

# Sacred Writings of East-Asian Religions in the Context of Comparative Cultural Studies

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**S**acred writings played a crucial role in the formation of the Asian civilisations, which were based predominantly not on oral tradition but on carefully recorded texts. Among the most important classics, which have to be introduced at least by reference, by digests and by reading brief excerpts from the texts, we can mention the following works:

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- For India: *Veda* books plus *Bhagavadgita* (with a special reference to the classic *Sruti* canon) and *Yoga-sutra* by Patanjali;
- For China: *Tao-te Ching* by Lao-zu, *Analects (Lun-yui)* by Confucius, with a reference to two sets of the so called *Confucian Classics* (4 and 5 books in each respectively);
- For all the Buddhist domain of Asia: Some fragments from the major Buddhist sutras like *Pradjnaparamita Sutra* and *Lotus Sutra*;
- For the whole area: Some Chinese and Japanese Zen-Buddhist writings (like ‘*The Sutra of Trust to the Spirit*’ (‘*Sin Sin Mei*’) by Hui Neng, classic koan from ‘*Umen juan*’ and the poems of the Way (*doka*) by Ikkyu;
- For Japan exclusively: Shinto mythology in two sacred books, ‘*Records of the Ancient Deeds*’ (*Kojiki*) and ‘*Annals of Japan*’ (*Nihongi*).

The problem is that this required minimum, even if represented by general descriptions, digest-like adaptations and short excerpts of the texts in English translation or in original, proves to be extremely difficult for the understanding of an average Japanese student, both in the respect of language and in the respect of philosophic discourse. Why is this the case in a country of refined spiritual culture such as Japan?

Reading sacred texts presumes, in any case, adequate cultural background as a prerequisite. For a student this should be basic knowledge of at least one religious tradition whatever it might be: monotheistic or polytheistic, Christian, Judaic, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Shinto or something else. Without it, a student faces many problems in conceiving the true meaning of the sacred texts, divine imagery, and mythological symbols in other religious systems. A purely atheistic and pragmatic mind—which often characterises Japanese students—is alien to any kind of spirituality except for the inspiration drawn from Internet websites. It is extremely difficult to change this atheistic predisposition at the age of 20—and probably not many Japanese students would really like to be changed.

Usually, at the big universities, this process is regulated in the most natural way: students who are really interested in religion and philosophy enter a relevant faculty, then enrol in the relevant courses and major in some of them. All the rest choose different faculties and different subjects. However at some schools in Japan, which can be placed as 'business-oriented' universities of liberal arts, the needs of students are different, and, on their scale of values, humanities in general occupy a not very important place. The point is, that at some universities, students have to take certain courses in humanities irrespective of their specialisation. I observed this at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, where I have been working for 12 years. Now, at the newly established Akita International University, which is a small elite experimental university with a limited number of students, the same trends are getting more distinct and the same problems need imminent solutions. The number of the students is relatively small. So is the number of the courses offered in humanities. It means that, usually, we have, in the same class, just a few students who come 'by vocation', and many others who enrol out of sheer curiosity or for the need of extra credits. In Japan, despite all the obvious differences, both groups still have much in common: a lack of elementary background in history, literature and 'spirituality' which is simply the direct reflection of middle and high school programmes in modern Japan, with their focus on 'practical knowledge', including practical rules of conduct for daily life.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not to speak of medieval Japan, spirituality was cultivated much more efficiently. The evidence can be easily found in personal contact with the intellectuals of an older generation. In imperial pre-war Japan, education had a strong, nationalist, ideological foundation, built of the appropriately adjusted State-Shinto militant doctrines, neo-Confucian moral dogmas, and Buddhist faith—in their respective order of importance. However reactionary it was, this kind of ideological basis required a certain level of knowledge of Shinto mythology and comprehension of nature-worshipping. That was also a link to indigenous Japanese spiritual traditions deeply rooted in the nation, to the rites performed on a regular basis in the hundreds of thousands of shrines all over the country, as well as to the cult of the emperor regarded as a 'Son of Heaven', a descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu.

The Confucian classics (at least some of them) were a school subject studied from elementary school level, making a bridge to Chinese antiquity but even more so to the glorious Samurai past of Japan with its *Bushido* ethics. *Bushido* code, according to the concept of the Meiji Ministry of Education, was to cement the whole nation after the earlier decline of the Samurai class. Religious ethics of the upper class were deliberately and successfully transplanted to the whole body of the nation, making it eventually a docile tool in the hands of the aggressive totalitarian regime.

Consequently, reading the Confucian classics (in original and also in their later interpretations by Japanese Confucian scholars) became an indispensable part of education at all levels, especially of higher education. This kind of reading required fluent command of classic Chinese (*wenyan*) and/or at least its Japanese adaptation (*bungo*). Since the Middle Ages, being an intellectual in Japan has meant being a master of ‘Chinese Learning’ (*kangaku*)—primarily Confucian texts and some classic Chinese poetry. The pattern did not change, even after the advent of Western culture in the Meiji period, and Confucian elements of ‘Chinese learning’ were widely promoted at public schools and national universities. However conservative they were, these texts would give people a general understanding (although not quite adequate perhaps) of the relations between the authorities and subjects, between the state and its citizens, between parents and children, between elder and younger brothers, and between spouses. As an ideal of family and social relations, they would convey the principles of humanity, loyalty, filial piety and the major concept of one’s personal duty: duty of honour, duty of respect, duty of gratitude.

Undoubtedly, the great teaching was perverted and abused by the leaders of military Japan, but this fact does not diminish its role. There have been many cases of distortion and perversion in the history of great religious teachings. Christianity was used by the Holy Inquisition, which not only persecuted thousands of victims in Europe, but also gave a blessing to the elimination of millions of native inhabitants of North America. Islam, originally one of the most tolerant of confessions, was repeatedly used by cruel tyrants and fanatics for genocide against ‘the infidel’, as it is being used now by Islamic terrorists. Nonetheless, these facts cannot diminish the value of the Bible or the Koran, or negate their extraordinary role in the history of humanity.

Buddhism, as a basically peaceful religion promoting the ideas of non-violence, was put in an inferior position by the militarist government in pre-war Japan. Nevertheless, its heritage, revealed in the hundreds of thousands of temples and monasteries, in the huge libraries of precious manuscripts and in its overwhelming influence on hearts and minds, just couldn't be pushed aside by official ideology. So it was taken as a part of the traditional religious complex which encouraged people to celebrate Buddhist festivals, attend Buddhist sermons, listen to some sutras, read the texts and some comments to them, and participate in the life of the local temple communities.

Considerable proficiency in classic Japanese (and often Chinese) based on diligent learning was a pre-requirement for participating in the cultural life of the community.

All these components put together tended to create a specific spiritual climate in pre-war Japan, which was certainly very vulnerable to strongly biased ideological impacts, and therefore could be easily used by the militarist regime in its attempt to forge the ideal subjects of the Great Japanese Empire. On the other hand, it was able to provide strong moral support to any individual, whether on a profane level or on a highly intellectual level.

The situation couldn't be more different in post-war, democratic Japan, where religion, according to the Constitution, was separated from the state, the social status of Shinto institutions was limited to purely confessional functions, the Emperor lost his divine status and the whole syncretic complex of religious beliefs based on the nationalist concept of 'organic entity' (*kokutai*) was dismantled.

All these democratic reforms initiated by the American Occupation Forces were aimed at the radical brainwashing and general purge of mentality. New generations of the Japanese had to be free from the military heritage of their country and from its 'evil past'. To guarantee this new quality of human resources, it was decided after fierce debates by the Ministry of Education (and approved by the Parliament):

- To reduce to the minimum descriptions of Japanese military operations in the period of New and Modern history in school education.

- Never to mention in textbooks any damage caused by the Japanese aggression to the Asian nations.
- To eliminate from textbooks any mention of the notorious reactionary social doctrines like *Bushido* (Samurai code) or *Shushin* (endeavour of a model citizen) and their crucial religious components, like Shinto, Confucianism or Buddhism, so that these religions would never again be associated with war.
- Not to mention either Shinto mythology, Confucian ethics or Buddhist doctrines of enlightenment and salvation in school courses.

As such policy had to be consistent, no mentioning of any other world religions was also assumed.

All these points did not put any restrictions on the freedom of conscience or the freedom of word in the country, because the media were always free to discuss any of the above mentioned problems and libraries were full of reference materials. In fact, this policy was aimed only at schools and was probably supposed to protect children from any vicious influences. It was felt this was possible because the world of children is separated from the world of adults in Japan much more distinctly than in the West. However, the results exceeded all expectations. In the country of three religions, where, judging by the official statistics, the number of believers is much larger than the total population of the country, and where hundreds of thousands of shrines and temples need priests, the new generation is completely ignorant about any elements of religious spirituality, and is mostly not interested at all.

This fantastic combination of official acceptance of certain confessions with the unofficial negation of them is a typical feature of modern Japan. 90% of students call themselves natural atheists—which does not prevent them from participating in some traditional ceremonies with their parents and grand-parents just for fun or to fulfil their family duty. However, they don't attend sermons and never read any sacred texts. Moreover, the overwhelming majority know not a single name from the Shinto or Buddhist pantheon, cannot say a single word of prayer and often even cannot distinguish Shinto from Buddhism.

Christianity is also mostly associated among the youngsters with such symbols as Christmas trees, crucifixes, and the so-called chapel weddings (for non-believers) with decorative Christian ritual.

Of course, some individuals do read supplementary literature and know some basics, but there are very few of these students at the Junior High School level, and, as they have never received any guidance, their understanding of the major world religions, and of Japanese spirituality, is sometimes grotesquely distorted.

Here we come to the crucial point, which gives a vivid illustration of the role of language in transmittance and formation of culture, and also provides an explanation of the enigmatic phenomenon of contemporary Japanese students.

As a result of the post-war reforms in the school education, written Japanese was revised, the number of characters for mandatory learning was reduced, many characters were simplified, and the language of the textbooks, along with the language of books for children, was considerably adapted to the level of 'easy reading'. Chinese was excluded from the school programs and classic Japanese (*bungo*) with its most difficult part *kanbun* (adjusted Chinese) was cut to a ridiculously primitive programme called *kobun* (old texts).

These reforms, along with the recent invasion of computers and electronic dictionaries (which can, allegedly, prompt any character) affected the language so much that modern students can barely struggle through several pages of the pre-war fiction of the 30s and 40s, even if the problematic characters and words in the texts have supplementary alphabetic subtitles. In fact, even the best novels of the *Meiji-Taisho*-early *Showa* period (1868-1945), not to mention the medieval masterpieces, became almost incomprehensible for the new generations, as did the traditional *tanka* and *haiku* poetry, which even now has to be written predominantly in *bungo*. Instead of the real textbooks of National Literature, the thin reader-books for schools contain just occasional short excerpts from a few classic texts, which remain alien to the students. Almost nobody can now overcome the language barrier and start reading books, rather than brief commented excerpts. Serious reading (including special intellectual journals) became very difficult for the public at large, and available almost exclusively for the special contingent of readers in every specific field (which almost never overlap) not lower than the university graduate level.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the process was almost complete: the classic heritage of Japanese literature, with its Chinese background, was put on the bookshelves and in the showcases of the beautiful new museums. All the best classics are supplied with commentaries being published, as a rule, in great series with parallel translation into contemporary Japanese. Despite this fact, modern Japanese school students (with extremely scarce exceptions) up to the moment of graduation never touch classics in their original form, and only some of them get a general idea of random masterpieces from the television versions and *manga* (comics) series. The *History of Japan*, too, was reproduced a few years ago in a long animation series for the same reasons.

Unfortunately, sacred books can be neither radically adapted nor transformed into television drama or manga—which makes them a conventional taboo for the school students. Consequently the whole domain of spiritual writings, alienated from schools—national, Chinese, Indian and Western alike—became *terra incognita* for the new generations of young Japanese. They are never advised to read it, they cannot read it in Japanese due to the terrible historic language barrier and they cannot read them in English either because both their English proficiency and their ‘philosophic basis’ are critically insufficient. Even in the clubs of traditional martial arts or fine arts, lately, young students (at the mass level) are not instructed in philosophy or spirituality of the relevant disciplines at all. The major result of this strange policy can be characterised as ‘despiritualisation’ of the nation, which inflicts the dramatic lack of self-identification of the individuals, often accompanied by low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence and confused perception of their national identity by the Japanese. ‘Infantilism’ of the Japanese students has become a truth universally acknowledged.

When students in Japan enter the university and come to the serious classes of comparative cultural studies, civilization studies or history of religions, they encounter difficulties which hardly can be imagined by their Western counterparts. They actually discover, for the first time in their lives, the New World of spirituality from which they were carefully protected at school—and reluctantly start exploring it from zero.

If the language of instruction is Japanese, a professor can only



give a general overview of the basic religious beliefs, and describe in simple terms the content of the sacred books, as the texts will be still too 'language heavy' for the students. For those who major in philosophy or religion, it will take another two or three years (which they don't have) just to master classic *kanbun* well enough for reading, not to mention real classic Chinese. In fact, they will be ready for real studies, involving reading of the original texts, only at graduate or postgraduate level.

However, acceptance of English as the primary language of instruction (which is still a very rare case for Japan) changes the situation drastically. Assuming that English proficiency of the students is high enough (for these courses pre-requirement is TOEFL-500), we can give assignments which include reading of some major classic texts of Asian religions in a carefully arranged selection of samples aimed at enhancing students' knowledge of the spiritual evolution of humanity, giving them a broad panoramic view of the principal religious and ethical oriental teachings.

The course begins with a few introductory classes familiarising students with some major concepts, notions and special terms of cultural anthropology, religious studies and social science, which will be applied to the studies of religious and cultural traditions of India, China and Japan. It continues with an outlook of historic cultural ties between these countries, and the role of each respective culture in the world civilization, follows, with special references to the successive transmission of religious traditions. Finally comes the comparative analysis of area cultures and religions, which is based on the textbook materials and on the reading of classic texts (almost exclusively in English translation although the students can choose the language of the sources freely).

We begin with the sacred writings of Hinduism. The spectrum that ranges from the level of popular Hindu belief to that of elaborate ritual technique and philosophical speculation is very broad, and is attended by many stages of transition and varieties of coexistence. Magic rites, animal worship, and belief in major gods and demons are often combined with the worship of minor deities or with mysticism, asceticism, and abstract and profound theological systems or esoteric doctrines. The concept of a Supreme God also can be traced in Hindu cults. Local deities are frequently interpreted as manifestations of a

high God.

Hinduism accepts all forms of belief and worship, trying to incorporate any kind of spirituality into the universal system of a mysterious and omnipotent *Knowledge*.

The *Veda*, meaning ‘Knowledge,’ is a collective term for the sacred scriptures of the Hindus. Since about the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the *Veda* has been considered to be the creation of neither human nor god; rather, it is regarded as the eternal Truth that was in ancient times directly revealed to or ‘heard’ by gifted and inspired seers (*rishis*) who transcribed it into Sanskrit. The absolute authority and sacredness of the *Veda* remains a central tenet of virtually all Hindu sects (with the exception of some Tantric sects which stick to alternative traditions). Even today, as they have been for several millennia, parts of the *Veda* texts are memorised and recited as a religious act of great merit.

The most important texts of Hinduism are the four collections of the *Vedas* (‘Books of Knowledge’): the *Rigveda* (‘Wisdom of the Verses’), the *Yajurveda* (‘Wisdom of the Sacrificial Formulas’), the *Samaveda* (‘Wisdom of the Chants’), and the *Atharvaveda* (‘Wisdom of the Atharvan Priests’). Of these, the *Rigveda* is the oldest monument.

In the Vedic texts following these earliest compilations, the *Brahmanas* (discussions of the ritual), *Aranyakas* (books studied in the forest), and *Upanishads* (secret teachings concerning cosmic equations) should be mentioned.

Together, the components of each of the four *Vedas*—the *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, and *Upanishads*—constitute the sacred canon of Hinduism, or the *Sruti* (‘Heard’). All other works—in which the actual doctrines and practices of Hindus are encoded—are treated as having been composed by human authors and are thus classed as *Smriti* (‘Remembered’). For Hindus, the *Veda* is a symbol of unchallenged authority and tradition.

Students are given an overview of the *Sruti* and have to read two hymns from *Rigveda* in the course of learning the core of Indian mythology.

Complicated philosophic concepts of *Veda* were popularised and explained in the classic epic tales *The Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

*The Mahabharata* (‘Great Epic of the Bharata Clan’), a poem of 100,000 verses (some say the longest poem in the world) attributed to the sage Vyasa, was preserved both orally and in manuscript form for

many centuries. The central plot is focused on the struggle and the decisive battle between the five sons of Pandu, called the Pandavas, and their cousins, sons of Pandu's brother Dhrtarastra. The battle eventually leads to the destruction of the entire nation, save for one survivor who continues the dynasty. As each of the heroes is the son of a god, the epic is deeply infused with religious implications. There are many passages in which *dharma* (sacred Law) is treated, so that Hindus regard The *Mahabharata* as one of the sacred writings (*Dharma Shastras*).

Much of the didactic material focusing on ethical teaching is found in the *Book of the Forest* (book 3), in which sages teach the exiled heroes, and in the *Book of Peace* (book 12), in which the wise Bhishma expounds on religious and moral matters.

The *Bhagavadgita* ('Song of the Lord', part of book 6 of *Mahabharata*) which became known as a book in its own right, is probably the most influential Indian religious text ever. It is comparatively brief—700 verses divided into 18 chapters—in the form of a dispute. When the opposing parties in the great Mahabharata war stand ready to begin battle, Arjuna, the hero of the favoured party, falls in frustration at the thought of having to kill his kinsmen and lays down his arms. Krishna, his charioteer, friend, and adviser, argues against Arjuna's reluctance to fulfil his duty as a noble warrior. The argument soon becomes elevated into a general discourse on religious and philosophical matters.

Three different ways of releasing the self from transmigration are suggested. Putting forward the discipline of action (*karma-yoga*) against the views held by Buddhist philosophy, which states that all acts bind, and that therefore abstention from action is a precondition of release, Krishna argues that it is not the acts that bind but the selfish intentions with which they are performed. On the other hand, he acknowledges the importance of the discipline of knowledge (*jnana-yoga*), in which one seeks release in a yogic (ascetic) course of withdrawal and concentration. Revealing himself eventually as a supreme God, Krishna grants Arjuna a true vision of his inner essence. The third, and perhaps superior, way of release he recommends is through a discipline of devotion to God (*bhakti-yoga*).

The *Bhagavadgita* encompasses all the three dominant trends of Indian religion: dharma-based Brahmanism, enlightenment-based

asceticism, and devotion-based theism. The influence of the *Bhagavadgita* was crucial for all later Hinduism.

By demanding that God's worshippers fulfill their duty and observe the rules of moral conduct, the *Bhagavadgita* linked the ascetic practices with their search for emancipation, on the one hand, and the needs of daily life, on the other. For those who lead a normal life, not quitting this world, the *Bhagavadgita* gave a moral code and a prospect of final liberation. It founded what may be called a social ethic, which demands the selfless dedication of all actions, duties, and ceremonies to the Lord and obliges a person to promote both individual and social uplift and welfare.

Students are given a brief digest of the *Mahabharata*, a review of the *Bhagavadgita* philosophy, and about 30 verses from the text.

The classical narrative of Rama is recounted in the Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana* by the sage Valmiki. Rama's reign in the tale becomes the prototype of the harmonious and just rule, to which all kings should aspire. Rama and his beloved Sita set the ideal of conjugal love; Rama's relationship to his father is the ideal of filial piety; and Rama and Laksmana represent perfect fraternal love. Everything in the myth is designed for harmony, which after being disrupted is at last regained.

The *Ramayana* identifies Rama with Vishnu as another incarnation and remains the principal source for widely spread Ramaism (worship of Rama). The book contains a great deal of religious material in the form of myths, stories of great sages, and accounts of exemplary human behaviour.

As the epic tale presents a romantic adventure story, students who have to read the digest are usually interested in the plot. They even recognise, in the King of the Monkeys, Khanuman, one of the popular characters of the Japanese and Chinese medieval novels revitalised by Japanese comic books and animation.

In addition, the excerpts from the *Yoga-sutra* by Patanjali are given as an illustration to the concepts of spiritual ascent, with a reference to the popularity of Indian yoga in the contemporary world.

Switching to China, we start with the exploration of Taoist thought, which has dominated Chinese culture for several thousand years until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, laying a solid foundation for various philosophic schools, ethic and aesthetic theories, science

and technology. The most important of these concepts, articulated by Lao-zu, Chuang-zu and other Taoist sages, are: the idea of Void; the dialectical unity of two opposed forces, *Yin* and *Yang*, in the universe; the interaction of five elements; the idea of the Natural Way (*Tao*); the solidarity of nature and man; the interaction between the universe and human society; the existence of the cosmic energy *Chi*; the cyclical character of time; the universal rhythm; and the law of return. The religious projections of the teaching are the worship of ancestors; the cult of the divine superhuman 'yogi' (*Hsien*) sages; and the cult of Heaven.

Emptiness realised in the mind of the Taoist who has freed himself from all obstructing notions and distracting passions makes the Tao act through him without obstacle. An essential characteristic that governs the Tao is spontaneity (*tzu-jan*). The inexplicable Tao governs the universe:

The ways of Heaven are conditioned by those of the Tao, and the ways of Tao by the Self-so. This is the way of the wise who does not intervene but possess the total power of spontaneous realization, the natural mind (*tzu-jan*).

The manifestation of the Tao in the realm of Being is *Te* (translated as virtue or moral merit), which is placed by Lao-tzu in his classic treatise on Tao as natural properties of the things. Those who understand Tao just subdue to its order, and it endows them with the 'mysterious power'. Real wisdom is in avoiding unnecessary action (*wu-wei*):

The man of superior virtue never acts (*wu-wei*), and yet there is nothing he leaves undone.

The text of *Tao-te Ching* is rather short but extremely condensed and overwhelmed with complicated abstract philosophic notions. Therefore, only several principal paragraphs are recommended to the students for reading.

Chuang-tzu's writing is the earliest surviving Taoist text to present a philosophy for private life, a kind of direction for the individual. Whereas Lao-tzu in his book was concerned with Taoist rule, not severing the ties with the establishment, Chuang-tzu, some generations later, rejected all the conventions of society. He compared the civil servant to the well-fed decorated ox being led to sacrifice in the temple

and himself to the happy untended piglet in the mire.

The style of Chuang-tzu, much different from *Tao-te Ching*, is full of metaphors, fables and parables—and therefore much easier for comprehension. The author depicts simple people who, through the perfect mastery of their craft, conceive the Way and exemplify the art of mastering life. In his view, life and death are equated, and death is seen as a natural transformation, a fusion with the eternal Tao. A free spontaneous spirit roaming through space and time, according to Chuang-tzu, animates human existence and brings sense to it. It overcomes the laws of conventional logic and social restrictions being always inspired by the all-perceiving Tao.

Some parables from Chuang-tzu (like the parable of a sleeping butterfly, a parable of a perfect cook, etc.) are given to the students for reading with a reference to the Taoist philosophy.

The Confucian doctrine of social justice and individual perfectionism became the corner stone of the administrative system and moral education, not only in China, but also in Korea, Japan, Vietnam and other countries of South-East Asia. Confucius found a key to social order in the creation of a scholarly community, the fellowship of *chun-tzu* (the noble-minded) who would observe their duty, defend justice and cultivate humanity in their hearts.

To do it properly, people had to follow regulations and respect the ties between the parents and the children, between the lord and the subjects, between the members of the family, and between the teacher and the disciples. The virtues of loyalty and filial piety were treated as the pillars of social morals.

The *Lun-yui* (*Analects*), the most revered sacred scripture in the Confucian tradition, which contains the Master's sayings, preserved in both oral and written transmissions, was compiled by the second generation of Confucius' disciples. Dialogues between the Master and the disciples are used to show Confucius in thought and action. Through the *Analects*, Confucians for centuries learned to reenact the ritual of participating in a conversation with the great sage.

Confucius stated his credo in a simple but significant formula: 'To bring comfort to the old, to have trust in friends, and to cherish the young'.

The major merit of Confucianism as an ethical and political teaching was the assertion of mutual responsibility between the author-

ities and the citizens based on moral duty, not on force. Government's responsibility is not only to provide food and security, but also to educate the people and give them security. Law and punishment are the minimum requirements for order. The higher goal of social harmony, however, can only be attained by virtue expressed through ritual performance. To perform rituals, then, is to take part in a communal act to promote mutual understanding.

One of the fundamental Confucian values that ensures the integrity of social structure is filial piety. Confucians used to apply the family metaphor to the community, the country, and the universe, defining the relations of the heavenly monarch with his subjects in terms of a state-family. The *shoguns* of the Tokugawa dynasty in Japan ascribed the same functions to the military dictator—as their imperial followers did later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neo-Confucian teaching became the foundation of the *Tokugawa Shogunate* as well as of the *Meiji-Taisho-early Showa* theocratic imperial regime. The role of Confucianism in Japan was overwhelming, and much evidence of it can be seen not only in the works of Japanese Confucian scholars, but also in the Japanese ideology of the New Time with its perverted values, which led to the tragedy of the Second World War.

Unfortunately, the works by the Japanese scholars are linguistically unavailable for the students. Instead they have to read the English translations of selected episodes from the *Analects* and some relevant parts of the famous *Hagakure* ('Hidden in the Leaves') by Yamamoto Tsunetomo, the sacred book of *Bushido* warriors (partly in original).

Moving to Buddhism, we presume that this Pan-Asian religion has played a central role in the spiritual, cultural, and social life of many Eastern countries. It spread from India to China, Tibet and Mongolia, to South-East Asia, to Korea and Japan, from where the teaching was transmitted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to America and Europe.

Analysing the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Path* of Buddhism, and studying the differences between *Mahayana* and *Theravada* Buddhism, students have to trace the proliferation of the teaching through several specific schools from India and China finding their successors or analogs in medieval and modern Japan.

Ancient Buddhist scripture and doctrine were deeply influenced by the speculative and mystical Indian traditions rooted in the Indian

philosophy. *Prajnaparamita-sutra* (Sutra of the Truth of Holy Law), claims that the world as it appears to us does not exist, that reality is the indefinable, that void is an absolute. The fundamental assumption of the *Prajnaparamita* is expounded in a famous verse:

Like light, a mirage, a lamp, an illusion, a drop of water, a dream, a lightning flash—thus must all compounded things be considered.

Students have to read these revelations as a prerequisite for understanding of the essentials of Japanese culture. They are also introduced to the *Lotus-sutra*, to some excerpts from the writings of the great Master Kukai (founder of the *Shingon* school in Japan), to the writings of Chinese Chan patriarch Hui Neng and Japanese Zen Masters Dogen, Ikkyu and Ryokan—which gives a panoramic view of the Buddhist spiritual domain with a special reference to arts.

The major literary sources for Japanese Shinto mythology, which constituted the basis of official state religion and ideology in Japan for over 12 centuries, are the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Deeds, 8c.) and the *Nihongi* (Annals of Japan, 8 c.). These works were assembled at imperial command from a wide assortment of no longer extant texts. There are many other sources, too, but *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* contain the main components of Shinto religion along with the *Engi Shiki* (Ceremonies of the Engi Era, 10 c.) a collection of *norito* prayers and court religious liturgies. For centuries, Shinto was entangled with Buddhism in a complex admixture of rituals and beliefs.

For the students, reading the original, even with modern translation, is out of the question, but luckily many adaptations of some popular myths have been made which can serve as a good illustration to the doctrine.

The last classes of the course are dedicated to the placement and comparison of various religious traditions, ethical teachings and ideological doctrines in the spiritual continuum of Medieval Japan, to the analyses of their role in modern society and prospects of their survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

By the end of the course, we usually can see a real transformation of the world outlook in many students, who change their attitude towards spirituality as a useless rudimentary component of the old-fashioned education style. Many of them develop a strong interest in



culture, history, religions and arts, which can hopefully give them a motivation for further studies in humanities.

### Selected sources for reading the texts in English

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