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# East Asian Religiosities in the European Union

*Globalisation, Migration, and Hybridity*



BRILL | SCHÖNINGH



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# Austria

*Lukas K. Pokorny*

## Abstract

This chapter outlines the current state of East Asian religiosities in Austria, divided into five areas: (1) Buddhism; (2) Christianity; (3) ethnic religions; (4) alternative traditions/holistic offerings; and (5) popular religious realities. In doing so, the relevant scholarship is mentioned and subsequently addressed systematically. Next, three main thematic lacunae in the research are discussed: (1) historical documentation; (2) sociological examination; and (3) material-aesthetical exploration. Finally, a range of challenges for the scholar of East Asian religiosities in Austria (and beyond) are addressed, including (1) language; (2) cultural competence; (3) accessibility; (4) ephemerality, marginality, and clandestinity; (5) historical blindness; (6) conceptual complexity; and (7) systemic discouragement.

## Keywords

diasporic religion – East Asian religions – religion and globalisation – religion in Austria

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Despite more than a hundred publications per year in recent years, religion in Austria is still largely uncharted territory. These contributions are scattered across journals, books, and disciplines. The main fields of study are (mainly Catholic and Protestant) church history, law, history, political science, religious education, and sociology. Since the launch of a book series under the programmatic title *Religion in Austria* in 2012 (initially published biennially and from 2020 annually), scholars of religious studies have also begun to engage more visibly in the field (Pokorny 2012–2023). Austria is home to a vast panorama of religions. Needless to say, the Christian mainstream and – albeit to a much lesser extent – (historical) Judaism and (present-day) Islam have received

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a revised and expanded version of Pokorny (2023b). This research is part of an FWF-funded project on “Glocal Buddhas: Exploring the Interplay of East Asian Buddhism and Globalization in Austria and Italy” (P 35116-G).

scholarly attention. In stark contrast, other religious traditions/currents are hardly (if at all) addressed in the relevant scholarship. A case in point is the wide field of East Asian religiosities. The religious field in this respect is not limited to sharply contoured organisations. It includes the diffuse popular religious context within diasporic communities, “holistic” disciplines and self-cultivational techniques, discourses informing hybrid “spiritual technologies” and self-tailored beliefs, and traditional “sciences” that often provide practitioners with religiously anchored mindscapes.

East Asian religiosities in Austria therefore comprise both an ethnic and a non-ethnic clientele.<sup>2</sup> The former hails from the diasporic communities comprising several tens of thousands of individuals. According to estimates, Austria is home to some 30,000 to 40,000 ethnic Chinese (including Taiwanese) people, circa 4,000 to 5,000 Japanese people as well as roughly the same number of (South) Koreans, and around 2,500 to 3,000 Vietnamese people. Non-ethnic participants in the wider Austro-East Asian religious arena may be in the hundreds of thousands.

The following section provides some basic data on and a brief historical sketch of the East Asian diasporic communities. Next, the present-day situation of East Asian religiosities in Austria is discussed. The existing research and missing elements are examined in Section 4. Finally, the major challenges that scholars face when studying, from a European experience, East Asian religiosities in Austria (and beyond) are addressed.

## 2. East Asian Diasporic Communities

For the year 2023, *Statistik Austria* provides the following figures for East Asian nationals residing in Austria:<sup>3</sup> 14,205 Chinese (including Taiwanese) people; 2,561 Japanese people; 2,119 South Koreans; 1,491 Vietnamese people; and forty-nine North Koreans.<sup>4</sup> For persons born in East Asia (some of whom may be naturalised, have no related or have changed citizenship), *Statistik Austria* reports 18,263 persons born in China (including Taiwan); 3,716 in Vietnam;

2 The term “ethnic” as used in this chapter refers to Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and/or Vietnamese ethnicity.

3 See <https://www.statistik.at/statistiken/bevoelkerung-und-soziales/bevoelkerung/bevoelkerungsstand/bevoelkerung-nach-staatsangehoerigkeit/-geburtsland> (accessed: December 20, 2023).

4 Moreover, there are 1,153 Indonesians, 444 Malaysians, and 212 Singaporeans, among whom one encounters a portion of ethnic Chinese as well.

2,967 in Japan; 2,641 in South Korea; and 121 in North Korea.<sup>5</sup> If we add the considerable number of multi-generational descendants and undocumented residents (mostly from the People's Republic of China or PRC and possibly numbering up to a few hundred), one easily arrives at the general estimates given in the introduction of this chapter of a total of some 40,000 to 50,000 or more ethnic East Asians currently living in Austria. Their number corresponds to circa 0.44 to 0.55 per cent of the total population. The East Asian diasporic communities are concentrated in urban areas, especially in Vienna.<sup>6</sup>

Ethnic Chinese migration largely dates back to the 1950s and 1960s, mainly from Taiwan. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Vietnamese-Chinese people (or *Hoa*) arrived as a result of the *paihua* 排华 (displacement of ethnic Chinese) policy of the Vietnamese authorities. In addition, migration from the PRC gained momentum in the time following the “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) policy of Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–1997), particularly the 1985 liberalisation of exit regulations (Chadwin and Pokorny 2021: 113; Vuong 2011; Kwok 2013). Since the mid- to late 1990s, the size of the ethnic Chinese community has tripled.

(South) Korean migration to Austria commenced in earnest in 1972/73 with the arrival of about one hundred nurses. Unlike the majority of students who had already started to come to Austria decades earlier, many of these nurses stayed on permanently and formed the core of the nascent Austro-Korean diaspora. Today, the Korean community, which has doubled in size over the past two decades, is extremely diverse in its occupational composition, with many migrants seconded by Korean companies, working as musicians, or enrolled as students (Pokorny and Sung 2018: 164–166). The Japanese expatriate community used to be very similar to that of South Korea, with musicians, students, and businesspeople being the main groups. However, the latter group has dwindled in numbers in recent decades as many Japanese companies have relocated to Eastern Europe. Overall, migration from Japan has increased noticeably since the late 1970s and gained particular pace since the 2000s. The migration of Vietnamese people to Austria began in earnest as a refugee movement in the 1970s and has doubled over the last twenty years.

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5 A large portion of those born in Vietnam are ethnically Chinese.

6 That is to say, with a view to registered citizens from East Asian countries, 58.26 per cent of the Chinese/Taiwanese are living in Vienna; 64.19 per cent of the Japanese; 68.24 per cent of the South Koreans; 47.02 per cent of the Vietnamese; and 81.63 per cent of the North Koreans.



### 3. East Asian Religiosities in Contemporary Austria

Given the diversity of religious currents and practices that make up the field, a clear-cut compartmentalisation is not possible. Using the rather conventional – though admittedly deficient – approach of categorisation by tradition, the East Asian religious landscape in Austria may be divided along the lines of (1) Buddhism; (2) Christianity; (3) ethnic religions;<sup>7</sup> (4) alternative religious traditions/holistic approaches; and (5) popular religious realities. Here categories (3) and (4) specifically involve the aforementioned array of practices that are mostly encountered outside institutionally distinct (i.e., Christian and Buddhist) discourses.<sup>8</sup>

These categories can be further categorised by regional affiliation (i.e., Greater China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam). In terms of the ethnic/non-ethnic composition of the carriers of East Asian religiosities, there are striking distinctions both at the top level (i.e., “tradition”) and at the bottom level (i.e., “regional affiliation”). With regard to the former, apart from the popular religious context, which is *eo ipso* centred on the ethnic community, the areas of Christianity and ethnic religions are almost entirely (Christianity) or predominantly (ethnic religions) made up of ethnic practitioners, whereas individuals who participate in Buddhism and alternative religious traditions/holistic approaches have a preponderantly non-ethnic background. With regard to the latter, Korean and Japanese Buddhism cater almost exclusively to a non-ethnic clientele, whereas their Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts have largely ethnic members.<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.1 *Buddhism*

East Asia-derived expressions of Austro-Buddhism mirror the huge diversity of the tradition across East Asia. Taken together they constitute the largest

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7 For the purpose of this chapter, “ethnic religions” are clearly institutionalised movements whose self-identities are not primarily ingrained in Buddhism or Christianity, but which instead draw upon the rich East Asian religious heritage.

8 East Asian ethnic religions in Austria share many commonalities with alternative traditions/holistic approaches. A distinguishing factor is that the latter are (very) loose in their organisational (and, more often than not, also doctrinal) identity and structure. Practices may indeed be very similar, and it is often the institutionally embedded discourse inscribed onto these practices that makes the difference.

9 However, there are exceptions at the level of individual groups or sub-denominations. For example, both Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhism in Austria each include one branch that is overwhelmingly made up of non-ethnic practitioners, namely, “Shaolin Buddhism” (see Chadwin and Pokorny 2022b) and Thích Nhất Hạnh’s (1926–2022) Order of Interbeing (*Đòng tu Tiếp Hiện*).

proportion of Austro-Buddhism (the other two currents being Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhism). Japanese Zen 禪 appears in its main forms of Rinzaishū 臨濟宗 and Sōtōshū 曹洞宗 including numerous sub-schools, as well as the lesser-known Sanbō Zen 三寶禪. The Zen spectrum in its local form is conventionally held to also embrace various “spiritual way disciplines” such as *kyūdō* 弓道 (Way of the Bow), *chadō* 茶道 (Way of Tea), and *kadō* 華道 (Way of Flower Arrangement). Developing out of the Zen landscape (especially Sanbō Zen) and bearing a distinct flavour is “Christian Zen.” Other Japanese Buddhisms at play include Nichirenism – especially Austria’s single largest Buddhist community Sōka Gakkai 創価学会 (Pokorny 2014a), but also Nipponzan Myōhōji Daisanga 日本山妙法寺大僧伽 with its Vienna Peace Pagoda, and the small Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗 – and Amidism. The latter currently appears in the form of the Jōdo Shinshū’s 淨土真宗 Shinshū Ōtaniha 真宗大谷派 and the Jōdoshū 淨土宗. Finally, Austria represents the international hub of the Japanese Zen-Amidist hybrid one-temple tradition Senkōbō 專光坊, whose practitioners are chief exponents of Naikan 内觀, a form of “Japanese psychotherapy” with Shin-Buddhist roots (Pokorny 2021b).

Japanese traditions are the dominant actors within Austria’s East Asian Buddhist landscape (Pokorny 2021a; 2023c), followed by Chinese (primarily Taiwanese) traditions of the usual Pure Land-Chan 禪 bent. Boasting the single largest Buddhist temple building in Austria is Foguangshan 佛光山 (Buddha Light Mountain) (Chadwin and Pokorny 2022a; Špirk 2020). Smaller and less visible groups are the Vienna-based Fojiao Ciji Gongde Hui 佛教慈濟功德會 (Buddhist Compassion Relief Merit Society; conventionally known as Tzu Chi or Ciji 慈濟) and Weiyena Cien Fotang 維也納慈恩佛堂 (Compassion and Kindness Buddha Hall Vienna). The major PRC-derived form of Buddhism is located in the wider Shaolin 少林 context (having an especially strong presence in Austria) with many groups stressing their Chan Buddhist heritage (often more inwardly than outwardly; Chadwin and Pokorny 2021; 2022b). Korean Buddhism in Austria rests on two chief pillars: the Chogyejong 조계종/曹溪宗-based Kwan Um School of Zen and the Ch’ont’ae 천태/天台 (C. Tiantai)-oriented Yun Hwa Denomination of World Social Buddhism, both having headquarters in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, small-scale groups in the Chogye and T’aego 태고/太古 traditions exist to this day. Vietnamese

10 Whereas the long-time president (since 2006) of the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society (*Österreichische Buddhistische Religionsgesellschaft*), Gerhard Weißgrab (b. 1952), received large parts of his Buddhist training in a now defunct Chogye-affiliated school in Vienna, the former president (2017–2023) of the European Buddhist Union, the Graz-born Ron Eichhorn (b. 1966), belongs to the Yun Hwa Denomination of World Social Buddhism commuting between the Berlin and Vienna temples.

Buddhism is likewise largely under the purview of two *Thiền* (J. Zen) communities, the Order of Interbeing and the *Pháp Tạng Đạo Tràng* (literally, Dharma Treasure Place to Enlightenment), which is strongly inclined towards Pure Land (*Thiền Tịnh*) teachings/practice.

### 3.2 *Christianity*

East Asian Christian traditions may be subdivided into Catholic and Protestant(-derived) groups. In terms of size, the Korean community is clearly in first place, followed (in decreasing order) by the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese communities. The latter two in particular have a preponderance of Catholics. The non-Catholic groups are quite diverse especially with respect to the Korean and, less so, the Chinese churches. Alongside the Presbyterian *Pienna Hanin Kyohoe* 비엔나한인교회 (Vienna Korean Church), which has one of the most active Korean congregations in Europe, there are, among others, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, and Pentecostal movements, such as the *Yōūdo Full Gospel Church*, whose parent organisation is the world's largest megachurch (Pokorny and Sung 2018). Additionally, in more recent years, Austria is the missionary field of two well-known messianic groups: *Sinch'onji Yesugyo Chūnggō Changmak Sōngjōn* 신천지예수교증거장막성전 (New Heaven and New Earth Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony) and *Hananim'ūi Kyohoe Segye Pog'ūm Sōn'go Hyōphoe* 하나님의교회세계복음선교협회 (World Gospel Mission Society Church of God). A fellow messianic movement with a decidedly Korea-centric profile is the Unification Movement/Church (T'ongilgyo 통일교/統一教) (with a couple of splinter groups emerging recently),<sup>11</sup> which has now been part and parcel of Austrian religious history for half a century.<sup>12</sup> A strikingly millenarian outlook can also be found in the still small but continuously growing number of Chinese non-mainstream churches, most prominently *Quannengshen Jiaohui* 全能神教会 (Church of Almighty God).

### 3.3 *Ethnic Religions*

Ethnic religious providers fall into two categories: groups with a chiefly ethnic or migrant membership and those attended by mainly non-ethnic practitioners. To the former belongs notably the *Yiguandao* 一貫道 (Way of Unity) cluster, predominantly comprising the *Andong* 安東 (whose *Honghang Fotang*

11 These involve the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary (Sanctuary Church), the Family Peace Association, and the *Komaba Kumiko* 駒場久美子 group.

12 On the Unification Movement in Austria, see Pokorny and Steinbeiss (2012; 2014); Pokorny (2014b; 2016; 2018; 2023a); Pokorny and Zoehrer (2018).

宏航佛堂 or Honghang Buddha Hall in Vienna also serves as the group's European headquarters) and Baoguang Jiande 寶光建德 (Precious Light Establishing Virtue) lineages (Broy 2021; Shen 2021), as well as related groups such as Mile Dadao 彌勒大道 (Great Way of Maitreya) and Tiandao Aodili Zonghui 天道奧地利總會 (Austrian Association of the Heavenly Way). The latter includes mostly smaller-scale Japanese groups, such as Tenrikyō 天理教 (Teaching of the Heavenly Principle), Seichō no Ie 生長の家 (House of Growth), Sekai Kyūseikyō Izunome Kyōdan 世界救世教いづのめ教団 (Izunome Religious Society of the Teaching of World Salvation), and Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学 (literally, Science of Happiness; internationally known as “Happy Science”). The latter (which is also one of the major *shibu* 支部 or branches in Europe) is particularly active within the holistic milieu (Pokorny and Winter 2012), as are the Chinese *qigong* 气功-related Falun Dafa 法輪大法 (Falun Gong 法輪功) and some Yiguandao groups as well as Sekai Kyūseikyō.

### 3.4 *Alternative Religious Traditions/The Holistic Field*

The holistic field consists of a wide range of holistically oriented methods involving psychophysical health care, life help, and spiritual cultivation.<sup>13</sup> It represents the chief contact zone with regard to East Asian religious thought/practice, more often than not revolving around energy or *qi* 氣 (Japanese/Korean: *ki*) work. We find numerous providers using both traditional(istic) (foremostly, *qigong*; *reiki* レイキ; Shugendō 修験道; *taijiquan* 太極拳; etc.) (Norden and Polzer 1995) and “scientific” practices. Religious undertones are also noticeable in widely popular *qi*-disciplines such as *fengshui* 風水, *shiatsu* 指圧, and *zhongyi* 中医 (Traditional Chinese Medicine), as well as more specialised fields therein such as Korean hand acupuncture and Chinese dietetics. East Asian religious notions are likewise appreciated by many practitioners in other sectors of the alternative religious field who embrace specific textual icons such as the *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Changes) and the *Daodejing* 道德經 (Classic of the Way and Virtue), (re-appropriated) meditation techniques, and notable figures and their apparent words of wisdom including, most prominently, Confucius and Laozi 老子.<sup>14</sup> Notably, practitioners of *musok* 巫俗

13 The term “holistic milieu,” previously introduced by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, is meant here to describe alternative religious contexts that are characterised by a holistic (self-)understanding in their therapeutic, “spiritual,” and/or wellbeing practices. The holistic providers make up the largest portion of the alternative religious field in Austria and beyond. A seminal study applying the term to the Austrian context, also involving scattered “East Asian methods,” is Höllinger and Tripold (2012).

14 A newly emerging religious phenomenon with an occasional specifically Japanese bent is that of (what scholars term) “hyperreal,” “fiction-based,” or “invented” religiosity. That is,

or “Korean Shamanism” (i.e. *mudang* 무당/巫堂) recently started activities in Austria as well.

Some of the practices mentioned above border another visible area (variously) overlapping the holistic field, namely, martial arts. Among the variety of styles (*aikidō* 合氣道, *hapkido* 합기도/合氣道, *iaidō* 居合道, *jeet kune do* 截拳道, *jūdō* 柔道, *jūjutsu* 柔術, *karate* 空手, *kendō* 剣道, *ninjutsu* 忍術, *t’aegwōndo* 태권도/跆拳道, *wing chun* 詠春, *wōnhwado* 원화도/圓和道, to name the most well-known ones), the religious (emically: “the spiritual”) dimension is highlighted to varying degrees by their respective providers.

### 3.5 *Popular Religious Realities*

Whereas more than half of (South) Koreans living in Austria engage in Christian church life, the vast majority of the East Asian diasporic community is in fact not connected to any institutionalised religion. Large segments, specifically of the mainland Chinese and Vietnamese populations, appear to be outwardly atheist; however, upon closer inspection, one does encounter a milieu enmeshed in popular religious discourses, mores, and rituals (see Chadwin 2022; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c), which effectively extends across the whole diasporic setting and manifests in varying degrees. These popular religious realities encompass beliefs in ancestors and otherwise supernatural entities or transcendent dynamics affecting this-worldly affairs (hence the significance of Chinese astrology and its regional expressions), mindsets involving hierarchically stratified familyscapes, as well as the ritual and behavioural execution of these beliefs and “sacralised” social convictions centring on the notions of reciprocity and respect, most markedly articulated through the virtue of filiality (*xiao* 孝).

## 4. Key Literature and Lacunae in the Scholarship

The existing scholarship on East Asian religions in Austria is virtually the sum of the references already included in the previous sections of this chapter. Although the University of Vienna, in particular, is home to one of Europe’s biggest East Asian Studies Departments, a respected Buddhist Studies Department, a religious studies programme, and many large adjacent disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, the local East Asian(-derived)

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portions of the *anime/manga* (and/or computer game) fan culture develop experimental (often rather short-lived) religious contexts based on mythologies crafted in this specific popular culture setting.

religious context has received growing attention only in the last decade.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Austria-based scholars of past and present working on East Asian religiosities chiefly addressed their historical, textual, and anthropological dimensions in the countries of origin. Research dedicated especially to their local (i.e., Austrian) manifestations is, by and large, a novel development almost exclusively carried out by a few Vienna-based Religious studies scholars.<sup>16</sup> Hitherto, their main focus was driven by (micro-)historical (specifically Pokorny) and anthropological (Chadwin) interests, primarily addressing Buddhism and new religious movements (especially the Unification Movement) and the Chinese diasporic community, respectively. Whereas research has been carried out on Chinese, Japanese, and Korean religions, the situation of Vietnamese religions has (as of yet) only been touched *en passant* (Pokorny 2022: 360). In terms of distinct movements, case studies have been provided on the Unification Movement (comprising several articles), as well as on Foguangshan, Kōfuku no Kagaku, Naikan, Shaolin Chan Wu Chi, Sōka Gakkai, the Vienna Korean Church, and Yiguandao.

The articles listed in the references section aside, we find only (very) brief mentions of East Asian religiosities in Austria in isolated articles, especially those dealing with the wider Buddhist tradition (in particular Zen), but also, for example, research on Christian denominational diversity.

In line with the wider field of religion in Austria, the study of East Asian religiosities therein is still at an initial stage. The three chief thematic lacunae concern (1) historical documentation; (2) sociological examination; and (3) material-aesthetical exploration. The former generally refers to research that thoroughly traces the origins and historical development of individual groups and currents/traditions as well as – if they still exist – their present-day organisational and demographic situations. Related studies also need to engage with their broader transnational and domestic networks as well as their variegated relationship with the host society and vice versa, employing the full methodological arsenal of the history of religions. Moreover, the impact and legacy of individuals within or outside institutionalised religions need to be profiled. This research provides the much-needed empirical basis for mapping the many blank spots in our religious cartography.

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15 Exceptions include brief case studies in Norden and Polzer (1995) and Deeg (2005).

16 Nikolas Broy (2021), a Sinologist, is based at Leipzig University, Yeh-Ying Shen (2021) is a social scientist from the National University of Singapore, Martin Špirk (2020) is a religious studies scholar based at Masaryk University, Brno. Gilbert Norden and Norbert Polzer (1995) (then University of Vienna) are sociologists.

The data thus generated (through substantial fieldwork and extensive archival studies) crucially feeds into the second thematic area, in which special attention is paid to the glocal manifestation of East Asian religiosities at the discursive and practical levels. What is believed and how is this practically executed in a distinctive socio-cultural environment? Here scholars must pursue a multi-perspective approach drawing on a comprehensive social-scientific toolkit, and interrogate, *inter alia*, individual/communal lifeworlds and mindscapes; economic dimensions; power, generational, and gender relations; and communication and reception processes within and outside (e.g., the dynamics of orientalism and occidentalism). Additionally, at thematic edges especially thinking of the holistic landscape, including, for example, martial arts and energy work, scholars need to carefully ascertain the religious dimension and the extent to which it can be made into a subject of religious studies research at all.

Regarding the third area, insights need to be gained into the material-aesthetical arrangements of these religious/"spiritual" lifeworlds as well, inviting more auto-ethnographic explorations. How does religious commitment manifest materially and aesthetically and how is it appreciated by practitioners and the host society?

## 5. Research and Methodological Challenges

Scholars working on diasporic religions in general and East Asian religiosities in particular have to meet a range of formidable challenges in their research routines.

A chief issue is that of *language*. Whereas large parts of the East Asian religious panorama is maintained by locals or expatriates with good German language skills, a range of groups and a sizeable portion of the East Asian ethnic community overall operate in their native languages. Moreover, even groups which maintain a large or almost exclusive non-ethnic membership, such as Kōfuku no Kagaku and Sōka Gakkai, have often implemented a two-fold communal structure, which is unilaterally permeable and based on ethnic belonging. For example, in these two cases, Japanese members form their own sub-groups that are inaccessible to non-Japanese (speakers), whereas regular meetings of the general membership are open to everyone.

A lack of relevant language skills will prove detrimental to related research on at least two accounts. On the one hand, it involves a simple inability to participate in and grasp emic modes of communication. On the other hand, the researcher will not (or only to a limited extent) be able to comprehend the

distinct discursive anatomy at play, as they have no (substantial) familiarity with the source materials.

This latter aspect in particular relates to another issue, namely, *cultural competence*. Despite what is occasionally claimed,<sup>17</sup> familiarity with the genuine socio-cultural contexts of the movements/currents and their ethnic carriers is vital for this research. Particularly when dealing with popular religious realities, the researcher needs to possess a sound socio-cultural sensorium. Overall, not only are East Asian languages crucially ingrained in socio-cultural intricacies, but many of the various movements and traditions cannot be fully appreciated in their self-conceptions and glocalised form without knowledge of their (original) breeding grounds and doctrinal sensitivities, and the ideological nomenclature that derives from this – Falun Dafa and their foundational notion of “clarifying the truth” (*jiang zhenxiang* 讲真相) being a case in point.<sup>18</sup>

A further related issue is that of *accessibility*. Religious contexts in which individuals operate in their native languages are *ipso facto* restricted to the linguistically proficient. Moreover, even with related language skills, establishing access to specific groups or segments of the diasporic community may be time-consuming at the least – if not occasionally impossible. Likewise, non-ethnic providers, specifically within the holistic milieu, may also sometimes deflect or straightforwardly refuse scholarly scrutiny.

Before access to a community or certain individuals becomes a question in the first place, their very existence needs to be traceable. At this point, three frequently interrelated issues come into play, namely, *ephemerality*, *marginality*, and *clandestinity*. Often groups or individuals operate only rather temporarily and/or within hardly detectable, close-knit social contexts. Both the alternative religious and diasporic settings are extremely fluid. Religious providers come and go, as do individual practitioners/adherents. Some religious circles are carried by short-time expatriates (e.g., Risshō Kōseikai 立正佼成会) or asylum seekers/undocumented residents (e.g., Quannengshen Jiaohui), remaining in existence for as long as their practitioners live in the country. Many groups are barely visible due to their small size, comprising only a

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17 In this respect I always recall one of several anonymous peer reviews of my *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements* (see Pokorny and Winter 2018), in which it was claimed that cultural and linguistic knowledge of East Asia was essentially not imperative for understanding new religious movements hailing from this region, and that skills in comparative religion alone could do the job instead.

18 This refers to a cardinal obligation of committed practitioners to publicly highlight by various means the severe repression Falun Dafa faces in the PRC.



few practitioners.<sup>19</sup> Others, although bigger in membership, may (almost) exclusively focus internally, with no interest in actively recruiting new contacts (e.g., Mile Dadao; lately also Ciji). Accordingly, their visibility even within related milieus (e.g., the diasporic community) might virtually be nil. Some organisations maintain a very loose presence carried by short-term missionary teams which frequently change in composition, locality, and their duration of stay (e.g., Sinch'ŏnji and Hananim'ui Kyohoe). They oscillate between massive week-long street proselytising and longer spells of inactivity, rendering them difficult to trace. The same applies to providers that seem to be outwardly unconnected to East Asian religiosities, rather appearing as general yoga or meditation groups (e.g., Maŭm Suryŏn 마음수련).

The overall dynamic profile of the alternative and diasporic religious arena requires constant monitoring and in-depth exploration. Except for very recent incipient attempts by scholars (see above), neither has been systematically done yet.<sup>20</sup> Hence, we encounter a great deal of *historical blindness* in respect to religious diversity in general and the presence of East Asian religiosities in particular. Frequently, group names or rough descriptions of activities are the only traces scholars have of past actors in the field. To give one of many examples, in my research on the beginnings of the Austrian Unification Movement in the 1960s, I came across mentions in a missionary diary of a local encounter with adherents of Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō 天照皇大神宮教 (Teaching of the Shrine of the Heavenly Goddess). This is in fact the only hint we have that this Japanese new religious movement was once active in Austria. Unfortunately, this historical blindness also extends to the actors in the field themselves. Only rarely do groups or individuals keep records of their past activities. Accordingly, reconstructing their histories often essentially requires to chiefly or solely rely on interviews. As a matter of course, over time, this invaluable source of writing local religious histories dries up.

Another issue for the scholar of East Asian religiosities in Austria (and beyond) is that of *conceptual complexity*. Many areas are scarcely charted in theoretical and methodological terms – let alone semantically. Engaging with

19 A logical question arising out of this, which is indeed frequently voiced even by scholars of religion, is why bother with thoroughly tracing what is ephemeral and marginal in the first place – one I do not concur with, for systematic scholarly monitoring *per se* requires the commitment to be as exhaustive as possible. However, one may well want to apply differing levels of prioritisation.

20 In this respect, neither the government-run Federal Agency of Cult Affairs (*Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen*) nor the Catholic Church's Office for Questions on Worldviews and Cults (*Weltanschauungs- und Sektenfragen*), the two chief and most up-to-date advisory bodies on religious diversity in Austria, are sufficiently staffed to carry out these tasks beyond merely collecting information gained through stakeholder and public enquiries.

popular religious realities, martial arts spiritualities, or other holistic discourses rife with East Asian religious notions represents a (relatively) novel territory for the scholar of religious studies. Delimiting the field and strategically manoeuvring within it is very much a pioneering task that needs a solid interdisciplinary backbone. Designing and executing a research programme like this is a daunting exercise in creative scholarship at the disciplinary fringes.

In contrast to this “boundary work,” large portions of work dealing with East Asian religiosities in Austria are effectively about preparing a solid empirical basis to begin with rather than marshalling theoretical models, given the plethora of blind spots perforating our current knowledge of the field. Yet, this very emphasis on gathering empirical data and outlining a concomitant historical frame pinpoints a final issue, namely, that of *systemic discouragement*. Unless driven by theory (or as a case study relating to academically more appreciated regional contexts), research considered to merely document local expressions of (East Asian) religiosities in past and present (scholarly rigour notwithstanding) retains a stigma of provincialism in the eyes of the international scientific community. Hence, such studies will not usually be considered in most ranked academic journals today,<sup>21</sup> nor will larger-scale funding applications for bigger research projects involving international referees stand a chance at the national level, let alone within the European Union’s research funding schemes. Similarly, since East Asian diasporic communities in Europe as well as East Asian religiosities overall are relatively small and publicly silent, private or company sponsorship is virtually inexistent.

The issue of systemic discouragement also contains a *mélange* of career constraints for the scholarly community, mirroring the problems the current sub-disciplines face. For example, both the study of new religious movements and the study of alternative religions (esotericism), for various reasons, hardly produce permanent jobs in academia. Likewise, the study of (contemporary) religions, let alone in their diasporic form, has become a minor (or even neglected) area in most East Asian studies programmes today. Moreover,

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21 I remember my first article on the subject, which was a micro-historical account on the background and formation of the Unification Movement in Austria (Pokorny and Steinbeiss 2012), drawing on numerous archival sources found after painstaking field research across the country and internationally. Incidentally, the Austrian group would within a short time become the most successful national branch in Europe and later turn into the “most feared cult” in church and public perception in Austria especially in the 1970s. The article was sent to an international journal, where it was accepted on the condition that a comprehensive theoretical spin could be given to the narrative. One reviewer, not at all appreciating the historical sleuthing into a group which became central protagonist in more recent Austrian religious history, stated dismissively that the article is “essentially about a guy and his van” (i.e., the first missionary) lacking any theoretical value.

within religious studies, this kind of research does not necessarily put emerging scholars on a promising career trajectory. Better opportunities might be found in anthropology and sociology departments, however, growing disciplinary chasms greatly reduce cross-discipline permeability and the creation of interdisciplinary portfolios needed for the overall research.

These challenges are not uniquely tied to the study of East Asian religiosities in Austria nor Europe *per se* but are issues found in varying degrees in similar fieldwork-related areas and beyond. Together they demonstrate the scholarly versatility needed to conduct serious research in an area that in turn receives comparatively little attention and overall lacks scholarly appreciation – and this despite its growingly important role within and impact upon lived religion in the Europe.

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