

Euro-American Esoteric Readings of East Asia: Introductory Remarks

Lukas K. Pokorny | ORCID: 0000-0002-3498-0612

Professor of Religious Studies, Department of Religious Studies,
University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

Corresponding Author

lukas.pokorny@univie.ac.at

Franz Winter | ORCID: 0000-0002-9115-9759

Professor of Religious Studies, Department of Religious Studies,
University of Graz, Graz, Austria

franz.winter@uni-graz.at

Received 11 August 2023 | Accepted 14 August 2023 |

Published online 12 December 2023

Abstract

This article introduces the special issue “Euro-American Esoteric Readings of East Asia.” First, the genesis of the special issue is explained, after which working definitions of the key terminology are given, namely, “East Asia,” “Euro-American,” “Western,” and “esotericism.” Next, the rationale of the special issue as well as short synopses of its five contributions are presented. The article argues that esoteric readings of things East Asia have saliently coshaped their Western reception history.

Keywords

esotericism – occultism – New Age – reception history – China – East Asia

1 The Genesis of the Special Issue

A guiding principle when putting together *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World* (Pokorny and Winter 2021) was to highlight the global entanglement of the “esoteric current.” The collection drew inspiration from various pioneering volumes (de Michelis 2004; Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2013; Djurdjevic 2014; Rudbøg and Reenberg Sand 2020; a splendid new addition being Strube 2022) and a range of individual studies. What is common in this scholarship is the focus on the “Western” – South Asian nexus. Other important recent volumes (Krämer and Strube 2020; Asprem and Strube 2021) noted additional discourse axes to the Islamic World (see also Saif 2015; 2019), the Jewish tradition (Chajes and Huss 2016), and East Asia, among others. The latter piqued our interest as we noticed that existing scholarship is either scarce (Irwin 2004; Sacco 2008; Nilsson 2013, 2020; Paolillo 2013; Statman 2019; Redmond 2021) or addresses protagonists at the “East Asian end” (e.g., Akai 2009; Yoshinaga 2009; Wu 2018; Gaitanidis and Stein 2019). Hence, soon after concluding *The Occult Nineteenth Century*, we turned to a follow-up book project that specifically paid attention to the Western – East Asian nexus, *The Euro-American Esoteric Reception of China*. While working on this collection in an attempt to contour the field, we realized that we effectively opened a “field of its own,” as also one of the anonymous reviewers of the volume commendably indicated. With *Appropriating the Dao: The Euro-American Esoteric Reception of China* (Pokorny and Winter, Forthcoming) close to completion, we ventured to edit a further collection of pioneering scholarship to underline and raise awareness of the great potential of this novel area of research. The result is this special issue, “Euro-American Esoteric Readings of East Asia.”

2 Working Definitions

Before briefly outlining the context of the special issue and introducing its five contributions, a few remarks on key terminology is in order: (1) “East Asia”; (2) “Euro-American” and “Western”; (3) and “esotericism.”

Definitions of East Asia vary depending on disciplinary concerns. We adopt our definition as given in Pokorny and Winter (2018: 4–6), taking “East Asia” to comprise today’s nation-states of China (excepting Tibet) and Taiwan, Japan, South and North Korea, and Vietnam due to their sociocultural commonalities as part of the “Sinosphere” (Fogel 2009).

“Euro-American” is a qualifier intended to *geographically* delimit the globally interwoven esoteric discourse. That is to say, the contributions in this

special issue draw on sources that were predominantly produced (however internationally entangled their formation processes may have been) by individuals living in or (originally) based in precisely this geographical context (i.e., Europe and North America). Moreover, the writings of these individuals were chiefly addressed to and/or received by a likewise European/North American audience. As a matter of fact, many of these sources circulated worldwide, finding an interested audience across the globe. The same applies to the use of the term “Western,” which in this special issue is understood merely as a very vague *geographical* qualifier and *not* as a (cultural) essentialist category; the use of the latter fueled a rising controversy especially in the last decade (culminating in Asprem and Strube 2021; see also, e.g., Pasi 2010; Granholm 2013).

“Esotericism” is a notoriously ambiguous term. Emerging in the mid-1960s, the scholarly field that inaugurated it as disciplinary *signifiant* (that is, study of esotericism) pursues two major understandings, either as a historical/historiographical or a comparative/typological category (Baier 2021: 231; Hammer 2004: 445–449; Asprem 2014; see also Strube 2023, Forthcoming), which are not congruent yet partly overlap. In this special issue, “esotericism” is understood as an umbrella notion comprising largely nonhegemonic teachings and currents with shared structural features, foremostly centering on the idea that higher or special (practical) knowledge distilled from a discourse deemed secretive can be (incrementally) utilized by its practitioners to salvific or otherwise self-cultivational ends, thereby uncovering ulterior dynamics of life, nature, and/or the cosmos at large.

3 Rationale

Western notions of East Asia have been constantly (re-)negotiated across the centuries. Likewise, the reception processes surging with the Jesuit Sino-Japanese enterprise of the sixteenth century (Mungello 2009; Ucerler 2022; Littlewood 1996) were formative in shaping modern Western identities. Engaging East Asian religiosities in particular spurred fascination and became a treasure trove for the accommodation, appropriation, and exploration of novel religio-spiritual avenues and a wealth of elements borrowed from them (e.g., App 2010). To capture the overarching grand episode of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, some scholars even advanced terms such as, inter alia, “Easternization of the West” (Campbell 2007), “Oriental Enlightenment” (Clarke 1997), and “Oriental Renaissance” (Schwab 1950). To this day, Western understandings of East Asian religiosities and philosophical traditions are the outcome of an intricate centuries-old reception continuum involving a plethora of globally scattered

informants. Notably, a fair portion of these “knowledge” transmitters of things East Asia in the past and present can be located in the esoteric milieu (which also holds true for the perception history of South Asia). It is indeed a panoply of esoteric prisms – not inconsiderable in scope and impact – through which East Asia and especially its religiophilosophical expressions were and are steadily conegotiated. That is to say, the esoteric reception of East Asia is in no small measure coshaping the construction and appreciation of ideas that come to be envisaged as “authentic” in a range of discourses that extend far beyond alternative religious circles. This special issue aims to cast a spotlight on some of the contributors and trajectories of this specific but vocal thread of reception history. As such this special issue is also a contribution to an ongoing debate about the wider cultural impact of esoteric discourses in the past centuries at various levels and in different contexts (see, e.g., Mühlematter and Zander 2021). Although it only adds a small piece to the puzzle, which we only recently started systematically to put together, the articles in this special issue serve as important early milestones to delimit what is still a scholarly *terra incognita*.

4 Overview

In the first article of this special issue, Julian Strube draws on his powerful decentered historiographical approach, offering a perceptive genealogical investigation into the term “esoteric.” Marshaling with philological rigor sixteenth- to eighteenth-century European writings on China and Japan, he takes readers on a tour d’horizon through multiple negotiation processes along the Europe–East Asia discourse axis that contributed to the formation of the very concept. Strube thereby dispels common views that inscribe onto the notion a merely “European” provenance and, instead, he puts emphasis on its entangled global history.

In the second article, Lukas K. Pokorny conducts a panoramic journey across two centuries of Euro-American esoteric encounters with an East Asian cultural icon, namely, Confucius. Starting in the nineteenth century, Pokorny excavates flamboyant portrayals and appropriations that go beyond the stereotype image of Confucius as merely being the Chinese Sage and paragon of moral philosophy. A closer look is given to Spiritualist and Theosophical representations from where Pokorny traces the soteriological evolution of the esoteric Confucius in the Ascended Masters mythoscape and its population with fellow Chinese Masters as found in the I AM Activity and its post-Second World War splinter groups The Bridge to Freedom (present-day The Bridge to Spiritual Freedom) and The Church Universal and Triumphant.

In the third article, Franz Winter introduces the important but often neglected French occultist Joseph Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1842–1909) and the role of China in his esoteric mythohistoriography. Saint-Yves d'Alveydre's writings were vastly influential, leading no less than the esoteric polymath Papus (1865–1916) to claim spiritual discipleship. More often than not at the time, Confucius and Laozi occupied center stage in perennialist depictions of the main esoteric custodians of East Asia and China. Yet some French occultists in particular went against the usual narrative, instead elevating the mythical cultural hero Fuxi 伏羲 to the highest echelon in the esoteric pantheon. Through a meticulous reading of the sources, Winter identifies Saint-Yves d'Alveydre as a most eminent promoter of the esoteric Fuxi trope.

In the fourth article, Davide Marino turns to a contemporaneous French occultist, Albert de Pouvoirville (1862–1939) alias “Matgioi,” the inspiratory source for Traditionalist mastermind René Guénon (1886–1951). Invoking a range of original sources, he sheds light on de Pouvoirville's amalgamation of colonialist and occultist topoi into a veritable *occultisme colonial*. Being one of the most prolific esoteric connoisseurs of East Asia in his time, it is de Pouvoirville's Indochina experience soaked through an elitist and colonial Darwinist mindscape that vitally informed his program of *occultisme colonial*.

In the fifth article of this special issue, Johan Nilsson has an esoteric giant enter the limelight: the English “Prophet of Thelema,” Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). Crowley possessed a lifelong fascination with “Eastern Wisdom,” specifically the divinatory manual *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Changes) and the *Daodejing* 道德經 (Classic of the Way and Virtue). A close reading of the latter saliently molded his utopian thinking. Indeed, as Nilsson persuasively demonstrates, Crowley deemed the *Daodejing*'s political message, that is, the theory of proper conduct and government, tantamount to that of his very own religious project “Thelema.”

References

- Akai, Toshio. 2009. “Theosophical Accounts in Japanese Buddhist Publications of the Late Nineteenth Century: An Introduction and Select Bibliography.” *Japanese Religions* 34(2): 187–208.
- App, Urs. 2010. *The Birth of Orientalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Asprem, Egil. 2014. “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism.” *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 2(1): 3–33.
- Asprem, Egil, and Julian Strube. (eds.). 2021. *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*. Leiden: Brill.

- Baier, Karl. 2021. "Esotericism." In Robert A. Segal and Nickolas P. Roubekas (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed., 229–240. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.
- Bogdan, Henrik, and Gordan Djurdjevic. (eds.). 2013. *Occultism in a Global Perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell, Colin. 2007. *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Chajes, Julie, and Boaz Huss. (eds.). 2016. *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press.
- Clarke, John James. 1997. *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. London: Routledge.
- de Michelis, Elizabeth. 2004. *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*. London: Continuum.
- Djurdjevic, Gordan. 2014. *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fogel, Joshua A. 2009. *Articulating the Sinosphere: Sino-Japanese Relations in Space and Time*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gaitanidis, Ioannis, and Justin Stein. 2019. "Japanese Religions and the Global Occult: An Introduction and Literature Review." *Japanese Religions* 44(1/2): 1–32.
- Granholm, Kennet. 2013. "Locating the West: Problematicizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism." In Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (eds.), *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, 17–36. London: Routledge.
- Hammer, Olav. 2004. "Esotericism in New Religious Movements." In James R. Lewis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movement*, 445–465. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Irwin, Lee. 2004. "Daoist Alchemy in the West: The Esoteric Paradigms." *Esoterica* 4: 31–51.
- Krämer, Hans Martin, and Julian Strube. (eds.). 2020. *Theosophy across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Littlewood, Ian. 1996. *The Idea of Japan: Western Images, Western Myths*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Mühlematter, Yves, and Helmut Zander. (eds.). 2021. *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia Around 1900*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Mungello, David E. 2009. *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500–1800*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nilsson, Johan. 2013. "Defending Paper Gods: Aleister Crowley and the Reception of Daoism in Early Twentieth Century Esotericism." *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 1(1): 103–127.

- Nilsson, Johan. 2020. "As a Fire Beneath the Ashes: The Quest for Chinese Wisdom within Occultism, 1850–1949." PhD diss., Lund University.
- Paolillo, Maurizio. 2013. "Il simbolismo del Centro e dell'Asse Verticale nelle pratiche di realizzazione secondo le più antiche fonti taoiste." *Perennia Verba. Il deposito sacro della tradizione* 13: 145–188.
- Pasi, Marco. 2010. "Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society." In Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, 151–166. Leiden: Brill.
- Pokorny, Lukas, and Franz Winter. (eds.). 2018. *The Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements*. Leiden: Brill.
- Pokorny, Lukas, and Franz Winter. (eds.). 2021. *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pokorny, Lukas K., and Franz Winter. (eds.). Forthcoming. *Appropriating the Dao: The Euro-American Esoteric Reception of China*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Redmond, Geoffrey. 2021. "The Yijing in Early Postwar Counterculture in the West." In Benjamin Wai-ming Ng (ed.), *The Making of the Global Yijing in the Modern World: Cross-Cultural Interpretations and Interactions*, 197–221. Singapore: Springer.
- Rudbø, Tim, and Erik Reenberg Sand. (eds.). 2020. *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sacco, Leonardo. 2008. "La tradizione taoista nel pensiero di René Guénon." *Aries. Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 8(1): 63–89.
- Saif, Liana. 2015. *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Saif, Liana. 2019. "What is Islamic Esotericism?" *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 7(1): 1–59.
- Schwab, Raymond. 1950. *La renaissance orientale*. Paris: Payot.
- Statman, Alexander. 2019. "The Tarot of Yu the Great: The Search for Civilization's Origins between France and China in the Age of Enlightenment." In Paula Findlen (ed.), *Empires of Knowledge: Scientific Networks in the Early Modern World*, 246–268. London: Routledge.
- Strube, Julian. 2022. *Global Tantra: Religion, Science, and Nationalism in Colonial Modernity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strube, Julian. 2023. "The Emergence of 'Esoteric' as a Comparative Category: Towards a Decentered Historiography." *Implicit Religion* 24(3/4).
- Strube, Julian. Forthcoming. "Religious Comparativism, Esotericism, and the Global Occult: A Methodological Outline." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 10(1).
- Ucerler, M. Antoni J. 2022. *The Samurai and the Cross: The Jesuit Enterprise in Early Modern Japan*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Wu, Yu-Chuan. 2018. "Techniques for Nothingness: Debate over the Comparability of Hypnosis and Zen in Early-Twentieth-Century Japan." *History of Science* 56(4): 470–496.
- Yoshinaga, Shin'ichi. 2009. "Theosophy and Buddhist Reformers in the Middle of the Meiji Period: An Introduction." *Japanese Religions* 34(2): 119–131.