

Unit 5: Holidays and Observances

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Impact of holidays on tactical operations
- Solar/lunar calendar differences
- Common Era abbreviations
- Muslim calendar distinctions
- Six major celebrations of Chinese folk religious practice
- Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as focus of Buddhist holidays and celebrations
- Variety throughout East Asia in dates of Buddhist observances
 - Four important holidays for Muslims

Identify

- Solar/lunar calendars
- Kathina festival
- Lantern Festival, Lunar New Year, Dragon Boat Celebration, Ghost Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Clear and Bright Remembrance
- Dharma, Buddha, and Sangha
- Buddha's birthday
- Bodhi tree, Buddha relics
- Arhats
- C.E., B.C.E., A.H., Ramadan
- Hijra, Ashura
- Shia
 - Mawlid al-Nabiy, 'Id al-Fitr, Id al-Adha

Realize

- Impact of holidays during Tet offensive--1968
- Reasons for variety in observance dates for Buddhist practitioners

Unit 5: Holidays and Observances

This section treats selected festivals and observances of Chinese religions, Buddhist, and Muslim practice. Space constraints limit treatment of celebrations important to Hindu, Christian and Jewish practitioners.

I. Necessity



Knowledge of key holidays and observances contributes to sensitivity and awareness of East Asian culture. In addition, tactical operations also may be directly affected as a result of religious holidays and events.

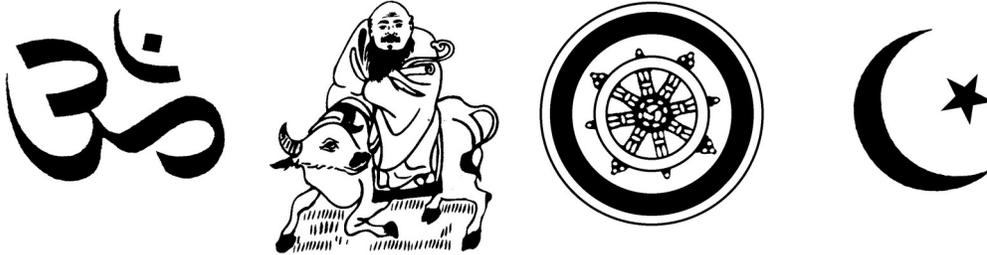
During the Vietnam conflict, enemy actions during the Tet offensive (Vietnamese New Year celebrations) became one of the turning points of the war. As recounted in American Military History's "The U.S. Army in Vietnam," the Tet offensive demonstrated anew the importance of holidays/observances in tactical operations.

"The Tet offensive began quietly in mid-January 1968 in the remote northwest corner of South Vietnam.

Elements of three NVA [North Vietnamese Army] divisions began to mass near the Marine base at Khe Sanh...concern over the critical situation at Khe Sanh and preparations for the Tet holiday festivities preoccupied most Americans and south Vietnamese...Americans were unprepared for what followed.

On 31 January combat erupted throughout the entire country. Thirty-six of 44 provincial capitals and 64 of 242 district towns were attacked, as well as 5 of South Vietnam's 6 autonomous cities, among them Hue and Saigon. Once the shock and confusion wore off, most

attacks were crushed in a few days. During those few days, however, the fighting was some of the most violent ever seen in the South or experienced by many ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) units." (pp. 672-673)



II. Hindu/Chinese Religions/Buddhist/Muslim Calendars

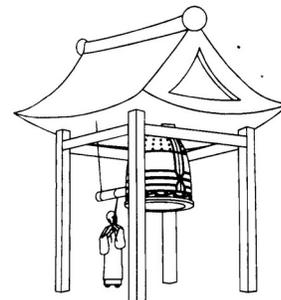
1. Solar and Lunar Calendars

Beliefs about the world and human interaction within that world determine, in part, how different cultures measure time. Some indicate time according to the sun (solar calendars). Others follow after the moon (lunar calendars). The lunisolar calendar combines aspects of both.

2. Chinese Religions Most Chinese religions follow the traditional lunar calendar.

3. Buddhist Calendars There is no single Buddhist calendar.

Throughout East Asia, Buddhist dates vary between different schools of thought and national makeup.



This is due to the many trends of practice within Buddhism, the diverse nature and importance of Bodhisattvas, unique national patriarchs, historical events and pre-Buddhist traditions which vary from country to country, the different calendars used--whether lunar, lunisolar, Gregorian--and the date of the beginnings of the year.

4. The Muslim Calendar

a. A.H. The lunar calendar determines festive dates in the Islamic calendar. Months alternate between 29 and 30 days. This results in a year 354 days long ($29.5 \times 12 = 354$), roughly 11 days short of the solar year. Thus, Muslim festival dates, compared to the Gregorian calendar, vary from year to year.

The migration (Hijra, HIJ-rah) of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina (A.D. 622) begins the Islamic calendar. The Islamic year A.H. 1417 (Anno Hegirae, the year of the Hijra), begins on Gregorian calendar 18 May 1996.

b. Ramadan (RAH-mah-dahn)



In the ninth month, Muslims fast from first appearance of light to sunset. Depending on the hourly length of days (whether Ramadan falls in summer, winter, spring or fall), fasting may require either very long or short days, depending on the season.

c. Muharram (muh-HAR-rahm) and Dhul-Hijja (thul-HIJ-yuh)

Two other months are special--Muharram, which begins the year, and Dhul-Hijja, the last month which is the time of pilgrimage.

Though the moon determines the dating of festivals, prayer times follow the rising and setting sun. During Ramadan, Muslims observe the fast from the first appearance of light to sunset.

5. B.C., A.D., C.E., B.C.E.

Marked by the birth of Jesus, the Christian era (Anno Domini, Latin for "the year of our Lord") is abbreviated A.D. Dates before the birth of Christ are designated as B.C.

Presently, the initials B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) indicate B.C. (Before Christ.) C.E. (Common Era) denotes A.D. (Anno Domini--in the year of our Lord.)



III. Chinese Religions/Buddhist/Muslim Festivals and Observances

1. Chinese Religions The following six celebrations are major events recognized throughout Chinese folk practice.

a. Lunar New Year

This event is the most important of the Chinese religious year, usually held the second new moon after the winter solstice. The celebration period is for a full month, offering a period of renewal before the spring agricultural work begins.

Various feasts honor important household deities. Prior to the New Year's Eve dinner, sacrifices are made to ancestors and restless spirits.

b. Lantern Festival Marking the end of the New Year's celebration, this event is an opportunity to view and display lanterns.



On the night of the Lantern Festival, people crowd brightly lit streets to see displays of lanterns and streamers. Tradition dictates that this is a good evening for young women to find husbands.

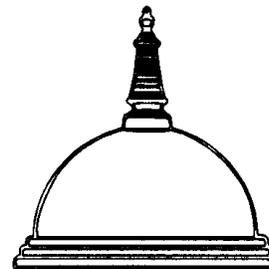
c. Dragon Boat Celebration Remembered near the summer solstice, this event recalls Chu'ü Yuan (328-298 B.C.), a Chinese poet and statesman who drowned himself in the Tungting Lake in protest of corruption within the royal court. Boats with dragon heads, representing forces giving rainfall, compete in races and reenact the search for Chu'ü Yuan.

d. Ghost Festival (yu-lan p'en, "you-lahn puhn") This Taoist/Buddhist/Chinese festival offers food and prayers for ghosts. These ghosts are harmful spirits--souls that are restless--because of their violent or untimely deaths, ill placed burial sites or neglect by their descendants. The kwei (gway--hungry ghosts) must be appeased. During the ghost festival, the gates of hell are opened and the free roaming kwei receive offerings.

e. Mid-Autumn Festival Focusing on the moon, originally this celebration centered on a popular deity known as Ch'ang O (Ch-ahng oh). In celebration of the full harvest moon, people go to the countryside, eat moon shaped cakes, and enjoy the holiday spirit.

f. Clear and Bright Remembrance

This second most important festival involves visiting ancestral tombs. Family members groom and conserve burial sites, eat together a great feast and offer money/gifts to departed ancestors. The event takes place in the third lunar month--106 days after the winter solstice.

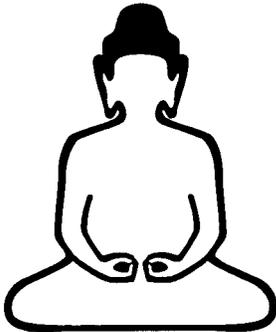


2. Buddhist Festivals Buddhist observances cluster around three areas (1) events remembering the personage of Buddha, the Dharma (teaching) and Sangha; (2) rites incorporating remembrances tied to a specific country or ethnic group's context; (3) commemorations linked to the agricultural/natural season. For purposes here, the focus is on festivals related to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

a. Events Honoring the Buddha

(1) Buddha's Birthday

Visakha Puja (vis-AHK-ah POO-jah) celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. According to legend, each one of these events occurred on the full-moon day of the lunar month of Visakha (April-May.) It is the most holy day of the Buddhist calendar.



Though festivals differ from country to country, most activities focus on temples and monasteries. People gather to listen to sermons and process in candle-lit movements around temples. **Bodhi** (BOH-dee) trees are cared for (the type of tree under which Buddha first received enlightenment), Buddha images cleaned, and pilgrimages made to sacred sites.

(2) Buddha Images Particular Buddha representations receive honor at differing times. Whether seen as physical representations of the enlightened one, heavenly Buddhas, or as objects worthy of reverence in their own right, ceremonies give respect to figures throughout the Buddhist world.

(3) Relics Devotion paid various Buddha relics (tooth, finger bone) can create extreme forms of devotional remembrance.

b. Dharma Celebrations Particular texts receive veneration on specific days throughout East Asia. In Theravada countries, the Three Baskets (Tripataka--discourse, doctrine, discipline) are honored on the full moon of the eighth lunar month.

In Sri-Lanka, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, the selfless generosity (dana) of young Prince Vassantara, who gives away all he has, only to be rewarded for his charity, is celebrated on a specific occasion. Merit--and the importance of giving and doing meritorious deeds--is emphasized.

c. Festivals in Honor of the Sangha Theravada countries honor the founding of the Sangha in Rajagriha in northern India by 1,250 arhats (AHR-huht--worthy ones). Particular celebrations, marking Sangha foundings, vary from country to country.

Often such festivals last for several days with entertainment of plays, dances, comedians, movies and videos. Loudspeakers will blare popular music and announce meritorious gift givers.



The beginning and ending of monsoon rain retreats (July--October in Theravada countries) marks the time when the Sangha retreats for collective study and meditation. Kathina festivals--where the Sangha receives new robes and wishing trees (gift bearing structures symbolizing trees)--mark the collective end to the rain retreat.

3. Muslim Festivals and Observances

Within Islam, Friday is the day of communal weekly gathering. Based upon the Lunar calendar, Muslims observe the following annual festivals and holidays.

The first of Muharram (muh-HAR-rahm, New Year's Day-- first month of the Islamic year) celebrates the Hijra of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. (A.D.).

a. Ashura (ah-shoo-RA) commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn (hoo-SAYN, grandson of the prophet Muhammad) on the 10th of Muharram, A.H. 61 (C.E. [A.D.] 680).

Among Shi'a Muslims, this festival is traditionally celebrated for 10 days, beginning from the first of Muharram. Ashura can also commemorate the safe landing of Noah's Ark.

b. Mawlid al-Nabiy (MOW lid oon-NA-bee, birthday of the Prophet) is the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. For many Muslims, this day ranks third in importance, after 'Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha.



c. Mi'Raj al-Nabiy (mehr-raj al-NEB-bee) commemorates the ascension (al-Mi'Raj) of the Prophet to heaven following his night journey (al-Isra') from Mecca to Jerusalem. Interpreted either symbolically or literally, the Qur'an records the event in Sura 17:1.



d. Nisf-Sha'ban (nush-if sha-ah-BAHN, Night of Repentance) comes on the 14th day of the eighth month (Sha'ban)...in the middle (Nisf) of the month. It is a night of repentance in preparation for Ramadan.

e. Ramadan (RAH-mah-dahn) is a holy month of fasting wherein Muslims, who are physically able to refrain, do not eat or drink from the first sign of dawn until sunset.

