# Review Essay

## A Spotlight on Religious Innovation: New Religious Movements in East Asia

**HANDBOOK OF EAST ASIAN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS**

Edited by Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter
Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018
Pp. xiii+620. US$ 217.

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In this handbook, twenty-nine authors[1] collaborated to introduce a total of twenty-seven new religious movements (NRMs) that emerged since the early nineteenth century in Japan (eleven), North and South Korea (seven), China and Taiwan (six), as well as Vietnam (three). These groups serve as case studies for the exponentially higher number of existing NRMs in East Asia and are meant to provide a "sound cross section of the phenomenon of East Asian new religiosity" (3). Of course, collecting statistical data on NRMs is very difficult, but a brief glance at the population shares given in Johnson and Grim (2013) for "New Religionists" (Japan: 25.9 percent, N. Korea: 12.9 percent, S. Korea: 14.2 percent, China: 0.0[016] percent, Taiwan: 6.7 percent, Vietnam: 11 percent) makes it clear that this handbook can at best scratch the surface of the NRM phenomenon in East Asia.[2] Being the first comprehensive reference work on NRMs in East Asia in English this volume will be without doubt an indispensable resource for scholars and teachers of religion in the region as well as in other parts of the world, since many of the presented NRMs "have now grown into seminal suppliers in the global 'spiritual market'" (10). The handbook's importance has already been highlighted through the Edited Volume Accolade it was awarded by the Leiden-based International Convention of Asian Studies (ICAS) in 2019.

Following a general introduction, the handbook presents its selection of NRMs in four country/subregion parts which each again start with an introduction to the country/subregion history of NRMs, their sociopolitical context, and major trends in related scientific studies. The selected NRMs are Tenrikyō, Ōmoto, Perfect Liberty Kyōdan, Seichō no Ie, Sōka Gakkai, Sekai Kyūseikyō, Shinnyoen, Risshō Kōseikai, Sūkyō Mahikari, Aum Shinrikyō, and Kōfuku no Kagaku (for Japan); Tonghak/Ch'ŏndogyo, Taejonggyo, Wŏnbulgyo, Unification Movement, Yŏŭido Sunbogŭm Kyohoe, Taesunjillihoe, and Tan Wŏltŭ for the Korean peninsula; Yīguàn Dào, Fójiào Cíjì Gōngdé Huì, Fóguāngshān, Fǎgǔshān, Quánnéngshén Jiàohuì (Dōngfāng Shǎndiàn), and Fǎlún Gōng for China and Taiwan; and last but not least, Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (Cao Đài), and Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo for Vietnam. Each of the chapters follows the same descriptive routine: After a short introduction, the history and development of the movement, its doctrinal aspects, daily life and main rituals, as well as recent developments are explained. Reference literature is provided for each chapter, and the handbook is equipped with an index.

The number of introduced groups in each section as well as the structure of the volume, that is, the decision of the editors to start with Japan—though it was culturally dependent on China and Korea for many centuries—shows the great importance Japan holds today in the discipline of religious studies and in research on NRMs in particular. If we were to trust the numbers given by Johnson and Grim (2013), its central role could also be understood by its higher population share of NRM believers. As the general introduction and the introduction for Korea evidently prove, the Japanese scholars' proposal of the term "new religion" (*shinshūkyō* 新宗教) has been widely adopted beyond Japan.[3] Furthermore, the latest Western scholarly discourse on NRMs shares with the Japanese discourse on "new religions" the intention to provide an, if not neutral, at least less pejorative term to address the history of religious innovation since the nineteenth century while also allowing for the inclusion of less institutionalized forms (movements) of religion. The editors and authors of the handbook maintain these intentions and additionally emphasize the need to accept and understand NRMs as *integral part* of religious history. Let me stress here in unison with them that,

> new religious movements should be interpreted as an integral part of the history of religions of the individual countries. The expression "new religious movement" should not be—following the principles of this Handbook—regarded as the designation of a new category of religious tradition comparable to Buddhism, Shintō, Christianity, or Islam. It should only serve as the indication or a time marker, that is, "new" in the sense of "more recent," but nonetheless an essential part of the religious traditions in the various countries. (18)

While this approach corresponds to the framework for government statistics at least in Japan, it clearly departs from earlier handbooks such as Swanson and Chilson (2006) or Prohl and Nelson (2012) which treated NRMs as a generic category.

The authors of the country introductions explain the variety of terminology available for NRMs in each country as well as classification systems and the discursive context of their usage.

They also repeatedly remind the reader of elements left out in common conceptions about religion(s) and NRMs. Indeed, the approach of the handbook as such, namely its attempt to understand and present the development of NRMs as dependent on the "socio-cultural anatomy" of East Asia (6), can be understood as a correction of many Japanese and Japanese studies scholars' conception of "new religions" (*shinshūkyō* 新宗教) as a "Japanese" phenomenon.[4] Therefore, I would argue, that the handbook can be seen as a contribution to an emerging trend in the historical studies in East Asia which seeks to overcome the rigid distinction between "national history" (Japanese: *jikokushi* 自国史) and "world history" (Japanese: *sekaishi* 世界史) that has been forced onto the minds of people through high school curricula in Japan as well as in China and Korea (cf. Ibaraki 2014).

The handbook defines East Asia as a region in cultural terms as characterized by "the process of sinicization ... as well as the ideological and material heritage of the "Three Teachings" (Chinese: sānjiào 三教; Japanese: sankyō 三教; Korean: samgyo 삼교/三敎; Vietnamese: tam giáo): Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (cf. Pye 2004)" (5). The latter "were adding significantly to the religious environment of East Asia, mutually influencing each other as well as existing and newly arriving religious systems (e.g., Christianity)" (ibid.). To incorporate alternative definitions of the region which rather stress the central role of Confucianism in the region, the editors further explain:

> The ethical dimension of the Three Teachings, most resonantly voiced by the Confucian tradition in days past, supplied a widely recognized standard of mores deemed conducive across the region for the establishment/maintenance of social well-being ... it still remains, at least latently, a socio-cultural substratum. (6)

Thus, the NRMs included in the volume have stemmed from the "discursive universe of the Three Teachings ... [which] keeps serving as the matrix or the syncretizing agent of newly emerging and transmigrated religious currents" (ibid.). However, they do not restrict their adaptations to the traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. The separate introductions into developments in China/Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, as well as the teachings of the NRMs included in each section show that the Three Teachings have come to be defined in quite different ways depending on time and place. While the editors emphasize the influence of the Three Teachings as a syncretizing *agent*, I would argue, that the reverse impact of "newly emerging and transmigrated religious currents" as well as of political ideologies on the notion and content of the Three Teachings, especially in the context of religious policy making during nation state building, should be acknowledged, too.

In modern Japan, for instance, the trilateral negotiation between a traditional notion of the Three Teachings, newly emerging and transmigrated religious currents and interests of religious policy making ultimately led to the inclusion of Shintō and Christianity at the expanse of Daoism and Confucianism. Evidence of this process can be found in the event of the "Meeting of the Three Religions" (Japanese: *sankyō kaidō* 三教会同) organized by the Home Ministry in 1912 which brought representatives of Buddhism, Shintō and Christianity together in order to subordinate them to "national morality." This move of the Home Ministry contradicted the government's earlier claim of Shintō as "non-religious" or "above religion(s)" and thus fit to provide the spiritual foundation for a modern nation under the condition of separation of religion and state. Nonetheless the invitation to join this "elevated" religion as "equal" was too flattering for Buddhists and Christians who had both struggled against deprecatory public sentiment and religious policies during the modernization process so far. They both attended and declared their loyalty to the state.[5] Apart from that, the meeting basically declared an officially approved new triad of teachings. But the downside of this approval was increased suppression of NRMs which, as should be noticed, continued to draw on the heritage of Daoism and Confucianism as well.

While the handbook does not explicitly name attempts to redefine the cultural, in particular the religious heritage of the Three Teachings, Pokorny discusses the imposition of the above new triad—albeit without reference to the meeting—on the Korean peninsula during Japanese occupation as a juxtaposition of "officially sanctioned religion" (Japanese: *kōnin shūkyō* 公認宗教) and "superstition" (Japanese: *meishin* 迷信) or "quasi religion" (Japanese: *ruiji shūkyō* 類似宗教) (239). Pokorny explains that "quasi religion" as one of the "derogatory terms central for the anti-cult, Christian apologetic, and (historically) ethnographic narrative ... was prominently introduced [to the study of NRMs] in the pioneering *Chōsen no ruiji shūkyō* 朝鮮の類似宗教 (The Quasi Religions of Korea) published in 1935 by the ethnographer Murayama Chijun 村山智順 (1891–1968)" (233).

According to Endō (2006), however, the term originally appeared in 1919 as a synonym for "superstition" which was used in "institutional" cases where religious *groups* promoting *unauthorized* teachings were addressed. The term was redefined in the 1930s to support the preparations for the enactment of the Religious Organizations Law (Shūkyō dantai-hō 宗教団体法, abbr. as ROL) which was meant to crown already existing tools of government control over religious organizations in Japan and its colonies. In this context "quasi-religion" (or "pseudo-religion" in Endō's translation) was promoted as key term in the Japanese government's *criminalizing* discourse against and *suppression* of NRMs (cf. also Garon 1986). Although a potential threat to their own existence the ROL with its anti-heretical focus was supported by the religious minority of (Catholic and Protestant) Christians who had been admitted to the new triad of teachings and thus the "state corporation" in 1912 (Krämer 2011).

Notwithstanding their importance in Japanese government policy toward NRMs, the handbook refers cursorily only once to the ROL and not at all to the Meeting of the Three Religions. Given the emphasis placed by the editors on the Three Teachings as main cultural characteristic of the East Asian region, closer attention to processes of the Three Teachings' redefinition and the impact of these redefined notions on NRMs—such as sketched above—would have enriched the handbook's analysis considerably.

As for cross-regional triggers and possible causes for the emergence of NRMs, the handbook's general introduction suggests "accelerated crisis" and "perceived deprivation" due to "social inadequacies, illness, identificatory disorientation" which were brought about by "the rugged transformation [modernization] process of the East Asian region" (10). In their response to crisis[6] most East Asian NRMs are said to share "an all-pervading elaborate spectrum of millenarian expression that aims at closure of collective deprivation" (ibid.). Other cross-regional characteristics laid out in the handbook are ethnocentric narratives combined with hierarchical structures that elevate the founder of the movement[7] and a "generally this-worldly outlook" (ibid.).[8] The above elements are given as a set of causes and characteristics which reflects the discussion among scholars of NRM, particularly in Japan.

The editors do not go into detail here and leave it to the authors of the individual chapters to provide specifics. Based on the structure of the chapters (1. short introduction, 2. history and development, 3. doctrinal aspects, 4. daily life and main rituals, 5. recent developments) their description, however, focuses more on the internal sphere of each NRM and less on their embeddedness in and interaction with the surrounding societies. The question whether the NRMs share certain characteristics sub- or cross-regionally is not raised in the individual chapters. Thus, the handbook differs from earlier works. First, in so far as it refrains from articulating a worldview of all NRMs as a coherent system with structural unity (cf. Hardacre 1986 for the case of Japan). Second, because it focuses only on the clearly demarcated religious contexts of each NRM it does not seek to explain "new religiosity" in its interconnection with religious traits as they manifest themselves in the social, cultural, and individual behavior of the larger populace in each of the covered countries/subregions (cf. Reader 1991).

The individual examples of NRMs for each country have been chosen based on "contextual and pragmatic considerations" due to their size and "wide-ranging significance within the religious landscape." In addition, the editors tried to avoid thematic overlaps—in Japan many large NRMs belong to the Nichirenist tradition, but only two of them were included in the handbook—and were, as in the case of China and Vietnam, limited by "general unavailability of relevant expertise" (3). Historical considerations do not seem to have played a major role. In the part on Japan, for instance, Winter describes four phases of the history of NRMs in line with "commonly accepted schemes" (29). Although the first phase of NRMs (the "old new religions") starts with the Bakumatsu period (1853–67) and extends through the Meiji period (1868–1912), he also included Tenrikyō (founded in 1838) as a prototype of later emerging NRMs. The representative example for the first phase is Ōmoto. The second phase—in Japanese literature the term "wave" is preferred—covers the 1920s and 1930s. During this time of increased scrutiny and suppression, the number of groups identified by the state as NRMs decupled from 1924 to 1935. Six out of the eleven NRMs included in the part on Japan were founded in this period. After Japan's defeat in 1945, the new Religious Corporations Law (Shūkyō hōjin-hō 宗教法人法) of 1951 opened the season for a third wave of NRM foundations which, however, has no representative in this handbook. The fourth wave starts in the 1970s and leads to the emergence of the "new new religions" which share some characteristics with the New Age movement and are represented here with three examples.

While works of the founder, print and online media issued by the NRMs and previous studies are the main sources used in this handbook, a total of six chapters also cite from interviews taken with believers and representatives. Needless to say, not only the bibliographies of the introductory chapters, but of the individual chapters as well are valuable resources for further study.

At the beginning of this review, I noted that the handbook can be seen as a contribution to an emerging trend in historical studies on East Asia. Since the 1980s the new concept of "global history" has been promoted as an alternative to the Western-centric historiographical categories of "world history" or "history of civilizations." Under the new paradigm scholars seek to overcome the boundaries of national historiographies by focusing on transregional and/or transcontinental links and networks as well as the commonalities and differences in historical development which they see as characterized by polycentricism. As a response to historiographical Western-centrism "global history" pays special attention to developments in the "Global South." The concept has been welcomed in East Asia, too, where emphasis so far is put on rewriting the history of the region in the context of globalization (cf. Haneda 2016).

Studies approaching religious phenomena from this perspective, however, are still rare. On the subject of NRMs Lucas and Robbin (2004), on Japanese religions in global perspective Dessì (2017) can be given as examples, whereas for the case of Christianity the "Munich School of World Christianity" systematically engaged in research from the perspective of "global history" that stresses transcontinental South–South relations (cf. *The Journal of World Christianity* 6 (1), 2016 (Special Issue "The 'Munich School of World Christianity'")). In this context, Yang (2018) calls for the recognition of East Asia as the "Global

East"[9] due to "the cultural and social differences of East Asian societies from the rest of the world" while asserting that "religion in the Global East presents theoretical and methodological challenges for the social scientific study of religion [in general]" (7). Paying attention to communities of migrants from East Asia around the world and the reception of East Asian religiosity in the "West," he adds, "religion in the Global East presents great opportunities for the social scientific study of religion in the globalizing world as well" (ibid.).

At first glance, with its clear definition of the East Asian region, restriction of presented NRMs to it and stress on their connectedness to the cultural heritage of the region, the handbook's editors seem to be conscious of the "global history" approach while intending to understand NRMs as a phenomenon of the region. Yet, the handbook does not establish a common historical timeline for the development of NRMs in East Asia nor attempt to detect commonalities and differences between them. Rather its introductions as well as the discussion of individual cases are predominantly limited to the national context, also largely leaving out migration and global expansion as influential factors in the NRMs' development. Regarding the impact of migration, Clart's chapter on Yīguàn Dào seems to be an exception. Yet, Clart does not discuss migration as a contributor to the group's expansion, but uses it to question the group's proclaimed "globality."

The NRMs are introduced above all as local actors and (except for Stalker's chapter on Ōmoto) their global aspirations are addressed in the subchapter of "Recent Developments." Despite references to the NRMs' global outreach[10] (with the exception of Günzel's chapter on Fóguāngshān) the impact of these endeavors on the NRMs' teachings, rituals and organizational structure is not discussed. Needless to say, the global expansion of East Asian NRMs makes them contributors to global culture. This aspect, however, must be analyzed together with the reverse impact of the "relativizing forces of globalization" on East Asian NRMs which will necessarily question their rootedness in East Asian cultural heritage, that is, their "East Asianness" (cf. Dessì 2017). Today, most East Asian NRMs are extensively active outside of their country of origin and indeed already share many characteristics with multinational corporations (cf. Smith 2002). Consequently more attention must be payed to how their "globalization" is affecting their East Asian identity.

Given the above described developments in historical studies, I think we need more studies which compare individual cases, developments, and propositions across the East Asian region and watch out for interrelations. Ultimately aiming at the integration of national histories with global history, such studies would first have to provide a methodology to integrate the history of East Asian countries/subregions into East Asian history. Religious phenomena—and religious movements with strong expansive impulses such as NRMs in particular—provide an excellent material for such studies.

## NOTES

1. Of the twenty-nine authors, four have East Asian background and three were academically based in East Asia at the time of publication.
2. It should be noted, however, that these numbers contradict with country based statistics. Although in Japan, for instance, the official census does not distinguish NRMs from traditional religious groups, Inoue estimated the number of NRM believers four years prior to Johnson and Grim at about 10% of the population (Inoue 2009, 18). Ishii suggests that 350–400 NRMs were active and managed to keep a certain membership after 2000 (Ishii 2010, 130).
3. Yet, at least from the country introduction it seems that Korean scholars developed a much greater variety of terms for use in the academia.
4. Handbooks on NRMs published in Japan such as Inoue et al. (2001) or Murakami (1980) list only Japanese NRMs.
5. In a resolution the participants "promise to bring their respective teachings to bear, support the Imperial household and promote national morality." They further "expect the authorities to respect religion and harmonize [the spheres of] politics, education and religion, so that they will be able to contribute to further national development" (*Kirisutokyō Sekai* (Christian World), February 29, 1912, 10).
6. As indicated above the handbook defines crisis in line with deprivation theory: "'Crisis' is a defining factor of the human condition, a biographical disruption triggered by perceived deprivation" (10).
7. In contrast to the general introduction, the individual chapters speak of charismatic leadership instead of hierarchical structure.
8. Although the alleged emphasis of NRMs on "this-worldly benefits" (Japanese: *genze riyaku* 現世利益) has dominated academic discussions on NRMs for a long time, only four references to "this-worldly" can be found in the handbook. On the other hand, the term "benefit" appears frequently and in many cases as "to the benefit of others." Thus, the descriptions of the NRMs in this handbook seem to mirror the latest self-image of NRMs and discussions about their social engagement.
9. Yang's notion of "Global East" includes migrant communities outside of East Asian territory.
10. For Japan four cases, for Korea one case, for China/Taiwan three cases, and for Vietnam none.

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