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RELIGION AND CUSTOMS



Religion and Customs

The Basic Law of the Macao SAR states: “Macao residents shall have freedom of religious belief, and freedom to preach and to conduct and participate in religious activities in public.” The Government, consistent with the principle of religious freedom, shall not interfere in the internal affairs of religious organisations or in the efforts of religious organisations and their believers in Macao to maintain and develop relations with their counterparts outside Macao, or restrict religious activities which do not contravene the laws of the SAR.

The Macao SAR protects the freedom of religion, worship and belief in general denominations through the Freedom of Religion and Worship Law (Law No. 5/98/M). It states that the Macao SAR does not recognise a state religion. Its relationships with all denominations are founded on the principles of separation and neutrality. The law further stipulates that all religious denominations are equal before the law.

Coexistence of Different Religions

Macao fully realises the diversity of religions. In addition to Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism – the main belief systems of the local community – later arrivals such as Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam coexist in Macao.

Adherents of various beliefs participate in religious anniversaries and celebrate their traditional festivals in their own distinctive ways. For instance, the Macao Catholic Diocese conducts traditional religious processions associated with the Catholic calendar, including the processions of Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lord of Passion, and Corpus Christi. During Buddhist festivals, crowds of followers worship and burn incense sticks, and recite sutras for the enlightenment of all beings. In addition, during traditional Chinese religious festivals, such as the birthday celebrations for Tin Hau (the Heavenly Queen and Protector of Seafarers), the God of the Land, the Taoist god Tam Kung and Na Tcha, temples are crowded with faithful devotees worshipping the gods and offering sacrifices as a sign of respect. Theatrical troupes also stage performances at temples to amuse the gods and provide entertainment for onlookers.

Buddhism

Buddhism plays a significant role in Chinese community life. But it is acknowledged that Buddhism is a very general concept in the minds of many Macao residents. It may be mixed with some other traditional beliefs and customs, such as Confucianism and Taoism. The ongoing construction of new temples and renovation of existing ones over the years – such as the A-Ma Temple, Pou Chai Buddhist Monastery and Temple, and Lin Fong Temple – as well as the constant crowds of worshippers, all bear testimony to the faith’s importance.

Most Macao residents are ethnic Chinese who are profoundly influenced by their own tradition and culture, of which Buddhism forms an integral part. Its roots extend deeply and widely into their daily lives and customs. There are many Buddhists and Buddhist communities in Macao. The most important of these is the Buddhist Association of Macau, which was established in 1997.

There are more than 40 Buddhist temples in Macao, as well as scores of village temples and houses dedicated to Buddhist deities. The majority of the temples, both large and small, are dedicated to Kun Iam (the Goddess of Mercy), Tin Hau or Kwan Tai (the God of War and source of righteousness).

Following the establishment of the Macao SAR Government, Buddha's Birthday, which falls on the eighth day of the Fourth Moon, was declared a public holiday.

Taoism

Religious beliefs in China originated with human's fear of natural phenomena. They are founded on the concepts of animism, immortality of the soul and ancestor worship. Taoism, a religion based on religious beliefs in ancient Chinese society, originated at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty.

According to *Xiang Shan County Annals*, Taoism had already been spreading around the Guangdong Panyu and Xiang-shan area in the 3rd century BC. In Macao, many Chinese families continue Taoism-related habits and customs. After centuries of evolution, current sacred places for Taoist worship are mainly Taoist temples, Zhengyi Taoism temples and Taoist altars. Established in 2001, the Macao Taoist Association is the major Taoist organisation in Macao.

"Taoist Ritual Music in Macao" was included by the Government in the Intangible Cultural Heritage List of Macao in 2009, and the State Council inscribed it on the third National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011. In addition to organising activities like the Taoist Culture Festival and Taoist Music Festival annually, Taoist associations participate in the Macao Temples Culture Festival.

Catholicism

The Macao Catholic Diocese was founded by decree of Pope Gregory XIII on 23 January 1576. As the first Catholic missionary centre in the Far East, it was originally responsible for many regions, including China, Japan, Vietnam and the Southeast Asian coastal islands.

The first bishop appointed to the Macao Catholic Diocese was the Jesuit Melchior Carneiro. Members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) had established a mission and a college in Macao by 1565. In the late 16th century, the standards of the latter's tertiary education were high enough to be recognised by European universities. Church of the Mother of God (commonly known as St Paul's Church), the Church of the Society of Jesus, was thrice destroyed by fire; the Ruins of St Paul's are the remnants of the blaze that occurred in 1835.

Franciscans, Augustinians, Dominicans, and Sisters of St Clare (who vowed to lead a hermetic life) all established missions in Macao during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Nowadays, the Macao Catholic Diocese is limited to the SAR itself. It has nine parishes. There are also 18 freestanding churches of various sizes and 55 chapels within diocesan buildings.

According to figures supplied by the Macao Catholic Diocese, Macao had 17,590 Catholic residents at the end of 2024. In addition, around 15,372 temporary residents of Macao were adherents, including Portuguese-speaking expatriates and their families, English-speaking people

and their families from all over the world, Filipino domestic helpers and their families, and non-resident workers from the mainland and other Asian countries. Altogether, there are around 32,962 Catholics in Macao.

The clerics registered in the Macao Catholic Diocese include one diocesan bishop, one bishop emeritus, 12 priests and 20 contributing priests. In addition, one priest from the Macao Catholic Diocese currently works in other dioceses.

There are also 51 priests and 31 brothers in male religious congregations that serve the community in Macao. In addition, there are 132 sisters and 165 dedicated voluntary workers.

Statistics from the Macao Catholic Diocese show that, in the 2023-2024 school year, it managed and maintained 30 educational institutions with 32,477 students, 1,363 of whom were in tertiary education, 12,039 in secondary schools, 13,738 in primary schools and 5,337 in kindergartens.

The Catholic Church also operates 22 social service agencies: seven child-care centres, six convalescent homes for the elderly and sick, four rehabilitation homes for the physically and mentally handicapped, and five residential homes for students from single-parent families and/or who are experiencing personal problems. During the year, 1,786 people – 1,053 in residential care and 733 in non-residential care – benefited from the wide range of services provided by these institutions.

The Catholic Church is also engaged in other activities. It operates a bookshop, libraries, cultural and media affairs centres, a conference centre, social service centres, social welfare organisations, summer camps and retreats. It also publishes a few religious periodicals.

Protestantism

Macao is considered an important base for the introduction of Christianity to China in modern Protestant history. The religion was introduced to China during the Tang Dynasty, Yuan Dynasty and Ming Dynasty, a total of four times. Macao was involved in the last two introductions.

Robert Morrison was the first missionary from the London Missionary Society to arrive in Macao, in 1807. He then opened the fourth chapter in the history of pioneering Christianity in China. He baptised Choi Kou in 1814, and made him the first Chinese protestant. He led services in Macao and Guangzhou for 27 years, serving as a bridge for cultural exchanges between the West and China. In the 19th century, Protestant missionaries came mainly from Britain and America, and were engaged in local cultural and religious activities, becoming driving forces in modern China's healthcare, education, printing and publishing. In 1834, Robert Morrison died; his body lies in the Old Protestant Cemetery, beside the Luis de Camoes Garden.

After the Opium War, the missionary base in Macao was moved to Hong Kong and Shanghai. But Macao still played an active role in the development of Protestant churches in the Pearl River Delta area.

Entering the 20th century, a succession of Chinese Protestant churches were established, through the efforts of missionaries and returning Chinese believers. The Macau Baptist Church was established in 1904; the Chi Tou Church of the Church of Christ in China was established in 1906

at Hac Sa Beach; and Sheng Kung Hui (the Anglican Church) began their missionary activities in Macao in 1938. In the early 1950s, there were about five Protestant churches. By the 1980s, the number of Protestant churches had increased to 20. During the 1990s, missionary organisations from Hong Kong and overseas arrived to establish branches, and further increased the number of Protestant churches to over 50 throughout Macao.

Today, major Protestant denominations in Macao include the Church of Christ in China, Baptist Church, Sheng Kung Hui (the Anglican Church), Sheun Tao Church, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Conservative Baptist Church, Assemblies of God, Church of the United Brethren in Christ, and the Evangelical Free Church. There are nearly 80 Protestant churches, with about 150 pastors and more than 8,000 believers.

Of the schools established by Protestants, four are secondary schools with primary and kindergarten sections; three are primary schools with kindergarten sections; one is a special education school; and there is one biblical institute. There are also several training centres and two bookshops operated by Protestant groups.

The Union of Evangelical Christian Churches and Associations in Macau was established in 1990, and comprises the Protestant churches and organisations. Its objectives are to strengthen links between Protestant organisations and enhance their development; and promote and organise local evangelising activities.

Around 60 Protestant organisations are involved in social services covering underprivileged groups, young people, families, workers, charity, counselling services and education. They also serve other people in need, including prisoners, patients, drug addicts and street sleepers.

Islam

The Islamic Association of Macau was established in 1935. It has long planned to build a mosque and Islamic centre; and a blueprint for the Islamic centre was approved by the former Portuguese administration. According to the plan, the mosque will have a total area of 1,250 square metres and will be able to accommodate a congregation of 600.

Baha’i

The Baha’i Faith was introduced to Macao in 1953. Its administrative body – the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of Macao – was established in 1958. Later, a local Baha’i Centre was set up in Taipa in 1984, and another local centre was set up in Coloane in 1988. An administrative body covering the entire territory – the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of Macao – was established in 1989, which also oversees the three local bodies of the Baha’is in Macao.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of Macao established a school in Macao, which includes a kindergarten, a primary school and a secondary school. It received a land grant from the Government in 2008 for campus expansion. Thus far, it has provided education to students from many countries.

Traditional Festivals

Macao is a city where Chinese and Western cultures coexist. Local Chinese, Portuguese and Macanese residents and other ethnic minorities in Macao respect and usually celebrate each other's festivals. Macao's festivals are so colourful and cheerful that some are designated statutory and general holidays. Traditional Chinese celebrations include the Chinese New Year (also known as the Spring Festival), Qing Ming Festival, Buddha's Birthday, the Mid-Autumn Festival and Winter Solstice; while Easter, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and Christmas are important local festivals derived from Western traditions.

Chinese New Year

The Chinese New Year is the most important festival for Chinese people. Macao residents usually perform religious ceremonies at home or in temples on the first two days of the Chinese New Year. They visit friends and relatives, let off firecrackers and join in various celebrations. Civil servants, who are normally forbidden to enter casinos, are granted special permission to do so during the first three days of the New Year. The incessant, ear-splitting noise of firecrackers and the red shreds of their wrappers last a whole week, creating a vibrant, joyful scene. These are the sights and sounds of Macao during Chinese New Year. It has become increasingly popular for Macao residents to take family vacations during the Chinese New Year public holidays.

Qing Ming, Chong Yang Festivals and All Souls' Day

The Qing Ming and Chong Yang (Double Nine) festivals are occasions for people to commemorate their ancestors and visit their graves. They pay homage to the deceased, strengthen bonds with their relatives and perform filial duties. All Souls' Day, the traditional Christian festival to remember the deceased, is also a public holiday in Macao.

Buddha's Birthday

Buddha's Birthday is a special local festival in Macao. During the festival, Buddhist organisations in Macao usually organise many celebrations, including sutra recitations and "Bathing the Buddha" ceremonies to celebrate the birth of the Buddha. Some non-religious organisations, such as fishmongers' associations, also celebrate the festival. Drunken Dragon Dance performances and the distribution of "Dragon Boat Rice" are among the traditional activities staged at this time.

The Drunken Dragon Dance is an ancient custom that originated in neighbouring Zhongshan Municipality in Guangdong province, and has become a tradition among Macao's fishmongers. Through the dance, they show their team spirit and commitment to society. After much modification through the years, the Drunken Dragon Dance nowadays features only the head and tail of the Dragon. The performers are expected to drink as they dance; and people believe they can only perform well if they are drunk.

The Macao Drunken Dragon Dance was included in the Intangible Cultural Heritage List of

Macao in 2009 and successfully inscribed on the List of National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011.

Dragon Boat Festival

The Dragon Boat Festival falls on the fifth day of the Fifth Moon. It is a time for eating special dumplings and Dragon Boat Racing. Macao's Dragon Boat Races have a unique local flavour, and have developed into an international competition. Many Westerners also participate, displaying their prowess.

Feast of the Immaculate Conception

Macao is the only place in Asia where the Feast of the Immaculate Conception is a public holiday. Since 8 December 1854, Catholics in Macao have held celebrations on this day, seeking forgiveness of all their sins, and for their hearts to be cleansed.

Christmas

Christmas is the time when Christians all over the world celebrate the birth of Jesus. Macao is filled with a vibrant festive atmosphere at Christmas with its unique, European-style streets festooned with colourful lights and decorations, and Christmas carols wafting from its churches.



Chinese New Year in Macao



Chinese New Year, as one of Macao's most significant traditional festivals, vividly embodies the enduring Chinese folk culture in the city. Rich in meaning and steeped in cultural heritage, Chinese New Year features a diverse array of customs and activities, and holds considerable value for the study of regional folk traditions. As a festival that brings families and communities together, Chinese New Year plays an important role in fostering community spirit, strengthening bonds, and transmitting social ethics. On 4 December 2024, "Spring Festival — Social Practices of the Chinese People in Celebration of Traditional New Year" was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

