Part I
Introductory Material

1

Religion

There are plenty of books on the market which describe Asian religions for the introductory college course or the casual reader. They define Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintō as distinct beliefs and practices. More recent textbooks are conscientious about presenting Asian religious traditions in multiple aspects – not just as scriptural traditions or "systems of thought," but as living religions, especially in their behavioral and ritual dimensions. Many are illustrated, or contain photographs of an ethnographic nature. Most are accurate, making use of both academic scholarship and insider experiences. I recommend these books for seeing how important religion has been and continues to be in Asian cultures.

This book may differ from others of its kind in recognizing that the study of religion has intrinsic value (it is humanistic) but at the same time supports the practical objective of intercultural exchange. One goal of this book is to further social and cultural *commerce* – a word that is related not only to trade, but also to communication, understanding, even appreciation. I do not subscribe to the prejudice that humanism and practical work are mutually opposed. In fact they inform one another.

The impact of religious tradition is felt in virtually every dimension of cultural life: politics, economics, medicine, ethics and law, marriage and family, human rights, media and communications, science and technology. The role of religion in shaping these institutions may no longer be obvious or apparent, but it runs so deep that, had religion been absent, the shape and contour of these cultural traits would have evolved in utterly different ways or would never have come into existence at all. In this sense, the study of religion also involves description of cultural practices, as well as personal understandings of social purpose and value. I often tell my students that my courses deal less with "religion" in a narrow sense than they do with "culture" as a whole: Whom do

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people marry, and why? How do people order themselves – who is higher in status, who lower? Who has the right to rule, and why should we follow them? How are families organized, how do they stay together? What accounts for economic progress or collapse? What do people like to eat? How do they prevent and treat illness? What kinds of artistic expression are funded, supported, encouraged or reviled?

These are, indirectly, "religious" questions, because so much of cultural and social history has been shaped by the impact of religious practices and conceptions on economics, politics, sexuality, ethnicity, and aesthetic expression. In the nineteenth century the German sociologist Max Weber wrote, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that the most dominant economic system in the world – capitalism – would not have emerged if not for the Protestant Reformation.[1] Similarly, we can better understand East Asian economics in relation to Confucian values, Southeast Asian practices surrounding death and dying in relation to Buddhist cosmology, Japanese trade and immigration policies in relation to Shintō conceptions of purity and pollution, Indian marriage and sexuality in relation to the conflict between freedom and duty in Hindu practice, and so on. In this sense, "studying religion" involves the description of institutions and practices across a wide spectrum of social structures and individual experiences.

Some of these may not seem explicitly religious at all, in that their modern social expressions may be have become completely "secularized," their followers having lost sight of the religious conceptions, priestly commands, or behavioral norms that first inspired them. Most Chinese are "family-oriented," make regular offerings to their ancestors, and enjoy delicious combinations of vegetables, spices, meats, and grains without thinking of themselves as "Confucian" or "Taoist" – but these norms and practices certainly had their roots in religion. Most Japanese would never dream of burying or cremating the dead without the sponsorship of a local Buddhist temple, and yet they describe themselves (in sociological surveys) as "non-religious." Most Indians try to balance individual identity and achievement with a sense of duty and responsibility, and yet they may not see this goal as especially "Hindu." And so on. This is to say, the impact of religion on daily life is far more subtle and more pervasive than the declaration of "beliefs," the citation of scriptures, or the "great thoughts" of religious leaders. It is this cultural dimension – inclusive of a great range of personal and social beliefs, norms, and practices – that we will examine here.

This book represents a different approach from others in the university library in that it assumes an understanding of religion that is more cultural than theological, more practical than abstract, more behavioral than conceptual, more embedded than distinct. At the same time it recognizes that religions, in all their various forms, respond to basic, universal needs, hopes, and fears.

The comparative study of religion affirms "otherness," and a second purpose of this book is to highlight differences in the values, worldviews, and psychological and spiritual assumptions that people of Western and Asian cultures make about their everyday lives. I will point out contrasts, not in an effort to defend superiority or inferiority, but in an effort to affirm what should be a very simple, obvious fact: the fact of religious pluralism. At the same time, by showing how others view the religious problems of meaning, of value, of "reality," it is hoped that this book will provide the Western reader with a lens, a new perspective through which to view – and to understand, even to critique – his or her own religious experience.

While acknowledging cultural contrasts, we should recognize that people are much alike: there are no cultures that "lack" religion, and there is a profound sense in which people are religious by nature, whether one defines this as a religious "mind" or predisposition, or even as a "religion gene." Some patterns of thought and practice are universal; they are religious patterns that individuals-in-community share across cultures. Another way of saying this is that all religions meet basic human needs: the need for hope in the face of death or despair, for order in the midst of chaos, for unity in the midst of division and strife. In this sense, the basic materials of Asian religions are no different from those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They respond to the same concerns, address the same questions, provide behavioral and conceptual solutions to the same problems; that is, they speak to us on a human level. Perhaps this is why Asian religions have become so popular in the West: because they answer universal questions and address universal wants and needs in a way that is new and fresh. Who has not lost a loved one, or faced her own mortality? Who has not confronted illness or disappointment, or sought a way out of trouble? Who has not fallen in love, or yearned to satisfy emotional and sexual needs that would otherwise remain unfulfilled? Who has not found meaning and belonging in family, friendship, calling or career, cooperative effort, ethnic or national pride, and religious identity? Asian religious traditions are grounded in the same ideals and the same anxieties. To understand them is to understand human life – and this is why the study of religion is, at heart, a humanistic enterprise.

How is this orientation reflected here? I ask the reader to relate his or her own experience – at this basic human level – to the values and practices of South and East Asian religious traditions. Through surveys and questions for discussion or consideration, I encourage the reader to reflect upon questions of life and death, nature and spirit, the "existence" or role of gods and spirits, gender and sexuality, physical and mental well-being, ethnicity and nationalism, and social identity. The surveys can be found online, and, as readers react to them, a database of responses will be generated that will be accessible to anyone who participates in them. The goal of these surveys is both to promote

a sympathetic appreciation for Asian religious beliefs and practices and to serve as an instrument for sociological analysis.

"Religion" and the Religions

One of the effects of globalization – and in particular of new technologies of communication such as the internet – is the weakening of boundaries. These ever more porous boundaries – between nations, cultures, languages, religions – make people less inclined to define themselves in narrow terms, as "simply" an American, an English speaker, a heterosexual male, a Caucasian (as I once would have defined myself), but rather as "hybrid" or "protean" individuals. Travel, education, internet access, consumption – all have become both more global and more universal. More and more young people regard themselves as "citizens of the world" who can see and experience, and buy from, every country and culture. They are no longer constrained by resources, race, or religion – at least at the level of *exposure* to the alternative modes of living that they can see every day on a television set or computer screen.

Social and cultural interconnectedness also extends to religion and the religions. In the commercially and technologically networked world in which we live in the twenty-first century, religions increasingly come into contact with and mutually influence one another. Buddhists and Christians promote interreligious dialogue (there is a society dedicated to this work, as well as a journal published by the society),[2] and the effect is in many cases a level of sharing and participation that is truly hybrid: I am no longer a "Christian" encountering a "Buddhist," but a "Buddhist Christian" or a "Christian Buddhist." Such dialogues are taking place between other traditions as well, and, in some sense, they are replicating a pattern of religious hybridization or syncretism that is a central part of the history of most of the great religious traditions of the world. Christianity, for example, arose from both Jewish and local "pagan" roots, while developing its own vision and practice, and thus was itself a product of such "dialogue." Shintō, the indigenous religious tradition of Japan – a religion that we tend to think of as closed and self-contained – is also a product of hybridity, influenced especially by Japanese forms of Buddhism such as Shin'gon. Buddhism in Sri Lanka today borrows institutional structures and patterns of congregational identity from European and American Christianity and has been described as "Protestant Buddhism."[3] Modern Hinduism is a product not only of ancient Vedic religion, but also of the European Enlightenment and of cultural encounters with the West. And we could cite innumerable other examples, all demonstrating that virtually every religion in the world, including those that would seem to be the most "closed" and "exclusive," were products of several others. What is different now, however, is that this process is occur-

ring at an accelerated pace, stimulated by communication technologies and higher levels of education worldwide. More and more, people yearn to formulate a syncretistic or eclectic religious identity, drawing upon many traditions.

Not only are the "religions" porous, but so is the concept of "religion." Traditionally, scholars defined "religion" as "supernaturalism" or the belief in gods (or God). While this traditional definition serves the West adequately (the belief in God is arguably the central and defining characteristic of the Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), it raises two fundamental problems when we look at religion from a more global or comparative point of view.

First, the definition of religion as the belief in God or gods overemphasizes "belief" – a kind of "mental" affirmation or activity. But even a cursory understanding of religion shows that religion is hardly limited to "belief"; indeed most religions put greater store on practices, whether behavioral (the realm of ethics and morality) or liturgical (the realm of religious ritual). Some traditions are so focused on practice that belief becomes virtually irrelevant: this is certainly true of Confucianism, which most scholars of religion identify as "religious" even in the absence of religious "beliefs," and, arguably, can even apply to Judaism – where religious leaders, especially in the Reform tradition, will often counsel their followers not to worry about "beliefs or doubts" but to keep the tradition intact through practice. On the whole, the emphasis on belief shows a Christian bias, derived from its Greek philosophical roots, professing the *credo* (Latin meaning "I believe") of intellectual affirmation. The emphasis on belief as a defining characteristic of religion is parochial and Christocentric. (It should be noted, however, that, even among Christians, "belief" is empty if not accompanied by liturgical and ethical practice.)

Second, the definition of religion as "supernaturalism" is proven unhelpful when we look deeply at the immense variety of "gods" and conceptions of "divinity" that we find in the world's religions. It is not only the case that some religions deny the existence of gods altogether (this is true of Confucianism, and also of more intellectual forms of Buddhism and Hinduism), but also that some religions, while recognizing the *existence* of gods, still deny their *importance*: the Buddha readily admitted that gods "exist," but he minimized their importance – he denied that gods had the power to heal the spiritual ills of his followers. To give another example, Taoist priests acknowledge that gods and spirits "exist" (and liturgically interact with them), but they claim their own powers to be far greater than those of the gods. If gods are "irrelevant" or "inferior," then it would seem to be unhelpful to define religion in purely supernaturalistic terms.

If religion is not "supernaturalism," then what is it? Scholars of comparative religion began to discuss the general concept of "religion" in the late nineteenth century, and the history of the discipline is fascinating in itself. I will not repeat

that discussion here, but draw upon two or three definitions that strike me as especially useful; indeed my own definition (and the operational definition for this book) is syncretic, and I am grateful to these scholars for shaping my own identity as a student of religion through their inclusive and insightful analysis. We will see that all of the traditions covered in this book can be understood with the help of an overarching definition:

> Humans are religious by nature. They seek patterns of meaning and action that are ultimately transformative. As such, religion is a model of and a model for reality, as experienced by individuals in the context of social, natural, and cosmic existence.

Let's look briefly at the three statements contained in this definition:

1 "Humans are religious by nature." What does it mean to say that people are religious by nature? Religion is fundamental, and it is universal. No society has existed without religion, that is, without some conception of super-mundane reality (however we might describe it) and ritual and behavioral norms directed toward personal and social transformation. Recently neurobiologists have even tried to identify a "religious gene," and some have claimed to have found it. My own appreciation for this point follows Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), who, in his book *The Sacred and the Profane*, describes the human being as *homo religiosus* – "religious man" – not based on any particular beliefs or practices (and certainly not on the basis of "the belief in God or gods"), but rather based on a sense of reality having two dimensions, the sacred and the profane.[4] These dimensions are profoundly distinct from each other, but they interact and interpenetrate in what Eliade calls "irruptions" of the sacred, moments in time and points in space where the sacred is experienced within the world of everyday life. By "sacred reality" or the experiential "sense of the sacred," Eliade understands all of the dimensions of religious experience that we would expect (encounters with divine beings, practices of prayer or meditation, places of gathering and worship), but also other kinds of extraordinary consciousness – occasions when our normal sense of space and time are suspended, such as when we are seeing a movie or reading a book, recalling a first kiss, being moved by nature, and so on. These too are "religious" experiences. From this point of view, it is difficult to imagine any human being who lacks a religious sensitivity.
2 "They seek patterns of meaning and action that are ultimately transformative." This part of our definition is derived from the work of another important scholar of the comparative study of religion, Frederick Streng (1933–1993). Streng was a student of Buddhism, especially the "doctrine

of emptiness" of the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) School. His translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*) was a path-breaking study of this concept, further developed in his book *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*.[5] Partly on the basis of his studies of Buddhism and of his personal engagement as a devout Lutheran Christian, Streng formulated a general definition of religion as "ultimate transformation."[6] For Streng, religion is fundamentally "active"; it promises change, and it delivers on that promise. Religious change (personal, social/political, and cosmic transformation) goes to our very core – it is "ultimate."

3 "As such, religion is a model of and a model for reality, as experienced by individuals in the context of social, natural, and cosmic existence." The elaboration on "ultimate transformation" expressed in this part of the definition is borrowed from Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), an anthropologist whose work on culture and symbolism brings together theories of meaning (symbol systems and semiotics), aesthetics and literary theory, political expression, economics, and social organization. It was Geertz who defined religion as "a model of and a model for reality." As a *model of* reality, religion gives meaning and structure to the world of experience, taking what is inchoate (indescribable and confused) and making it meaningful and manageable. That is to say, religion gives people an accurate understanding of what reality "really is." As a *model for* reality, religion gives people a blueprint or set of instructions and norms to create a "new" reality, to achieve Streng's "ultimate transformation." Taken together, as "model of" and "model for," religion is both *descriptive* (telling us the true nature of the world) and *prescriptive* (instructing us on how to transform it).[7]

We might reframe Geertz's definition in terms of Eliade's categories of the sacred and the profane. To describe religion as a "model of" reality suggests that, *prior to* religion or *without* it, our ordinary or "profane" understanding of reality is fundamentally mistaken. We are blind to reality as it really is, and we are lost in ignorance (in fact many religious traditions – including Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, to name only three – describe the basic problem of humankind as ignorance); only religion can transform ignorance into knowledge. Then religion also gives us the tools to move from ignorance to knowledge – it provides a "model for" thought and action that is *ultimately transformative*.

Dimensions of religion that fit into the "model of"/descriptive category would include belief systems and creedal commitments, myth, cosmology (theories of the structure of the universe – the existence of the afterlife, of places equivalent to our Western "heaven" and "hell," and so on), cosmogony (theories of the origins of the cosmos, creation stories), hagiography (stories of religious

heroes), and theories about human nature as well as about the nature of supernatural realities (gods and spirits, ghosts and demons, souls and spirits of the dead).

Dimensions of religion that fit into the "model for"/prescriptive category would include behavioral norms (morality and ethics), liturgical norms (ritual, worship, meditation, prayer), and practical ways of living (renunciation; mendicancy; ordination as a priest, rabbi, imam, monk, or nun; and other religious lifestyles or avocations) – all directed toward the "ultimate transformation" that envisions a perfected self, society, and cosmos.

Although we cannot explore every aspect of every tradition studied in this book, we can use this definition as a template for what to include when studying the religious dimensions of Asian cultures. No doubt, the definition seems broad – this is intentional: religion permeates culture and is, in many profound ways, the basis for a wide variety of cultural systems, from government and politics to family structures, medicine, labor, even sports and entertainment. For the entire history of humankind, religion has functioned to inspire and sustain virtually every dimension of human social existence. Religion is not simply "belief," nor is it simply "ritual" – it is the cultural spring and foundation of the needs, motivations, thoughts, and behaviors that make up the totality of human experience.

Notes

1 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, trans. Peter R. Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).
2 *Buddhist-Christian Studies* was founded in 1981 and published its thirty-second volume in 2012.
3 Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
4 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987).
5 Frederick Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967).
6 Some years ago, shortly after Streng died, I published an article on the influence of Buddhism on his general theory of religion: "Frederick Streng, Mādhyamika, and the Comparative Study of Religion," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 16 (1996), pp. 65–76. His own theory is most completely developed in his book *Ways of Being Religious* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1973).
7 Geertz developed this definition in two essays. They can be found in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): "Religion as a Cultural System" (pp. 87–125) and "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols" (pp. 126–141).

2

Language

There is one other preliminary step we should take before we begin our investigation of Asian religions, and that is a discussion of language. In this book we will examine, in their respective languages – Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese – a number of terms relating to both belief and practice. Why do I favor using these terms rather than their English translations (or approximations)? And why is language so important to begin with?

Clifford Geertz, one of the authors of our definition of religion in Chapter 1, defined "culture" as a "system of symbols." This definition highlights how closely culture is related to language – after all, what is "language" if not also a "system of symbols"? Languages employ words (nouns) to refer to things, by symbolizing those objects in letter or sound, or evoke descriptors (adjectives and verbs) to describe their shape, movement, appearance, form, orientation, attitude, and so on. By virtue of language we communicate with one another, and thus we set our culture (our language) apart from those of others. If you have traveled abroad, you know that one of the first and most significant obstacles to cross-cultural understanding is simply the language barrier. *They* are different from *me*: they speak a different language, one that *I* cannot understand. And any professor of modern languages will tell you that the first and only way to truly understand another culture is by mastering its language. It is important, even crucial, that our educational system encourages fluency in numerous languages, for all of our citizens; only then can we be citizens of the world and not just a narrow slice of it.

But language is not merely a tool for understanding a culture. In a very real sense, a language *is* a culture. Or, to put it another way, the highest form and expression of culture is language. In Chinese the earliest character (word/

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symbol) for "culture" was *wen* (文) – a character that also means "language" or "writing." The mythical inventor of writing, Cang Jie (倉頡), "culture minister" to the legendary Yellow Emperor, did not "invent" writing so much as he discovered it – in the prints of birds and the striations of jade. Chinese language and culture are thus inextricably tied to the very landscape of the Middle Kingdom, *Zhongguo* (中國) – the Chinese name for China. Indeed the phrase meaning "Chinese language" is exactly this: *Zhongwen* (中文), the culture of the Middle Kingdom. And what is true of China is true of all people: our language is our mother tongue, related to birth, childhood, and home. It is what I talk with and think with, and it forms the very basis of my self-identity. It is as deep as my soul (to use a religious term), and thus language is not only culture, but religion as well.

We will examine the religious dimensions of language throughout this book, but let's begin by comparing the impact of oral and written languages on the cultures of India, China, and Japan in terms of these countries' social and political histories. In many ways, language has been determinative of culture in each one, with widely divergent results.

We can start from the obvious fact that people in India, China, and Japan speak different languages. In fact the languages spoken in these countries belong to completely different language groups. The languages of India belong to the Indo-European (or, more narrowly, Indo-Aryan) language group; the languages of China belong to the Sino-Tibetan language group; and the languages of Japan belong to the Japonic language group. Such classifications indicate that these peoples speak languages that are radically "foreign," with strikingly different linguistic and phonetic patterns. This is why it is extraordinarily difficult for the Japanese, for example, to learn Chinese: Chinese is as linguistically foreign to native Japanese speakers as it is to native English speakers.

Why is this important? Because India, China, and Japan have such long histories of cultural interaction, especially in terms of religion. From India, Buddhism spread to Tibet and to China, and eventually to Korea and to Japan. Translation teams consisting of monks from India, China, and Central Asia met in the first centuries of the Common Era to render Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Chinese, a task that proved extraordinarily difficult because of linguistic barriers. Even today, when Chinese people practice the liturgical recitation of sacred Buddhist texts (*sūtras*), one can hear the curious (that is, foreign-sounding) admixture of Sanskrit phonemes, which are ritually powerful but make "no sense" to most Chinese. Similarly, when the Japanese adopted Chinese characters in the fourth century CE, they were making use of a writing system that had no linguistic connection to their own indigenous language. The result was a writing system in which the same "word" (Japanese *kanji* or "Chinese character") could be read in either of two different ways: the native

kun or "Japanese" reading; and the foreign *on* or "Chinese" reading. The long history of cultural interaction among these three countries has certainly been complicated by their vastly different language systems.

An accurate census of languages and dialects is difficult to substantiate, but, according to *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, the number of mutually unintelligible languages spoken within each of these three countries differs enormously between them:

- India: 461 languages;
- China: 299 languages, with 14 major dialects of Chinese;
- Japan: 15 languages.

Examples of the 461 languages spoken in India include Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Urdu, and Punjabi (all spoken by at least 50 million native speakers). *Ethnologue* categorizes Chinese as a "macrolanguage" with 14 major dialects. These dialects are so different that they are mutually unintelligible. Among the most widely spoken are Mandarin, Hakka, Cantonese, and Taiwanese (a variant of the Southern Min language). The most widely spoken languages of Japan are Japanese and Ryukyuan (a language confined to a tiny population on the island of Ryukyu).[1]

Ethnologue's "diversity index" is even more telling; this index shows the likelihood that any two individuals within a country will speak a different language:

- India: 0.916;
- China: 0.510;
- Japan: 0.027.

That is, in India there is a 92 percent likelihood that any two individuals, surveyed at random, will speak different languages; in China, a 51 percent likelihood; in Japan, only a 2.7 percent likelihood. Among the 10 countries in the world with populations over 100 million, India has the highest diversity index, Japan the lowest. *Ethnologue* reports that 21 percent of the population of India are fluent speakers of its official language (Hindi); 70 percent of Chinese are fluent speakers of Mandarin; while over 98 percent of Japanese are fluent speakers of Japanese.

One can easily imagine the immense social and political impact of these differences. How easy it must be to imagine oneself as part of a single cultural whole when nearly everyone in the country (in the case of Japan) speaks the same language! And how difficult it must be to unify or govern a nation when only a small number of people (as in the case of India) speak the official language (or they speak it only as an acquired or second language). Chinese

governments are intensely concerned with this problem, which is why they have imposed Mandarin as the "common" language (普通話, *putonghua*) in China (the People's Republic of China), Taiwan (the Republic of China), and Singapore.[2] For more than half of Chinese, however, Mandarin is an acquired language. The sensitivity of this issue is one reason why Chinese linguists refuse to categorize the languages of China *as* "languages" (語言, *yuyan*), labeling them as "dialects" (放言, *fangyan*) instead. But, no matter how they are labeled, the fact is that Cantonese (the language or dialect spoken in the southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong/Canton and Hong Kong) and Mandarin (originally a northern language or dialect native to central China, including the capital of Beijing) are mutually unintelligible. Cantonese speakers and Mandarin speakers simply cannot understand one another, unless they happen to have acquired the other language as a second language. The same could be said of any other Chinese language.

Language preservation is a political issue going to the heart of cultural unity and diversity. In Hong Kong most people have adopted Mandarin since the Handover (from British to Chinese sovereignty) in 1997, but some stubbornly resist the change and will insist on speaking Cantonese – or feign ignorance of Mandarin – when confronting Chinese visitors. Similarly, a major platform of the Independence Movement as supported by the Democratic Progressive Party (民進黨, *minjindang*) on the island of Taiwan is the preservation of the Southern Min or Taiwanese language – though Mandarin has been the language of instruction in Taiwan public schools since the late 1940s.

Turning to written forms of these languages, the cultural contrasts between East Asia (China and Japan) and South Asia (the Indian subcontinent) are sharpened. Chinese characters – employed in China and Japan – are pictographic; they have the same meaning regardless of what language or dialect is used to read or pronounce them. Chinese characters appeal to the eyes; they are visual, and aesthetic in form. One of the most recognized of the visual arts is calligraphy, and virtually any two-dimensional art (for instance landscape painting or woodblock printing, such as the one seen in Figure 2.1) contains written characters and owners' seals, which represent a central aspect of the completed work.

Recall that the Chinese word for "language," 文 *wen*, refers specifically to writing, the heart of Chinese culture. Until the end of the Qing Dynasty (the last of the imperial dynasties), paper containing writing could not be disposed of idly – to trample on written words was a punishable offense.

Chinese written characters are a cultural unifier. Because they are pictographic rather than phonetic, they mean the same however they might be pronounced.[3] Using our earlier example, even if two businessmen from Hong Kong and Beijing are unable to communicate orally, they can simply write a letter or email in Chinese and be readily understood. They will "sound out"

Figure 2.1 "Travelers among mountains and streams" by Fan Kuan 范寬 (fl. 990–1020)**.** National Palace Museum, Taipei. © Corbis.

their communication in their own languages (or dialects), but the meaning will be the same regardless of what the characters sound like in the mind's ear. Throughout Chinese history, written communication has made linguistic diversity irrelevant to social cohesion and political rule. The common written language has allowed China to remain unified for more than two millennia; because of its written language, China is the oldest extant culture in the world.

Sanskrit is the classical language of India. While not strictly a "dead" language (like Latin), it is a spoken language for only a tiny few communities in India; principally it is the priestly language of religious scriptures. The written script of Sanskrit has been adopted in almost all of the Indo-Aryan languages, including Hindi, the official language of India. Like the Roman alphabet (and,

obviously, in contrast to Chinese), this system is phonetic: each symbol represents a sound. The script is called, in Sanskrit, *devanāgarī*, "the script of the gods." A Sanskrit dictionary is organized in a way that emphasizes the symbols' sounds: 11 vowels followed by 33 consonants. The sound corresponding to the first letter – equivalent to the English *a* but pronounced more like *a-u* or the *ou-* in the word "out" – is formed at the back of the throat and comes from deep within one's vocal range. Similarly, the first of the consonants, an unaspirated *k* (it is not breathed but vocalized, and resembles the English sound of a hard *g*), also begins at the back of the throat. The last letter of the Sanskrit alphabet is like an *m* – it is the last because it is formed at the front of the mouth, that is, with the lips. So, by representing all the sounds that can be made by the human voice, beginning at the back of the throat and ending with the lips, Sanskrit represents the oral basis of language – and of culture.

When a Hindu yogin (that is, a practitioner of yoga) meditates on the sound *om* (or, more accurately, *aum*), as represented in Figure 2.2, he or she is beginning at the back of the throat and ending at the front of the mouth – vocalizing, in abbreviated form, all of the sounds that the voice can produce. This is believed to replicate the sounds of the gods, the sounds of the cosmos.

This oral basis of Indian languages, and especially of their root language, Sanskrit, illustrates that India is primarily an oral and aural culture. For centuries, the scriptures of Hinduism were not even written down at all, but passed on from teacher to student, generation after generation. To be a student requires being in the presence of a teacher, and to be a devotee or a worshipper requires invoking and being in the presence of a god. In Sanskrit this is called *darśan*. It means "being present" or "being in direct contact" – Hindus talk about "giving" or "receiving" *darśan*. In Buddhism, a disciple is an *upāsaka* (male, a monk) or an *upāsikā* (female, a nun), one who "sits at the feet" of one's teacher. Both Hinduism and Buddhism emphasize this immediate and intimate relationship between teacher and student.

Figure 2.2 The Sanskrit word o*m*, composed of the first and last letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, and thus representing "all of the sounds of the universe."

Just as China is primarily a visual culture, based on its pictographic written system, India is primarily an oral/aural culture, based on its phonetic written system. So much follows from this. Whereas Chinese education emphasizes reading and writing, classical Indian education emphasizes hearing and reciting. Whereas Chinese arts are primarily two-dimensional (painting and calligraphy), Indian arts are primarily three-dimensional (sculpture and architecture – as well as music, which moves three-dimensionally through space). Whereas Chinese culture is vertically oriented (moving through time, with a conception of history that is linear), Indian culture is spatially oriented (moving through space, with a conception of history that is circular). For India, the universe has no beginning or end, but "vibrates" and "hums" like a spinning wheel. The idea of "creation" in Hinduism (an idea we will explore later in this book) entails an originating sound, the thrumming of a drum.[4] In short, China is a culture of the eyes, of what can be seen; India is a culture of the ears, of what can be heard.

To be sure, Indian influence on China has been significant, but always exotic and foreign. China did not develop sculptural arts until it imported Buddhism, and the most accomplished forms of Chinese sculpture are Buddhist statuary. Moreover, the tradition of recitation of scripture, which is now very common in China and Japan, came from India. Indeed, the emphasis on sound is so important in Buddhism that the chanting of scripture is more religiously important than its meaning. Recitation alone has spiritual efficacy, regardless of whether or not the devotee knows the meaning of what he or she is reciting. Recall our discussion in the last chapter about belief: belief, which requires understanding the meaning of words, is relatively unimportant when it comes to Buddhist practice, even though it is religious texts – scriptures – that are being recited.

Throughout this book we will examine terms in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Japanese, and we will often have to leave them untranslated – as they entail a cluster of meanings that can be used to explain them. Here too, knowing the etymology of terms (their origins and structure) will be beneficial to understanding their religious significance. While I have reproduced in this book the terms as they are actually written, we will also see and discuss them in Romanized or transcribed form, in order to help with pronunciation. But bear in mind that, from a Chinese, Indian, or Japanese point of view, our Roman alphabet also looks foreign and exotic. In fact English words are often used because they are "eye-catching" and "modern," sometimes without concern for their meaning. I have a marvellous collection of t-shirts that I have purchased over the years with all kinds of strange English words and phrases, some unintentionally humorous. One of my goals in this book is to take the "strangeness" out of the religious language of Asia and to penetrate religious teachings and practices through the terms that they themselves employ.

Notes

1 For these and other data, see http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp (accessed August 29, 2013).
2 Why is the official language called "Mandarin"? In English, "mandarin" was the old name for a Chinese official – it was a term coined in the British colonial period. It is a direct translation of the Chinese word *guan* (官), which designates an official of the imperial court. Indeed, the old name in Chinese for this dialect was *guan-hua* (官話), "the language of the officials." They needed a common dialect to be able to communicate with one another, since they had come to court from different parts of the country and thus had different native tongues. Today Chinese people simply refer to Mandarin as the "common" language.
3 A small number of Chinese characters have a phonetic element. However, these "phonetic lexigraphs" represent fewer than 5% of all Chinese characters.
4 Contrast this with the Abrahamic traditions (Christianity is especially "visual" in orientation), which conceive of creation as an originating light.