

# Historic Foundation of East Asian Cultures

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## Course Information

Thursdays from 1:30–3:30 p.m. for eight weeks beginning March 7 through April 25.

**Hybrid – Lecture – Unlimited**

## Course Description

East Asia is immense. Its cultures are immense. The chronology of its development is immense. In order to cover it all in a 16 hour course we shall not get lost within a maze of warring dynasties or in a cascade of battles. We shall occasionally refer to such things because conflict and its resolution sometimes define society. And conflicts that exist without overt hostilities often create the culture that perpetuates society's values.

Historically, East Asian cultures have been rife with such cultural conflicts. Many emanate from the pervasive presence of China at East Asia's geographical and philosophical heart. From earliest times the gravitational pull of China's cultural development threatened to engulf its neighbors. Sometimes, such as in 7th century Japan, this was welcomed. Other times it was not. The Mongols, for example, after conquering China and ultimately creating history's largest geographically contiguous empire, struggled mightily to preserve their own identity rather than to be assimilated into Chinese culture. Similarly, the Manchus, when in power, envisioned their leading a universal multicultural state. Many Asians did not concur.

Culture is never monolithic and often apparently inconsistent. For example, China is the home of Taoism, which teaches that one should effortlessly enter into the Way, and Confucianism, which teaches that one should strive mightily against adversity. Reconciling such perspectives was, and is, a key part of East Asian life. Such life is not conceived on Western principles. For instance, Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, which are paramount in East Asian philosophy, emphasize the responsibility of humans to adhere to family and societal "rites" rather than to pursue individual "rights."

Also fundamental to East Asia's cultural development has been the attempted blend of Confucianism and Buddhism. Their respective views on self, soul, body, and afterlife differ significantly, and unresolvedly. Because Buddhism does not concern itself with family life or with the state, a workable interrelationship usually can come to be. But it is not always a harmonious amalgamation. Each nation has developed its own cultural resolutions regarding this, and many other things.

These simple examples reflect the intriguing complexities of societies about which most of us know not much. This course is to expand our awareness of the many elements that make the societies of East Asia what they are. We shall consider key political, economic, social and cultural ingredients of their history. Our study will be a colorful kaleidoscope of places and peoples worth knowing.