

## Introductory Remarks

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### Abstract

This volume aims to provide an overview of East Asian religiosities in the European Union, with the aim of shedding light on their increasingly significant presence, revolving around the informal or structured practices of several million Europeans and East Asians (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese people) living in Europe. In this introductory chapter we address some of the main scholarly issues concerning the study of these religiosities, paying attention to the reasons why this topic is relevant to Religious Studies and other related disciplines, to the methodological challenges inherent to this field, and to some conceptual questions emerging from the country-related and thematic chapters.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; diaspora; East Asian religions; European Union; hybridisation; religious studies

### 1. Why Study East Asian Religiosities in the European Union?

In the early twenty-first century, Europe hosts a substantial East Asian diaspora, but one which is routinely overlooked.<sup>1</sup> Eurostat figures for 2018 (before Brexit but excluding Denmark) list over 1.262 million officially registered Chinese nationals, over 228,000 Vietnamese citizens, nearly 127,000 Japanese nationals, about 93,000 South Koreans nationals, nearly 34,000 Taiwanese citizens, and just over 1,000 North Koreans, a total of about 1.74 million people (Eurostat 2018). We can add to this number (1) naturalised migrants and their descendants; (2) ethnically East Asian people with other nationalities such as Singaporean; (3) people with mixed (e.g., East Asian and European) heritage as well as East Asian adoptees; (4) undocumented residents; and (5) estimates for

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<sup>1</sup> In this book, we follow Pokorny's definition and take "East Asia" to include today's nation-states of China (excluding Tibet) and Taiwan, Japan, South and North Korea, and Vietnam (Pokorny and Winter 2018: 4–6).

Denmark and non-European Union countries, meaning that there are easily three million or more East Asians living in Europe, for longer or shorter periods of time (Pokorny 2023: 245).

Meanwhile, Europeans have long been adopting or influenced by East Asian religiosities of many kinds. This is particularly true for East Asian Buddhisms as well as for some East Asian forms of Christianity; what are sometimes called “ethnic religions” such as Daoism and Shintō 神道, etc. also have their European adherents. Moreover, Europe like North America has a wide landscape of “informal religiosities” within which East Asian forms are particularly significant: this includes among other things a wide spectrum of holistic medicine and healing practices as well as a diverse field of martial arts, which to varying degrees offer practitioners the opportunity to engage with a distinct “spiritual” cosmos. Added to this, is the vast realm of East Asian popular religious realities, but also (sometimes shared) elements of popular culture such as fantasy and *manga*.

Overall, we estimate that there are tens of millions of people in Europe with personal practical experience, present or past, within the wider East Asian religious/spiritual panorama – the large majority of them ethnically “European.” There would thus seem to be good reason to ask basic empirical questions about East Asian religiosities in Europe.

Moreover, the relationship between Europe and East Asia (for the purposes of this book, the “EU 27” as they stand in 2024, along with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and “greater China”) is a significant one. These are two major political, economic, and cultural power blocs – Europe including the historical centres of capitalism and colonialism, before WWI definitely the wealthiest and most powerful part of the world; East Asia including empires and powerful cultural identities as well as much of the human species, and from the later twentieth century often identified as the present or coming centre of the world’s economy.

Their many complex relationships go beyond trade, finance, geopolitics, and diplomacy to include movements and exchanges of ideas, culture and aesthetics, but also religions and people. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in particular, European Christians made sustained efforts to convert East Asian populations – while today some East Asian churches, as well as Buddhism or martial arts, now have sustained presences in European cities in particular. East Asians come to Europe (and vice versa) to live, work, and raise children as well as for shorter study, tourist and other purposes; Europeans encounter and at times commit wholeheartedly to East Asian practices of various kinds; and of course friendships, subcultures, relationships, and families develop.

Moreover, from the period when imports of Chinese and Korean silk led to a balance of payments problem for the Roman Empire, via the accounts of thirteenth- and

fourteenth-century European travellers such as Marco Polo (1254–1324) and the first direct trade encounters and Jesuit missions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, many people both in Europe and East Asia have sought to understand “the Other” through what we would now call a religious lens: at various times Buddhism or Confucianism in particular have been used (well or badly) to find a way into these radically different cultures, while Meiji 明治 (1868–1912) Japan in particular sent delegations to Europe, among other things researching how “church” and “state” interacted in various countries. Diasporic groups often use religion as a source of many kinds of social support, a space for interaction and networking, and a new kind of identity, while missionaries (in both directions) seek to change the Other through the medium of their own particular religion.

The cultural shorthand, of reading culture through religion, is interesting among other reasons because of the complexities of what “religion” might mean in different contexts. Historically, European Christians understood themselves as individual members of mutually exclusive churches, often in ethnically-defined ways, while East Asia was often said to be characterised by multiple affiliations for different purposes and a less well-defined sense of individual membership of an overarching organisation (and in practice may avoid public signalling of religious inclinations for a variety of reasons). In editing this book, constant choices had to be made about the English (and European) terminology of “believers,” “adherents,” “members,” and the like – the shift to terminology such as “practitioners” signals some of these difficulties.

Conversely, by comparison with much of the world, (parts of) Europe and (parts of) East Asia are notable for their high levels of religious *dis*affiliation, atheism, and/or secularism: some of the world’s least formally religious ethnicities (at least for a certain value of “religious”) are European and East Asian ones. This also leads to a substantial (and for scholars challenging) degree of “fuzzy religion,” hence our use of the term “religiosities” in this book. As researchers know only too well, one of the first conversations that is often had when encountering Europeans interested in (for example) Zen 禪, holistic healing, or martial arts revolves around the assertion that such practices are “spiritual” but not “religious” (meaning, among other things, not equivalents to religion as traditionally normative in European Christian contexts). Conversely, East Asians who indicate that they are “non-religious” may very well practise a variety of “informal religiosities,” of which the best-known to outsiders are Chinese New Year (*chunjie* 春节) and ancestor commemoration. All of this means that – for the East Asian diaspora and Europeans involved in East Asian religiosities alike – formal organisations, and formal affiliation, by no means mark the boundaries of a field which is in practice much more fluid.

East Asian religiosities in the European Union thus represent a significant area of empirical and theoretical interest for scholars of religion, culture, and migration as well

as for the East Asian or European Studies specialist. It overlaps with long-standing European and East Asian traditions of using the lens of religion to understand one another. Finally, given the global importance of both blocs and the very large numbers of people involved, it offers scholars a frame for considering significant empirical trends in the contemporary world.

## **2. State of Research and Challenges**

The study of East Asian religiosities past and present in Europe/the EU is fraught with methodological and theoretical challenges, which have hitherto rendered large parts of the field a veritable *terra incognita*. What we aim to achieve with the present volume is to offer a first sketch of *what we know* and, especially, *what we do not know* about lived East Asian religiosities in the EU. To a certain extent, therefore, this volume represents more a mapping of empirical lacunae rather than a comprehensive discussion of actual research findings. At the outset, we tried to cover the whole of the EU 27, but it soon became clear that we had overestimated the state of research in this area. For some countries, despite the most painstaking efforts, we were unable to obtain even the most basic chapter. For others, authors who had initially agreed to participate either disappeared in the process or politely withdrew when they finally realised the complexity of data collection. This explains some of the gaps in the country chapters section (i.e., Cyprus, France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, and the Netherlands). The difficulty of putting the collection together is also a testament that we are dealing with a glaring amount of work that needs doing.

One major purpose of this volume is that it provides a basis for further country-specific research. That is to say, the country chapters – however different in emphasis and scope – bring together nearly all that is currently available on the subject, including internationally lesser-known publications in the national languages. These chapters provide contexts and point to specific circumstances both on the ground (i.e., involving the mainstream religious landscapes and socio-legal frameworks) and in the academy. The latter refers to the general scholarly sensitivities (i.e., the level of significance accorded to our subject by researchers working in relevant fields) and, in particular, the disciplinary constellations at play. The study of East Asian religiosities in the EU ought to be a multidisciplinary project; but these chapters show that almost every country has a specific and mainly single disciplinary historical track record and contemporary trajectory – East Asian Studies, Anthropology, History, Philosophy, Sociology, Theology (often in its guise of Apologetics), or Religious Studies.

Another emphasis of the volume is its comparative dimension. For example, the country chapters point to common problems in approaching our subject in terms of data collection. On the one hand, in many cases, scholars can hardly draw on prior

scholarship, because it simply does not exist, or only to a very limited extent. Research therefore has to start virtually from scratch – a daunting task that many are reluctant to undertake. On the other hand, most contributors stress language barriers, barely accessible close-knit networks of the East Asian migrant communities, and the lack of visibility of many groups and individual providers.

Furthermore, as Pokorny points out in his country chapter on Austria, there is, among others, a “systemic challenge” to our and related fields of study, which is in parts also hinted at in other chapters. On one side, the study of local religiosities, especially in smaller/less “prominent” national contexts but also if one’s research is more empirically driven, is traditionally not seen (and thus not recommended to emerging scholars by their established peers) as a gateway to getting published in top-tier journals or entering high-level international debates. On the other side, laboriously acquiring the methodological skillset required to tackle our subject – or in other words, to overcome the many obstacles that most scholars face (above all, language and cultural competence as well as fieldwork accessibility) – does not seem very attractive to emerging scholars, for whom “time is of the essence.” Rather, one would probably prefer to choose a better “cost-benefit ratio” and a more internationally “saleable” subject, given that academic career profiles nowadays have to be fast-paced and very international. This is not to discourage scholars, but just one of the reasons why we see so little research out there. On the contrary, conducting fieldwork “on one’s doorstep” is crucial and deserves more recognition. What this volume also shows in this respect is that there is a distinct lack of and need for diaspora Chinese/Japanese/Korean/Vietnamese scholars in our field, whose “diasporic proficiency” would not only speed up the preparation scholars need to be ready for the task, but would also bring a whole range of new research questions, sensibilities, and methodological options to the table.<sup>2</sup>

Typically, East Asian diasporic communities are comparatively small in size, and, even when they are not, they tend to be easily overlooked. Even scholars from countries with one or more relatively large East Asian minorities have usually told us that these communities are “quiet” and “hidden” to the observer. Despite their often seemingly marginal status at first sight – as mentioned above – East Asian religiosities are by no means limited to clearly contoured organisations operated by diasporic actors. As the chapters show, the vast majority of practitioners of forms of East Asian religiosity in the EU do indeed belong to the local populations. In this respect, in particular, the field of martial arts spiritualities, which is important but has received little scholarly attention, is a very significant part of our subject. Accordingly, we have included a thematic

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<sup>2</sup> We see this when we look at other regional contexts, such as North America, where there are so many more ethnically East Asian scholars, largely because of a different migration history; or when we look at Islamic religiosities in the EU, where we have so much more research by both ethnic minority and other scholars, given the larger diasporic communities and their greater visibility.

chapter dedicated to this topic. In the same vein, the other thematic chapters bring broader issues (Orientalism and Occidentalism, migration, and sexuality) into conversation with our subject, that is, East Asian religiosities in Europe/the EU. The final thematic chapter goes beyond the actual focus of this collection and provides a preliminary look at the study of Mongolian religiosities in Europe. It highlights the natural next step in our larger vision, which is to expand the scope of research to include Central, South, and Southeast Asian religiosities in Europe and the European Union.

### **3. Conceptual Issues**

By way of conclusion, we would like to offer a brief reflection on some basic conceptual issues related to East Asian religiosities in the EU context. As already acknowledged above, this volume is just an initial attempt to address this very broad area of studies as a whole, and, admittedly, we are not aiming to put forward any specific conceptual framework for the comprehensive study of East Asian religiosities in Europe. And yet, some useful indications in this direction emerge from both the country-related chapters and the thoughtful thematic chapters included here. What is immediately apparent from this wealth of information (at least for us) is that the scope of East Asian religiosities in the EU – as almost anywhere else – is about the intermingling and combined effect of different types of religioscapes.

Among these, an increasingly relevant one is certainly that centred on migration with its various ramifications, including those forms of religiosity brought either directly or indirectly from East Asia by individuals and groups, and their rediscovery by migrants or their descendants already living in the EU area. It is also quite obvious that the import/export of practices and beliefs is not necessarily dependent on migration, as for example with the broad field of mediatisation and its Orientalist/Occidentalist implications, or the active engagement in proselytising by institutional religions. Among the perhaps less apparent but equally important religioscapes emerging from the material illustrated in this volume, we can think, for instance, of elements such as that centred on individual/collective interreligious interactions where forms of East Asian religiosity are involved, or another aspect, which comes to the fore in many country-related overviews especially because of different national legislations on religious matters, mainly concerning East Asian religions' boundary-management with non-religious domains. Closely intertwined with all these and conspicuously operating in the European context – as these chapters and previous research on this topic have documented – is the dimension of hybridity, which allows for a perspective on the ongoing reworking and adaptation of East Asian religious forms in the European context.

It is apparent that these dimensions overlap meaningfully, not simply in terms of macro-dynamics, but, first and foremost, at the level of individual/collective subjectivities. Be it

the customary rituals unpretentiously performed by immigrants in their homes, the formalised practices required by traditional religions and new religious movements, the personalised bricolages of multitudes of spiritual seekers, the reshaping of religious contents for popular distribution, or institutional lobbying for official recognition, to cite just a few examples, these dimensions are not composed of unhindered and abstract flows. On the contrary, they can represent the globalisation of East Asian religions in the European context to the extent that the agency of religious individuals/institutions and the power relations concretely shaping their everyday lives are fully acknowledged as their “flesh and blood.” In view of relevant discussions on scale taking place especially in the field of human geography (e.g., Bell and Orozco 2023; Jones et al. 2007), it is perhaps all the more worth emphasising that such production of religious localities/places can hardly be framed in terms of top-down hierarchies. Whereas we are unavoidably operating here within a multi-scalar framework (national–supranational–global), the dynamics of East Asian religiosities in the EU seem to substantially support the claim that “power asymmetries between different scales are always contested and subject to struggle” (Leitner and Miller 2007: 117) and that, as Doreen Massey put it, “places” are “criss-crossings in the wider power-geometries which constitute both themselves and ‘the global’,” and therefore are themselves “‘agents’ *in* globalisation” (Massey 2004: 11).

In this connection, Massey’s observation that “places,” as “the locus of the production of heterogeneity [...] are not simply always the victims of the global” (Massey 2004: 11) takes us to another important issue related to the impact of East Asian forms of religiosity on the European context. Although we are broadly characterising their cultural translation in terms of hybridisation, it is evident that this dimension is incompatible with any views of European and East Asian religious cultures as “pure” entities, either ready or unready to potentially interact with each other. Rather, as scholars of cultural globalisation never cease to remind us, the notion of “cultural purity” is simply untenable, since “cultures have been hybrid *all along*” and “contemporary accelerated globalization means the hybridization of hybrid cultures” (Nederveen Pieterse 2009: 88). This means that with reference to our specific area of scholarly interest, any exploration of Europeanised East Asian religious forms in the contemporary setting requires equal attention to complex and multi-layered historical interactions, including a focus on Orientalism-driven productions brought about by colonial modernity, and more in general the acknowledgement that while “millennia of East-West osmosis have produced intercontinental cross-flow, and European and western culture are part of this global *mélange* [...] for a long time Europe was on the receiving end of influences from the Orient” (Nederveen Pieterse 2009: 136–137).

Against this backdrop, Massey’s reference above to the putative or actual “victims of the global” indirectly calls our attention to instances of counter-hybridisation in this age of intensified cultural and material global exchanges. As many have noticed since the

beginning of the debate (for an early example, e.g., Robertson 1992), processes of accelerated globalisation, far from necessarily implying the weakening of national borders, have implied instead a renewed push toward particularism and chauvinism at the national and regional levels, where the power of religious capital often offers itself as an effective tool for the reproduction of claims of socio-cultural authenticity and superiority. In this connection, the overviews and suggestions for further research provided by the various chapters included in this volume can also be understood as a well-informed provisional guide to the ongoing Europeanisation of East Asian religiosities, offering a potential antidote to ideologically-driven popular representations and distortions of the issue of religious pluralism in Europe. After all, today, as yesterday, for the fabric of cultural and religious hybridisation it is somehow business as usual, just increasingly busier and complicated.

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