

Belgium

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Abstract

Belgium has a small East Asian diaspora, within which the Chinese community is the largest, as well as a long local reception of Chinese and Japanese art, philosophy and religion which led to some Belgians identifying as Buddhist from the 1950s onward. Today there are a significant number in particular of Belgian Buddhist converts in various East Asian traditions, with centres identifying as “Zen” (sometimes in practice Ch’an, Thièn or Sōn) the most visible, alongside East Asian-led groups. East Asian Christianities, new religious movements, holistic healing and martial arts are all also visible. Research on East Asian religiosities in Belgium is constrained both by a shortage of statistical data and limited scholarly interest.

Keywords: East Asian religion, Belgium, migration, diaspora, Buddhism

Introduction

The present chapter has been written as desk research, as part of our concern to represent as many of the EU 27 countries as possible. Beyond the inevitable constraints of such research – notably a lack of access to the ethnographic and historical material needed for a richer understanding – it is also shaped by the present author’s linguistic constraints, having French but not Flemish and no East Asian languages. This overlaps with some Belgium-specific limitations: (1) a general shortage of statistical data on religion in Belgium, due perhaps both to historical tensions between Catholic and secularist political orientations and more recently tensions over immigration; (2) a surprising lack of scholarly attention to East Asian religiosities in Belgium, despite the country’s prominent scholarly traditions of Sinology and Japanology; and (3) a tendency for Belgian religious activity to cross national borders, with both French- and Dutch-based groups having a significant presence for obvious reasons. The Benelux agreement also means that from 1960 there has been free movement between the countries, long before Schengen and contemporary online communication. This chapter is thus intended

as an indicative starting point only which it is hoped may spur further research by Belgian-based scholars.

1. The East Asian Diasporic Context

1.1 East Asian Communities in Belgium

As elsewhere in Europe, statistical details on diasporic populations in Belgium are not straightforward. Leaving aside undocumented migrants, statistics are collected on those born outside the country (whether subsequently naturalised or not), those with foreign citizenship (but not dual citizens who are categorised as Belgian) and those born abroad (Myria 2016: 56). Such data becomes progressively less useful in subsequent generations, where rates of naturalisation can be expected to increase along with the number of those whose parents have more than one national origin.

Belgium does not collect official data on ethnic self-identification (or religious affiliation), so numerical assessments of, for example, “the Chinese community” have to be taken with caution – particularly as smaller populations are often not reported on in much detail in official statistics, and such identifications of a population with a state break down in relation to “Chinese” in particular.¹

Moreover, diasporic populations are often neither particularly stable nor restricted to a single European country. Groups such as Chinese students or Japanese corporate employees and their families often stay for relatively short periods, with implications for religious participation, while as noted above a certain degree of cross-border mobility can be expected.

Myria (2016: 59) gives a relatively detailed overview of what *is* known: in 2015, with a total population of 11.2 million, only 29,423 people (two per cent of the total of 1.26 million foreign passport-holders) were “East Asian,” along with 30,269 (three per cent of the total of 0.95 million) naturalised Belgians. This figure of around 60,000, however, also includes people born in or holding Southeast Asian passports.

In 2019, the Belgian national broadcaster repeated a common estimate for “the Chinese community” of over 40,000 people (Vangulick 2019), while the Belgian embassy in Japan notes more than 5,000 permanent Japanese residents in Belgium.² Comparable guesstimates for the Korean population (including adoptees born in Korea) and Vietnamese are not readily available. However we can see some general agreement on the order of magnitudes involved.

¹ <https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/population/structure-population/origin> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

² <https://japan.diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/rerelations-belgique-japon/rerelations-diplomatiques> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

At least in 2014, most new “East Asian” arrivals were Chinese or Japanese (Myria 2016: 72). In 2015, Chinese citizens made up a significant proportion of those receiving short-term visas (Myria 2016: 81); forty-one per cent of initial visas issued to Chinese citizens were for study, thirty-two per cent for family reunification and seventeen per cent for work. In that year there were 1,469 long-term Chinese visas issued and 940 Japanese (Myria 2016: 81). No data is given for Korean or Vietnamese citizens. Meanwhile, the gender breakdown of *naturalised* Belgians from China between 1991 and 2014 lies at around thirty-seven per cent men to sixty-three per cent women (a common but not universal pattern; Myria 2016).

Chinese and Japanese immigrants (excluding dual citizens) in the Brussels region were also the subject of a more detailed study (Cassier 2017). At this point there were 2,835 Chinese and 2,754 Japanese (Cassier 2017: 2) registered as living in the region (once again Korea and Vietnam are not among the top ten Asian nationalities).

1.2 The Chinese Population in Belgium

The first major Chinese immigration to Belgium consisted of sailors from Guangdong and Fujian who “jumped ship” from international steamers at Anvers to seek work locally, giving rise to small Chinese neighbourhoods. This was followed by overland migration from Qingtian and Wenzhou, giving rise to a small community from Zhejiang in mid-twentieth-century Belgium. Both groups were exclusively male (CELCR 2005: 12–13). From the 1950s until the 1974 closing of borders, migration from the new People’s Republic of China (PRC) dried up but Hong Kong New Territories Chinese people arrived in Belgium via the United Kingdom, founding restaurants and recruiting relatives and friends from home in a chain migration process (CELCR 2005: 13–14).

The Chinese population became more diverse from this point, and grew steadily (more than doubling in the Brussels region) between 2000 and 2016 (Cassier 2017). Earlier small business migration such as restaurants had led to a dispersed population pattern, but a “Chinatown” developed from the 1980s. Also from the 1980s, student visitors led to concentration around universities across Belgium (Cassier 2017: 5). The numbers are sometimes significant: at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, for example, Chinese students formed the second largest single nationality in 2003/4 (513), ahead of any other European group except Belgian citizens (25,638: CELCR 2005: 32).

There is a non-trivial proportion of asylum seekers from the PRC, principally Tibetan but also Uyghur, Falun Dafa 法轮大法 (Falun Gong 法轮功), Christian, political, and North Koreans arriving via China: in 2004 there were a total of 350 PRC applications under consideration

(CELCR 2005: 28–29). This goes alongside a number of undocumented migrants (CELCR 2005: 34–36).

In 2016, the average age of this diverse population in Brussels was 33.3 years, as against 37.4 for the overall Brussels population. Cassier (2017: 7–8) summarises the gender and age profile as that of an established population, with a mix of young adults and older people, and a suggestion that children may be more likely to hold Belgian passports.

1.3 The Japanese Population

Economic partnerships led to a Japanese presence in Brussels from the 1950s; by 1992 Brussels had one of the largest Japanese populations in Europe (see above) but numbers remained static from 2000 to 2016 (Cassier 2017: 2). At least in 1996, most Japanese in Belgium were government officials, journalists, corporate employees, and their families, with very few permanent residents. This is also reflected in their ages, an average of 32.8 years for Japanese citizens in 2016; Cassier (2017: 7) describes the gender and age profile as shaped around families. Consistent with this, the Japanese government and businesses support the Japanese School of Brussels (in operation since 1974) which can take up to 500 students between six and fifteen, enabling their successful return to education in Japan (2017: 3).

1.4 The Vietnamese Population

The much smaller Vietnamese population in Belgium became tragically famous in late 2019 with the discovery of thirty-nine dead Vietnamese migrants in a trailer shipped from Zeebrugge to England. Myria (2022) discusses this in the wider context of Vietnamese victims of human trafficking in Belgium, a case which highlights the limits of possible data collection, both because of clandestinity but also because of the short time period involved in Belgium (the report notes that it is traffickers who decide the final destination, but that choosing the United Kingdom allows them to raise the price and hence the debt owed by the victims and their families).

A Vietnamese-authored overview from c. 2005 highlights the longer history of Vietnamese people in Belgium: initially the result of a 1965 breakdown of diplomatic relations between South Vietnam and France which saw Vietnamese students seeking out Belgian universities instead. The combination of language links with explicit educational arrangements led to the latter process continuing uninterrupted, but the 1975 defeat of South Vietnam and the subsequent movements of “boat people” as well as family reunification added to numbers, as

did the effects of 1989 in East and Central Europe, when some Vietnamese workers moved west. The document estimated over 14,000 Vietnamese in Belgium at the time of writing.

A 2017 Master's thesis on Vietnamese student visitors (Bouhmou 2021) complements this, showing an overall increase in the annual number of Vietnamese passport holders entering Belgium between 1990 and 2018, from just under 100 per year to just over 300 per year over the three decades (Bouhmou 2021: 25). From the 1990s to the mid-2010s immigration was predominantly female and mostly aged between twenty and thirty-four (Bouhmou 2021: 31–32).

1.5 The Korean Population

In 2019, the director of Belgium's Korean Cultural Centre estimated 1,000 Korean residents in Belgium, of whom 400 were permanent residents and the remainder students. Along with these there are about 5,000 Korean adoptees, some of whom take an active interest in Korean culture.³

2. Local Interest in and Historic Practices of East Asian Religiosities

Unlike its notorious presence in today's Democratic Republic of the Congo, Belgian colonial engagement in East Asia was limited. Until Belgian independence in 1830, Belgians shared involvement in the much larger Dutch colonial empire, which had a long trading presence in Japan and a shorter colonial presence in Taiwan; Belgium's Asian adventures were limited to a 1902–1931 concession in Tianjin in northern China. Meanwhile the Congrégation du Cœur Immaculé de Marie (Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, or Scheut Fathers) was founded in 1862 for missionary work in China.

This built on a much longer history of Belgian involvement in wider European circuits of knowledge exchange with China and Japan in particular, including the reception and publication of travellers' accounts and Jesuit missionary letters, the translation of what were seen as key texts and (from the later nineteenth century in particular) interpersonal encounters. Thus, for example, as Pan (2019) has shown, the Tintin book *The Blue Lotus* represented the outcome of a network of Chinese and Belgian Catholics who had created a project for Chinese students in Belgium and in the early 1930s sought to build Belgian support for China following the Mukden Incident. We can also note here the impact of major Belgian Catholic scholars of Buddhism such as Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1869–1938) and Étienne Lamotte (1903–1983) (see below).

³ <https://apprendrelecoreen.fr/centre-culturel-coreen-bruxelles-belgique-kpop/> (access ed: January 15, 2024).

Coming from a very different direction, Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969), the great traveller, political radical, and populariser of Tibetan Buddhism in particular, also travelled in Japan, Korea, and China and was a singer in the Hanoi Opera House in the 1890s. David-Néel was brought up in Brussels for most of her first two decades and published extensively in French from the later 1920s on. David-Néel had become a member of the Theosophical Society in 1892; the 1890s saw the development of a number of lodges in Belgium and between 1899–1910 a series of periodicals appeared. The movement was particularly influential among artists, notably Jean Delville (1867–1953) (Clerbois 2002).

From the 1950s on, a small group of Buddhist sympathisers existed around Robert Linssen (1911–2004), which later became Les Amis du Bouddhisme Zen (The Friends of Zen Buddhism). Raymond Kiere (1897–1981) published *Le Sentier* and developed contacts with a wide range of international Buddhist groups, founding a Belgian Buddhist Mission in Ans, both existing in a wider milieu including Theravādin and Tibetan Buddhists. Adriaan Shitoku Peel (1927–2009) founded what would become the Centrum voor Shin-Boeddhisme (Centre for Shin Buddhism) in Anvers in 1974, while a number of Sōtō Zen 曹洞禅 *dōjō* 道場 developed in the same period within the Deshimaru Taisen 弟子丸泰仙 (1914–1982) lineage, followed by Rinzai 臨濟 and Chan 禪 training halls in 1995 and 1988 respectively (De Backer 2002).

3. East Asian Religious Institutions and Practices

3.1 The National Context

As in a number of European countries, East Asian religiosities in Belgium have historically come under a certain amount of official suspicion, far more recently than might be expected given nominal claims to secularism and religious tolerance. In 1997, a parliamentary enquiry on “sects” provided fuel to “anti-cult” groups and journalists while simultaneously alarming Buddhists in particular, notably because of its appendix of groups mentioned by police and intelligence services – including among others “Zen,” “Theravāda,” the Yeunten Ling association in Huy, the Laotian Wat Asokaran in Liège, and the Shin Boeddhisme association of Anvers. The commission carried out specific inquiries into the Ogyen Kunzang Chöling community and the Japanese Nichirenist Sōka Gakkai 創価学会 (de Backer 2002: 56–59). Such an alarming event naturally led to a concern for greater legitimacy and organisation, and the previous Fédération des communautés bouddhistes de Belgique (Belgian Federation of Buddhist Communities; established 1986) was replaced by the current Union Bouddhique Belge (Belgian Buddhist Union) in 1997 as part of this process (de Backer 2002: 25).

This strategy has borne some fruit and in the intervening quarter-century the situation has transformed considerably, although it is less clear what the situation of smaller and less well-organised East Asian religions may be in this context. Since 2006, the Union Bouddhique Belge has received organisational funding from the state, along with other religions, enabling them to pay salaries, for example, for counsellors and chaplains (Chini 2023).

From 2023, a further step was taken with the recognition of Buddhism as a “worldview” along with four Christian denominations, Judaism and Islam, and organised secularism.⁴ It is not yet clear if this will allow Buddhism to be taught in schools.⁵ However the scale of the change in the twenty-six years since 1997 is dramatic, representing at the same time general changes in Belgian society and politics, the success of the Union Bouddhique Belge’s efforts and of course Buddhism’s growth and organisational development of Buddhism. No other East Asian religions have achieved this level of recognition, although many East Asians identify with some of the recognised Christian denominations, with Islam, or indeed as being non-religious.

3.2 Buddhisms

Turning now from the national level of a “world religion” to the many varieties of East Asian religiosities in Belgium, we can start with the relevant Buddhisms. The Belgian census does not include religious questions; in fact a sociologist’s 2016 attempt at doing this for Muslims in Belgium met with widespread criticism (La rédaction de TF1info 2016). Nonetheless in 2023 the Federal Justice Minister gave the figure of 150,000 Buddhists in Belgium in the context of its official recognition as a “worldview,” (Chini 2023), presumably relying on information from the Union Bouddhique Belge, which had thirty-five affiliated organisations at this point. Meanwhile RTBF (Radio-télévision belge de la Communauté française) claimed 180,000 Buddhists (without giving a source) while reporting on the same recognition process (de Houck 2023).

Older figures are considerably lower: for example, the commercial company Statista estimated that 0.2 per cent of the population were Buddhist in 2010, which would give a figure just over 20,000.⁶ French Wikipedia cites figures from now-defunct sources from that period giving

⁴ <https://www.rtbf.be/article/le-gouvernement-federal-approuve-la-reconnaissance-officielle-du-bouddhisme-en-belgique-11169363> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

⁵ <https://www.rtbf.be/article/reconnaissance-du-bouddhisme-en-belgique-pourrait-il-etre-enseigne-dans-les-ecoles-11168823> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

⁶ <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/684050/repartition-de-la-population-par-croyance-religieuse-belgique/> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

estimates between 10,000 and 40,000, while Decorte et al. (2009: 258) cited an estimate of 30,000.⁷

The large discrepancy between these two sets of estimates does not reflect any obvious change either in migration or in conversion, but may well reflect the difference between a partially-stigmatised and relatively low-profile religion around the turn of the millennium and the higher level of organisation and visibility needed to gain state recognition in the 2020s.

Of course the idea of clear membership (where someone can neatly be counted as “a Buddhist” or “not a Buddhist”) is in any case something of a fiction; but it is clear from the level of organisation involved that significant but not massive numbers of people in Belgium consider themselves Buddhist – though by no means all of these follow East Asian forms of Buddhism. We can now look more closely at the specifics, by country of origin or reference.

In 2008, Martiniello and Bousetta (2008) noted that the Belgian branch of Foguangshan 佛光山, as one of the most visibly transnational Chinese religious organisations in the country, with close links with Chinese institutions and international publishing efforts. At this point the Belgian organisation was estimated as involving about 200 people. Today it operates as IPBS Belgium, based in Antwerp.

Alongside Foguangshan is L’Ermitage Zen Vents du Dharma (Dharma Winds Zen Hermitage) in Namur, affiliated with the Xuyun 虛雲 (1840–1959) tradition. Founded by Yao Xin Shakya (Luis Lista), it is in turn the “mother hermitage” of the international Dharma Winds Zen Sangha, with “branch hermitages” in France, Israel, and Brazil.⁸

Another substantial Chinese-affiliated Buddhist group is the Maha Karuna Ch’an, whose founder Tom Lathouwers (b. 1932) was given Dharma transmission by the Chan master Tizheng 體正 (Ashin Jinarakkhita, 1923–2002). Maha Karuna Ch’an currently lists 13 groups in Belgium as well as groups in the Netherlands and England.

Japanese Buddhism is represented by Soka Gakkai International Belgium, by the Shin Jikoji association, two Shingon 真言-based associations (Shinnyo-en Belgium and Yō E An) and by many Zen traditions. The Zen lineages represented as associations rather than single centres in the Union Bouddhique Belge include the “Belgian Zen association” AZB-BZV, Association Zen du Brabant Wallon, Centre Zen de l’Harmonie Paisible (Zen Centre of Peaceful Harmony), Daisen Centre Zen, Zenboeddhistisch Centrum Leuven, and the Zenboeddhistisch centrum Wolk en Water (Cloud and Water Zen Buddhist Centre). Beyond these there are over two dozen individual Zen centres that are not obviously Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese-affiliated.

⁷ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bouddhisme_en_Belgique (accessed: January 15, 2024).

⁸ <https://dharmawindszensangha.org/contact/> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

Korean Buddhism is represented by the Kwan Um School of Zen, based at Molenbeek (Brussels). Finally, Vietnamese Buddhism is well represented, in the form of Thích Nhất Hạnh's (1926–2022) Order of Interbeing (which lists twenty-four different local groups in Belgium), the Association Bouddhiste Linh Son, the Bouddhisme Zen Thien Tong de la Bamboueraie de la Délivrance (Thien Tong Zen Buddhism of the Bamboo Garden of Liberation) – Trúc Lâm Giải Thoát, the Chùa Hoa Nghiêm temple in Brussels, and the Chùa Tuệ Giác temple in Liège/Association bouddhique de Liège (Thiên), the latter created by Vietnamese immigrants.⁹

3.3 *Ethnically Specific Religions*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, ethnically specific religions (Confucianism, Daoism, Shintō 神道, Cao Đài, *musok* 무속/巫俗 etc.) often appear in (French or Flemish-speaking) public space in other forms. For example, the Korean “shamanic” drummer Yŏ Sŏng-nyŏng 여성룡 performed in 2016 in an artistic context with the indigenous Argentinian choreographer Ayelin Parolin (Makereel 2016), while Shintō is referenced particularly with relation to martial arts (see below). However Brussels has a Centre Culturel Cao Dai¹⁰ which presents itself simultaneously as a cultural centre (hosting exhibitions of paintings by Vietnamese artists and others), as a provider of physical and spiritual healing, including moxibustion and “dynamic/static energy” (Động Tĩnh Khí Lực), and hosting a Cao Đài dignitary, Huynh Tam.

3.4 *Christianities*

While the Catholic use of Zen meditation, following the explorations of Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle and others, is not unknown in Belgium, it seems to have declined considerably, perhaps following the strictures of Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI).

There are various groups of East Asian Catholics in Belgium; for example, a chaplain for the Vietnamese Catholic community holding regular masses in Liège and a Vietnamese abbot in Brussels, two Korean-language masses a month in Brussels and a monthly Japanese-language service in Scheut, home of Belgium's main missionary order to the Far East.¹¹¹²

⁹ <https://www.buddhism.be/centreswallonie-fr-1/association-bouddhique-de-liege> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

¹⁰ <https://centreculturelcaodai.org/> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

¹¹ <https://www.cathobel.be/2023/01/nouvel-an-les-ressortissants-asiatiques-le-celebrent-aussi-en-belgique/> (accessed; January 24, 2024).

¹² <https://www.catho-bruxelles.be/communautes-dites-dorigine-etrangere/#1450709888003-574f519a-e0d0> (accessed: January 24, 2024).

Belgium's largest Protestant denomination, the United Protestant Church in Belgium, has two Korean affiliates, in Brussels and Antwerp, while the evangelical Vianova church has the Eglise Protestante Japonaise de Bruxelles (Japanese Protestant Church of Brussels). We can also mention the Eglise Evangélique Vietnamienne de Bruxelles (Evangelical Vietnamese Church of Brussels) and two Korean Mission Churches 벨기에 선교 교회, all offering services in the relevant languages. Meanwhile, the Réseau Antioche (Antioch Network) 's Word of Life Ministries also offers Korean-language services.¹³

Ethnographic or more intensive netnographic research would almost certainly throw up both a wider range of East Asian Protestant churches based in Belgium and cross-border or trans-continental Christian affiliations of various kinds.

3.5 New religious movements, holistic health and martial arts

While as noted Belgium has a certain history of official concern, most new religious movements (NRMs) which have attracted public attention in Belgium are not East Asian in origin. Moral panics aside, East Asian NRMs more generally are present in Belgium but apparently not in large numbers.

The first Unification Church (통일교) missionaries arrived in Belgium in 1968 and 1969, but the movement's growth dates from 1973 in particular, with a significant component of communal living at the time. Following the 1997 report on "sects", the Minister of the Interior sought and failed to prevent Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Church, from obtaining a visa¹⁴. In 2014 an internal document noted a membership of 57 for the group, not notably different from the 55-60 estimated by researchers in 1982 (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1985: 371-375).¹⁵

As noted above, Falun Gong 法輪功 (Falun Dafa 法輪大法) practitioners are among PRC nationals seeking asylum in Belgium. The group has a certain presence, listing nine different local groups which practice in open-air spaces as well as holding public demonstrations.¹⁶ The Japanese new religious movement Sūkyō Mahikari 崇教真光 is also present, claiming seven local groups.¹⁷

¹³ <https://cacpe.be/annuaires/lieux-de-culte/> (accessed: January 24, 2024).

¹⁴ https://www.lesoir.be/art/visa-pour-le-reverend-moon_t-20061213-0085J2.html (accessed: 24 Jan 2024).

¹⁵ Lukas Pokorny, pers. comm.

¹⁶ https://nl.falundafa.org/contact_belgie.html?v=bks04 (accessed: 24 Jan 2024).

¹⁷ <https://www.sukyomahikarieurope.org/en/how-to-contact-us/> accessed: 24 Jan 2024).

Holistic health is almost certainly a more significant category. East Asian concepts of energy or *qi* 氣 (Japanese/Korean: *ki*) are widespread in this area, although by no means all individual practitioners and providers emphasise “spiritual” or religious dimensions, or these may be highlighted in some contexts (e.g. training) but not others (e.g. advertising and provision of one-off services).

Thus, for example, *qigong* is represented among others by the Fédération Belge de Qigong de Santé, representing multiple approaches and centres.¹⁸ Reiki レイキ is provided in a great variety of contexts across the country, as is *fengshui* 風水. *Zhongyi* 中医 (Traditional Chinese Medicine) is widely provided along with a number of training courses.

Taijiquan 太极拳 is also widely practiced, but from a religious point of view we can note in particular the Société de Tai Chi Taoiste de Belgique (Daoist Taiji Society of Belgium), part of the Canada-based Fung Loy Kok group founded by Master Moy Lin Shin.¹⁹

For shiatsu 指圧, the website of the Fédération Belge de Shiatsu (Belgian Shiatsu Federation) currently lists 245 practitioners (including equine and canine shiatsu) and a range of training options.²⁰ The first section of the site highlights that the federation “helps Belgians to access quality shiatsu which enables them to find *their inner freedom*, to make choices and to benefit from holistic health”.

Thus it seems reasonable to expect that ethnographic or in-depth documentary work would discover relatively extensive participation in looser forms of East Asian religiosities in this milieu, not least the interesting question of how diasporic and local participants relate to one another in these contexts.

The same is likely to be true for martial arts. Belgium boasts multiple federations for *aikidō* 合気道, for example. *Jūdō* 柔道, *karate* 空手 and *t'aegwōndo* 태권도/跆拳道 are all well represented, with *jūjutsu* 柔術 *kendō* 剣道 and other martial arts also present. As Faxneld (this volume) notes, martial arts are likely to be numerically the largest space for male participation in East Asian religiosities. Again, closer research would be needed.

¹⁸ <http://www.belgianhealthqigongfederation.be/> (accessed: 24 Jan 2024).

¹⁹ <http://www.taoiste-org.be/> (accessed: 24 Jan 2024).

²⁰ <https://shiatsu.be/fr/> (accessed: 24 Jan 2024).

4. Key Literature and Lacunae in the Scholarship

Despite considerable eminence in the field of Buddhist studies in particular, Belgian scholarship seems to have had relatively little interest in East Asian religiosities in its home country. Prebish (1999: 185) briefly discusses what he identifies as a Franco-Belgian “school” of Buddhist studies, including among the Belgians Louis de La Vallée Poussin and Étienne Lamotte; however, the key distinction he draws to the “Anglo-German” school is not one of methodology but simply one of which languages (Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan in the Franco-Belgian case) were the subject of attention: the implication being that, as elsewhere in Europe, the tendency was for the emphasis to be on classical languages and texts and secondarily on the history and ethnography of Asian religion in Asia – with exploration of its travels further afield largely absent.

More recently, Jan Swyngedouw (1935–2012), like Lamotte a Catholic priest and in fact a missionary to Japan, made substantial contributions to the study of Japanese religions and the general discussion of secularisation. However, living in Japan itself it is unsurprising that Japanese religiosities in Belgium was not a focus of his research (aa.vv. 2013) The Congregation of the Immaculate Heart, mentioned above, has had a particular role in Belgium’s overseas contribution to Asian studies: beyond Swyngedouw its members also included, for example, Jan Van Bragt (1928–2007), first director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (Vande Walle 2016).

This fits with a wider cultural pattern where, most visibly perhaps in Japanese studies, there is high-level exchange of a diplomatic, religious, and business character reflecting Japanese prestige among other things, having a particular impact on the reception of Japanese religiosities in Belgium and no doubt also its practice by Europeans, but without particular research into such forms of practice or indeed diasporic Japanese religiosities. Thus as early as 1928 the Japanese industrialist Baron Satsuma Jirohachi 薩摩治郎八 (1901–1976) funded a Leuven chair in the history of Japanese civilisation, followed in 1936 by the foundation of an Orientalist Institute (Vande Walle 2016; Gaens 2001). Its first holder was P. Pierre Charles S.J. (1883–1954) of the Louvain Missiological School, who lectured on European-Japanese contacts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

There is a significant amount of research and teaching in major Belgian universities in matters East Asian, including religion, but this does not translate into a similar level of interest in East Asians or East Asian religiosities in Belgium. Thus the Ghent Centre for Buddhist Studies, for example, lists no research projects on Buddhism in Belgium or outside Asia.²¹ The same is true,

²¹ <https://research.flw.ugent.be/en/gcbs> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

for example, for KU Leuven's Research Group Sinology and Center for Korean Studies; the Université Libre de Bruxelles' Centre de Recherche Interdisciplinaire d'Etude des Religions et de la Laïcité (Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Religions and Secularism) and the Centre de Recherche sur l'Asie de l'Est (East Asia Research Centre);²² the Centre d'Etudes Japonaises (Centre for Japanese Studies) at the Université de Liège;²³ or the Université Catholique de Louvain's Institut Orientaliste (Orientalist Institute):²⁴ this is not to say that there is no relevant research on East Asian religiosities in Belgium, but that it is very marginal. For example, the eminent Belgian scholar of religion Karel Dobbelaere (b. 1933), for much of his career based at the KU Leuven, does not seem to have included research on Sōka Gakkai in Belgium in his extensive research on the group Sōka Gakkai.

Unusually for the European context, the most sustained research into East Asian religiosities in Belgium in recent years is carried out by a psychologist, Vassilis Saroglou (b. 1966) of the Université Catholique de Louvain with multiple collaborators, with a particular interest in the pro-social aspects of Buddhism (e.g., Saroglou and Dupuis 2009). We can also mention research on how Confucianism affects older first-generation Chinese migrants' activities in Belgium and the Netherlands (Pan et al. 2021).

KU Leuven's Chinese Studies research does include a project on early Sino-European contacts,²⁵ a theme also explored by Willy Vande Walle (b. 1949), emeritus professor of Japanese studies at KU Leuven, while Andreas Thele at Liège also researches aspects of reception and cultural transmission. Beyond these we can mention a 2002 report on Buddhism in Belgium for the Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-Politiques (De Backer 2002) and research on how Buddhism was represented in Catholic religious education in Belgium before and after Vatican II (Van Wiele 2022). Fresnoza-Flot's research on how migrant Thai women use Buddhist social spaces (2022) does show the potential for comparable work on East Asian diasporic religions in Belgium.

Overall, then, it seems that there is much scope both for research on diasporic East Asian religiosities and for the exploration of convert forms in Belgium, but that these themes are at best marginal to the present-day concerns of Belgian East Asianists, Buddhist Studies scholars, and so on. For now, basic statistical information is limited and ethnographic research is almost non-existent. While there is research on Orientalism in earlier centuries, there seems to have

²² <https://cierl.phisoc.ulb.be/> (accessed: January 15, 2024); <https://msh.ulb.ac.be/fr/team/east> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

²³ https://www.cej.uliege.be/cms/c_10151585/fr/cej-le-centre (accessed: January 15, 2024).

²⁴ <https://uclouvain.be/fr/instituts-recherche/incal/ciol> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

²⁵ <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/chinese-studies/english/research/early-sino-european-contacts> (accessed: January 15, 2024).

been little or nothing done on how this earlier reception history connects to present-day developments.

5. Research and Methodological Challenges

In writing this chapter as a non-Belgian without Flemish, I have been very conscious of the European-language barriers to researching the question. These are multiplied many times when diasporic religious activities carried out through Asian languages are taken into account. Perhaps it should not need to be said, but in-depth understanding of the religions in question, not simply their normative expressions but their history and practice, is also fundamental.

Having carried out research on Buddhism in Ireland (Cox 2013), attempting to write the current chapter based on desk research alone highlights other important challenges which are often underestimated. In 2023, the simultaneous proliferation and fragmentation of online platforms makes what for practitioners is often the first port of call (their smartphones) into a real research challenge. It is one thing to search for Web-based lists of religious institutions that seek to claim public space in a national context. However to effectively track the kind of transnational, family-based, or ephemeral religious practice that do *not* lead to formal organisations of this kind is a practical ethnographic or netnographic challenge that also defies pure desk research – and can require, among other things, the ability to navigate China-specific platforms which may not be those that western researchers are typically familiar with, as well as the cultural and linguistic literacy needed to explore small-scale family religious practices.

These challenges are shared in researching East Asian religiosities in general, but Belgium presents two specific problems. In the absence of official religious statistics or the lists of registered religious organisations enabled by some legal systems, we are faced with an exploration of websites which may no longer be actively maintained, and often clearly rely on information about individual groups that are no longer in operation or have changed form. Which of the groups that “the Internet” claims to exist actually have a real-world presence of any kind at the time of writing?

Furthermore, the general transnationalisation of religion that characterises many diasporic contexts as well as the development of convert religions is exacerbated in the case of small countries within the Schengen area, where the national level may often be the least significant. This is perhaps particularly true for Belgium, where even desk research highlights the extent to which Flemish-speaking groups may form part of organisations based in the Netherlands, Francophone groups may relate to French bases, and Brussels’ character as the EU’s *de facto*

capital makes for a particularly international character. These cases – like, for example, Chinese or Vietnamese groups operating transnationally – may easily disappear from sight. Finally, of course, the relative lack of research in the area means that much of the necessary preliminary work of identifying archives, tracing personal histories, and the like remains to be done. This is of course not a reason for not starting, and indeed such material may represent “low-hanging fruit” for pioneer researchers. The hope is that this chapter may provoke a Belgian researcher to write a better one.

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