

Exploring Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia: Thailand and Vietnam

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Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad 2011: Thailand and Vietnam Curriculum Project

## **Exploring Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia: Thailand and Vietnam**

Grades: 9-12

Subjects: Social Studies, Religious Studies

**Established Goals:** The curriculum unit meets the following High School Social Sciences Standards of the Oregon State Board of Education:

Core Standard 1. Analyze and apply cause and effect relationships to a variety of historical issues, events, and problems.

Core Standard 5. Apply geographical skills, concepts, and technologies to gather, display, and analyze spatial information.

HS.1. Evaluate continuity and change over the course of world history.

HS.3. Explain the historical development and impact of major world religions and philosophies.

HS.14. Create and use maps, technology, imagery, and other geographic representations to extrapolate and interpret geographic data.

**Understandings:** Students will learn about the origins and diversity of religious belief in Southeast Asia through the case studies of Thailand and Vietnam. Thailand and Vietnam have very different religious traditions, a product of each country's unique history. Students will gain a deeper understanding of the historical origins of Buddhism (both Theravada and Mahayana), Confucianism, and Taoism in Southeast Asia. Through the use of lecture, geographical research, the analysis of primary religious texts, viewing images of religious institutions in Thailand and Vietnam, and a culminating research project, students will gain a deeper understanding of both the shared values and diverse religious beliefs in Thailand and Vietnam. After completing the unit, students should have a more holistic understanding of religious development in Southeast Asia, along with a more profound understanding of the lived religious practices of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

**Essential Questions:** Students will address the following questions during the unit:

- What are the origins of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism in Southeast Asia?
- How did geography and history influence the different religious traditions in Thailand and Vietnam?
- What shared values do the religious traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism promote?
- What do temples in Thailand and Vietnam tell us about the religious beliefs and practices of Thai and Vietnamese people?
- What do the religious traditions in Thailand and Vietnam have in common? How are they different?
- What role does the temple play in religious life in Thailand and Vietnam?

## Learning Activities:

### Materials Required:

- Handout #1: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism in Southeast Asia
- Handout #2: Parallel Sayings of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism
- Handout #3: Temples of Southeast Asia Research Project
- PowerPoint: "Temples in Southeast Asia: Rites and Symbols of Convergence"

Time Required: One Week

### Procedure:

1. The teacher will read through the "Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism in Southeast Asia" handout with students, answering any questions about the three religions or their origins in Southeast Asia.
2. Students will break into small groups. Using information from the handout and research from the Internet, have each group draw a map documenting the spread of Buddhism from its origins in India to the rest of Asia, including Thailand and Vietnam. Students should indicate the development and spread of both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Next, have students document the spread of Confucianism and Taoism from their origins in China. Select several groups to present portions of their map illustrating the spread of the three religions to Asia, particularly their arrival in Thailand and Vietnam.
3. Have students break into small groups and distribute the "Parallel Sayings" handout. Have students summarize each group of teachings. After summarizing the teachings have the students answer the following questions: What beliefs, values, and ethics do the religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism share? How do you think these shared beliefs, values, and ethics shape the culture of Southeast Asia?
4. Divide students into five groups. Read over the "Research Project" assignment. Give students 1-2 class periods to research their assigned temple (requires Internet access). Have each group present on their particular temple. After presentations have concluded, have a class discussion on the common elements of temples (symbols, rituals, architecture, etc.) in Thailand and Vietnam. What common purposes do the temples share?
5. Present the "Temples in Southeast Asia" PowerPoint to the class. Have students take notes on what they see in the images. At the end of the presentation have a class discussion on the reflection questions.
6. As a final assessment, have students write a one page reflection paper on the role of the temple in daily life in Thailand and Vietnam. What role does the temple play in daily life in these countries? Despite the diversity of religious beliefs, what do the temples in Thailand and Vietnam have in common?

**Performance Tasks:** Teachers will evaluate students' comprehension of the unit through the following tasks:

- Teachers will monitor small group work and group discussion to determine comprehension of material.
- Teachers will evaluate students' research projects on temples in Thailand and Vietnam.
- Teachers will evaluate students' reflection papers to determine the overall insights students gained from the unit.

**References:**

Baker, Chris and Pasuk Phonpaichit. *A History of Thailand*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

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*Guidebook Wat Pho*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Bangkok, Thailand: Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararam, 2007.

*Hoan Kiem Lake: Its Legends and Temples*. Hanoi, Vietnam: The Gioi Publishers, 2008.

Stratton, Carol. *What's What in a Wat: Thai Buddhist Temples*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2010.

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## Handout #1: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism in Southeast Asia

### I. Overview of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism

- **Buddhism** is based upon the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE India. After renouncing a life of luxury and a life of asceticism, Siddhartha discovered the middle way of simple living and meditation. Upon attaining enlightenment, the Buddha discovered that all life is *dukkha*; anxiety, frustration, or suffering; which can be stopped through following the eightfold path.
- **Confucianism** is based upon the teachings of Confucius, who lived in 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE China. Confucius' disciples collected his sayings in the *Analects*, which teaches about harmonious relationships, respect for elders, and moral duty.
- **Taoism** is a philosophy based upon the teaching of Lao Tzu, a mysterious figure, who taught in China during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The religion's primary text, the *Tao Te Ching*, teaches the concept of living in accordance to the Tao, or the "way of nature".

### II. The Spread of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism to Southeast Asia

- **Theravada Buddhism** arrived in Thailand from Sri Lanka during the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. Theravada Buddhism focuses on the teachings of the Buddha and teaches the importance of meditation. Theravada Buddhism emphasizes the *sangha*, or religious community, and many Thais live for a period of time as monks (and to a lesser extent, nuns). Lay Buddhists make merit by making offerings to Buddhist monks.
- Vietnam, which was under Chinese rule for one thousand years, hosts a different branch of Buddhism. **Mahayana Buddhism** arrived in Vietnam during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE from China. Mahayana Buddhism focuses on the divine nature of the Buddha and encourages popular devotion from lay Buddhists. Unlike Theravada Buddhism, which only recognizes the historical Buddha, Mahayana Buddhism reveres numerous bodhisattvas—those on the path to enlightenment—in addition to the Buddha. Mahayana Buddhism is open to other religious traditions, and consequently many Buddhists also practice the other Chinese religions.
- **Taoism** and **Confucianism** arrived in Vietnam with Chinese rule during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. Confucianism influenced Vietnamese culture with its emphasis on the value of education, reverence for elders, ancestor rituals, and the importance of the emperor. Taoist temples exist alongside Confucian temples, and many Vietnamese follow both philosophies. The mystical teaching of the Tao complements the rigid structure of a Confucian society.

## Handout #2: Parallel Sayings

### Taoist

“Being compassionate, one could afford to be courageous.”

Tao Te Ching LXVII:164

“Those who are good I treat as good. Those who are not good I also treat as good.”

Tao Te Ching XLIX:111

“What is firmly rooted cannot be pulled out. Cultivate it in your person and its virtue will be genuine.”

Tao Te Ching LIV:122

“Discard profit, and there will be no more thieves and bandits. Have little thought of self and as few desires as possible.”

Tao Te Ching XIX:43-44

“He who considers himself right is not illustrious; He who brags will have no merit; He who boasts will not endure.”

Tao Te Ching XXIV:55

### Buddhist

“Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, cultivate a boundless heart toward all beings.”

Sutta Nipata 149-150

“Consider others as yourself”

Dhammapada 10:1

“Whatsoever a person commits, whether it be virtuous or sinful deeds, none of these is of little import; all bear some kind of fruit.”

Udanavarga 9:8

“The avaricious do not go to heaven, the foolish do not extol charity. The wise one, however, rejoicing in charity, becomes thereby happy in the beyond.”

Dhammapada 13:11

“The faults of others are easier to see than one’s own. This is like the cheat who hides the dice and shows the dice of his opponent, calling attention to the other’s shortcomings, continually thinking of accusing him.”

Udanavarga 27:1

### Confucian

“For gentlemen of purpose and men of benevolence while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished.”

Analects XV:9

“Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire”

Analects XV: 24

“There are, are there not, young plants that fail to produce blossoms, and blossoms that fail to produce fruit?”

Analects IX:22

“How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy.”

Analects VI:11

“When you meet someone better than yourself, turn your thoughts to becoming his equal. When you meet someone not as good as you are, look within and examine your own self.”

Analects IV:17

### **Handout #3: Temples of Southeast Asia Research Project**

Temples play an essential role in daily life in Southeast Asia. Examining the temples of Thailand and Vietnam demonstrates both the diversity and interconnectivity of religious life in Southeast Asia. Your group will be assigned one of the following temples to research:

- Wat Po—Theravada Buddhist—Bangkok, Thailand
- Wat Phra Kaew—Theravada Buddhist—Bangkok, Thailand
- One Pillar Pagoda—Mahayana Buddhist—Hanoi, Vietnam
- Temple of Literature—Confucian—Hanoi, Vietnam
- Jade Emperor Pagoda—Taoist—Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Your group is responsible for a 7-10 minute presentation on the temple and must create a poster with both content and images. Your research must address the following questions:

- Provide historical background for the temple. When was it created? Who created it? Why is it an important religious site?
- What symbols and artwork are found in the temple?
- What rituals are performed in the temple? Who performs the rituals? What do they symbolize? Are there any annual festivals that occur at the temple?
- Are there other religious influences in the temple (i.e. Hindu mythology in a Theravada Buddhist temple)? If so, explain how the temple blends multiple religious traditions.
- How is the temple similar to other temples in Southeast Asia? What makes this temple unique?