodies of the Trustees are the Islamic Union of Hong Kong, the Pakistan Association, the Indian Muslim Association and the Dawoodi Bohra Association.

Charitable work among the Muslim community, including financial aid to the needy, medical care and assisted education, is conducted through various Muslim organisations in Hong Kong.

The Hindu Community: The religious and social activities of Hong Kong's Hindu community of 40 000 are centred on the Hindu Temple in Happy Valley. The Hindu Association of Hong Kong is responsible for the upkeep of the temple, which is also used for meditation, spiritual lectures, yoga classes and other community activities as well as the observance of major Hindu festivals such as Diwali, Dussehra, etc. Engagement and marriage ceremonies are performed at the temple according to Hindu rites. Devotional music sessions and religious discourses are held every Sunday morning and Monday evening. The Sunday sessions are followed by a free community meal.

The Hindu Temple is an approved place of worship for the performance of marriages under the Marriage Ordinance.

Other important services rendered by the temple include administration of last rites, arrangements for cremation and related ceremonies and the maintenance of the Hindu crematorium at Cape Collinson.

The Sikh Community: The Sikhs, numbered at about 10 000, are perhaps one of Hong Kong's most colourful minorities. A unique feature of the Sikh Temple in Wan Chai is that it provides free meals and short-term accommodation to overseas visitors of any faith. The main holy days and festivals observed are the birthdays of Guru Nanak (founder of the faith), Guru Gobind Singh (the 10th Guru) and Baisakhi (birthday of all Sikhs).

The Jewish Community: With a history dating back to the 1840's, Hong Kong's Jewish community, comprising families from various parts of the world, worships at three main synagogues. Ohel Leah Synagogue (Orthodox) provides daily, Sabbath and festival services and the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong (Reform) provides Sabbath and festival services. Both synagogues share the same premises in Robinson Road, Hong Kong Island. The Chabad Lubavitch in Garden Road also holds daily services. 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 at Happy Valley, a historical site in Hong Kong.

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

Traditional and Religious Festivals: There are five major festivals in the Chinese calendar, with the *Lunar New Year* being the most important. Gifts and visits are exchanged among friends and relatives and children receive *lai see*, or 'lucky money'. During the *Ching Ming Festival* in spring, ancestral graves are visited. In early summer (fifth day of the fifth lunar month), the *Dragon Boat Festival* is celebrated with dragon boat races and by eating cooked glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves. The *Mid-Autumn Festival* falls on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month. Gifts of mooncakes, wine and fruit are exchanged and

adults and children gather under the full moon with colourful lanterns. *Chung Yeung* is on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, when many visit their ancestors' graves or hike up mountains in remembrance of an ancient Chinese family's escape from plague and death by fleeing to a mountain-top.

Apart from the above traditional festivals, quite a number of important religious festivals, including Good Friday, Easter, Buddha's Birthday and Christmas, have been listed as public holidays. Adherents hold special celebration or memorial ceremonies on these occasions.