



Exploring East Asian Religiosity in Austria: Current State, Desiderata, and Challenges

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Published online 21 June 2023

Abstract

This article outlines the current state of East Asian religiosity 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, a glance is cast at the relevant scholarship, which is subsequently addressed in systematic terms. Next, three chief thematic lacunae in the research are expounded upon: (1) historical documentation; (2) sociological examination; and (3) material-aesthetical exploration. Finally, a range of challenges for the scholar of East Asian religiosity in Austria (and beyond) are addressed, including (1) language; (2) cultural competence; (3) accessibility; (4) ephemerality, marginality, and clandestineness; (5) historical blindness; (6) conceptual complexity; and (7) systemic discouragement.

Keywords

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

1 Introduction

Despite some one hundred plus publications annually in recent years, religion in Austria remains chiefly an uncharted territory. Contributions are scattered across journals and books as well as disciplines. Major areas of study include

(mainly Catholic and Protestant) church history, law on religions, history, political science, and sociology.¹ Ever since the launch of a dedicated book series in 2012 (which was initially published biennially and since 2020 annually) under the programmatic title *Religion in Austria*, Religious Studies scholars also commenced to engage more visibly in the field.

Austria is home to an astoundingly 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 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 religiosity.² Regionally – in reference to my definition given in *The Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements*³ – East Asia is meant here to involve Greater China, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and Vietnam. 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 oft-times vest practitioners with religiously anchored mindscapes.

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

In the following section, this article provides a sketch of the present-day situation of East Asian religiosity in Austria. Next, the existing research will be briefly addressed, upon which the scholarly desiderata will be examined. Finally, the major challenges that scholars face when studying, from a European experience, East Asian religions in Austria (and beyond) are discussed.

2 East Asian Religiosity in Contemporary Austria: A Brief Outline

Given the diversity of religious currents and methods making up the field, a clear-cut compartmentalisation is unrealistic. With reference to a rather

1 See Pokorny, *A Bibliography of 2018 and 2019 Scholarship*; Pokorny, *An Annotated Bibliography of 2020 Scholarship*; Pokorny, *An Annotated Bibliography of 2021 Scholarship*.

2 See Pokorny, *Ostasiatische Traditionen*.

3 See Pokorny/Winter, *East Asian New Religious Movements*, p. 6.

conventional heuristic – yet admittedly deficient – categorisation by tradition, the East Asian religious landscape in Austria may be divided along the lines of (1) Buddhism; (2) Christianity; (3) ethnic religions;⁴ (4) alternative religious traditions/holistic offerings; and (5) popular religious realities – specifically categories 3 and 4 comprise or connect to the aforementioned array of practices that are mostly encountered outside institutionally distinct (i.e., Christian and Buddhist) discourses.⁵

These categories can be further partitioned by regional affiliation (i.e., Greater China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam). In terms of ethnic/non-ethnic composition of the carriers of East Asian religiosity, one observes striking distinctions at the top (i.e., “tradition”) as well as the lower level (i.e., “regional affiliation”). As for the former, the popular religious context aside which is *eo ipso* centred on the ethnic community, the areas of Christianity and ethnic religions are comprised vastly (Christianity) or predominantly (ethnic religions) by ethnic practitioners, whereas individuals partaking in Buddhism and alternative religious traditions/holistic offerings have a preponderantly non-ethnic background. As for the latter, Korean and Japanese Buddhism almost exclusively cater to a non-ethnic clientele, whereas the Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts have largely ethnic members.⁶

2.1 *Buddhism*

East Asia-derived expressions of Austro-Buddhism mirror the huge diversity of the tradition across East Asia. Taken together they constitute the largest portion of Austro-Buddhism (the other two currents being Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhism). Japanese Zen 禅 appears in its chief guises as Rinzaishū 臨濟宗 and Sōtōshū 曹洞宗 spanning over numerous sub-schools, as well as the lesser-known Sanbō Kyōdan 三宝教団. The Zen spectrum in its local manifestation is conventionally held to also embrace various “spiritual

4 For the purpose of this article, 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.

5 East Asian ethnic religions in Austria share many commonalities with alternative traditions/holistic offerings. 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 oft-times the institutionally embedded discourse inscribed onto these practices that makes the difference.

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

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). Growing out of the Zen scenery (especially Sanbō Kyōdan) and bearing a distinct flavour is Catholic Zen. Other Japanese Buddhisms at play include Nichirenism – here especially Austria’s single largest Buddhist community Sōka Gakkai 創価学会,⁷ 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 presently takes the form of the Jōdo Shinshū’s 浄土真宗 Shinshū Ōtaniha 真宗大谷派 and the Jōdoshū 浄土宗. Finally, Austria represents the international hub of the Japanese Zen-Amidist hybrid one-temple tradition Senkōbō 専光坊, whose practitioners are chief exponents of Naikan 内観, a form of “Japanese psychotherapy” with Shin-Buddhist roots.⁸ Japanese traditions are the dominant actors within the East Asian Buddhist landscape in Austria,⁹ followed by Chinese (that is, chiefly Taiwanese) traditions of the usual Pure Land-Chán bent. Accommodating the single largest Buddhist temple building in Austria is Fóguāngshān 佛光山 (Buddha Light Mountain).¹⁰ Smaller and less visible groups are the Vienna-based Fójiao Ciji Gōngdé Huì 佛教慈濟功德會 (Buddhist Compassion Relief Merit Society; conventionally known as Tzu Chi or Ciji 慈濟) and Wéiyěna Cǐen Fó táng 维也纳慈恩佛堂 (Compassion and Kindness Buddha Hall Vienna). The major PRC-derived form of Buddhism is located in the wider Shàolín 少林 context (having an especially strong presence in Austria) with many groups stressing (often more inwardly than outwardly) their Chán Buddhist heritage.¹¹ 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. Tiāntāi)-minded Yun Hwa Denomination of World Social Buddhism, both being headquartered in the United States.¹² Additionally, small-scale groups in the Chogye and Taego 태고/太古 tradition exist to this day. Vietnamese Buddhism is likewise largely under the purview of two Thiền (J. Zen) communities, the Order of Interbeing and the Pháp Tạng

7 See Pokorny, *Sōka Gakkai in Austria*.

8 See Pokorny, *Naikan in Austria*.

9 See Pokorny, *Japanese Buddhism in Austria*.

10 See Chadwin/Pokorny, *A History of Fóguāngshān in Austria*.

11 See Chadwin/Pokorny, *Chinese Buddhism in Austria*.

12 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 discontinued Chogye-affiliated school in Vienna, the president (since 2017) 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.

Đạo Tràng (literally, Dharma Treasure Place to Enlightenment), which maintains a strong inclination vis-à-vis Pure Land (*Thiền Tịnh*) teachings/practice.

2.2 Christianity

East Asian Christian traditions may be subdivided into Catholic and Protestant(-derived) groups. In terms of size, the Korean community clearly stands first with (in decreasing order) the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese communities following. Notably, the latter two have a preponderance of Catholics. The non-Catholic gamut is quite diverse especially with respect to the Korean and, less so, Chinese churches. Next to the Presbyterian Pienna Hanin Kyohoe 비엔나한인교회 (Vienna Korean Church), which is 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.¹³ Additionally, in more recent years, Austria is the missionary field of two well-known messianic groups: Sinch'ŏnji Yesugyo Chŭnggŏ Changmak Sŏngjŏn 신천지예수교증거장막성전 (New Heaven and Earth Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony) and Hananim'ūi Kyohoe Segye Pog'um Sŏng'o Hyŏphoe 하나님의교회세계복음선교협회 (World Gospel Mission Society Church of God). A fellow messianic movement with a decidedly Korea-centric profile is the Unification Movement (with a couple of splinter groups emerging recently), which has been part and parcel of Austrian religious history since half a century now.¹⁴ A strikingly millenarian outlook can also be found in the still small but continuously growing number of Chinese non-mainstream churches, most prominently Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì 全能神教会 (Church of Almighty God).

2.3 Ethnic Religions

Ethnic religious providers fall into two categories: groups with a chiefly ethnic membership and those attended by mainly non-ethnic practitioners. To the former belongs notably the Yíguàndào 一貫道 (Way of Unity) cluster, predominantly comprising the Āndōng 安東 (whose Hóngháng Fótáng 宏航佛堂 or Hóngháng Buddha Hall in Vienna also serves as the European headquarters)

¹³ See Pokorny/Sung, *The History of the Vienna Korean Church*.

¹⁴ On the Unification Movement in Austria, see Pokorny/Steinbeiss, *The Unification Movement in Austria. Background and Early Years, 1965–1966*; Pokorny/Steinbeiss, *The Austrian Unification Movement, 1966–1969*; Pokorny, *The Post-Mun Unification Movement in Austria*; Pokorny, *Current Perspectives on Past Experiences in the Austrian Unification Movement*; Pokorny, *Austrian Unificationists Meet Their Messiah*; and Pokorny/Zoeherer, *Austrian Unificationist Perspectives vis-à-vis the Cheon Il Guk Constitution*.

and Bǎoguāng Jiàndé 寶光建德 (Precious Light Establishing Virtue) lineages,¹⁵ as well as related groups such as Mílè Dàdào 彌勒大道 (Great Way of Maitreya) and Tiāndào Àodìlì Zǒnghuì 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 (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) in particular engages within the holistic milieu,¹⁶ as does the Chinese Qìgōng 氣功-related Fǎlún Dǎfǎ 法輪大法 (Fǎlún Gōng 法輪功) and some Yíguàndào groups as well as Sekai Kyūseikyō.

2.4 *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.¹⁷ It represents the chief contact zone with regard to East Asian religious thought/practice, more often than not revolving around energy or *qì* 氣 (Japanese: *ki*) work. One encounters numerous providers marshalling traditional(istic) (foremost, Qìgōng; Reiki レイキ; Shugendō 修験道; Tàijí quán 太極拳; etc.)¹⁸ and “scientistic” practices. Religious undertones are also noticeable in widely popular *qì*-disciplines such as *fēngshuǐ* 風水, *shiatsu* 指圧, and *zhōngyī* 中醫 (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 providers in other sectors of the alternative religious field by embracing specific textual icons such as the *Yījīng* 易經 (Classic of Changes) and the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 (Classic of the Way and Virtue), (re-appropriated) meditation techniques, and distinct figures and their apparent words of wisdom including, most prominently,

15 See Broy, *The Making of Transnational Yiguandao*; Shen, *The Expansion of the Andong Division of Yiguan Dao in Austria*.

16 See Pokorny/Winter, *The History of Kōfuku no Kagaku in Austria, 1989–2012*.

17 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/Tripold, *Ganzheitliches Leben*.

18 See Norden/Polzer, *Tai Chi Chuan in Österreich und China*.

Confucius and Lǎozǐ.¹⁹ Notably, practitioners of *musok* 무속/巫俗 or “Korean Shamanism” (i.e. *mudang* 무당/巫堂) recently commenced their 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 panoply of styles (Aikidō 合気道, 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’aekwōndo 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 brought to the fore in varying intensity by the respective providers.

2.5 Popular Religious Realities

Whereas more than half of the (South) Koreans living in Austria engage in Christian church life, the vast majority of the East Asian diasporic community, overall numbering some 40,000 individuals, are in fact not connected to any institutionalised religion. Large segments, specifically of the mainland Chinese and Vietnamese population, appear to be outwardly atheist; however, upon closer inspection, one indeed encounters a milieu enmeshed in popular religious discourses, mores, and rituals,²⁰ 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 impacting this-worldly affairs (hence the significance of Chinese astrology and its regional expressions), mindsets appreciating 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 as most markedly articulated through the virtue of filiality (*xiào* 孝).

19 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, portions of the *anime/manga* (and/or computer game) fan culture develop experimental (oft-times rather short-lived) religious contexts based on mythologies crafted in the distinct popular culture setting.

20 See Chadwin, *How Chinese Immigrant Children in Vienna Engage with Christianity*; Chadwin, *How Chinese University Students in Vienna Observed Spring Festival*; Chadwin, *Lived Religious Experience of Chinese Immigrant Children in Vienna*; and Chadwin, *Religiosity of Chinese Parents in Vienna*.

3 Scholarship

The existing scholarship on East Asian religions in Austria is virtually the sum of the references already included in the first two sections of this article. Although the University of Vienna, in particular, is home to one of Europe's biggest East Asian Studies Departments, a reputed Buddhist Studies Department, a Religious Studies programme, and many large adjacent disciplines such as Anthropology and Sociology, the local East Asian(-derived) religious context has received growing attention only in the last decade.²¹ In fact, Austria-based scholars in past and present working on East Asian religions chiefly addressed their historical, textual, and anthropological dimensions in the countries of origin. Research dedicated especially to the local (i.e., Austrian) manifestations is, by and large, a novel development almost exclusively pursued by a few Vienna-based Religious Studies scholars.²² 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* in a brief overview.²³ In terms of distinct movements, case studies have been provided on the Unification Movement (comprising several articles), as well as on Fóguāngshān, Kōfuku no Kagaku, Naikan, Shaolin Chan Wu Chi, Sōka Gakkai, the Vienna Korean Church, and Yíguàndào.

The articles listed in the references section aside, one comes across (very) brief mentions of East Asian religiosity in Austria in scattered articles, especially those dealing with the wider Buddhist tradition (here in particular Zen), but also, for example, research on Christian denominational diversity.

4 Desiderata

In line with the wider field of religion in Austria, the study of East Asian religions therein is still at an initial stage. The three chief thematic lacunae

21 Exceptions include brief case studies in Norden/Polzer, *Tai Chi Chuan* and Deeg, *Chinesische religiöse Diaspora-Gemeinden im Wandel*.

22 Nikolas Broy (2021), a sinologist, is based at Leipzig University, and Yeh-Ying Shen (2021) is a social scientist from the National University of Singapore. Gilbert Norden and Norbert Polzer (1995) (then University of Vienna) are sociologists.

23 See Pokorny, *Ostasiatische Traditionen*, p. 360.

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 do still exist – their present-day organisational and demographic situations. Related studies also need to engage with the 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.

The data thus generated (through substantial fieldwork and extensive archival studies) vitally feeds into the second thematic area, in which special attention is paid to the glocal manifestation of East Asian religiosity 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/occidentalism). Additionally, at thematic edges especially with a view to 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 after 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 Challenges

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

A chief issue is that of *language*. Whereas large parts of the East Asian religious panorama is maintained by locals or expatriates with a good German language proficiency, 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 concerns the 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 for s/he has no (substantial) familiarity with the source materials.

Especially the latter aspect relates to another issue, namely, *cultural competence*. Other than occasionally averred,²⁴ familiarity with the genuine socio-cultural contexts of the movements/currents and their ethnic carriers is indeed vital for the research. Particularly when dealing with popular religious realities, the researcher needs to be vested with 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 thus devised ideological nomenclature – Fǎlún Dǎfǎ and their foundational notion of “clarifying the truth” (*jiǎng zhēnxiàng* 讲真相) being a case in point.²⁵

A further related issue is that of *accessibility*. Religious contexts in which individuals operate in their native languages are *eo ipso* 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 refuse scholarly scrutiny.

Before accessibility to a community or certain individuals becomes a question in the first place, their very existence needs to be traceable. At this point,

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

25 This refers to a cardinal obligation of committed practitioners to publicly highlight by various means the severe repression Fǎlún Dǎfǎ faces in the PRC.

three frequently interrelated issues come into play, namely, *ephemerality*, *marginality*, and *clandestineness*. 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., Rissshō Kōseikai 立正佼成会) or asylum seekers/illegal residents (e.g., Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì), remaining in existence for as long as their practitioners reside in the country. Many groups are hardly visible due their small size comprising only a few practitioners.²⁶ Others, although bigger in membership, may (almost) exclusively focus inwardly with no interest in actively recruiting new contacts (e.g., Mílè Dàdào; lately also Cíjì). 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'ŭi 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 religiosity, 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.²⁷ Hence, one encounters a great deal of *historical blindness* in respect to religious diversity in general and the presence of East Asian religiosity 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

26 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.

27 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.

Japanese new religious movement was once active in Austria. Unfortunately, this historical blindness actually 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 is ever drying out.

Another issue for the scholar of East Asian religiosity in Austria (and beyond) is that of *conceptual complexity*. Many areas are scarcely charted in theoretical and methodological terms – let alone semantically. Engaging with popular religious realities, martial arts spiritualities, or other holistic discourses ripe with East Asian religious notions represents a (relatively) novel territory for the scholar of Religious Studies. Delimiting the field and strategically manoeuvring therein is very much a pioneering task in need of a vast 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 dealing with East Asian religiosity in Austria is 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 limning a concomitant historical frame pinpoints a final issue, namely, that of *systemic discouragement*. Unless being driven by theory (or as a case study pertaining to academically more appreciated regional contexts), research considered to merely document local expressions of (East Asian) religiosity in past and present (scholarly rigour notwithstanding) retains a stigma of provincialism in the eyes of the international scientific community. Hence, neither will such studies usually be considered in most ranked academic journals today,²⁸ nor do 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

28 I remember my first paper on the subject, which was a micro-historical account on the background and formation of the Unification Movement in Austria (Pokorny/Steinbeiss, *The Unification Movement in Austria*), drawing on numerous archival sources found after painstaking field research across the country and internationally. Incidentally, the Austrian group would within short become the most successful national branch in Europe and later turn into the “most feared cult” in the church and public perception in Austria especially of 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.

funding schemes. Similarly, since East Asian diasporic communities in Europe as well as overall East Asian religiosity 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 to the scholarly community, mirroring the problems the actual 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 academe. Likewise, the study of (contemporary) religions, let alone in their diasporic guise, has become a minor (or represents an even neglected) area in most East Asian Studies programmes today. Moreover, 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.

6 Concluding Remarks

Whereas the figures for ethnic East Asian communities in Austria and Europe are not comparable to those of diasporic communities hailing from chiefly Islamic countries, they are nonetheless significant. For 2018 (excluding Denmark and pre-Brexit), EUROSTAT gives more than 1.262 million officially registered Chinese nationals, slightly more than 228,000 Vietnamese nationals, nearly 127,000 Japanese nationals, around 93,000 South Korean nationals, and almost 34,000 Taiwanese nationals residing in the countries of the European Union.²⁹ Adding to these some 1.74 million individuals ethnic East Asians (1) who are naturalised and their multi-generation offspring, (2) who have other citizenships (e.g., Singaporean), (3) who are illegal residents, as well as (4) estimates for Denmark and non-European Union countries brings the overall number easily up to three million (or more) individuals. Some estimated 40,000 of them live in Austria. On top of that, one needs to consider probably tens of millions of people in Europe with personal practical experience present or past within the wider East Asian religious/spiritual panorama, with Austria having its share of at least several 100,000 individuals. These figures alone provide ample reason to further the study of East Asian religiosity in Austria and Europe.

29 For the same year, EUROSTAT indicates little more than 1,000 North Korean nationals. See EUROSTAT, *All Valid Permits*.

This article set out to first sketch the current state of East Asian religiosity in Austria in order to get a better understanding of the scale and immense diversity of the field. Second, survey the state of related scholarship, relevant disciplines, and notable avenues taken therein. Third, give a brief overview of the thematic lacunae in the research. And fourth, address a range of key challenges scholars face when engaging in this field. These are not uniquely tied to the study of East Asian religiosity in Austria nor Europe *per se* but are issues found in varying degrees in similar fieldwork-related areas and beyond. Together these challenges demonstrate the scholarly versatility indeed 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 west.

Acknowledgements

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).

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