



Unit 4 Overview: Empires and Belief Systems 600 BCE to 700 CE

In Unit 4, we encounter the rise of large empires and the spread of portable belief systems. As empires expanded, rulers used religion to help maintain order and govern vast territories filled with diverse people. Some belief systems became world religions that spread along the roads and networks that connected empires. Han Dynasty China and the Roman Empire are two examples of both the expansion of empires and the different ways that rulers used belief systems to their advantage during this period.

**0:03**

Montage of photos of various coming of age ceremonies, including a bat mitzvah, confirmation, Quinceanera, and sweet 16; map of Zhou Dynasty China

In many communities, young adults go through coming of age ceremonies. These might be common in your own community. They include ceremonies like bar or bat mitzvah, confirmation, quinceañera, and even sweet 16. If you've ever experienced one of these ceremonies you have something in common with the Duke of Lu, a powerful Chinese Lord who lived 2,500 years ago.

0:30

Series of Chinese paintings and drawings; a man writing in Chinese calligraphy; photos depicting the Chinese capping and hairpin ceremonies known as Guan Li and Ji Li

In the year 564 BCE the 12-year-old Duke was told that he should go through the Confucian ceremony known as Guan Li, or capping. A Confucian writer named Wuzu tells us about this ritual. For a ruler to be capped one must perform the ceremony of offerings and sacrifices, one must play music of metals and stones, and it must happen in a temple of one's ancestors. The Duke went into a temple and the ritual was followed. He was now a man who could become a ruler. To mark this transition a cap was placed on his head. That's why it's called Guan Li, or capping ceremony. Women also pass through a similar ritual called Ji Le, or hairpin ceremony.

Side-by-side photos of the Chinese hairpin ceremony (Ji Li) and capping ceremony (Guan Li); series of images representing Chinese belief, religion, and empire

Not many teenagers today get promoted to ruler after their sweet 16. Still, this ceremony and others like it are part of a world historical story of belief, religion, and empire that is connected to today's coming of age ceremonies.

1:39

Photos of a cave painting and a large, stone Buddha head

Ceremonies like Guan Li are often associated with belief systems. The first belief systems were localized with each small community or band of foragers having their own set of rituals and beliefs tied to a specific place and a particular group of people.

Map of Europe and Asia focused on the Roman and Chinese Empires, highlighting how Christianity and Buddhism were able to spread from one region to another

About 3,000 years ago a social innovation emerged. People began to imagine their beliefs as universal and portable. They believed that their God or Gods could move with them wherever they went. And they believed their religion could apply to people outside of their local community. As a result, many religions began to spread across large regions.

2:22

Series of images depicting the Chinese philosopher Confucius, as well as the practice of Confucianism in China

Confucianism was one of these portable belief systems. It was a set of practices that arose in the 6th Century BCE, during a period of War. Part of its purpose was to emphasize unity and moral behavior. Confucianism was based on the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, but it drew on ideas from many parts of China. The ritual of Guan Li is associated with Confucianism. We know that it was still a new practice in many parts of China during the life of the Duke of Lu, but it soon became common place.

2:58

Map of Han Dynasty China; series of drawings and writings

About 300 years after the Duke's ceremony, Confucianism was embraced by the Emperors of the Han Dynasty which unified China after centuries of conflict. During



depicting the practice of Confucianism in other regions, such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam

the Han Dynasty Confucian ideas and ceremonies spread and influenced societies in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. In Korea, the capping ceremony is called Gwallye.

Montage of images, including Islamic writings, a Christian painting of Jesus, and Buddhist statues

During this period and after other portable belief systems including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism also emerged and spread to new places.

3:41

Series of paintings including that of a Chinese army along a mountainside and a Han Emperor; photos of the Great Stupa and the Colosseum

The development of portable belief systems had important effects on government. For example, Confucian rituals like Guan Li were believed to increase social harmony. Harmony was important to the Han Emperors who ruled after a period of great disruption. For the Emperors of this dynasty Confucianism and its rituals, including Guan Lu were a way to remind people of the importance of order and stability in all things. Performing rituals was one way to avoid social unrest. The rise of vast empires in other parts of the world was tied to other portable belief systems. Many empires emerged which were bigger and more powerful than those that had come before. They had conquered many diverse groups of people who held many different beliefs.

4:31

Painting of a Han Emperor; paintings from the Persian and Roman Empires

Portable belief systems helped emperors rule over all those conquered people. Some rulers, like the Han Emperors chose to embrace a single belief system and tried to get everyone to follow it. Other emperors tolerated or supported lots of different religions to gain the loyalty of a diverse population. Portable belief systems helped empires rule. While empires in turn helped belief systems spread to new places.

5:06

Map of various empires stretching from Han Dynasty China in the East to the Roman Empire in the West

All the way across Eurasia, from Han Dynasty China, but at just about the same time the rulers of Rome conquered an Empire stretching across the Mediterranean Sea. The Romans had gods of their own and their own Coming of Age rituals. But they ruled over regions with lots of different religions.

5:28

Series of paintings depicting life in the Roman Empire

Throughout their history Roman rulers alternated between promoting a single belief and system and sponsoring lots of different religions. For example, at first, they persecuted members of a new religion Christianity before eventually adopting it as their state religion, helping to spread it across the Empire and beyond.

5:48

Side-by-side photos of the Colosseum and a Han Dynasty palace; photo of tourists at a Chinese temple; mosaic of a Christian baptism

The Roman Empire and Han Dynasty China were very different. But they both needed to manage a vast and diverse territory and while both Empires collapsed thousands of years ago their legacies remain. Confucian ethics still play an important role in China and many other parts of Asia. Meanwhile, the Christian practice of baptism developed from a first century CE Jewish ritual and spread among Christian communities in the Roman Empire.



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