

ESOTERICISM IN EAST ASIA

Cultural Interpretation and Politics



EDITED BY CHIENHUI CHUANG, SANGYUN HAN & JULIAN STRUBE

Esotericism in East Asia

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Acknowledgments

We, the editors, would like to express our deepest gratitude for the generous support and collaboration we received from scholars across diverse fields and regions, which made it possible to compile this volume exploring the multifaceted landscape of what may be discussed under the term “esotericism” in modern and contemporary East Asia.

This volume builds upon the theoretical interventions and the diverse expertise of a range of scholars who aimed at a critical reexamination of intellectual and institutional assumptions behind conceptualizations of “esotericism” in various fields, including Asianist disciplines and “Western esotericism.” Most fundamentally, this volume seeks to develop regionally grounded perspectives by situating “esotericism” within the specific historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts of East Asia. We hope that this interplay between theoretical reflection and regional analysis will contribute meaningfully to the development of global esotericism studies in the years to come.

The conversations that eventually led to this volume date back to the early 2010s and were shaped through a series of workshops and online meetings, including a conference at the University of Heidelberg in 2015. To recognize the global significance of esotericism, the 2015 Heidelberg conference *Theosophy Across Boundaries* sought to revise the Western-centric paradigm by incorporating Asian Studies and other academic disciplines, and by recontextualizing Theosophy as a global and transnational movement. This initiative resonated with scholars of Theosophical movements in Asia and helped lay the groundwork for new lines of research. This collaborative effort involved scholars based in Japan, China, Korea, Europe, and North America.

One of the key platforms that inspired this endeavor was the East Asian Network for the Academic Study of Esotericism (EANASE), established in 2020 as a successor to the Japanese Network for the Academic Study of Esotericism (JNASE), which had been active since 2016. EANASE was founded with the aim of addressing the scholarly gap in the study of “esotericism” in modern Asia, while fostering interdisciplinary and transregional dialogue beyond linguistic and disciplinary boundaries. Its international workshops, held in Tokyo (2019), Vienna (2023), Amsterdam (2024), and Chiba (2025), promoted approaches that

resisted treating “esotericism” merely as a Western import, instead emphasizing the contested and manifold meanings of this term as the results of entanglements with religious, political, and philosophical developments in Asia. What emerged as particularly fruitful is approaching the underlying cultural exchanges through the perspective of a global religious history.

This volume may be seen as one concrete result of these ongoing dialogues. It is intended to further substantiate the conversation between cutting-edge, global approaches to the study of esotericism and established networks that have focused on East Asia thus far. In this spirit, we would like to explicitly acknowledge the pioneering work of EANASE, which was founded by the late Yoshinaga Shin’ichi (1957–2022), who ironically described himself as a scholar of “pseudo-religions,” and a pioneering figure in the study of modern Japanese Buddhism, occultism, utopian thought, and social movements. His commitment to integrating “marginal” intellectual traditions—such as Theosophy—into the broader field of religious studies posed important methodological and historiographical challenges. The values and intellectual networks that shaped EANASE were deeply rooted in Yoshinaga’s scholarly vision and sense of social engagement, and his spirit is embedded throughout this volume. We were deeply saddened by his passing in 2022, a profound loss to our community. We hope that his legacy and intellectual curiosity will resonate with readers of this book.

The chapters gathered here address an exceptionally wide range of topics—from Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism to yoga, political movements, and subcultures—all of which shed light on how understandings of “esotericism” were transformed and practiced in East Asia from the modern period onward. Despite various personal and institutional challenges, each contributor committed themselves to the writing and revision process and made extraordinary efforts to collaborate across different academic cultures and linguistic settings.

Finally, we are especially grateful to the external reviewers and the editorial team at Bloomsbury Publishing for their unwavering support. We sincerely thank them for embracing a volume that is both methodologically ambitious and regionally distinctive, and for their patience and professionalism throughout the editorial process.

We hope this book will serve as a foundation for further scholarly dialogue and collaboration, and that it encourages a rethinking of both the geographical and theoretical horizons of esotericism studies.

Note to the Reader

Throughout this volume, the names of East Asian figures (Japanese, Chinese, and Korean) mentioned in the texts are presented according to their native convention, that is, with the surname preceding the given name. Names from other cultural contexts follow the standard Western convention, with the given name preceding the surname. With regard to romanization, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean terms and names are rendered according to the Modified Hepburn, Hanyu Pinyin (without tone marks), and McCune–Reischauer systems, respectively. Minor variations in romanization may occur depending on established conventions for names and other terms. The editors' names on the cover appear in alphabetical order by surname.

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Introduction

What Is “Esotericism” in East Asia? Historical and Methodological Perspectives

Chienhui Chuang, Sangyun Han, and Julian Strube

This volume appears at a time when the study of “esotericism” is rapidly diversifying and developing in various directions. While this is an exciting development, there is a greater need than ever for conversations about academic approaches to this elusive subject. As editors, we hope that the chapters in this volume contribute to such conversations by addressing two major challenges. First, there is a notable lack of clarity regarding what “esotericism” may or may not mean in different contexts. Second, there is a persistent separation between different fields of study, prominently including those dedicated to East Asia.

As for the first challenge, many readers will be aware of the ubiquity of “esoteric” terminology in scholarship on East Asia. In Japan, for example, the term “esotericism” is often associated with “secret teachings” (*mikkyō* 密教), especially within Buddhist traditions, and this connection has been the subject of substantial scholarly attention. Because the term itself implies secrecy, *mikkyō* is often regarded as a representative example of what is considered “esoteric” (inner, concealed) in contrast to “exoteric” (outer, public). On the other hand, elements that have been labeled “esoteric” can also be observed in Daoist rituals and “folk” religious practices in China, Korean “shamanism,” and Japanese Shinto practices. Nevertheless, as the discussions within this volume demonstrate, it is impossible to fully comprehend, recognize, or translate all of these practices through predominant Western-centered conceptual frameworks of “esotericism.” Thus, it is essential to understand the histories of terms in relation to the specific contexts and characteristics of each region. To be sure, we can draw on a variety of valuable studies on related subjects, such as “new religious movements” and modern “spirituality” in East Asia (e.g., Borup and Fibiger 2017; Pokorny and Winter 2018). Important work has also been done on the “Western” reception

of “Eastern” ideas and practices that may fall under the rubric of “esotericism” (e.g., Pokorny and Winter 2021, 2024, 2026). Yet, thus far, the focus has mostly rested on reception history, rather than on more decentered or entangled historiographies. There is an urgent need for more systematic reflection among Asianists regarding the use of “esoteric” terminology, and we hope that this volume will give some impetus to that effect.

This is also necessary with regard to fields studying “esotericism” beyond East Asia, which leads us to the second challenge. As is well-known, the academic study of “esotericism” was institutionally established in European religious studies under the designation “Western esotericism,” a field that has served as a major site for methodological reflection over the past few decades. Within this tradition, “esotericism” has often been defined as a form of “rejected knowledge” rooted in the intellectual and cultural heritage of the “West” (for a critical assessment, see Asprem 2021). While this development stressed the historical and context-dependent nature of the concept of “esotericism”—opening up an academic perspective that cuts across the traditional boundaries of religion, science, and philosophy—the qualifier “Western” still functions, in some respects, as an obstacle to crossing another boundary: that between “East” and “West.” Indeed, experts in the field of “Western esotericism” have often stressed that a “Western” esotericism does not imply an “Eastern” esotericism, but we are today facing a *de facto* division of scholarship into just that, considering areas of study such as “esoteric Buddhism” (see Strube 2024d). Although it is now widely acknowledged that what is considered “esoteric” in European history incorporates diverse elements from non-Western cultures in complex ways (e.g., Hanegraaff 2025), there remains a dominant tendency to conceptualize “esotericism” primarily as a “Western” phenomenon that was exported into other regions, the latter cast as the victim of a “terminological imperialism.”

In recent years, esotericism scholars have increasingly engaged with global historical approaches to address such issues (e.g., Granholm 2013; Asprem 2014; Bergunder 2016; Strube 2021). However, without a critical reassessment of the qualifier “Western,” attempts to globalize the field risk reproducing a diffusionist model—one that presumes a unidirectional flow of ideas from a culturally central “West” to a passive “East.” This also concerns recent debates about the pitfalls of “Eurocentric bias” within more praxeologically and comparatively oriented projects, which have highlighted that “East Asia clearly remains a foreign territory” (Lackner et al. 2025: 349, 352). These persistent challenges underscore the need for renewed scholarly dialogue on how to approach the

study of “esotericism” in an inclusive and methodologically self-reflective manner.

It is important to note that our aim is not to argue for the existence of two entities called “Eastern” and “Western” esotericism, and neither do we understand esotericism as something universal. Rather, we argue from a historical perspective that notions of “esoteric” have been shaped by centuries of cultural exchange, not least between Europe and Asia. Exchange explicitly encompasses conflict and power asymmetries, particularly those inherent in the colonial and missionary contexts in which such interactions have occurred, both historically and in the present. Our regional focus on East Asia does not claim to be exhaustive, but hopefully will serve as a stimulus for similar research focusing on the same as well as on other regions, which will contribute to more robust methodologies for examining “esotericism” from global perspectives.

The chapters in this volume approach the above issues from diverse angles and perspectives. They offer contextual analyses of the *historical use* of terms such as “esoteric” and “occult” within and in relation to Asia; they trace the *genealogies* of terms such as “esoteric Buddhism” and “esoteric Shinto” in Asia and beyond; and critique the *scholarly constructions* of “esotericism” as a universal object of study, as well as the distinction between “Western esotericism” and its (at least implied) “Eastern” counterparts. In what follows, we propose a common foundation for these and future conversations by first providing a broad historical overview of selected historical developments of “esoteric” terminology, before returning to some methodological and theoretical deliberations.

A Brief Overview of “Esoteric” Terminology Between Europe and East Asia

The Study of “Esoteric Buddhism” as a Starting Point from the Present

As noted above, there is an ongoing debate as to whether “esotericism” is a distinctly Western concept that was subsequently exported to other parts of the world, thereby carrying with it the legacy of colonialism and Christian missionary activity. Indeed, the term “esoteric Buddhism” itself seems to be a typical example of a European import within a colonial context. It was first popularized by the Theosophist Alfred P. Sinnett (1840–1921) in his 1883 book, *Esoteric Buddhism* (Rudbøg and Sand 2020; Harlass 2021). Scholars of “esoteric

Buddhism” typically provide meticulous philological studies, careful textual interpretations, and thorough analyses to support their choice of terminology. However, they seldom explain their reasons for adopting the very term *esoteric*, and sometimes there seems to be a certain unease about the apparent nineteenth-century provenance of the term (Strube 2024d; also see Gaitanidis and Klautau, forthcoming). Charles Orzech, for instance, simply references the *Oxford English Dictionary*, highlighting Sinnett’s book alongside texts by other Theosophists, subsequent missionary literature, and the scholarship of the famous Orientalist pioneer of religious studies, Friedrich Max Müller. He writes: “This decidedly quirky and colonialist genealogy is cause for caution in adopting the term ‘Esoteric Buddhism,’ though it appears that its origins have been largely forgotten” (Orzech 2006: 40–1). We, the editors of this volume, believe that it is precisely an examination of this term’s “forgotten history” that will provide us with valuable insights into how we can study the subject of esotericism today.

Although considerable debate persists, scholars working on “esoteric Buddhism” generally concur that the concept involves: (1) notions of secrecy; (2) certain ritualistic practices that necessitate initiation by an authoritative teacher; and (3) functioning effectively as a claim to authority rather than signifying a specific lineage, tradition, or school (Strube 2024d: 112). Interestingly, the precise rationale behind employing the term “esoteric” to characterize these Buddhist forms remains unclear. In their extensive handbook on *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, the editors propose that “esoteric,” despite its modern origin, is appropriate because it parallels native terms such as the Chinese *mijiao* 密教 and the Japanese *mikkyō*, along with the Indic *guhya*, each carrying connotations of secrecy. Nevertheless, the editors urge caution against oversimplified equivalences, given the absence of a straightforward, empirical phenomenon corresponding directly to these terms. Instead, teachings and practices labeled with these terms are embedded within complex historical contexts marked by ideological conflicts, power struggles, anachronistic interpretations, and varying objectives (Orzech et al. 2011: 10–13).

Disagreement persists concerning both the historical emergence and geographical origin of what might legitimately be termed “esoteric Buddhism” between India and China. However, the Japanese division between “esoteric” and “exoteric” (*kengyō* 顕教), prominently employed in Shingon and Tendai Buddhism, can be traced to the works of the monk Kūkai 空海 (774–835) (Sharf 2002: 264–5). Similarly, the Chinese concepts of *mijiao* and its “exoteric”

counterpart, *xianjiao* 顯教, were employed to classify Buddhist doctrines from roughly the fifth through the eighth centuries and beyond (McBride 2004: 330–1). These terminological distinctions themselves became arenas for ideological struggle, exemplified when Shingon scholars differentiated between “pure” (*junmitsu* 純密) and “miscellaneous” or “impure” (*zōmitsu* 雜密) forms (Orzech 2006: 41).

There is broad consensus among scholars that “esoteric Buddhism” did not represent a singular tradition and that terms such as *mijiao* and *mikkyō* frequently functioned as rhetorical devices to assert superiority over competing groups. Richard McBride points out that the distinctions between “esoteric” and “exoteric” were not always claims of novelty; rather, they often featured in polemical debates (McBride 2004: 332). The label “esoteric” sometimes simply indicated superiority, asserting a special status within broader Mahayana traditions due to ritual methods aimed at transcending duality and achieving buddhahood (McBride 2004: 335; cf. Sharf 2002: 227–8; Orzech 2006: 42; Sørensen 2011: 174–5).

Central to these debates was the notion of secrecy, typically associated with initiation (*abhiṣeka*) by a qualified master (*ācārya*), mirroring the Hindu guru-disciple relationship. Texts frequently assert that specific methods were secretive, reserved exclusively for those initiated, and ritual knowledge and related material culture were commonly organized along lineage (Orzech 2006: 68–71; McBride 2004: 347; Orzech et al. 2011: 11–13; Sørensen 2011: 172). As mentioned above, this secrecy and exclusivity contrasted sharply with the widespread popularity and mainstream acceptance of “esoteric Buddhism.” Indeed, the opening statement of the handbook on *Esoteric Buddhism* emphasizes that this form of Buddhism likely had the most extensive geographical spread (Orzech et al. 2011: 3). What then makes it “esoteric”?

Among its defining features, scholars frequently highlight the belief in the efficacy of specialized language (*dhāraṇī*, *mantra*), the pursuit of exceptional abilities (*siddhi*), and the possibility of immediate buddhahood based on the inherent buddhanature of all beings (Davidson 2002: 117 *passim*; Orzech 2006: 40–1; Orzech et al. 2011: 14). Robert H. Sharf cautions, however, that these characteristics were broadly shared across Chinese Buddhist traditions, whether elite, popular, monastic, or lay (Sharf 2002: 278). Conversely, Henrik H. Sørensen identifies “esoteric Buddhism” as emerging from a distinct Mahayana orientation emphasizing ritualistic and magical practices (Sørensen 2011: 157). Sørensen views this not as a separate school but rather as a movement focused on achieving both spiritual and practical goals through rituals, notably *dhāraṇī*

or “spells” (Sørensen 2011: 159). Certain ritual methods, notably those involving sexuality, were explicitly considered unsuitable for public practice.

From this perspective, specific teachings and practices may differentiate “esoteric Buddhism” from other Buddhist forms without constituting a uniform category. With this in mind, it is important to stress that neither the power dynamics of secrecy nor associations with “magic” should mislead us to think that we are dealing with “typically esoteric” subjects. Some scholars critique the scholarly tendency to associate ritual practices involving invocation of deities or spirits with notions of “magic” or “mysticism,” suggesting these perspectives carry Protestant-influenced biases favoring an imagined “original Buddhism” devoid of ritual. Sharf emphasizes that rituals, including frequent chant recitations and *dhāraṇī* usage, were commonplace even in openly practiced, non-secret contexts (Sharf 2005: 249–53). A clear consensus on the precise nature of “esoteric Buddhism” thus remains elusive.

Jesuit-Asian Encounters and Cultural Interpretation Since the Sixteenth Century

Several historical reasons may be identified to explain why scholars are so comfortable with using the label “esoteric” to describe their objects of study, despite the unclarity pointed out above (Strube 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2024d; also see the India-focused case study in Strube 2022). Again, these reasons should not suggest that there is one universal esotericism with various local manifestations, or that we can observe meetings between “Western” and “Eastern” varieties of esotericism. Rather, one can observe “how the distinction between inner and outer, secret and public, esoteric and exoteric teachings and practices has become an interpretative structure of Asianist scholarship” through centuries of cultural exchange (Strube 2024b: 10). Since the sixteenth century, the use of terms such as *esotericus*, *occultus*, *esoterisch*, *ésotérique*, *esoteric*, *arcanus*, *acroamaticus*, and so forth have often been used not only to refer to classical narratives of a *philosophia perennis*, to which supposed Asian origins (e.g., among “gymnosophists”) were integral, but also to engage in cultural comparison (Strube 2023).

As shown by Urs App, the distinction between an “inner” and an “outer” Buddhist doctrine was central to European interpretations of Asian religions (App 2010, 2012). As far as we know, it emerged from Jesuit encounters in Japan where Francis Xavier (1506–1552) and his companions arrived in 1549. Initial confusions arose from cultural translations. Terms like God were equated with Dainichi 大日 (i.e., *Dainichi Nyorai* 大日如来 or Vairocana), the Sun Buddha in

Shingon Buddhism, causing Japanese hosts to initially view Jesuits as Buddhist reformers. Jesuits, in turn, misunderstood Buddhist terms, prompting them to better grasp these concepts for missionary purposes in the spirit of the Jesuit technique of *accommodatio*, the adaptation of Christian concepts to local contexts. In 1556, a Jesuit *Sumario de los errores* identified Shinto and listed Buddhist “sects,” notably Zen, characterized by an inner doctrine leading to dual meanings in teachings, distinguishing between common beliefs in heaven and hell and an elite secret belief in “emptiness” (Ruiz-de-Medina 1990: 666–7; see Strube 2024b: 12 for more details).

The Jesuits gradually recognized actual distinctions between “outer” teachings for common people (*gonkyō* 権教) and “inner” teachings (*jikkyō* 実教) for advanced practitioners, based on Buddhist classification systems originating in China (Strube 2024b: 12–14; Orzech, Sørensen, et al. 2011). Kukai had indeed differentiated “open teachings” (*kengyō* 顕教) from “secret teachings” (*mikkyō* 密教). Thus, although flawed, Jesuit perceptions referenced genuine historical distinctions prominent in China and Japan. The Jesuit Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) further systematized these distinctions in his 1586 *Catechismus Christianae fidei*, highlighting inner-outer distinctions (Valignano 1586: 4r–4v). He detailed how Japanese sects, notably Zen Buddhists and Shintoists, pursued meditation practices returning all existence to a formless principle. Valignano’s catechism, disseminated widely in Europe, influenced missionaries like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who initially adopted Buddhist monastic identities in China but later shifted alliances to Confucianism, viewing it as a preservation of primordial monotheism corrupted by Daoism and Buddhism (App 2010: 19–26). Conversely, João Rodrigues (1561–1633) opposed Ricci’s strategy, associating Chinese literati with ancient paganism from the Middle East (Cooper 1981: 238–9).

Following the beginning of European colonization of the Americas and the “East Indies” starting in the late fifteenth century, Renaissance intellectuals—previously fixated on Egypt and the (supposed) teachings of Hermes Trismegistus in search of an ancient, universal monotheism—began increasingly directing their interest toward the far East (Strube 2024b: 15). Guillaume Postel (1510–1581), for instance, claimed that the Brahmans descended directly from Abraham and had safeguarded antediluvian texts and ancient wisdom. This illustrates how initial Jesuit engagements with distinctions between inner and outer teachings, often signified as esoteric and exoteric, became entwined with broader historical frameworks that connected ancient Egypt, India, and East Asia, constructing a narrative of cultural transmission and development.

These speculations intensified throughout the seventeenth century. Athanasius Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652) explicitly drew parallels between Egyptian mysteries and East Asian teachings, dividing Chinese and Japanese religious traditions into philosophically elite Zen Buddhists and mass-oriented Pure Land Buddhists. Kircher saw parallels between Amida worshippers and ancient Egyptian practices, emphasizing distinctions between learned inner doctrines and popular superstitions (Strube 2024b: 15–16). Similar notions appeared in Martino Martini's *Novus atlas Sinensis* (1655), depicting Buddhism as teaching dual doctrines of idolatry and emptiness, closely aligned with Pythagorean philosophies. Such interpretations became widespread and went far beyond the confines of Jesuit (or broadly Catholic) discourse. The Lutheran theologian Gottlieb Spitzel (1639–1691), for instance, influenced by Kircher and Martini, connected East Asian teachings to Egyptian and Pythagorean mysticism, perceiving a universal symbolic philosophy rooted in Hermetic and Kabbalistic traditions. The historian Daniel Georg Morhof (1639–1691), in his *Polyhistor* (1688), further developed this comparative framework, linking Asian and European esoteric traditions through concepts such as exoteric and acroamatic (secret) teachings, underscoring the pervasive symbolic nature of Asian philosophical systems like the *Yijing* 易經 (Strube 2023: 362, 2024b: 20–1).

These concepts became pivotal in the Spinoza debates of the late seventeenth century, notably in Pierre Bayle's (1647–1706) influential *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697, followed by many editions until the nineteenth century), which associated Spinoza's atheism with Asian philosophical traditions (Israel 2006: 640–62, 2013; Weststeijn 2007; App 2010: 149–53, 2012: 219–37). Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) challenged the common negative portrayal of Chinese doctrines. Instead, he emphasized the rational parallels between Confucianism and Christian theology (Strube 2024b: 22–3; also see Li and Poser 2000; Israel 2006: 652–7; Dew 2009: 240, *passim*). While intrigued by claims of secret teachings, Leibniz prioritized publicly accessible Confucian concepts, promoting a universal, rational theological discourse bridging China and Europe. Throughout the early eighteenth century, the idea of hidden teachings became commonplace in European discussions of Asian thought. These narratives, still referring to the Jesuit sources discussed above, profoundly shaped encyclopedias and prominent historical works, including Johann Jakob Brucker's *Kurtze Fragen aus der philosophischen Historie* (1731–6) and its influential Latin successor, the *Historia critica Philosophiae*, a main reference for Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (Strube 2023: 369–70, 2024b: 24–5).

In these works, the recurring themes first established in the sixteenth century persisted in shaping scholarly discourse through successive generations into the nineteenth century. Despite significant transformations within that period—driven notably by rapid professionalization and the rise of rigorous philological methods—it can be argued that these developments have shaped, in highly context-dependent ways, scholarly terminologies up to the present day. What becomes evident is that narratives forming part of the genealogy of the term “esotericism” have fundamentally included references to East Asia, which from an early point on were shaped by exchanges between Europeans and Asians on the ground. Understanding and implementing the related complexities, the ruptures, continuities, ambiguities, and contradictions is a challenge that will require more interdisciplinary and multiperspective research.

Terminology in Modern Asian Contexts: Selection and Omission Arising from Untranslatability and Gaps in Translation

Taking up the challenge requires moving beyond the interpretive lens of Western conceptual frameworks and reception histories. This shift in focus is one of the main objectives of this volume. What we suggest is not an either-or situation, not a replacement of “Western” perspectives with “Eastern” ones. Rather, we argue that adopting an *entangled history* approach is crucial to investigating how meanings of “esotericism” have formed historically. A key issue in understanding these developments in modern East Asia is the problem of language and vocabulary. At the outset, it is important to keep in mind that there is no fixed understanding of “esotericism” in “the West.” This means we cannot assume the translatability of stable concepts across different languages or cultural and historical contexts.¹ When we focus on the term “esotericism” itself, we can observe that, in “non-Western” settings, no single, widely accepted equivalent has been established. Instead, a variety of expressions—such as “mysticism,” “esoteric Buddhism,” “secret teachings,” “occult,” “mysterious learning,” or “occult studies”—have been used depending on the context. These terms, in turn, are themselves ambiguous, contested, and often associated with what is called “esotericism” in the West. To approach this difficult situation, we may examine how discrepancies and absences in translation and vocabulary reflect deeper institutional and cultural conditions that determine what can be spoken about, and how. This can help us to explore how conceptual and institutional boundaries have taken shape in East Asia itself, and how regional histories of translation, religion, and knowledge

production have interacted with—and sometimes redefined—the very notion of the “esoteric.”

In Japan, terms such as “mysticism” (*shinpi shugi* 神秘主義), “esoteric Buddhism” (*mikkyō* 密教), “secret teaching” (*hikyō* 秘教), and “occult” (*okaruto* オカルト) have been used in different contexts to refer to concepts that may be associated with “esotericism.” However, each of these terms is related to specific disciplinary or cultural spheres—such as philosophy of religion, Buddhist studies, or popular culture—and thus cannot serve as a precise or consistent translation. For instance, in the 1873 dictionary *Eiwa jii* 英和字彙 (An English-Japanese Lexicon), “mysticism” was translated as *hikyō*, while “esotericism” was translated more descriptively as “secret doctrine” (*himitsu no oshie* 秘密の教) (Shibata and Koyasu 1873: 337, 745). Furthermore, in an 1884 Japanese-English dictionary, *hikyō* was listed as the equivalent for “esotericism,” while “theory of spirits and deities” (*kishinron* 鬼神論) was given for “mysticism” (Sano 1884: 4). There are also cases where “esotericism” is described using the phrase “mysterious-esoteric doctrine” (*genpishugi* 玄秘主義) in reference to Shingon Buddhism (Hara 1973: 164). In contemporary usage, however, it is arguably the word “occult” (*okaruto*) that is more widely recognized by the general public (Gaitanidis and Klautau 2024; Han 2024). As these examples show, there is still no fixed or widely accepted Japanese equivalent for “esotericism” today.

In the case of China, a 1924 report in the major newspaper *Shenbao* 申報 covered a lecture held by a local branch of the Theosophical Society, stating that the organization’s primary purpose was to conduct research on “spiritual science” (*lingxue* 靈學). In the same year, *Shenbao* also published an explanatory article on the term *lingxue*, noting:

Western spiritual science is generally divided into two types. One is referred to as “psychical research” (et al. *xinlingxue* 心靈學), with its headquarters located in London and founded by a number of well-known figures. Its scope of study goes beyond mere physical phenomena to include mysterious techniques such as clairvoyance and suggestion. These are said to be effective in eliciting confessions from criminals and treating mental illness. Some even refer to these methods as “mental telepathy.” (“Jiang Kanghu yanjiang waiguo lingxue” 1924: 27)

The second type was referred to as “spiritual theology” (*shenlingxue* 神靈學), which was described as focusing on phenomena involving communication between the human spirit and a divine being that exists beyond human existence. This category was said to include practices such as “planchette writing” (*fujī* 扶乩), which sought to communicate with the will of the dead. It was also noted

that similar practices could be found in Western countries (“Yanjiang xuzai” 1924: 28). As these examples clearly show, not only was there no standard translation for “esotericism,” but terms such as “Theosophy,” “psychical research,” and “spiritualism” were often used interchangeably and without clear distinction.

In South Korea as well, there has been no standard translation for terms such as “esotericism” or “occult.” In 1975, the popularity of the American film *The Exorcist* sparked an “occult boom,” which led to the production of numerous works in South Korea that explored the theme of the occult.² This influence of the film was also observed in Japan around the same time and is considered a major factor in the establishment of the term “occult” within the Japanese lexicon (Ōmichi 2021: 172). According to a search conducted using South Korea’s largest search engine, NAVER, and the NAVER News Library, it appears that the term “occult” is still commonly used today, while “esotericism” remains generally unfamiliar to the public.³

Such variations in vocabulary are not merely a matter of linguistic difference; rather, they are closely connected to the institutional and cultural boundaries that determine which terms are permitted—or not permitted—for public or scholarly use. For example, when explaining the concept of *lingxue* mentioned above, it was often described using preexisting Chinese concepts and vocabulary. This indicates that limitations in available terminology had a direct impact on how people thought about and understood such practices.

It is important to ask why terms such as “esotericism” and “Theosophy” have been translated into a variety of expressions in East Asia, including mysticism (Jp. *shinpi gaku*, *shinpi shugi*; Ch. *shenmi zhui*; Ko. *sinbijjuŭi*), “esoteric/secret teachings” (Jp. *hikyō*; Ch. *mijiao*; Ko. *milgyo*), “Theosophy” (Jp. *reichigaku*, *shinchigaku*; Ch. *shenzhi xue*, *tianrenmingdao xue*, *zhengdao xue*; Ko. *sinjihak*), “occultism” (Jp. *okarutizumu*; Ch. *shenmi zhui*, *shenmi lun*; Ko. *okŏlt’ijŭm*, *sinbijjuŭi*). What matters is not only the translations themselves but also who translated them, for what purposes, and with which sets of vocabulary. In order to address these issues, the following section examines some of the institutional frameworks that influenced the categorization of ideas and practices, as well as their translation.

Inconsistencies in Institutional Frameworks

In modern East Asia, ideas and practices regarded as “mystical” or “supernatural”—that is, “esoteric” topics—have long been excluded from the legitimate domains of scholarship and institutions. This tendency was not merely a result of religious

prejudice or rationalist values; it was deeply connected to the process by which East Asian countries established themselves as modern nation-states, adopting the ideals of “civilization” and “scientification” as indicators of social progress. During modernization, binary oppositions such as “rational/irrational,” “public/private,” and “science/superstition” became firmly embedded within education and institutions. As a result, religion and spiritual practices were confined to the private sphere, categorized as matters of “faith” or “individual inner life.”

Within the academic field of religious studies, as Tamaru Noriyoshi has pointed out, the common feature shared by early Japanese scholars such as Anesaki Masaharu, Uno Enkū, and Kishimoto Hideo—who pioneered the study of religion in Japan since the Meiji period—is that “they regarded religion fundamentally as a part or function of human life and activity, and they sought the core of religion in the human mind or spirit. Even when superhuman powers (such as gods or transcendental beings) are assumed, they are understood only in correlation with the human mind” (Tamaru 1984: 1176–7). In other words, religion was viewed as a form of “human spiritual activity,” a human-centered practice comparable to society and culture. From its beginning in the Meiji period, the discipline of “religious studies” was characterized not as “theology,” but as a field that approached religion as part of human culture and spirit. Within this structure, “the esoteric” came to be marginalized as something lacking academic and social legitimacy, and with each reorganization of religious institutions and systems of knowledge, it was pushed further to the periphery of those institutions. As Sueki has similarly noted, forms of popular Buddhism neglected by doctrinal or philosophical scholarship have instead been taken up in folklore studies, though without sustained dialogue between these fields (Sueki 2017: 288). In what follows, a brief outline of the reorganization of religious institutions in modern East Asia can illustrate how contemporary understandings of “esotericism” have been structured in Japan, China, and Korea.

Since the early Meiji period, while promoting the policy of separating Shinto and Buddhism, the government redefined mythology as a symbol of national order. The term *Kokka Shintō* (State Shinto) became established only later, and its formation was a gradual process. However, the government positioned the myths recorded in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* as “official history” and used them as the symbolic foundation for national unification. Within Japan’s diverse religious traditions, there existed independent mythological systems different from those in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, but presenting such alternative myths itself was regarded as an act of “disrespect to the emperor” (*fukeizai*) and became a target of religious suppression by the authorities. In this way, the state strengthened

its institutional control over the religious sphere through the construction of a unified mythological orthodoxy and the exclusion of heretical discourses (Murakami 1982: 45). It should also be noted that, in the course of these policies, not only the state but also non-state actors such as religious organizations and intellectuals played certain roles (Shimazono 2010; Komagome and Takagi 2025).

Looking at the case of modern Buddhism, after the Meiji Restoration the Japanese Buddhist community was compelled to redefine its position within a rapidly changing political and social environment. However, instead of severing ties with the state, Japanese Buddhism was construed as a “modern religion,” which could be explored as a new form of public engagement. This reorganization cannot be understood simply in terms of opposition to or subordination under State Shinto; rather, it should be seen as a complex process of negotiation in response to the demands of “civilization” within the ideological formation of the modern nation-state and the international order (Krämer and Klautau 2021).

In this process, the modern legitimacy of Buddhism was constructed through the spheres of ethics, education, and social reform. At the same time, elements regarded as “mystical” or “irrational” were gradually pushed outside the boundaries of academic and institutional legitimacy. A similar process can be observed not only in modern Japanese Buddhism but also within the Chinese Buddhist world (Schickelanz 2016). In other words, the exclusion of “the esoteric” in modern East Asia was not primarily the result of religious heresy or doctrinal conflict, but rather part of the institutional and social adjustments made in order to *adapt* to modernization in East Asia.

When tracing the formation of religious studies in postwar Japan, it is clear that its intellectual background was influenced not only by the civilizational dichotomy of “liberalism versus totalitarianism” that took root after the reforms of the Occupation period, but also by the later emergence of the “intellectuals versus the masses” framework that developed through the 1960 Anpo protests and the 1968 University of Tokyo struggles (Kurita 2024). As Isomae Jun’ichi has pointed out, the studies of “popular religion” and “new religions” by scholars such as Yasumaru Yoshio and Shimazono Susumu were developed within this historical context as attempts to give philosophical meaning to the religious autonomy of the people (Isomae 2018). Through these processes, academic research tended to confine the spiritual practices of ordinary people within the framework of “personal experience” or “freedom of belief.” In this context, while there are indeed studies within contemporary Japanese religious studies that address esoteric themes, it is often in fields such as literature, folklore, or sociology—rather than religious studies itself—that such subjects can be more

readily approached academically and tend to receive greater recognition. For example, within literary studies, Ichiyanagi Hirotaka has developed extensive research on *kaii* 怪異 (the strange or uncanny), while in the field of folklore studies, the work of Komatsu Kazuhiko has been highly influential.⁴ In recent years, Ioannis Gaitanidis's sociological analyses have also become indispensable (e.g., Gaitanidis 2024).

On the other hand, the scholar who has taken a markedly different approach to esoteric subjects from that of conventional Japanese religious studies is Yoshinaga Shin'ichi. Yoshinaga reinterpreted the occult, Theosophy, and spiritualism not as mere superstition or irrational belief, but as systems of knowledge that were deliberately excluded and marginalized during the modern reorganization of "science, reason, and religion" in Japan. In other words, the occult was not a "remnant of the unscientific," but rather the "shadow" that emerged alongside the very formation of modern knowledge. Furthermore, he analyzed occult phenomena not simply as part of religious history, but as social phenomena that developed through the circuits of publishing, mass media, and popular culture. He evaluated prewar spiritualist movements and postwar New Age thought not as expressions of "individual faith," but as movements toward the democratization and deinstitutionalization of religious expression in modern Japan (Yoshinaga 2021, 2024). Yoshinaga conducted pioneering research that treated esoteric topics not as "the enemy of science" or "outside religion," but as a creative domain arising at the intersection of modern knowledge and religion. He also founded the predecessor organization of the East Asian Network for the Academic Study of Esotericism (EANASE), a scholarly association for the study of esotericism in East Asia.

In the case of China, Paul Katz and Vincent Goossaert have pointed out the conceptual transformation of religion under Christian and Western influence. They argue that one of Christianity's most profound impacts on modern China was not institutional but intellectual: during the late nineteenth century, Western and Christian notions of "modern religion"—together with the very term *zongjiao* (religion 宗教)—were transmitted from Japan and became embedded in China's adoption of modern social science categories. As a result, China's emerging discipline of religious studies (*zongjiaoxue* 宗教學) was largely shaped by Christian conceptual frameworks. By the end of the Qing dynasty, many Chinese elites had begun to define religion through Western lenses as part of their project of national modernization, while simultaneously dismissing indigenous traditions as "superstition" (*mixin* 迷信). Influenced by Western secularization theories, they came to regard religion as a vestige

of China’s “feudal past,” although, as Katz and Goossaert note, applying the Western concept of secularization to the Chinese context requires considerable caution (Katz and Goossaert 2021: 5).

In late Qing China, amid the growing influence of Western thought (*xixue* 西學), Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909) proposed the well-known policy of “School-building on Monastic Properties” (*miaochan xingxue* 廟產興學) in 1898. This policy sought to promote Confucian education by converting the lands and temples of the declining Buddhist and Daoist establishments into modern schools. Its implementation led to the confiscation of a large number of Buddhist and Daoist properties in the name of educational modernization, and is regarded as a major turning point that forced Chinese Buddhism to undergo institutional and social reorganization in the modern era.

With the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, the Ministry of Education issued the Guidelines for the Administration of Religion (*Guanli zongjiao zhi yijianshu* 管理宗教之意見書) in the same year. Goossaert and Palmer point out that this document not only expressed the state’s intention to recognize religion as a form of social organization, but also placed the core of its “reform” (*gailiang* 改良) in the elimination of “superstitious elements”—a principle that, they note, has largely remained in place ever since (Goossaert and Palmer 2012: 58).

Echoing the state’s earlier efforts to reform religion, the intellectual world of China also entered a new phase after the May Fourth Movement, a kind of “holy war” emerged among the intellectual class, in which science was positioned as a weapon against religion and so-called mysticism. Within this trend, an atheistic stance rooted in scientism became dominant, promoting the view that all natural phenomena should be explained through scientific and empirical methods. As a result, anything that contradicted science came to be labeled as “superstition,” and religion in general was also regarded as a form of superstition. Influential intellectuals such as Hu Shih (1891–1962) and Chen Daqi (1887–1983) advocated for the legitimacy of science and criticized both traditional Chinese and imported spiritual practices—such as *fuji*, *feng shui* 風水, and *lingxue*—as superstitions. Their perspectives on religion and superstition reflected the prevailing attitudes of the emerging intellectual elite in the late Qing and early Republican periods. These views were further reinforced by Cai Yuanpei’s (1868–1940) advocacy of aesthetic education as a substitute for religion, as well as by the later introduction of Marxist atheism, which together contributed to the development of a deeply rooted anti-religious sentiment in twentieth-century China. From this period onward, religion in China was

frequently treated as “spiritual opium” and denounced as a remnant of “feudal” society. In line with this, the Nationalist government passed laws in 1928 that promoted campaigns to destroy religious statues and dismantle temples across the country (Huang 2015: 158–9).

The emphasis on “eliminating superstition” in early twentieth-century religious reforms also led many religious groups to redefine themselves in moral and social terms. In order to be recognized as legitimate “social organizations,” they sought to demonstrate their contribution to public morality and education rather than to ritual or belief. This trend is evident in the frequent use of the term “morality” (*daode* 道德) in the names and propaganda of “religious” associations. For instance, the “Daoist Universal Morality Society” (*Wanguo daode hui* 萬國道德會, founded in 1919) promoted ethical cultivation as a form of national service, while Wu Tingfang (1842–1922) rendered the Theosophical Society as “Society for Moral Communication with the Divine” (*Daode tongshen hui* 道德通神會) when he began introducing Theosophy to China in the 1910s. These examples illustrate how the moralization of religion functioned as a strategy to distance religious movements from “superstition” and align them with modern, reformist ideals.

After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, as pointed out by Zhu Wentong (2008), although the situation has been gradually improving in recent years, the study of popular religion in Chinese academia had long faced significant difficulties. Yang Fenggang classifies the history of state-religion relations in the People’s Republic of China into four distinct phases. From 1949 to 1957, the period was characterized by “cooperation and control,” during which the government sought limited collaboration with religious organizations under strict supervision. Between 1957 and 1966, the focus shifted to “the promotion of socialization,” as religion was encouraged to align with socialist ideology and state objectives. From 1966 to 1979, religion entered a phase of “elimination,” marked by severe suppression during the Cultural Revolution. Since 1979, the state has emphasized “the strengthening of legal regulations,” reestablishing religious activity within a framework of legal and administrative control (Yang 2012). Article 4 of the Regulations on Religious Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (*zongjiao shuwu tiaoli* 宗教事务条例) states:

Religious organizations, religious institutions of learning, places of religious activity, and citizens who believe in religion shall comply with the Constitution, laws, regulations and rules, practise the core socialist values, and safeguard national unity, ethnic solidarity, religious harmony, and social stability. (State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), revised 2017)

In other words, religious organizations that operate legally in China are organized and administered under the state’s religious management system, in accordance with the guiding principles of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Meanwhile, esoteric or spiritual practices that once fell outside officially recognized religions have been reframed in cultural or health-related terms—such as the widespread popularity of Qigong—as part of everyday wellness culture in contemporary China (Palmer 2007).

This institutional framework has also shaped academic approaches to “esoteric” or “spiritual” phenomena. Such topics tend to be studied primarily as part of the history of modern thought, the history of scientific ideas, or the history of psychology. For instance, in Zhang Hong-bin’s work, starting from the perspective of the history of religious thought, he examines how modern Western science challenged traditional Chinese cosmological concepts—such as those concerning comets, rainmaking, earthquakes, feng shui, and the soul (Zhang 2021).

In South Korea, where Christianity and Confucianism have had a strong influence, spirit-medium rituals performed by shamans (*mudang*) have remained culturally persistent. Nevertheless, Korean shamanism (*musok*)⁵ has been regarded as “superstition” and positioned outside the framework of modern religious institutions, and has also been marginalized in academic discourse. Shinzato Yoshinobu (2020) points to cases in postwar Korea where efforts were made to apply for the designation of *musok* not as a religion, but as part of Korea’s cultural heritage. According to Shinzato, beginning in the 1970s, shamanic practices began to be recognized as intangible cultural properties by emphasizing their artistic and folkloric aspects, while intentionally avoiding their religious dimensions. In fact, many of the official reports on such designations excluded or ignored the religious aspects of *musok*—such as divination, ritual practice, and the faith-based relationships between *mudang* and their followers. Moreover, it is interesting to note the concept of “ethnic religion” in postwar South Korean academic research. In the 1980s, there was a movement within the field of religious studies in South Korea to reevaluate the indigenous new religions of Korea, which had played a significant role in the national liberation movement under Japanese colonial rule (Sassa 2021: 33–5). Some of these new religious movements began to gain academic attention due to the rise of nationalism.

In this way, spiritual practices in Japan, China, and Korea have all been reorganized through the frameworks of state and academic institutions since the modern era. While some have been institutionalized as legitimate

traditions, many others have been excluded or marginalized in public discourse as “superstition” or “unscientific.” In this process, modern binary oppositions such as “religion/superstition” and “science/occult” have functioned as filters that restrict the very possibility of speaking about extra-institutional beliefs and spiritualities. As a result, spiritual practices and forms of knowledge have been reshaped in response to external factors such as institutional constraints, public visibility, and claims to epistemological legitimacy.

In East Asia, noninstitutional spiritual practices are rarely recognized as “religion,” and the academic frameworks necessary to study them remain underdeveloped. Consequently, what some would interpret as “esoteric” forms of knowledge and practice (such as “shamanism”) are often absorbed into the fields of folklore studies or cultural studies rather than religious studies.⁶ At the same time, subjects such as “esoteric Buddhism” are widely recognized as “mainstream” and form an integral part of everyday religious practices across the cultural spectrum. This categorizes them as anything but marginal. Therefore, any discussion of “esotericism” in East Asia must critically address asymmetries and power structures in religious institutions, the translatability of terminology, and the infrastructures of academic recognition and classification. These underlying dynamics are conditioned by local contexts as well as the global connections that shape them.

This outline has shown that, in broadly questioning the legitimacy of religion in modern and contemporary China, Japan, and Korea, each case requires careful contextualization. Although their historical trajectories differ in detail, all three cases share the marginalization of local spiritual and intellectual traditions that cannot be fully captured within the conventional category of “esotericism,” yet have often been regarded as peripheral or “non-religious” within modern institutional and academic frameworks.

Perspectives Beyond Western-Centric Paradigms

As indicated at the beginning of our introduction, we decided to include this historical overview to provide diverse examples of the historical uses of “esoteric” and related terms, which will hopefully serve as a stimulus to reconstruct their histories in more detail. It should be clear by now that we are not dealing with one thing called “esotericism” that can be the object of our research, but rather, a wide variety of highly context-dependent meanings that were often strongly contested. It is for this reason that we do not pursue an approach that aims

at establishing a definitional set of characteristics to heuristically identify the subject of esotericism in different cultural settings (in contrast to, e.g., Engler and Gardiner 2023). Instead, we trust that the historical contextualizations and genealogies provided by the contributors to this volume shed light on why and how certain subjects have been identified as “esoteric,” and how this can inform ongoing discussions about interdisciplinary approaches to the global study of esotericism.

We consider overcoming diffusionist models in the study of esotericism a prerequisite for this goal. This issue is directly tied to the role of colonialism, Orientalism, and Christian mission, which has become evident in the aforementioned summary, and which may reinforce the idea that we are dealing with typical examples of Western Orientalist and colonial projections onto Asian cultures. This, however, would overlook the scholarship that has complicated earlier perceptions of the histories of Orientalist studies and missionary activities as the unilateral diffusion of “Western” knowledge and resulting terminological imperialism. A large body of scholarship has demonstrated that understandings of religion, including Christianity, have been shaped through cultural exchanges rather than one-sided projections and impositions (for a recent example directly relevant to the present discussion, see Rubiés 2020). Examples of Jesuit *accommodatio* provide particularly instructive insights into the importance of taking the local venues of these interactions into full account (e.g., De Caro 2025; Chakravarti 2018). In China and Japan specifically, many missionaries had to adapt to local conditions that very much shaped their own perceptions. For example, Strube’s study of the collaboration between the French Jesuit Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–1793) and his friend in Beijing, the prince Hongwu 弘晔 (1743–1811), has shown how Daoism, Confucianism, and practices identified as “kung fu” were interpreted through the lens of mesmerism, significantly shaping understandings of mesmerism in both Europe and Asia (Strube 2024a; also see Statman 2017, 2019, 2023).

Furthermore, modern Western colonialism manifested quite differently in various Asian regions and at different historical periods. Even in fully colonized regions like modern India, a non-Eurocentric approach would precisely not assume that the inhabitants of Asia were simply the passive recipients of Western knowledge (see the case study on Tantra in Strube 2022). For future debates, it is crucial that scholars of “Western esotericism” participating in the debates on global approaches familiarize themselves with the relevant regional histories at different times and in different places, which requires the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration we argue for in this volume.

A valuable recent impulse to that effect has been given by the Japanese-language anthology *Theosophy and Asia* (*Shinchigaku to Ajia*; Yoshinaga 2022). The Theosophical Society formed international channels of communication through journals, correspondence, and annual gatherings, and the encounter between East and West not only reproduced colonial hierarchies, but also generated new intellectual and spiritual movements that could reshape both sides (Yoshinaga 2022: 35). Accordingly, the volume examines various aspects of the Theosophical movement in Asia through a three-part structure: “Emergence 勃興,” “Encounters 接触,” and “Circulations 波及.” It offers empirical insights into how the Theosophical movement unfolded in non-Western contexts and how it was received and transformed in various ways. It argues for recognizing the complex historical networks through which “esoteric” ideas circulated globally. At the same time, it raises a fundamental question that concerns the future direction of esotericism studies: Should these phenomena be understood simply as the reception of “Western esotericism,” or should they be reevaluated as culturally creative forms of religious and intellectual practice in non-Western settings? This question runs as a central theme throughout the entire collection.

In other words, it is suggested that, in the case of the study of esotericism in East Asia, the key task is not merely to follow the trajectory of “Western esotericism” and claim that “rejected knowledge also exists in non-Western contexts.” Specifically, we must examine what has been recognized as legitimate knowledge, what has remained unsaid or unarticulated, and how the (im)possibility of translation has shaped these processes.⁷ In this way, making visible the asymmetries in vocabulary, structure, and institutional frameworks becomes a crucial starting point for developing a response from East Asia to the growing trend of decentering esotericism studies.

This volume focuses on the processes of knowledge negotiation through which “esoteric” elements—practices and vocabularies with similar characteristics—have been translated and assigned new meanings within different cultural contexts. Drawing on the individual contributions included in this collection, it aims not only to deconstruct preexisting conceptual frameworks, but to shed light on alternative sites of construction and reconfiguration. Ultimately, *Esotericism in East Asia* does not aim to isolate regional peculiarities, but to contribute to a broader methodological conversation about how “esotericism” can be understood as a historically situated and globally entangled subject area. By foregrounding translation, institutional asymmetry, and epistemic negotiation, this volume invites a more dialogical and plural understanding of what “esotericism” has meant across cultures.

Overview of the Chapters

The two parts of this volume comprise a total of ten chapters. The topics addressed in the chapters have been selected with the aim of advancing scholarly understanding of “esotericism” in East Asia. As discussed above, we have no intention of establishing a distinct field of “Eastern esotericism” in contrast to “Western esotericism,” nor do we intend to define any field’s identity. Rather, the chapters in this volume aim to go beyond the de facto disciplinary boundary between “Western” and “non-Western” esotericism by presenting various cases in which Asian actors have actively participated in the global circulation of “esoteric” ideas and discourses, thereby shaping the history of “esotericism” in their own right.

Part 1 contains six chapters that explore how the realms of the “esoteric” and the “occult” have been discussed and conceptualized within East Asian academic, historical, and religious contexts. Rather than merely defining terms, chapters in this part address broader issues such as the translation, reconstruction, and boundary-setting of “esoteric” concepts. As a starting point, Chapter 1 by Ioannis Gaitanidis focuses on contemporary Japanese *kaii* 怪異 studies—a subfield of cultural studies that has become one of the leading academic approaches to the “occult” in Japan. Emerging in the 1990s, *kaii* studies defined the “occult” as a form of “hidden knowledge” and framed it as a type of otherness that elicits an affective response—a sensation of the uncanny or the weird—commonly referred to in the Japanese term *kaii*. At the same time, this “dark and strange Other” came to be positioned as a countercultural realm to modernity. According to Gaitanidis, such an understanding has grown out of trends in Japanese religious studies and folklore research since the 1970s, which, as seen in the case of *yōkai* 妖怪 studies, have interpreted “paranormal” phenomena as a form of primeval or natural Japanese religiosity that offers a remedy for the pathologies of modern life in Japan. However, Gaitanidis argues that this point of view—which treats *kaii* phenomena as hidden and marginalized Others—has resulted in an excessive focus on the temporary “boom” in Japanese *kaii* studies to emphasize the “occult” as a scholarly topic. Building on this insight, he argues that concepts associated with the category of the “occult” need to be examined as affect-loaded labels that are sustained by the timeliness we bestow upon them.

Chapter 2 also examines academic interpretations of the “occult” and “esotericism” in East Asia, this time focusing on the Chinese scholarly context. Davide Marino shows how Chinese scholars have engaged with “Western esotericism” while reworking its concepts through indigenous traditions and

political realities. While noting that “Western esotericism” has been translated and discussed in various ways in China, he analyzes the academic discourse that has developed around three key semantic components—神 (*shen*), 秘/密 (*mi*), and 灵 (*ling*)—which recur in most of the terms used to render the concept. He also highlights several distinctive features of the field in China, observing that discussions of esotericism extend beyond the discipline of religious studies, intersecting with sociology, history, psychology, philosophy, and even Marxist theory. Furthermore, he emphasizes the influence of state institutions in shaping the contours of esotericism-related scholarship in the Chinese context.

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, these chapters trace the discursive history surrounding *gishi* 偽史 (false history) and Koshintō—topics that are closely tied to Japanese nationalistic identity as well as have often been categorized under the label of the “occult”—from the prewar through the postwar period. Specifically, in Chapter 3, Orion Klautau examines the evolution of *gishi* narratives in Japan. He points out that the term *gishi* (false history) emerged in the 1930s–1940s as a counter-category to *seishi* 正史 (official history). A key figure in the formation of this discourse was Takeuchi Kiyomaro (1874–1965), who proposed an ultranationalist historical narrative rooted in Japanese mythology. Building on Takeuchi’s ideas, *gishi* narratives were later developed and, while they were excluded from academic and political spheres as “false” histories, they also found a new avenue of popular consumption during the occult boom of the 1970s. At that time, they resonated with widespread public fascination with mystery and alternative narratives, and came to be circulated within the broader category of “the occult.” Through this investigation, Orion argues that the Japanese “Occult” should not be seen as a static Euro-American export, but rather as a fluid and evolving category continually reshaped by local classifications, media dynamics, and political contexts.

Chapter 4 by Avery Morrow discusses the use of the concepts “esoteric” and “occult” in relation to Shinto, as well as the problems that arise from such usage. These terms have meanings and historical backgrounds rooted in Western contexts, and the chapter examines the kinds of discrepancies and misunderstandings that can occur when they are applied to Japanese religions, especially Shinto. Furthermore, by using labels such as “esoteric” and “occult,” the chapter critically investigates the historical validity of terms like “esoteric Shinto” and “Koshintō” (ancient Shinto), drawing on modern and contemporary literature and religious practices. It also analyzes examples from the modern period, including the redefinition of Shinto after the Meiji Restoration (1868), the occult boom, and the spiritual marketplace.

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, these chapters look further back in time to explore “esotericism” within the history of East Asian religions. Through these two chapters, we can glimpse a part of the long history by which the boundaries between “religion” and “heresy,” as well as between “esoteric” and “exoteric” Buddhism, were drawn in Japan. Akai Toshio’s discussion (Chapter 5) examines how the failure of mutual understanding between Japanese Buddhists and Western Theosophists in the late nineteenth century was rooted in differences in goals, lack of shared knowledge, and the broader historical background. He describes how their interaction was shaped—and distorted—by the cultural and religious “lenses” through which each side viewed the other. Using historical sources, the chapter explains the mismatch between the Japanese perception of Theosophy and the Western understanding of Japanese Buddhism. It traces how these differences led to misunderstanding, overestimation, silence, and eventual disconnection. Through this process, the chapter raises important questions about what counts as religious knowledge and who has the authority to define it, offering a critical reflection on the intersection of religious authority and cultural translation in the modern era.

Chapter 6, written by Kameyama Takahiko, examines how the concept of the unity between Perfect and Esoteric teachings was theorized and developed after the systematization of Tendai Esoteric Buddhism (*taimitsu* 台密). The doctrinal idea known as “the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings” (*enmitsu itchi* 円密一致) was formed and developed within Japanese Tendai Buddhism, which is based on the Tiantai tradition originating in China. This concept explains the doctrinal connection and complementary relationship between the “Perfect teaching” (*engyō* 円教), the core of Tendai thought, and “Esoteric Buddhism” (*mikkyō* 密教), a Buddhist tradition centered on secret oral transmissions. This chapter aims to clarify how insights from both *mikkyō* and *engyō* were integrated, through an analysis of the text *Abbreviated Procedures of Entering the Gate of Shingon, Abiding in the View That Accords with Reality, and Giving a Lecture on the Lotus Sutra* (*Nyū shingonmon jū nyojitsuken kōen hokke ryakugi* 入真言門住如実見講演法華略儀). The chapter also examines how medieval Tendai Buddhism reorganized knowledge and redefined the concept of the “esoteric,” showing how it integrated and reconstructed Esoteric Buddhism through *enmitsu itchi* to assert its own legitimacy.

Part 2 consists of four chapters (Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10) that offer meaningful discussions on how the political dynamics of East Asia influenced the transformation of esoteric thought. In Chapter 7, Chuang Chienhui examines the political entanglements and cross-border activities of the Theosophical

movement in prewar East Asia, focusing on its intersections with pan-Asianism, anti-colonialism, and international religious networks. Chienhui investigates the multifaceted activities of Indian Theosophist Hari Prasad Shastri (1882–1956), active in Japan and China during the 1910s and 1920s, using unpublished documents and multilingual sources. The chapter explores why Shastri and other Theosophists approached the Japanese pan-Asianist group “Black Dragon Society (*Kokuryūkai* 黒龍会)” and engaged with right-wing intellectuals such as Ōkawa Shūmei (1886–1957). It also analyzes Shastri’s connection with the Zionist movement in Shanghai to show how he moved between religious ideals and political realities. His activists in Shanghai illustrate how Theosophy’s “Universal Brotherhood” was transformed into tools for political and religious boundary-making. His ideological duality—moving between esoteric universalism and strategic nationalism—shaped both his message and his evolving position within global religious networks. The chapter reveals how this ideal of spiritual unity was, in practice, sometimes reconfigured into forms of religious exclusivism and political division in East Asia.

Meanwhile, Kurita Hidehiko, the author of Chapter 8, opens his discussion with a critical examination of the currently institutionalized field of Japanese religious studies. He points out that the field has primarily focused on the institutional and organizational dimensions of modern religious groups, often categorized as “new religions” (*shin shūkyō* 新宗教). Within this framework, phenomena such as the “*seishin sekai* 精神世界” (spiritual world) of the 1980s and the “spirituality boom” of the 2000s are frequently interpreted as signs of religious privatization and individualization. However, spiritual practices with political or ideological dimensions—those that cannot be fully explained within this framework—have often been overlooked.

Building on this perspective, Kurita examines how “esotericism” intersected with radical politics in post-1960s Japan, focusing on former New Left-affiliated editors—Takeda Sūgen (b. 1950), Moriya Hiroshi (b. 1944), and Shiba Hidetaka (b. 1945). Emerging from the Zenkyōtō movement, they articulated a radicalism that blended progressive, reactionary, and nationalist ideas. Through publishing that resisted both academia and commercialization, they created a unique space for esoteric thought, prompting a reassessment of their intellectual significance.

The final two chapters (Chapters 9 and 10) explore the modern development of Korean esoteric traditions—specifically *tanhak* and shamanism—within the political contexts of prewar and postwar Korean history. Sassa Mitsuki, in Chapter 9, examines the global development and local reconfiguration of esotericism through the case of a Korean *ki*-training organization, Dahn

World 단월드. While esotericism has often been seen as a Western import, this chapter reconsiders such a one-way model of “ideological transmission” and argues that Korean *ki*-training groups have served as an “arena of negotiation” where esoteric ideas are received and transformed. *Tanhak* 단학[丹學], a self-cultivation method based on Daoist internal alchemy developed during the Chosŏn Dynasty, was interrupted by colonial rule, national division, and war. Its revival began with the founding of Kuksŏndo (국선도[國仙道]) in 1970, followed by other *ki*-training groups. Rather than inheriting the past, Dahn World “de-traditionalized” practices like meditation and breathing techniques in response to postmodern conditions, addressing the individualization of spirituality and its commodification through corporate strategies. This chapter shows that such groups occupy a key position at the intersection of shifting traditions, religion-state relations, colonial legacies, and globalization. The chapter also highlights how, in contemporary South Korea, conservative Christians label New Age movements as “heretical religions” (*saibi chonggyo* 사이비종교 [似而非宗教]) and seek to exclude them, offering a new perspective on the role of esotericism in the country’s postcolonial religious landscape.

James Flowers, in Chapter 10, deals with the relationship between spiritual healing (shamanism) and medicine in Korea, along with its cultural and historical significance. In Korea, anxiety among elites about the country’s late industrialization has led to a strong desire to present the nation as modern and scientific to the international community. As a result, traditional healing practices such as shamanism have often been dismissed or overlooked. These dismissals, however, are not limited to modern times. The text highlights the shared emphasis in both Korean medicine and shamanism on concepts such as the heart/mind (*sim* 心) and spirit (*sin* 神). Through terms like *sinbi* 神秘 (mystery) and *pibŏp* 秘法 (secret methods), it explores how what is often labeled “occult” in Korea was actually part of accepted medical and intellectual practice. The discussion ultimately calls for a reevaluation of spiritual practices, religion, and shamanism as central components in Korean medical and cultural history, challenging the dominant view of modern development as based only on science.

As the collection of chapters in this edited volume demonstrates, the concept of “esotericism,” as articulated within Western academic frameworks, does not function as a readily translatable or homogeneous category within East Asian contexts. However, it also becomes clear that meanings of “esotericism” were manifold and contested; they did not simply emerge and develop in the “West” but have long and complicated histories shaped by cultural exchange (which notably includes conflict, often embedded in nationalism, colonialism,

and religious encounters). What also becomes clear is that modern Western frameworks do not preclude the possibility or importance of engaging with “esotericism” from non-Western perspectives. It is our hope that this volume may serve as a foundation for more nuanced and productive scholarly conversations on “esotericism” and its global entanglements.

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Part 1

Naming and Framing the “Esoteric” and “Occult”

Darkness, Strangeness, and Monstrosity: The Affectiveness of *Kaii* in Japanese Studies of the “Occult”

Ioannis Gaitanidis

The “Weird” as Both the Reason and Object of Study

The following text begins the introduction to perhaps the most cited scholarly volume on the 1970s occult boom (*okaruto būmu* オカルトブーム) in Japan, *Empire of the Occult: Reading Japan in the 1970s* (orig. *Okaruto no teikoku: 1970nendai no Nihon o yomu*, Ichiyanagi 2006b):

Occult, from the Latin *occulta* (hidden), is an axiom that grasps, by intuitive analogy, the essence and power behind the phenomenal world. It is something that analytical or inductive methods of thought cannot fathom, and for this reason, it can be seen as a counter-proposition to the scientific rationalism that has swept the world since the nineteenth century. Today, however, the occult is not hidden. In subcultures such as light novels, video games, anime, and manga, the occult has become an indispensable element in the construction of stories. Somewhere along the way, we find ourselves in contact with the occult daily. The occult is just a miscellaneous toy box from which we never know what will come out. Thus, the occult has spread widely and thinly throughout the world. But again, occultism is “hidden” knowledge. It is the wisdom of the gods, and it should have been a hidden ancient wisdom. Nowadays, the occult has become a subcultural genre with a light atmosphere. The image of occultism as heresy no longer exists in contemporary Japan. (Ichiyanagi 2006a: 9)¹

The paradox of the argument that the occult can be simultaneously hidden and everywhere invites us to value the strangeness of the irrational in everyday life, as if we are supposed to know about it but constantly forget its existence. This is why so many arguments surrounding the *okaruto* are temporalized around

“booms.” Like Ichiyanagi’s edited volume, a series of scholarly works have taken the 1970s occult boom as a point of reference for wider societal and religious change in Japanese society. These works usually employ the media visibility of the concept of *okaruto* and the products that it was associated with at the time, such as Uri Geller’s performances on Japanese television or the horror film *The Exorcist* (see also Gaitanidis 2026), to claim for the exponentially popular interest in the occult; an interest that is then used to explain the consumption of such products. However, this circular type of argumentation based on the occult’s mediatic visibility leaves opaque the assumed connection between the “occult” products and what their popularity is supposed to tell us about the appeal of the uncanny. I want to argue here that the reason that this connection is left opaque lies precisely in the affective quality of the argument. Authors who point to the rejected, yet widespread, presence of the uncanny *despite* the rationalism of modern societies also rely on the element of surprise, and sometimes nostalgia, that stems from reminding us of the existence of such products. In other words, like for the conceptualization of esotericism as rejected knowledge, studies of the uncanny are supposed to remind us not only of our societies’ “strange” roots but also make us realize that their value is precisely that: telling us something we have supposedly *forgotten*.

For example, among the fascinating displays of the exhibition *Regnum Imaginarium: Realm of the Marvelous* (kyōi 驚異) and *Uncanny* (kaii 怪異) held in 2019 at Japan’s National Museum of Ethnology, there was a particularly intriguing genre: early-nineteenth-century “dried mermaids.” Made in Japan out of a fishtail attached to a monkey’s upper body or sometimes only with wood and papier-mâché,² these cryptids (*genjū* 幻獣) can now be found in Leiden’s Wereldmuseum, a remnant of the treasures obtained by Dutch scientists and traders stationed in Dejima—the most important outpost for Europeans in Japan from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. As the exhibition catalog explains, a fascination with such mermaids ensued in the United States and England, where they became a staple of cabinets of nineteenth-century wonders (Yamanaka 2019: 138). Known also as the Feejee mermaid, the showman Phineas Taylor Barnum is said to have ordered them directly from Japan (Bondeson 1999: 54), while the one that had been procured by Frederic Ward Putnam—the father of American archaeology and curator of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University—was rediscovered by chance in 1969 by Peabody museum staff members (Levi 1977). These mermaids were even discussed in leading nineteenth-century American scientific journals, because of how they could represent “a comprehensive and concrete articulation

of (human) evolution and the evolution of life” (Kovacic 2024: 162). This entangled history and the endless possibilities of comparison with Euro-American representations of mythical fish-human creatures, as part of the encyclopedic fascination with such creatures that resulted in conjunction and, sometimes, because—and not despite—scientific progress worldwide, is not lost on the chief curator of the exhibition at the National Museum of Ethnology. Yet, like the scholars I will discuss in this chapter, the catalog of the exhibition seems to insist that the value of these displays lies in how we are meant to *feel about* these artefacts, by overlaying the meaning of the word *kaii*—the uncanny—with the feeling that we, the rational visitors, are assumed to hold on seeing such fantastic creatures.

Modern scientific rationalism relegated the marvelous and uncanny to the confines of “fantasy” and condemned the pursuit of such things to “pseudoscience” and the “occult.” But before the emergence of modern science, they were considered an integral part of comprehensive knowledge about the natural world. Perhaps there is something to be learned from the humility and inclusiveness of premodern encyclopedists who did not deny the existence of the unproven. (Yamanaka 2019: 9)

Since the start of this century, a growing Japanese scholarly interest in *kaii*, and particularly their representations in various types of media, has resulted in a tremendous amount of work about the unreal and the monstrous in urban legends, ghost stories, science fiction and fantasy literature, horror cinema, and other Japanese popular cultural texts. The catalog of the National Library of Japan lists 3,863 books with the word *kaii* in the title, with 2,648 titles of those published after the year 2000. CiNii, the bibliographic database service for material in Japanese academic libraries, lists 700 titles in book format, 435 of those having come out in the last twenty-four years.³ These numbers would more than double if one were to search for *yōkai* 妖怪 (often translated as “specter”), a subcategory of *kaii* that has become popular since the 1960s, particularly thanks to the work of manga artist Mizuki Shigeru (1922–2015).

The *yōkai* are today ubiquitous in popular culture, with media franchises including video games, animations, novels, and comics that have reached global popularity (e.g., *Inuyasha* rel. 1996, *Yo-kai Watch* rel. 2012, or the more recent *Demon Slayer* rel. 2016). This is, by no means, a phenomenon peculiar to Japan. From studies of folklore (e.g., Foster and Tolbert 2015), anthropology (e.g., Lepselter 2016), and media (e.g., Petro 2022; Ravetto-Biagioli 2019), the exponential growth of the entertainment industry, which has been accompanied

since the second half of the twentieth century by technological innovations that have brought films, television, books, comics, and all sorts of popular cultural texts into our smartphones, calls for sustained analysis and for dedicated (especially, cultural studies) approaches to unveil the systems of power within it. However, it is often the case that beyond the precious work of cataloging, analyzing, and bringing to light material that has often yet to be discussed, the premise of many academic exegeses tends to rely on affective undertones such as those conveyed through the message of the curator I quoted above. To put it simply, readers, like the visitors looking at the Japanese dried mermaids in a Dutch museum, are invited to feel (1) strange that such matters occupied the minds of rational people and (2) hopeful that by coming to terms with these feelings of strangeness, they will discover a different kind of value-system, one that is assumed to have long been lost to scientism or one that embraces a different kind of scientism.

I want to draw attention here to how this tendency has also been common to many studies of esotericism, especially those that rely on an assumed fascination with the uncanny, a fascination that they seek to sustain through more and more information about specific people, ideas, and practices, but with less explanation of what the reader is supposed to make with that kind of information on a theoretical basis, other than confirming once more that we have never been modern (Latour 1993). Indeed, this is how I understand the warning of the editors of *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, who note that the conceptualization of esotericism as a dustbin of rejected knowledge “risks amounting to hyperbolic statements about the field as the ultimate victim of hegemonic knowledge systems, while at the same time contradicting the likely results of in-depth analyses of rejection processes, marginalization, and distributions of power—or worse, making such analyses impossible” (Asprem and Strube 2021: 244). In this chapter, I want to explore how the same argument can be made for the *kaii* studies that have flourished in Japan in the last thirty years. And in doing that, I want to draw attention to affective evaluations attached to such methodological approaches in which the phenomena in question are adorned with certain essentialist qualities that undermine the more important processes of classification, which were put in place so as to differentiate those phenomena from the rest. Like some studies of Western esotericism, I argue that many *kaii* studies essentially rely on the claim that the *assumed* uncanniness of their subjects of study already places them outside of the reach of their readers and even of their researchers, who are merely confined to unveiling that uncanny, relishing in the subversiveness of the material but stopping short of considering what their rhetoric entails.

An Atmospheric History

But where did this all come from? What happened in terms of scholarly shifts that led to such a confluence of arguments? It is undoubtful that the main thrust behind the understanding of the occult boom of the 1970s and the continuous interest in *kaii* henceforth has been a repetition of Mircea Eliade's argument regarding "the occult explosion of the seventies" (Eliade 1976: 64). Eliade's book *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (1976) was translated into Japanese (*Okarutizumu, majutsu, bunka ryūkō*) in 1978, and figures prominently in exegeses of the "occult" that have continued to appear well into this century. As Ōmichi Haruka notes, Ichiyonagi's and others' interpretation of the "occult boom" is very Eliadean (Ōmichi 2017: 106). In an introductory textbook of folk religion, edited by prominent members of the academic study of religion, Shimazono Susumu, another prolific scholar who has written at length about new religious movements and new spirituality culture (see Shimazono 2004), also quotes from Eliade's book to explain the occult and analyze its significance (Shimazono 1999: 103), thus, illustrating many similarities between his belief in the salvific potential of popular religion (see later in this chapter) and Eliade's "hope for *renovatio*."

Even when these ideas are naively or even ludicrously expressed, there is always the tacit conviction that a way out of the chaos and meaninglessness of modern life exists and that this way out implies an *initiation* into, and consequently the revelation of, old and venerable secrets. It is primarily the attraction of a personal initiation that explains the craze for the occult ... initiation also has a superpersonal function, for every new adept is supposed to contribute to the *renovatio* of the world. (Eliade 1976: 64–5)

Of course, concerns within postwar Japanese academia about the ills of capitalism developed in conjunction with Euro-American sociological critiques of modernization. In the records of a debate that followed a series of lectures on *Modernisation and Religious Booms* (Araki et al. 1990: 296–7), Nishiyama Shigeru 西山茂, one of the first sociologists to analyze the occult boom of the 1970s, refers to Peter Berger's monograph *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change* (1974, translated into Japanese in 1976). Berger's fierce critique of modernity's myth of growth reflected contemporaneous calls for alternatives to both socialism and capitalism that sought to free the individual from the chains that bound personal fulfillment to productivity and technocratic control (Berger 1974: 18). Many of those who strove to explain the occult boom

and the modern interest in *kaii* can be understood, therefore, not as scholars of religion, the supernatural, or even folklore, but as what Nishiyama, at the end of a series of questions pertaining to the motives behind his interpretation of religious shifts of the 1970s, explained himself to be doing, namely “era-based social theory” (*jidai-shakai-ron* 時代社会論) (Araki et al. 1990: 287). Nishiyama’s approach recognized the influence of media trends, but he believed that such phenomena only reflected “an overall atmosphere of the times” (Araki et al. 1990: 267). In other words, the 1970s were seen as having a particular kind of atmosphere, which became visible in the form of associated booms and the henceforth appearance of religious change.

In his recent study of early modern Japanese society through the lens of *kaii*, Kiba Takatoshi notes that the above critical shifts in scholarly perspective regarding modernity pushed scholars in the 1970s and 1980s to focus on (micro-) social histories (*shakai-shi* 社会史) as these can be drawn from the perspective of ordinary people (Kiba 2020: 376). The key influence here was the historian Ninomiya Hiroyuki 二宮宏之, who, on his return in 1966 from a six-year study at École Normale Supérieure in Paris, proceeded to spread within Japanese academia the methods of the Annales school that he summarized as follows: (1) from universality to local knowledge, (2) from the abstract conceptual world to the everyday world, and (3) a relativization of the European model of modernity (Nagahara 2008: 496). Before starting to publish his own research in the 1980s, Ninomiya introduced the French Annales school through translations of essays by French scholars, most notably in 1976 with an essay by the representative of the movement, Jacques Le Goff (1976), and then in 1979, with a special issue on “social history” (*shakai-shi*) in the same periodical, *Shisō*. Incidentally, two months after that special issue, *Shisō* published an article on the newly *en vogue* “vitalistic concept of salvation in new religions,” authored by one of the new generation of sociologists (Tsushima 1979) who sought to reappraise Japanese contemporaneous religious shifts as popular organic reactions to the ills of modernity and capitalism.

Le Goff’s and other Annales scholars’ view of the study of history is clearly palpable in Ninomiya’s first monograph (1986), where he described what the French historians had called history from the depths (*l’histoire des profondeurs*), namely “the unshakable belief that the various aspects of history, such as economy, society, and civilization, whatever their surface level, all beat to the same drum at their ‘deepest level,’ and that if we pursue their interconnectedness, they will naturally converge into a single image of society and a single image of the times” (Ninomiya 1986: 7; my emphasis). Written in the middle of what has

been called a social history boom (starting from the late 1970s to the 1980s) and preceding the beginning of the *kaii* studies in the early 1990s, this new approach to history had already established and mutually reinforced the idea that some sort of popular “atmosphere” can be linked to a variety of phenomena across the entirety of society, leaving thus an indelible mark to the corresponding chronological period; in other words, a “boom.”

The Organic 1970s

These shifts to methodological approaches in the 1970s were accompanied by ethnological reinterpretations of the structure of folk religion, starting with studies of *yōkai*, a popular category of specters that became the subject of several manga in the 1960s and subsequently were consumed within the rising interest in the supernatural from the 1970s onward (see Foster 2008: ch. 5). This popular interest drew into the academic limelight the work of anthropologist-folklorist Komatsu Kazuhiko 小松和彦, who attracted attention in the late 1970s for updating an influential, yet several decades-old, argument regarding *yōkai*, made by the father of Japanese ethnology, Yanagida Kunio. Yanagida had claimed that *yōkai* used to be revered gods, but over the course of history, people had gradually stopped believing in them, and they eventually came to be regarded as terrifying beings that lurked in boundary spaces. In 1979, Komatsu updated this “downfall” theory (*reiraku-ron* 零落論), which he blamed on the influence of nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology (1979: 332), with the argument that the *yōkai* are supernatural beings that are located on one end of a continuum, the opposite pole of which is occupied by gods (*kami*); the position on the continuum depending on the relationship—malevolent or benevolent—toward human society (1979: 338–9). By placing the *yōkai* on the same level as gods, Komatsu sought to include these phenomena within a wider perspective of gods in Japanese culture (Hirota 2022: 65),⁴ one that, as the subtitle of his most-quoted book—*The Japanese Mind as Seen Through Yōkai*—attests to a rather essentialist perspective on culture.

On becoming a professor at the prestigious International Research Centre for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in 1997, Komatsu sought to firmly establish the study of *yōkai* as a scholarly discipline, leading to the publication of the monumental—nearly 700-page long—*Compendium of Japanese Yōkai Studies* in 2003. In this highly influential call for a field of *yōkai* studies, Komatsu argues that Japanese culture was shaped by the “small basin universe” (*kobonchi*

uchū), which corresponds to the “characteristic landscape of the country.” He then suggests that this enclosed living environment gave birth to the basic and commonly shared Japanese belief that spirits dwell in everything: from the trees to the buildings and of course inside humans themselves (Komatsu 1994: 53). Subsequently, relations with these spirits, which were thought to feel and behave as humans, could be nurtured or broken, and, in the second instance, calamities, such as famine and disease, could ensue and take the form of specters (*yōkai*). In order to battle these specters, which could be of animal form (fox, tanuki), man-made (house-haunting spirits), or of human origin (spirits of the dead or of the living [*ikiryō* 生霊]), the Japanese appealed to the various magico-religious practitioners who have appeared over the centuries. While such culturalist exegesis of Japan was not rare at the time, Komatsu’s argument came in response to the popular mediatic fascination with *yōkai* in the 1960s and of the occult boom in the 1970s, where specters started reflecting both an idealized rural folkloric past *and* an urban scientific present, where they joined a plethora of “paranormal” phenomena that scholars associated with anxieties surrounding economic growth and its unintended consequences (Hirota 2021: 334). Here we see the connections with the ideas of other analysts of the occult boom, who, implicitly or explicitly, have continued to argue that the boom was an expression of some sort of *primaeva*/natural religiosity that helped the Japanese out of the ills of modernity.

Such an idea of the occult as an affective escape could be later found across the board of religious studies publications. For example, in 1993, the famous and prolific ethnologist Miyata Noboru wrote an entire book comparing the temporary migration of Japanese back to their family homes in the countryside in mid-August and the start of January, to the rise of suicide, crime, fortune-telling, superstition, the occult, and new religions, which he saw as prevalent phenomena in urban settings. He argued that, like those traditional holidays that marked a break in people’s lives, for today’s city dwellers who have accumulated a lot of anxiety in their daily lives, the occult offers an opportunity for *hare* (a chance to reinvigorate their lives) to relieve their mental anxieties (Miyata 1993). Miyata here employs the highly popular ethnological theory that sought to describe Japanese culture in terms of a tripartite structure: *kegare* (contaminated), *hare* (sacred or transcendent), and *ke* (profane or mundane). As with Komatsu’s 1970s update to Yanagida’s work, this tripartite structure also originates from a 1970s update to Yanagida’s argument that Japanese life used to be divided between *hare* and *ke*. In the mid-1970s, the ethnologist Sakurai Tokutarō and anthropologist Namihira Emiko added to this very Durkheimian

structure the concept of *kegare*, which was inspired by Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, translated into Japanese in 1972 (see Sakurai 1984). The original idea was that Japanese society could be conceived as being in a constant cycle of *ke*, a source of vitality, which, with time, withers (*kegare*) and needs, therefore, to be replenished (*hare*) through seasonal rites.

This organic conceptualization of folklife had become highly influential by the late 1970s as a non-Eurocentric critique of the Weberian theory of disenchantment. It stemmed from a tendency of scholars of the immediate postwar period to stress the popular morality of premodern Japanese society, envisioning “a moral social order capable of radical self-transformation and constant renewal through the critical reappropriation of its own original form and consciousness—its religio-political archetypes” (Barshay 2019: 201–2). Scholars studying contemporary religion started talking of a “vitalistic concept of salvation” that they considered particular to Japanese new religious movements (Tsushima et al. 1979), and which, in general, conceived of religious change as a reactionary critique of postwar society's ills: conservatism and pervasive capitalism. In the aforementioned proceedings of a series of lectures given at the end of the 1980s at Kokugakuin University about *Modernisation and Religious Booms* (1990), Nishiyama Shigeru reiterates his argument, originally forged in the late 1970s, that contemporary psycho-spiritual techniques (*reijutsu* 霊述; see Yoshinaga 2021), which were repopularized in the 1970s occult boom, function as a source of vitality (*ke*) for the youth who are extremely tense and tired of a society devoid of meaning (Nishiyama 1990: 107).

Later, Shimazono Susumu argued that the occult is a modern phenomenon that focusses on experiential and empirical approaches to individual and fragmentary “facts,” and which ought to be considered as part of “popular religion” (Shimazono 1999: 105), namely the locus of preservation of a sort of primeval religious drive for life and salvation (Shimazono 1999: 90). As I have discussed elsewhere, from new religious movements to the study of spirituality that arose at the turn of the twenty-first century among sociologists of religion in Japan, Shimazono's conceptualization of a salvific and therapeutic popular religious basis that informs (superficial) religious changes—from established religions to new religions, and then to global spirituality—can be traced back to “the adoption of the concept of popular religion to identify the anti-establishment potential of a populace that had just come out of a terrible war” (Gaitanidis 2022: 71). Modernity and subsequent crises must have been a shock, but people keep fighting back with the power conferred to them by their essentially religious nature. This is the argument, in a gist. And while this argument could

be seen within the burgeoning sociology of New Age spirituality of the 1990s, it also, as I have shown, permeated the newly developing field of *kaii* studies and accompanied exegeses of the occult.

The Affective Boom

Ichiyanaagi Hirotaka 一柳廣孝, the editor of the book that I introduced at the start of this chapter, *Empire of the Occult*, has been particularly prolific in bridging the use of these two concepts of *okaruto* and *kaii*. Across over fifty book-format publications—and notwithstanding an equal number of academic articles and more than double that number of essays and magazine contributions—Ichiyanagi has edited and contributed to two seminal studies of occulture and the New Age in the 1970s (Ichiyanaagi 2006b) and 1980s (Yoshida 2009a), coedited and written for the entire eight-volume *Nightmare Series* (2005–12), which explores the horror genre across manga, novels, films, and other popular media, as well as the three-volume *Time and Space of the Uncanny* (2016), which the publisher describes as follows: “Ghosts, specters, and psychic phenomena ... this is a book series that defines the *kaii* as ‘phenomena that cannot be real’ and which bewitch, terrify, revere, and sometimes become objects of consumption and pleasure for people across time and place.” In addition, Ichiyanaagi’s volume on spirit photography (*shinrei shashin* 心霊写真; Ichiyanaagi 2004), on the young adult fiction genre called “light novel” (*raito noberu* ライトノベル; Ichiyanaagi and Kume 2013), and his monographs on hypnosis, parapsychology, and their impact on ideas of the mind in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century (see Ichiyanaagi [1997] 2021, Ichiyanaagi 2014) remain reference works in their respective topics. Finally, Ichiyanaagi is the cofounder (with Kondō Mizuki and Taniguchi Motoi) of the *Society for the Study of the Weird and Mysterious Tales* (*Kaii Kaidan Kenkyūkai*), which, since 2012, has been behind many publications that make scholarly connections between the *kaii* and the *okaruto*.⁵

In a 2020 volume collecting some of his most popular writings and aptly titled *Representational Spaces of the Bizarre* (*kaii*): *Media, Occult, Subculture*, Ichiyanaagi proceeds to define *kaii* as phenomena that cannot be dealt with within the framework of “common sense” (2020: 1). However, like many other scholars, this apprehension of *kaii* is emotion-based: “It is too scary to leave the *kaii* as *kaii*, so a special framework is provided for these phenomena” (Ichiyanaagi 2020: 1). According to Ichiyanaagi, the study of the *kaii* is the study of specific narrative forms that reflect how *kaii* have been understood in specific times and

locales. It is, therefore, a study of media, of audiences, and of the use of such media for political, economic, or entertainment purposes; but it is most of all a study of how we represent our worst fears, particularly those that have to do with alterity, “the other” (Ichiyanagi 2020: 4–5). Ichiyanagi and the majority of scholars dealing with this subject have considered their ultimate purpose to be that of revealing the emotional baggage, so to speak, behind the media representations of *kaii*. This has had particular effects on how these scholars label and explain such phenomena *despite* modernity and in conjunction with science and religion.

The first monograph that Ichiyanagi published was also the first-ever study of the history of the introduction to Japan of the game of table turning, which since the 1880s was accompanied by a fascination with scientific investigations of people claiming to possess clairvoyant powers that peaked with Fukurai Tomokichi’s highly mediatized experiments at the start of the twentieth century (see Takasuna 2012; Hsiung 2023). In the introduction to the book, Ichiyanagi argues that “spirits” became actualized (*genjitsuka*) because of the import of “science” in modern Japan (Ichiyanagi 1994: 7). And he clarifies: the occult boom is a mysterious “noise” that came to the surface together with scientific developments (Ichiyanagi 1994: 7); it is what allows people to look for happiness after they have achieved “happiness,” to look for values when no clear values exist (Ichiyanagi 1994: 10), to come to terms with death (Ichiyanagi 1994: 11) and other kinds of pains of the heart and mind that the scientific paradigm has ignored but not managed to efface (Ichiyanagi 1994: 13). This romantic outlook on the possibilities offered by the “occult” lies at the heart of studies of *kaii*, which began attracting interest in the 1990s.

Indeed, Ichiyanagi (2020: 5–7) argues that the 1990s saw a rise in the popularity of *kaii* and *yōkai* across several genres, from the reedition of premodern ghost stories (*kaidan* 怪談) to the appearance of a new genre of “school tales of the supernatural” (*gakkō kaidan* 学校怪談) and the major hits achieved by new horror novels and films—Suzuki Kōji’s trilogy of the *Ring* novels appeared in 1991, 1995, and 1998, while the homonymous film directed by Nakata Hideo opened in theatres in 1998. The year 1993 also marked the start of Inagawa Junji’s Mystery Night Tour,⁶ held every summer since, leading to the birth of a new generation of live narrators of ghost stories (*kaidan-shi* 怪談師) and to the establishment of August 13 as the day of ghost stories (*kaidan no hi*). But, Ichiyanagi writes that the 1990s interest in *kaii* should not be seen as a sudden phenomenon, but as a continuation in a series of booms in the 1980s (e.g., the spiritual world/New Age boom, the New Science boom, etc.), the 1970s (e.g.,

the occult boom, the fantasy literature boom, etc.), the 1960s (the *yōkai* boom, the monster film boom, etc.), and also several booms in the prewar period (Ichiyanagi 2020: 9). Again, we see here how frequent it is for scholars in Japan to explain the significance of their topic by referring to how that topic was at some point the subject of particular cultural products.

As Erica Baffelli has noted in her study of media and new religions in Japan, “boom” is a loanword used in Japanese media to denote cultural, economic, and fashion trends (Baffelli 2016: 40n19). Yet, despite appearances, there is often no explanation of how the scholar referring to such a trend connects it to their analytical argument. In contemporary societies where religion is, first of all, information, “visibility, vitality and social influence are different things” (Hjelm 2015: 15). A reference to booms to support the importance of one’s research often sounds like the trailer for a newly released movie that already claims that it is an “international hit in the box office,” with the hope that it actually becomes one. As I show below, this is not a new argument, but I claim here that the popularity of the “boom-argument” in studies of the monstrous and the occult can also be explained by the affective value that is inherent in the interpretation of these phenomena.

Already in the late 1980s, Yoshimoto Mitsuhiko regretted the absence of barriers between consumer culture and academic culture, noting a phenomenon that could be witnessed beyond the confines of the postmodernist intellectual turn that he sought to discuss at the time.

In Japan, where capitalism’s dependence on the coming and going of different booms is particularly apparent, it is impossible for intellectuals to exist outside of intellectual booms. To put it briefly, the boom artificially creates a new difference, which is exploited through the process of massive commodification, and is over when mass commodification makes it impossible for that particular difference to function as difference any longer. It is followed by another boom then, but this new boom based on a different kind of difference has to be over soon, too. What rules this succession of booms is simply the law of commodification, not some kind of teleology or meta-narrative. In this type of boom-based society, discourse on a postmodernism can exist only if it itself is commodified first. When there is a postmodern boom, intellectuals can be heard only if they can sell their discourses on postmodernism as attractive commodities. (Yoshimoto 1989: 9)

While Yoshimoto’s argument may sound somewhat naive in today’s world, where scholars are rather congratulated when they become part of consumer culture,

it also points to a confluence between scholarly arguments and the “booms” they rely upon to explicate the popular interest and therefore significance of the phenomena they study. This sort of looping effect (see Gaitanidis 2022: 184–6) between scholars who discuss a topic after it becomes the subject of a boom, and then argue that the topic is important because of that boom, undermines not only arguments of visibility but also any attempts to define a phenomenon based on a time-defined trend and then proceed to categorize by association a series of other phenomena that preceded or followed that trend like Ichiyanaagi does in his recollection of booms earlier in this section. There is a reason, however, why the reliance on booms is especially apparent in studies of *kaii* and the occult, and that is the affective qualities of the notion of “boom.”

In her analysis of environmentalism in Japanese women’s magazines, Lise Skov argues that one side effect of successive booms “is the creation of a strong sense of here-and-now—which, at least to some extent, dispenses with the content and causality of what happens to be in style in a particular year” (Skov 1995: 175). This “temporal logic” is also part of the affective undertones of the scholarly fields I discuss in this chapter. Studies of the *okaruto* and *kaii* are not just there to surprise us with uncanny context; they are also valued for *constantly reminding us* that this context has been or still is popular *despite* us having forgotten about its cultural influence. This trope can be found across the range of approaches to the subject, where authors construct their arguments on media-based interpretations of the lexical meaning of these concepts, where that meaning is collapsed onto what we, the audience, are supposed to experience as the elusiveness of what it represents. A popular understanding of such interpretation of the “occult” is exemplified by the description given by Mori Tatsuya, a famous journalist and independent documentary director, who drew international attention with his films on the life of the members of Aum Shinrikyō after the religious group’s 1995 deadly attack in the Tokyo subway. In 2012, Mori published a thick account of his interviews with various figures of the Japanese occult scene, made famous mostly by their media appearance in the 1970s–90s as specialists in spoon-bending, dowsing, or other kinds of extrasensory abilities. Stemming from the idea behind a television documentary that Mori had originally directed in 1998 and which featured three of the most famous *espā* (Japanese pronunciation of ESPer, i.e., someone with extrasensorial perception), Mori describes the “occult” as follows:

If one were to put it in plain words, that would be “hidden in plain sight” ... just when you think it’s hidden, it peeks out of the tip of your sleeve, and if

you look hard enough, it disappears again. This phenomenon is especially noticeable when one is enthusiastic about verification or experimentation. And this phenomenon constantly repeats itself. That's why we can't move forward. However, we can't go backwards either. In the end, we just keep going in circles. We are left in a state of ambiguity. (Mori 2012: 20)

Mori's description essentially qualifies the "occult" as an affective and temporary encounter with an audience that expects a glimpse into the unknown—Yoshida, a frequent collaborator of Ichiyanagi and editor of the sequel to *The Empire of the Occult*, writes of the occult as "hidden knowledge" (*kakusareta chi*, Yoshida 2009: 15)—but never really does. The occult's appeal, like that of the notion of "boom," lies precisely in its sense of here and now.

The Way Out

There have been recent efforts to approach the ever-popular topics of *kaii* and *yōkai* from a different perspective. For example, Murakami Norio has proposed to take the argument that the *kaii* are specific narrative forms (see Ichiyanagi's claim at the start of this chapter) for what it means, namely that these phenomena only exist because someone has categorized them as a *kaii*-kind of information. Scholars like Murakami have therefore claimed that the *kaii* only become *kaii* when they are treated as *that* kind of information. This shifts the focus from the *kaii* to the medium that carries *kaii*-information. As a result,

the judgment of whether something is a "*kaii*" or not will be made based on the "knowledge" of history, geography, and experience, and it is only those who have the authority to build and reference such a database of information who will decide whether to adopt this new information as *kaii*. The recognition of something being *kaii* can be replaced by the question of who maintains and operates the databases of history, geography, and experience. (Murakami 2023: 18)

This focus on mediation is linked to the influence that the anthropology of media has had on studies of religion in general (see, e.g., Eisenlohr 2011). In Japan, the ontological turn in anthropology has also led to the reentrance of the *kaii* phenomenon into the anthropology of religion, as exemplified by the work of Hirota Ryūhei (2022, 2023, 2024), who has, in recent years, made several successful attempts at applying Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism

(2012) onto the appearance of *kaii* on digital platforms. These new developments show hope that scholars have started moving away from affective and essentialist exegeses of these subjects.

It is worth mentioning, however, that already in the 1990s, not all scholars of religion approached the “occult” in the manner I have described throughout this chapter. Yoshinaga Shin’ichi, who would later become a prominent scholar of the entanglements between Buddhism and occultism, was already arguing in 1994 that the use of the word “occult” did not provide more meaning than that of a yet-to-be-classified experience. In a short article written under his usual pen name, Iwamoto Dōjin, Yoshinaga draws from the work of Robert Galbreath (1984) to note how “colourless” the label “occult” is and how it should not be defined against religion or science (Iwamoto [1994] 2024: 46–7). Throughout his analysis of the historical background of the occult boom, Yoshinaga shows that visibility does not necessarily mean more than just interest, and that “revival,” as Galbreath had argued, does also not mean that such interest had once disappeared and has now temporarily reappeared (see Galbreath 1984: 21–3). Galbreath had been ahead of his time when he challenged common assumptions that permeated the academic exegeses that associated the occult with social crisis and irrationality. Already in a special issue that he edited for the *Journal of Popular Culture* discussing the American fascination with the occult at the start of the 1970s, Galbreath writes the following:

It would be extravagant and baseless, therefore, to conclude that with the current occult revival we are witnessing a wholesale abandonment of reason and a “remystification” of the world (to reverse Max Weber’s phrase). Reading a horoscope or buying an occult book need not mean anything beyond the simple desire for a diversion ... [while] the occult in its myriad forms has proved to be of more than passing interest to an astonishingly large number of intelligent persons in this century alone. (Galbreath 1971: 631)

Considering the contemporaneous arguments by Nishiyama (1990), Miyata (1993), and Shimazono (1999) among others, Yoshinaga’s refusal in the mid-1990s to see the occult as some expression of primeval religiosity was revolutionary, to say the least. And the comparison with the American context that becomes possible through his reliance on Galbreath’s work already undermined the “Japanese” essence that *kaii* authors were trying to find in the popularity of the occult, and preannounced Yoshinaga’s subsequent network-based approach to studying Theosophy and Buddhism across the Pacific Ocean (see Yoshinaga 2013 for an early article in English).

In a review of Japanese scholarship on the “global occult,” Yoshinaga’s focus on specific networks—whether translocal, transnational, transimperial, and so on—was suggested to be a more appropriate method to “maintain the particularity of individual actors within internally-diverse social assemblages” (see Gaitanidis and Stein 2019/2021: 5–6). This observation was drawn out of a comparison with what was called in that article, “the sociological approach” of Nishiyama and Shimazono, and “the cultural studies approach” of Ichiyanagi. I hope to have shown now in this chapter that there are significant overlaps in how these two latter strands of scholarship have conceptualized *okaruto* in their work and, more importantly, how that conceptualization was inspired by methodological debates regarding the relationship between popular religion, science, and society in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the revisiting of influential ethnological arguments surrounding “Japanese” cosmologies during the same period.

The genealogical reconstruction approach suggested by the editors of this volume offers a way to unwrap the motivations for which authors, such as those I discussed in this chapter, chose certain labels over others to talk about what they were observing. It also problematizes the associative and, ultimately, anachronistic thinking that, inspired by twenty-first-century understandings of the uncanny, would, for example, categorize nineteenth-century dried mermaids as *kaii*. This, of course, begs the question: to what extent are labels such as *kaii*, *okaruto*, or even the “esoteric” (which is discussed in other chapters of this volume) applicable to scholarly analysis across a variety of complex phenomena, which would lose from being confined to a “an occult boom”-type of argument? The quick answer: only to the extent that they would facilitate the identification of affective undertones, similar to the ones I have described here, in a “diachronic tracing” (Strube 2023: 120–2) of motivations across several fields of interest. It is important, however, not to forget that, as the case study here has illustrated, these affect-loaded labels have a particular connection with our sense of time and with a periodization that helps sustain them. It would be impossible to reconstruct the genealogy of the *kaii* without referring to its mutual reinforcement by the notion of “boom.”

In his critique of how 1980s scholars of the postmodern turn stopped writing about the phenomenon after “the postmodern boom” in Japanese academia ended, Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro notes that postmodern critics cannot examine the postmodern condition without being part of what they analyze, because they’re not just critics of the postmodern; they’re also critics *in* the postmodern age (Yoshimoto 1989: 10). The same looping effect can be

seen with sociologists of religion, like Nishiyama, who were writing in the middle of what the 1970s media had already called an *okaruto* boom, or with Ichiyanaagi, who was writing while *yōkai* studies was being advocated as a new field in the 1990s. The embrace of the affective fleetingness of the uncanny as a common denominator across subsequent scholarly work perhaps needs to be discussed as a methodological issue that goes beyond the topic of this chapter. I am referring to the stance adopted by researchers who need to continuously remind their audiences that what they are doing is both timely relevant (“we’re in the middle of a boom”) and *also* part of a wider, long-standing narrative of explaining *out* ourselves. Perhaps not everything we do needs to be an exegesis of the human condition.

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Western Esotericism with Chinese Characteristics: Translations and Translators in the People's Republic

Davide Marino

Introduction

The field of study known as “Western esotericism” is currently experiencing significant expansion in both Europe and America. Academics are not only reflecting on the meaning of the category “esotericism” and exploring new methodologies but also expanding the geographical scope of ideas traditionally considered “esoteric.” In particular, a new generation of scholars (Asprem 2014; Strube 2021; Gaitanidis and Klautau 2024; Gaitanidis and Stein 2019; Granholm 2013; Roukema and Kilner-Johnson 2018) has challenged the “Western” label of the field, emphasizing the importance of non-Euro-American actors and exploring areas previously overlooked by research. Recently, China has also entered this conversation, with sparse literature discussing the importance of the Chinese tradition for “Western esotericism” (Marino 2026; Nilsson 2013, 2020; Pokorny and Winter 2024a, 2024b, 2026; Statman 2019; Redmond 2021; Winter 2024).

So far, however, almost nobody¹ seems to have posed the opposite question: what happens when “Western esoteric” material enters China? Or better, what happens when such a material gets received, translated, and ultimately interpreted by contemporary Chinese academics, who live in an environment, far removed from the cultural, linguistic, and political norms of Euro-American academia? This chapter, therefore, investigates the journey of “Western esotericism” within “academia with Chinese characteristics.”

This journey starts linguistically. One reason for the insularity of Chinese academia lies in the fact that the vast majority of students and scholars lack proficiency in non-Chinese languages. Consequently, their exposure to

foreign ideas is often mediated through translations of international literature. Considering the challenges of transferring meaning from alphabetic to logographic languages, translating into Chinese is no easy task—especially in the case of “Western esotericism,” for which there is no established tradition of native vocabulary. For this reason, my analysis will begin in late nineteenth-century Japan, a true laboratory of meaning transfers from alphabetic languages to Sinograms. In this sense, contemporary Chinese translators, like their earlier Japanese counterparts, are true pioneers, and the choices they make today will have long-lasting effects on how “Western esotericism” is understood and theorized in China for decades to come.²

The notion that translation plays a crucial role in the global discourse on esotericism is not new, as evidenced by a recent special issue of the journal *Correspondences* titled “Translating Esotericism” (Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay 2023). These pages aim to both continue and reorient Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay’s project. On the one hand, I fully agree that, “if we are serious about globalizing the study of esotericism, such questions must be taken seriously and must be pursued systematically for all the terms in its standard vocabulary and in a wide variety of European and non-European languages” (Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay 2023: 14). However, before doing so, it seems necessary to establish what this “standard vocabulary” actually entails. Does “Western esotericism” actually have a “standard vocabulary”? A glance at the aforementioned special issue raises doubts, as contributors debate the translation of terms such as “Western,” “God,” or “consciousness,” which can hardly be considered “standard” in any field.

Another crucial point raised in the introduction is the agency of translators themselves, which entails looking “at translation from a socio-cultural and historical rather than from a technical-linguistic perspective ... This means that translations must be assessed not just for their technical merits but in view of how they actually function in specific cultural, social, or economic contexts” (Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay 2023: 15). Unfortunately, nothing of this sort can be found in the *Correspondences* special issue, where the contributors extensively debate how to translate specific terms across various languages, leaving no room for discussion about the translators themselves.

Against this approach, this chapter is about translators more than it is about translations. Rather than attempting to offer an impossible glossary of an alleged standard vocabulary for an equally alleged tradition of “Western esotericism,” my goal is to understand who is translating “Western esoteric” literature in contemporary China and why. This is especially important given that, as one

of China's most prominent living translators has noted, "academic translation is not only poorly paid; such work is not regarded as an important academic contribution in Chinese universities and research institutions and is not helpful for professional promotion" (Zhang 2018a: 784). Thus, in this chapter the question of how to translate will surely be important, but I will never argue that "the term X should be/is translated as Y in Chinese." Instead, my analysis will follow Maltese and Strube's recommendation of asking "*when and where* signifiers like 'religion' [or, in my case, 'esotericism'] are used *by whom* and *in engagement with/demarcation from whom*" (Maltese and Strube 2021: 244; italics in the original).

With this end in mind, I have selected a very specific group of people (native Chinese scholars active as academic translators of "Western esoteric" literature residing in the People's Republic) hoping to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the globalization of esotericism and, perhaps more importantly, to illuminate the dynamic world of Chinese intellectuals, who are too often perceived in "the West" as either mindless agents or innocent victims of the ruling party.

秘/密教: Sinic "Esoteric Distinction" and Western Orientalism

In the preparation of this chapter, I often sought the help of specialists, both in China and abroad.³ I soon realized that most of my conversations started in a predictable manner: if I was speaking with a foreign scholar, I could comfortably predict that, after I informed them about my project on "Western esotericism" in China, the first question was "so, how do you say 'esotericism' in Chinese?" As for Chinese scholars, every time I told them that I was researching "西方神秘学" (*xifang shenmixue*, one of the possible renderings of "Western esotericism"), almost invariably I was asked, "比如?" (*biru*, "such as?"). My colleague's puzzlement, of course, did not stem from a lack of knowledge of the Chinese language and culture but rather from a deep familiarity with it. If foreign scholars know that many words in Chinese could render the English "esotericism," Chinese intellectuals needed more examples to point out what I exactly meant with "shenmi xue." Thus, "esotericism," a concept highly unstable in any language, including the European ones, cannot only be rendered in Chinese by many words, but each carries a wealth of meaning.

Overall, the linguistic discussion about "Western esotericism" in China develops around three semantic poles, and virtually all the words that have

been adopted to signify “Western esotericism” utilize one or more of the following words:

1. 神 (*shen*), that can be either a noun (“god(s),” “spirit(s)”) or an adjective (“spiritual,” “divine,” “supernatural,” “magical”). It is made by the radical 礻 (*shi* 示 representing sacrificial offers on an altar/offering table) and the phonetic component 申 (*shen*);
2. 秘/密 (*mi*) both referring to the idea of “secrecy”; and
3. 灵 (*ling*), composed of the graphic component 亠 (*ji*) over 火 (*huo*, “fire”). This character was chosen in the 1950s to replace the previous homophone 靈 made up by 甪 (*ling*) over 巫 (*wu*, “sorceress/shaman”). 甪 is composed by 雨 (*yu*, “rain”) over three raindrops (口口口), suggesting the meaning of *ling* as “spiritual efficacious,” since shamans danced to call on the spirits to make rain. 灵/靈 convey concepts related to spirituality, intelligence, and the supernatural. As a noun, it can mean “spirit,” “soul,” or “supernatural being” and, as an adjective, it implies a sense of spiritual effectiveness.

As it happened with many “isms” created in the modern era (Spira 2015), the earliest translation of the noun “esotericism” in sinograms seems to have appeared in Japanese. The earliest occurrence I was able to find is in *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (*Tetsugaku ji'i* 哲学字彙), published in Tokyo in 1881, where the English lemma “esotericism” is rendered as 秘教 (Jp. *hikyō*, Ch. *mijiao*, literally “secret teaching”) (Inoue 1881: 31). This translation is significant because it represented an early stage in which the newly created western category of “esotericism” became merged into a millennia-old Chinese tradition of “esoteric distinction” (Strube 2023a, 2024).

Long before being associated with “esotericism,” the homophone and nearly semantically identical term 密教 (*mijiao*) referred to what English-speaking scholars today call “Esoteric Buddhism” or Chinese “Tantric” schools. In this context, “esoteric” and its companion 顯教 (*xianjiao*, “exoteric teaching”) were used, from at least the fifth century CE, indicate a rhetoric and polemic discourse internal to Chinese Buddhism. Here, “esoteric” and “exoteric” address, on the one hand, concepts of secrecy, concealment, and hiddenness as opposed to clarity, openness, and visibility. On the other hand, “esoteric,” functioned as a claim that the Mahāyāna was superior to the Hinayāna. Thus, “esoteric,” in this second sense, signified the bodhisattva’s transcendent understanding of ultimate reality, “in other words, esoteric teachings are, Mahayana by definition, advanced teachings suited to bodhisattvas” (McBride 2004: 332).

The intense debate within Buddhist Studies regarding the problematic nature of labeling *mijiao* as “esoteric” lies outside the scope of this work (Gaitanidis and Klautau, forthcoming; Orzech 2006; McBride 2004; Sharf 2002; Strube 2022, 2023a).⁴ Yet, it seems relevant to note that one issue with this definition arises from its associations with “Western esotericism,” as the term “Esoteric Buddhism” originates from the questionable orientalist interpretations of A. P. Sinnett (1840–1921) and H. P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) (Gomes 2024). In their view, “Esoteric Buddhism” was a secret knowledge that “long antedated the passage through earth-life of Gautama Buddha” (Sinnett 1883: 4) contained in “the secret philosophy of Sakyamuni, which in its essence is certainly identical with the ancient wisdom-religion of the sanctuary, the Pre-Vedic Brahmanism” (Blavatsky 1877: 142). These fanciful interpretations were enormously influential in Europe between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, and they were taken seriously and discussed by many prominent scholars (Rudbøg 2021).

Given this context, it is not surprising to find 秘教 *mijiao* used as an early (perhaps the earliest) sinic rendering of the English word “esotericism,” since its homophone and semantic twin 密教 *mijiao* carries a long-established East Asian tradition of distinction between inner and outer teachings. Furthermore, through the work of the Theosophists, Buddhism came to be seen as the paradigmatic “esoteric tradition,” a grand narrative that sees the teaching of the Buddha as a link in the chain of the perennial tradition perpetually passed down through humanity. Thus, works such as *A Dictionary of Philosophy* may be taken as indicators of an early merging of “Eastern” and “Western” esoteric distinctions—a stage in which foreign grand narratives were grafted, as carriers of a language of modernity (the “ism”), onto a native East Asian (Japanese) religious discourse.

Today, *mijiao* retains a Buddhist connotation, and in Chinese scholarly discussion, it is not used to convey a general idea of “esotericism,” even less a “western” one. However, this early Japanese rendering is an ideal entry point in our discussion about Chinese translations because it shows the constant negotiation and entanglement of native traditions and foreign innovation that is going to be the leitmotif of our analysis while we finally enter the People’s Republic.

神秘: Esotericism, Mysticism, and Spirituality

We move here to a second possible rendering of the word “esotericism” (*shenmi xue* 神秘学). *Shenmi xue* is a modern compound, created by adding the suffixes

学/主义 (*xue/zhuyi* representing the “ism”), to another word with a long and rich semantic history, 神秘 (*shenmi*). The term can already be found in medieval Daoist literature, expressing the idea of hidden knowledge or spiritual secrets.

In its modern form, the compound *shenmi xue* can be found in late nineteenth-century dictionaries and early twentieth-century academic literature. In this corpus, *shenmi* either refers to “mysticism” or “spiritual(ity),” and it is acknowledged as an umbrella term that refers to an “idealistic” style of religious/philosophical thought that entails “the oneness of all things” (Feng 1927: 53), an essential element of the three native traditions of China (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism).

This early usage persists throughout much of the twenty-first century, the period on which this chapter particularly focuses. Somewhat mirroring what happened in other cultural and linguistic contexts, the unstable notion of “esotericism” (and the alike vague Chinese word used to translate it, *shenmi*) resulted in the discussion on “esotericism” being deeply intertwined with that on “mysticism,” with the former understood as a subtype of the overall category of *shenmi zhuyi*. Different authors utilized various linguistic strategies to differentiate the two fields. The historian Wang Yude 王玉德 centered his discussion on the two semantic levels of the character 神 (*shen*), insisting in his works on the importance to acknowledge that the study of *shen* is of pivotal importance in the collective effort to alleviate “the increasingly severe crisis of human civilization” (Wang 2003: 6). He believed that the term *shenmi* is, in its essence, undefinable and untranslatable but it can be morphologically understood in two ways. In the first sense, *shenmi* is about “supernatural beings imagined by religion and mythology,” while the second meaning indicates a discourse about “extraordinary phenomena” (Wang 2003: 5). The first deals with “the methods and experiences of achieving unity between humans and the divine [神]” (Wang 2003: 8), while the second “refers to the systematization and theorization of spiritual [神] concepts. It represents a spiritual [神] understanding of the universe, social phenomena, and cognitive processes” (Wang 2003: 9).

Another important aspect in Wang’s argument is the clear-cut separation between Western and Chinese reality. Because of what Wang believes to be the difference between Eastern and Western cultures, there cannot be a univocal definition of *shenmi zhuyi*. Also, unlike China, the West has a long-established tradition of study of *shenmi*, starting from ancient Greek θεολογία “the study of the divine [神学]” (Wang 2003: 2). Europe also has a different kind of *shenmi xue* (“occultism”), concerned with

mystery knowledge [奥秘知识, *aomi zhishi*], theories, customs, and rituals based on the spiritual realm, that is, the unknown cosmic forces. Occultism is divided into Satanism, astrology, Kabbalah, spiritualism, divination, witchcraft, sorcery, and so on. (Wang 2003: 2)

A similar sharp division between Eastern and Western forms of the *shenmi* can be found in an article published by Wang Liuer 王六二 (2012). He argues that, after the Chinese 1980s “Cultural Fever,” a vast array of occult phenomena (witchcraft, necromancy, hypnosis, Satanism, astrology, etc.) were lumped under the category of “esoteric culture” (*shenmi wenhua* 神秘文化), while in the West there has been a clear distinction between “mysticism” (*shenmi zhuyi* 神秘主义) and “occultism” (*shenmi xue/guimi zhuyi* 神秘学/诡秘主义). In his work, Wang outlines the evolution of Western “*shenmi*-ism” across four historical stages. It begins in the nineteenth century with the European “discovery” of Eastern (mainly Indian) religion and philosophy, followed by the rise of neoromanticism in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century as a reaction against bourgeois civilization, rationality, and science. The third stage occurs in the 1960s and 1970s, when “*shenmi* culture” resurfaces within countercultural movements. Finally, in the 1980s and 1990s, mysticism and occultism returned amid global social, economic, and ecological crises, as people turned to traditional and indigenous cultures, rejecting modernity and scientific rationalism. The article concludes with a brief survey of the Chinese sources available on the subject.

Wang’s article does not represent cutting-edge scholarship in the field of Western esotericism, as it relies heavily on sources such as Mircea Eliade that had already been superseded by the time of its publication in 2012. Although the most recent literature on the subject is not addressed, the contribution is important not only because it is an attempt to make some linguistic order into the field, but, most importantly, because Wang is a prominent member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS, *zhongguo shehui kexueyuan* 中国社会科学院).⁵ Often considered one of China’s largest “semi-official” think tanks, CASS is one of the leading research arms of the Party-state, an institution to which the government turns when it seeks clarity on a topic considered of national importance (Grünberg and Stec 2024: 7).

A more elaborate attempt to linguistically differentiate different domains of *shenmi* is offered by Cheng Lesong 程乐松, professor of philosophy at Peking University. A section of his *Daoism: Body, Immortality and Mysticism* is “An Analysis from a Semantic Approach” to *shenmi zhuyi* (Cheng 2017: 105–10). Cheng stresses the fact that the term originates from translations of Western

literature, “with numerous corresponding or overlapping term” (Cheng 2017: 105). In an attempt to create a standard vocabulary for the field, Cheng proposed a four-kind typology of *shenmi*, differentiating “mysticism” (*shenmi zhuyi* 神秘主义), “occultism” (*shenmi xue* 神秘学), “esotericism” (*mijiao* 密教), and “gnosticism” (*lingxing zhuyi/nuositi zhuyi* 灵性主义/诺斯替主义) (Cheng 2017:105).

These examples show how “Western esotericism” first made its way into China through the field of religion and, more in particular, gradually emerged from the native discussion on “mysticism/spiritual” (*shenmi*). None of these authors understand themselves as a specialist of a nonexistent field of “esotericism,” and discussions on this subject are always peripheral to their main themes. Moreover, they refer to rather outdated sources, such as Mircea Eliade’s classic *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (1976), which explains the predominance of the term “occultism” to define what in the West, from the 1990s and the emergence of the field of “Western esotericism,” is more often called “esotericism.”

It is interesting to note how these Chinese authors consistently emphasize the distinction between Western and Chinese traditions. This approach appears quite contrary to the early Western pioneers of esoteric studies like Eliade, who were often in search of transcultural paradigms and perennialist explanations. This tendency endures among a new group of Chinese scholars who approach the study of Western esotericism (and the translation of such Western texts) in a more specialized manner to which now we turn our attention.

灵知, 秘传, and 神秘: Western Esotericism as an Independent Academic Field

The initial efforts to clarify the lexical confusion in the field of “*shenmi* studies” emerged in the early 2000s, when a handful of scholars began to seriously engage with contemporary Euro-American scholarship and focused on establishing a theoretically precise framework for “Western esotericism” in Chinese. It is difficult to establish a direct line of filiation between this body of literature and the works discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. Rather, various attempts to construct a field—and a corresponding vocabulary—of “Western esotericism” in China appear to have emerged independently, driven by scholars who, for reasons examined in the following sections, began engaging directly with specialized Euro-American literature on the subject. A 2011 seminal article, “Western Esotericism——宗教学领域新兴研究学科” (“Western

Esotericism: A New Research Field in Religious Studies”), perfectly embodies this new phase of Chinese scholarship.

The author, political scientist He Guquan 何桂全, introduces to a Chinese audience “a new discipline that, since the 1990s, has emerged in the field of Western religious studies” (He 2011: 43). Unlike previous scholarship, this article is a well-informed survey of Euro-American specialized literature and begins with the challenge of translating the word “esoteric(ism).” The solution provided is highly precise: the author proposes a dual translation of the adjective “esoteric” to convey both its literal (*neizai de* 内在的, lit. “internal”) and religious meanings (*shenmi de* 神秘的, lit. “spiritual”). To avoid confusion, he suggests moving away from the earlier association of “esotericism” with *shenmi*, instead opting for 灵知主义 (*lingzhi zhuyi*, lit. “spiritual knowledge/Gnosis”) (He 2011: 43). The rationale for this choice lies in He’s observation of commonalities among the varied perspectives of Western scholars, particularly the emphasis on considering “gnosis” (one of the possible meanings of *lingzhi* 灵知), obtained either through spiritual intermediaries or personal experience, as the core element of Western esotericism. This choice marks an initial attempt to distinctly separate an independent field of “esotericism” from that of “mysticism,” which is translated as 神秘体验 (*shenmi tiyan*, lit. “spiritual/mystical experience”) (He 2011: 46). In this perspective, mysticism is viewed as an experiential dimension within the diverse array of phenomena classified as “esotericism” (alongside magic, alchemy, astrology, etc.) (He 2011: 46).

This distinction represented an advancement with respect to previous literature, but also a sharp interpretative twist on Western source material. By translating “esotericism” as *lingzhi*, He forces the contested category of “esotericism” toward the (equally undefined) idea of “gnosis.”⁶ This translation choice leads to a sort of circular argument. From the fact that “esotericism” is rendered with a word that also means “gnosis,” it derives that “the core element of Western esotericism [灵知主义] is gnosis [灵知]” and that “the most important characteristic of Western esotericism [灵知主义] is gnosis [灵知]” (He 2011: 47).

A more sophisticated definitional discussion can be found in a 2016 paper by historian of science Gao Yang 高洋. In his work, Gao engages with the category of “Hermetic Tradition” famously proposed by Frances Yates (1964). For Gao, the notion of “Hermetic Tradition” is misleading for defining the rich Renaissance spiritual milieu from which modern science emerged and, in alternative to it, he suggests isolating the study of the *Corpus Hermeticum* as a “hermetic text *par excellence*” (Gao 2016: 54) rather than treating it as a foundational text of

“Hermeticism” that attracts a wide variety of “Hermeticists” with diverse and conflicting ideas. Instead, he prefers to categorize these various doctrines, which include “Neoplatonic writings, Kabbalistic ideas and texts, works attributed to Pythagoras, the Chaldean Oracles, and the Orphic Hymns” (Gao 2016: 55), under the umbrella term “Esotericism.” He rejected the early terms *shenmi* and *lingzhi* as too general (the former) and too closely associated with Gnosis and Gnosticism (the latter). Instead, he coined the neologism 秘传学说 (*michuan xueshuo*), which conveys the idea of a set of theories (*xueshuo*) that have been secretly transmitted (*mi*, “secret”; *chuan*, “handing down,” “transmitting”) through the ages.

Like He Guiquan, Gao Yang demonstrated an excellent command of Western specialized literature. Both authors sought to bring order to the field by reinventing the term “esotericism,” each aligning it with their specific research interests (Gnosticism for He and the Renaissance for Gao). Ultimately, however, their concepts of *lingzhi* and *michuan xueshuo* did not succeed in becoming standard in the field. As we will see in the next section, Gao eventually moved away from this early theorization, shifting his focus in subsequent work—arguably of much greater significance for the Chinese academic reception of “Western esotericism”—toward a new approach.

This shift was catalyzed by a pivotal moment in the development of Western esotericism as an academic field in China: the 2018 Chinese translation of Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2013). There are several reasons that make this volume so significant. First, whereas “Western esotericism” was previously a secondary aspect of discussions on Chinese spirituality or religion or studied in brief articles, the *Guide for the Perplexed* represents the first instance of a complete monograph entirely dedicated to the scientific study of Western esotericism. Another important aspect to consider is that the volume was published by the prestigious Commercial Press (*shangwu yin shuguan* 商务印书馆), which is arguably the most significant academic publishing house in China. Last, the translator of this project, Professor Zhang Butian 张卜天, was not only a full professor at the esteemed Tsinghua University but also one of the most renowned and prolific living translators, having authored over forty translations of Western classics.

The volume was published in the series *Studies in the History of Science* (*kexue shi yi cong* 科学史译丛), thereby firmly inserting “Western esotericism” into mainstream intellectual discourse, in particular linking it with the decades-old “Needham Question.”⁷ Zhang strongly opposed those who believe that “ancient China had science too” (Zhang 2018a: 783), but instead firmly believes that “Science is a Western concept, emerged from the womb of Western civilization”

(Zhang 2018b: i) and the only way to really understand the contemporary pervasiveness of scientific discourse is to “return to the womb of Western civilization” (Zhang 2018b: iii). A necessary tool for this “return to origins” is the reading and understanding of Western cultural classics, from which modern science initially emerged. This endeavor, pursued by Zhang throughout his career as both historian and translator, especially allows for a critical examination of the rigid structure of the Chinese classification system, which strictly separates science within the “natural sciences” from the “humanities” and ignores the close connection between religious systems and modern science. Thus, Western esotericism works, in this project, as an ideal bridge between science and religion—“the third pillar of Western civilization” (Zhang 2018b: 255)—alongside faith and reason.

Zhang also critically reflected on the translation choices of his predecessors. Since “we may never arrive at a precise definition of esotericism,” he believes that “translations need not be overly rigid about its literal meaning” (Zhang 2018b: 255) and for this reason he chooses a more general and intuitively understandable *shenmi xue* to render “esotericism.” In his postscript, Zhang also acknowledges alternative translations that we have found in our excursus through Chinese scholarship, but they are ultimately rejected because they only convey some specific aspects of the broad term “esotericism” whose meaning “has expanded over time and is no longer limited to ‘secret transmission’” (Zhang 2018b: 255).

It is clear how, both with his choice of translation and his typology, Zhang individuates a neat distinction between Western and Chinese esotericisms. Subscribing to Hanegraaff’s “rejected knowledge” thesis, Zhang interprets Western esotericism as a “knowledge rejected by mainstream science, philosophy, and religion” (Zhang 2018b: 255) and argues that such a dynamic is unknown in Chinese history, where esoteric theories and practices were integrated into the classical Chinese intellectual framework, often coexisting with Confucian and Daoist philosophies.⁸

New Generations, New Voices: In Search of Meaning and Rigorous Scholarship

Zhang Butian’s work marked a new era in the Chinese study of “Western esotericism,” with his translation of Hanegraaff setting the standard for the field’s technical vocabulary. In a sense, after Zhang Butian, it became possible

to definitively answer the question, “How do you say ‘Western esotericism’ in Chinese?”—the answer being, to this day, 西方神秘学 (*xifang shenmixue*).

Unlike in Western academia, where “Western esotericism” has eventually developed into an independent field of inquiry, in China, the study of esotericism is gradually being incorporated into more mainstream academic disciplines. A new generation of Chinese scholars is actively continuing the work of studying and translating Western esoteric texts. In these new generations, two distinct trajectories can be observed. On the one hand, there is a pursuit of scientific precision; on the other, an approach that seeks in esoteric authors and texts an antidote or a response to social and existential questions. Two young scholars are particularly representative of these tendencies: the aforementioned Gao Yang and Zhou Dangwei 周党伟. Their work is especially significant, since they are both active translators and they are the first Chinese intellectuals to have actively participated in the European academic community of scholars of esotericism.⁹

Into Academic Mainstream

Currently, the most important initiative regarding “Western esotericism” in China is the first professional translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The project was sponsored from 2019 to 2024 by the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences (*quanguo zhexue shehui kexue gongzuo bangongshi* 全国哲学社会科学工作办公室), arguably the most prestigious funding body in the field of the humanities. It is led by Gao Yang at the Institute for Advanced Study in the History of Science at Northwest University in Xi’an.¹⁰

Gao’s work exemplifies a new phase in China’s engagement with Western esotericism. He combines a solid foundation in European early modern history with mastery of the target languages of his primary sources (English, Greek, and Latin). Moreover, Gao demonstrates a thorough understanding of the scholarly discourse surrounding “Western esotericism,” both domestically and internationally. In China, he has adopted the vocabulary proposed by Zhang Butian, moving beyond his earlier experimental terminology, mentioned above. Internationally, Gao actively participated in the European scholarly community of esoteric studies, spending a year as a visiting PhD student at the Warburg Institute in London and being member of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE). His scholarly profile represents the first generation of academics to some extent integrated into the international community of esoteric studies.

In his translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Gao emphasizes the importance of rediscovering their original spiritual meaning, a dimension often overlooked by Chinese scholars unfamiliar with the esoteric aspects of the texts. Thus, his immersion in “Western esotericism” marks the beginning of a new phase for the history of science that, unlike “esotericism,” is included in the Chinese academic classification. In Gao’s words:

Understanding and studying the history of science reveals that science itself has a history—one shaped by temporal and spatial changes and influenced by language, nationality, politics, and religion. It also shows that science exists in relation to various actors and social roles, not merely in the minds of scientists, books, or laboratories. The history of science teaches us that not everyone needs to view science through the lens of scientists, nor is it only scientists who can convey a complete understanding of science.¹¹

Gao can be regarded as the scholar who most fully represents the post-Zhang generation. For this cohort, “Western esotericism” is understood primarily as a historical and foreign (“Western”) phenomenon that can—and should—be studied through rigorous academic inquiry. However, such investigation does not amount to mere scientific reductionism. On the contrary, by identifying “Western esotericism” as one of the foundational elements of the universally recognized “Western science,” an institutional avenue has been established for conducting research on topics that would otherwise be challenging to propose within Chinese universities. The scientific rigor of these scholars is a crucial prerequisite for carving out academic space for the study of “Western esotericism.” Projects like Gao’s, sponsored by one of the most competitive funding bodies in China, demonstrate the potential to create niches for esoteric thematics within mainstream Chinese academic discourse.

Western Esotericism and Chinese Psychology

Zhou Dangwei has a dual identity. He is a scholar of cultural history (he is currently a lecturer at the Hubei Normal University) and a practicing psychotherapist. He is also an active translator, having published in Chinese some of the most important works by Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) (Zhou 2014, 2016, 2023a), achieving a wide public success.¹²

The significance he attributes to his work as a translator can be inferred from his research interests, which, apart from Jung, focus on Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), understood as a paradigmatic “‘spiritual mediator’ between the East and

the West” (Zhou 2023b: i). If Willhelm believed that Chinese spiritual ideas could help repair the western soul from the damages caused by the First World War, Zhou thinks that some concepts of Jungian psychology may be used by Chinese people to navigate the many contradictions of the People’s Republic. For him, “translation is not merely about transferring words; it is, above all, about transforming ideas from one culture to another,”¹³ and for this reason, Zhou’s translations are not addressed specifically to scholars, but they are written in a language that can be comprehensible to a more general audience. For example, Zhou’s volumes are always aesthetically pleasing, and he is very sparing in his use of footnotes.

Zhou places particular emphasis on translating two key aspects of Jung’s thought that he deems especially significant for the Chinese audience: the concepts of “Self” and “Individuation.” In Zhou’s view, traditional Chinese values lack a theoretical framework for understanding the personality as an autonomous entity, distinct from, and sometimes in conflict with, societal norms and expectations. This gap highlights the urgency of introducing Western psychological models to help contemporary Chinese individuals navigate a society that, despite its modernization, continues to retain many premodern cultural traits, such as rigid hierarchies, collectivism, and patriarchy.

For the term “Self,” Zhou introduced the neologism 原我 (*yuanwo*, lit. “original self”). This expression represents a reinterpretation of Jung’s concept, drawing from his statement that “the self, I thought, was like the monad which I am, and which is my world” (Jung 2009: 206). Zhou selected the Chinese word 原子 (*yuanzi*, “atom”) reflecting a more scientific understanding of “monad,” while still encapsulating the Jungian notion of the Self as both the core and the totality of an individual’s personality. This choice of translation is an attempt to get rid of an excessive religionist baggage of previous Jungian scholarship, which translated “Self” with the Buddhist term 自性 (*zixing*), indicating the essential nature of all beings. With his choices, Zhou intends to defend the scientific mandate of psychology, which can be undermined by an excessive reliance on esoteric/religious themes.

Alike, Zhou’s translation of Jung’s concept of “individuation” also shows his effort to introduce scientific precision to a Chinese audience unfamiliar with such frameworks. In Jungian theory, individuation refers to the psychological process through which individuals develop a distinct identity, separating themselves from collective norms and universality while fostering personal differentiation and autonomy. Zhou renders “individuation” with the term 个体化 (*geitihua*). *Geti* refers to an individual or a person, and *hua* is a suffix that denotes a process

or transformation, implying the act of becoming or making something into a particular state. Such a translation emphasizes the structural and developmental aspects of this transformation, positioning it firmly within a scientific rather than religious context. By opting for *getihua*, Zhou signals his intention to frame individuation as a universal process relevant to modern psychology, opposed to early translations that are informed by Buddhist worldview such as *zixinghua* 自性化.

With scholars like Gao and Zhou, Western esotericism in China is currently evolving in two distinct directions, both shaped by a strong command of the international debate on the discipline. On the one hand, figures like Gao are integrating esotericism into Chinese mainstream academic discussions, such as the history of science. On the other hand, scholars like Zhou are drawing from Western esotericism to address more existential concerns, particularly in his work as a therapist, where such knowledge plays a crucial role in exploring psychological and spiritual dimensions of personal growth. This dual approach reflects the broader trend in China where, rather than consolidating a dedicated field of study on “Western esotericism,” certain aspects of the European scholarly debate are being imported and adapted to serve internal needs, foster academic progress, and provide intellectual tools for tackling societal and individual crises.

隱微: Esotericism, Gnosticism, and the “Subtle” Art of Politics

In the initial section of this chapter, I argued that the discussion of “esotericism” in China has revolved around three semantic poles: *shen* 神, *mi* 秘/密, and *ling* 靈. However, a different kind of discussion about “esotericism” has emerged in an unexpected context: political philosophy. This influence derives from the use of the word “esoteric” by an author mostly ignored in the Euro-American academic discussion of “Western esotericism.”

In 1941, German-American philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973) published a famous article titled “Persecution and the Art of Writing” (1941), in which he discussed the role of intellectuals in times of political oppression. Strauss argued:

Persecution cannot prevent even public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines. (Strauss 1941: 490)

The books written according to this “forgotten kind of writing” (Strauss 1954) are dubbed by Strauss “esoteric.” The Straussian theory of “esotericism” has sparked intense debate among Strauss’s interpreters. Some have argued that Strauss himself wrote “esoterically,” concealing his ultraconservative ideas behind the facade of academic production (Drury 2005: ix), while others contend that “Strauss’s preoccupation with esotericism in particular has nothing to do with a political agenda” (Melzer 2014: 109).

If, in the Euro-American discourse, the Straussian ideas about esotericism have been ignored by the field of “Western esotericism,”¹⁴ the situation is different in a country like China, hit by a prolonged “Strauss fever” (Shaw 2017; Tu 2023). The most influential figure in introducing Strauss (and his concept of “esotericism”) to China is Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, a professor at Renmin University of China. A theologian, philosopher, and political scientist, Liu views modernity as a spiritual predicament shared by both China and the West, arising from the decline of traditional spiritual values. In reaction to this predicament, Liu embarked into an intense campaign of translation of Western classics, playing a pivotal role as the editor-in-chief of the monumental series *Hermes: Classici et Commentarii*, which had grown to encompass 750 volumes at the time of writing. The series represents to the Chinese public a version of “Western tradition” deeply informed by Strauss, with translations not only of most of the writing of the German philosopher (in 40 volumes), but also all those authors studied by Strauss “throughout his career and in all his far-flung researches, from Plato, Thucydides, and Aristophanes, to Al-Farabi, Maimonides, and Marsilius, to Spinoza, Burke, and Heidegger” (Melzer 2014: 108).

From the name of this series, *Hermes*, it is clear how Liu’s project is deeply informed by a spiritual understanding of Western tradition and, as such, it has become a gateway for importing esoteric themes in China.¹⁵ Thus, with Liu’s understanding of Strauss, esotericism enters a political discussion, distinct from the spiritual realms prevalent in Western discourse. This distinction is highlighted in the choice of translation for the term “esotericism.” In this body of work, esotericism is not rendered with the religiously charged *shenmixue* but as 隐微 (*yinwei*, lit. “hidden and subtle”), a term that captures the deliberate concealment of ideas intended for a discerning audience, contrasting with the “*shenmi*-esotericism” centered on supernatural or spiritual elements.

Liu’s influence on Chinese culture can hardly be underestimated, with some negative critics commenting that the translation and publishing activities of the “‘Liu Xiaofeng academic clique’ (*Liu Xiaofeng xueshu jituan*) have created a ‘climate’ of the clique’s own in mainland intellectual circles, particularly since

the late 1990s” (Davies 2007: 143). Liu’s theories have inspired generations of intellectuals, some of whom have taken his ideas into new directions.

One of the most interesting Liu-inspired scholars is Zhang Xinzhang 张新樟, an associate professor at the Institute for Marxist Religious Studies in New Era, Zhejiang City University. Throughout his career, Zhang has especially explored the intersection of spirituality and political philosophy, with a particular attention to Gnosticism (Zhang 2017). This choice of specialization comes, as in Liu, from Zhang’s engagement with the problem of the relations between modern secularity and religious traditions. If Liu refers more often to Strauss, Zhang is influenced by other German-speaking conservatives such as Hans Jonas (1903–1993) and Eric Voegelin (1901–1985), and that “discussion on Modernity, the process of secularisation and their relation to theology raged within a cluster of German scholars in the 1950s and 1960s” (Hotam 2007: 591).

As a member of the Communist Party of China and, moreover, embedded in a Department of Marxist Studies, Zhang’s scholarship is highly politicized. He argues that “Gnosticism must inevitably become an important research subject in Marxist religious studies” (Zhang 2017: 2), suggesting that the principles of Gnostic soteriology can shed light on the Marxist ideas of “alienation,” its resolution through dialectics and even asserting that the Marxist ideal of “objective truth” carries a “Gnostic connotation” (Zhang 2017: 2).

For Zhang, studying Gnosticism does not simply mean analyzing a dead religion, but could be instrumental “to understand, investigate and guide” (Zhang 2017: 5) contemporary phenomena such as “New Age,” “alternative religiosity,” and “new religious movements” but also social evils such as fanaticism, extremism, and even terrorism (Zhang 2017: 1). This need to understand and regulate religion in contemporary Chinese society is at the heart of Zhang’s concerns, as testified not only by his commentary on Gnosticism but also by his works on the regulation of domestic *xiejiao* 邪教, a Chinese technical term that defines religious movements that illegally promote antisocial or harmful behaviors (Zhang 2020; Zhang and Xu 2024).

The significant political dimension of Zhang’s work should not lead one to underestimate the spiritual importance of his contributions. Although he is not directly engaged in the national or international debates surrounding “Western esotericism,” Professor Zhang has repeatedly demonstrated an interest in the spiritual aspects of the Western tradition, especially when viewed in comparison to his own native tradition. A prime example of this spiritual focus can be found in his translation of *A Collection of Ancient Gnostic Texts* (2017) (*Gudai nuositizhuyi jingdian wenji* 古代诺斯替主义经典文集). In this book, Zhang

highlights the spiritual content of Gnosticism as “an important intellectual resource needed to address humanity’s eternal questions, such as life, disease, conflict, and even the end of the world” (Zhang 2017: 1004). More importantly, Gnosticism, in this work, is not confined to an (alleged) historical school, but extends to what we may call “Western esotericism,” which, for Zhang, is represented by the “various sects affiliated with Gnosticism [that], in the last five hundred years, have become the main pathway for the intellectual elite to pursue the study of religion” (Zhang 2017: 1006).

Zhang approaches this topic in a completely original way, using a new interpretative category: “大健康” (*dajiankang*, “comprehensive health”). For him, religion and healing have been closely intertwined since antiquity, emphasizing that Gnosticism was, above all, a form of *soteria* (*zhengjiu* 拯救), aimed at the health of both body and soul. Alike, for Zhang, “神秘宗教” (*Shenmi zongjiao*, “mystery/esoteric religions”) have constantly been one of the key ways to achieve liberation from bodily and spiritual ailments (Zhang 2017: 1005). If Gnosticism was a response to the crisis initiated by that meeting of East and West represented by Alexander’s conquest, alike, “esoteric religions” can be an antidote to the evil of our time:

crises in social and psychological health, such as loneliness, alienation, and a lack of trust in interpersonal relationships. Spiritual issues related to the meaning of life, belonging, values, ideals, and faith. (Zhang 2017: 1005)

It is evident how, in this context, “Gnosticism/esotericism” sheds its characteristic as an exotic (“Western”) antiquarian curiosity and emerges as an important foundational theoretical topic within the religious, social, and political discourse surrounding the process of Chinese-style modernization. Furthermore, Zhang’s political-therapeutic approach “saves” esotericism from the politically sensitive domain of religious studies in China, shifting it onto safer grounds. Moreover, Zhang has surpassed the eminently intellectual scope of Liu’s project, moving the discussion of “Western esotericism” toward more practical aims, such as those related to social, physical, and mental health,¹⁶ which can provide a viable path for the future of the study of alternative religions with Chinese characteristics.

Concluding Remarks

What is presented in these pages is a first attempt at reviewing the study of “Western esotericism” in contemporary Mainland China. Contrary to what

happened in Europe and in North America, the Chinese engagement with esotericism is characterized by the absence of an institutional framework, with the majority of scholars working outside the boundaries of religious studies and in departments as diverse as sociology, history, psychology, philosophy, and even Marxist studies.

A second distinctive feature of this environment is the pervasive influence of the state on their work. This influence is twofold, manifesting through both censorship and co-optation. State censorship is a constant in Chinese intellectual life. Today, state control largely shifted away from traditional totalitarian practices, moving toward more modern forms of censorship that preventively suppress discussions on certain topics and rely chiefly on self-censorship (Klotzbücher et al. 2020). Censorship is naturally central when it comes to publications, with authors sometimes dealing with incomprehensibly convoluted regulations.¹⁷ In this sense, the Straussian theory of “esoteric writing” can be interpreted as a useful tool for Chinese intellectuals to navigate the difficult waters of “political sensitivity.”

Censorship is not the only aspect of the relationship between intellectuals and the Chinese state. Although often overlooked by Western audiences, a second significant dynamic exists: cooperation. Government agencies frequently rely on intellectuals to offer expert insights and recommendations on policy proposals. This collaboration allows the state to tap into specialized knowledge and academic expertise, ensuring that policy decisions are vetted by specialist perspectives. This “co-operative approach with the establishment is anything but craven compliance” (Cheek 2016: 282), and intellectuals, in turn, may gain opportunities for influence on legislators and access to state resources, creating a complex interplay of mutual dependency and cooperation that extends beyond mere acquiescence or dissent. The study of “Western esotericism” can be considered paradigmatic for this dynamic, with scholars engaged with esotericism such as Wang Liuer being directly or indirectly involved in state legislation on religious matters.

The interplay between intellectual endeavors and pragmatic political and societal needs has fostered a notable linguistic fluidity. Rather than striving to establish a cohesive “field of research” or a standardized vocabulary, Chinese intellectuals have tailored “Western esoteric” materials to align with their specific interests. This dynamic is particularly evident in the term “esotericism,” the genealogy of which has been examined in detail in this chapter.

We have observed that most translations of the term “esotericism” revolve around three characters: *shen* 神, *mi* 秘/密, and *ling* 灵. Various authors have

emphasized different aspects of esotericism, initially opting for *mijiao*, a term of Buddhist origin used to represent a form of Chinese “esoteric distinction.” Subsequent generations of authors have focused more on aspects such as secret transmission (*michuan*) or the centrality of gnosis (*lingzhi*). Eventually, the field reached a turning point with the translation of Hanegraaff’s *Guide for the Perplexed* by Zhang Butian, which, in a sense, canonized *shenmi xue* as the standard rendering of “Western esotericism.” After Zhang Butian’s work, esotericism entered the mainstream of Chinese academia, and we have seen how newer generations of scholars are exploring new directions. Building on Zhang’s systematization, they continue to pursue scientific accuracy—as seen in the work of historian Gao Yang—and emphasize the societal importance of esoteric themes, such as those explored in Jungian psychology by scholar and therapist Zhou Dangwei.

Last, this chapter explored a more political direction taken by a group of intellectuals led by Liu Xiaofeng. Influenced by Leo Strauss, they have theorized a type of esotericism (*yinwei*) related to “the art of writing under persecution.” Liu and his extensive translation efforts have introduced Chinese audiences to a Western tradition in which esotericism—particularly Rosicrucianism and Platonism—plays a significant role. This tradition, shaped by German conservative thinkers like Jonas and Voegelin, is currently advanced by scholars such as Zhang Xinzhang. Zhang integrates his research on Gnosticism with themes of religious politics and an innovative theory of esotericism as “comprehensive health” (*da jiankang*), understood as a potential solution for social issues such as alienation or mental illness.

Chinese academics often complain about the backwardness of esoteric studies compared to their Western counterparts. However, I believe that the linguistic, intellectual, social, and political framework in which they operate is at the origin of the unique features of the Chinese esoteric studies landscape, with perspectives that are often fresh and innovative. In this sense, this excursus through the Chinese academic tradition can serve as an example for those who seek to take the much-debated globalization of esoteric studies seriously.

The semantic instability of key concepts in what some envision as the “standard vocabulary” of the field underscores the impossibility of comparative projects based on terms like “esotericism,” which hold meaning only within the extremely narrow confines of the Euro-American academic study of “Western esotericism.” Unfortunately, some of those promoting so-called “global perspectives” often rely entirely on European languages and conceptual frameworks, without the academic training or linguistic competence necessary to engage seriously with

non-Western sources. This is particularly evident in recent projects based on “esoteric practices” (Otto 2025), which, under the pretense of employing a “second-order working definition,” exclude from their theorization any possible contribution from non-European languages.¹⁸

Instead, I believe that if we are serious about pursuing “an open-ended process grounded in the agency of embodied humans, each situated in their own times and spaces” (Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay 2023: 26), we must stop scouting the world for equivalents of our cultural constructs and commit to learning how to read and listen to what non-Western thinkers and traditions actually say. Thus, to achieve a genuinely global study of esotericism, it is imperative to be willing to set aside some of our familiar words and categories and be ready to embrace the alterity of diverse intellectual worlds.

There is nothing to lose but our epistemological chains.

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The Heresy of History: The Category of *Gishi* in Modern Japanese (Oc)culture

Orion Klautau¹

The depiction of the past is not the exclusive domain of the discipline of history; it extends into other academic fields and, beyond them, into the wider cultural sphere. Sociologists and linguists also craft histories, as do journalists, novelists, and others. Although the pasts created by these latter public writers are sometimes far more influential than those shaped within the walls of modern universities, we often do not examine these depictions with the same level of scrutiny that we apply to our academic colleagues. Of course, some of these “nonprofessional” histories are so anachronistic or nonsensical that it is difficult to determine where to begin. However, this does not alter the fact that these images of the past can still reveal a great deal about the expectations certain groups hold for the present and, more importantly, for the *future*. From Theosophical Society founder Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and her ideas on Lemuria, to American Congressman Ignatius L. Donnelly’s (1831–1901) theories about Atlantis; from Mu proponent James Churchward (1851–1936) to the more recent and immensely popular narratives by Graham Hancock (b. 1950) concerning humanity prior to the so-called Younger Dryas impact—these otherwise fringe ideas have continued to circulate across generations. Their creation, dissemination, and reception reveal much not only about how their authors perceived their own times, but also about the formation of communities of shared belief and the commodification of the past.²

Always fantastical—and often disseminated in connection with religious movements³—these discourses are typically infused with an ambiguous sense of secrecy. That is, on the one hand, they are disseminated through best-selling books and popular television documentaries; on the other, they present themselves as revealing ideas that have remained hidden from the public and

stand in opposition to mainstream ideologies. The appeal of belonging to a select group that claims to possess the “truth” about the world—and the idea of this exclusive knowledge emerging in defiance of dominant narratives—is a hallmark of what are commonly referred to as “conspiracy theories.” While recent scholarship has explored the “shared milieus” between conspiratorial thinking and esoteric traditions (Asprem and Dyrendal 2018: 207), I suggest that the development of discourse surrounding the term *gishi* 偽史 in Japan offers a dynamic that differs significantly from patterns typically observed in the West.

Meaning literally “false history,” *gishi*, as we will explore in detail below, was first used in the modern context as a means of criticizing historical narratives that, while emerging from Shinto-based new religious movements, primarily sought to justify Japan’s position at the apex of the early- to mid-twentieth-century global order. Significantly, these critiques originated not from liberal or leftist circles, but from other conservative and nationalist actors who viewed such narratives as detrimental to what they regarded as the authentic expression of the Japanese national polity, or *kokutai* 国体. Although originally deployed in the context of competing nationalist visions during the Second World War, *gishi* gradually migrated over the course of the twentieth century into the contemporary esoteric milieu, and was ultimately reframed, after the 1970s, within the discursive framework of what contemporary actors came to call “the Occult.”

This chapter, therefore, traces the story of how, shaped by both local material conditions and global intellectual currents, a particular set of historical narratives—structurally resembling depictions of the past that emerged within the framework of late nineteenth-century Western “occultism”—came to be discussed, in the Japanese context, in precisely those terms. In other words, it is the story of how *gishi*, one of the contemporary labels for fantastical depictions of an ultra-ancient Japan, shifted from being primarily an expression of nationalist critique to becoming a central feature of the “esoteric” market. This does not mean, however, that the narratives associated with the term ever lost their Japan-centric character, or that they originally lacked elements of “esotericism”—both of these aspects, arguably, have always been present. My aim here, rather, is to move beyond contemporary understandings of these categories and, from a genealogical perspective, trace the historical formation of the semantic field surrounding *gishi*. In doing so, I seek to complicate essentialist interpretations of the term and, at the same time, to highlight an example of East Asian agency in shaping the content and contours of “the Occult” in contemporary Japan.

The Birth of *Gishi*: 1930s–40s Debates on Origin Narratives

On a winter morning in early 1936, just thirteen days before the infamous attempted *coup d'état* known as the “February 26 Incident,” police in the small town of Isohara in Ibaraki Prefecture arrested Takeuchi Kiyomaro 竹内巨磨 (1874–1965), the leader of the Shinto-based religious group Amatsukyō. Takeuchi, who had founded the association over three decades prior in 1900, was apprehended alongside one of his disciples on suspicion of offenses against the imperial house. This incident was not isolated; just two months earlier, in December 1935, authorities had cracked down on two other Shinto-based associations, Ōmoto and Tenrikyō, both popular at the time (Fujiwara 2020: 96–7). During this period, the Japanese state viewed these new religious groups as potential sources of dissent and implemented various preventive measures against them.

Like some of his fellow religious founders, Takeuchi had had previous encounters with the law (Nagaoka 2017: 94; Fujiwara 2020: 85–7). However, this time, it resulted in a serious criminal charge of *lèse-majesté*. The essence of this accusation was that Takeuchi had been falsifying materials, leading people to develop false visions of Shinto and, more broadly, of Japanese imperial history itself (Fujiwara 2020: 98). In short, Takeuchi claimed that his family had, for well over a millennium, been custodians of an ancient set of documents that described a past much older than that found in the first Japanese “official history,” the early eighth-century *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀. Since these sources discussed a time long before the introduction of Chinese writing into Japan, they were partly written in *jindai moji* 神代文字, or “characters of the Age of the Gods.”

The contents of these materials, which in time became collectively known as the *Takeuchi Documents* (*Takeuchi monjo* 竹内文書, or *Takeuchi bunken* 竹内文献),⁴ were as sensational and imaginative as some of the finest fantasy novels available at the time.⁵ Perhaps the most famous of the Takeuchi stories is the one about how Jesus, having lived in Japan and received ninja training during his youth, returned to Palestine to preach and ultimately managed to escape crucifixion. According to the documents—or contemporary narratives directly inspired by them—he returned to the archipelago, settling in the remote northern village of Herai in Aomori Prefecture, where he married a local woman and lived until the age of 118. The documents claimed that it was not Jesus, but his brother, Isukiri イスキリ, who had been surrendered to the Romans and crucified. Therefore, beside Christ’s tomb atop a small hill in the village lies

a symbolic grave for his younger sibling, honoring Isukiri's noble and selfless sacrifice.

Yet Jesus was not the first Jewish figure said to have visited ancient Japan—according to intellectuals such as Sakai Katsutoki 酒井勝軍 (alt. Katsuisa, 1874–1940), one of the earliest and most influential interpreters of the *Takeuchi Documents*, Moses had done so long before him. Interestingly—and not coincidentally—Sakai was also among the first Japanese figures to introduce into the country what is arguably the most infamous piece of anti-Semitic literature of the twentieth century: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Kovalio 2009: 23). Originally published in Russia in 1903, the text purports to describe a global Jewish conspiracy for world domination. Sakai first encountered it while serving in the Siberian Expedition (1918–22), during which Japanese forces supported the White Army against Bolshevik revolutionaries. Often portrayed as someone who transitioned from anti- to philo-Semitic views, Sakai would argue that the global success of the Jewish people was due to great figures such as Moses and Jesus having learned in Japan (Yamamoto 2017). As if legitimizing this lost-tribe style narrative, a stone gifted by the city of Jerusalem in 2004 as a “testimony of friendship” between the village and the state of Israel lies in the middle of the Jesus and Isukiri graves. Nevertheless, modern Israel was not the first official body to lend legitimacy to the narrative; hoping for a surge in tourist visits, the village of Herai—later Shingō—had done so for most of the twentieth century. Many early Showa public intellectuals with government connections, such as the aforementioned Sakai, also saw potential in the broader worldview presented in the materials. The documents depicted ancient Japanese sovereigns not as local chieftains, but as heads of a global network of kingdoms that coexisted in peace. The documents could, therefore, be read as an invitation for the emperor to once again assume his position as the head of a Japan-centered world order.

Much like with the Christian Bible or the *Book of Mormon*, archaeological digs aimed at substantiating some of the claims became a reality. Sites and relics were “discovered,” each of these findings sparking peaks of public interest into the 1930s.⁶ Although printed versions of the *Takeuchi Documents* as such circulated only among select audiences—thus preserving a certain aura of mystery—this very exclusivity may have served to attract the attention of contemporary academia, which, from the outset, regarded the materials with skepticism. In this context, perhaps the most scathing critique came from Kanō Kōkichi 狩野亨吉 (1865–1942), former president of Kyoto Imperial University, who, after stepping down from his academic position in 1907, went on to become an antiques expert. In this capacity, he concluded in a 1936 article—published,

notably, just a few months after Takeuchi Kiyomaro's arrest and in a widely read contemporary magazine—that the documents were nothing more than a forgery. He ended his thorough analysis of the case by expressing his hope that Amatsukyō would “reflect on its errors, repent, abandon its delusions, and swiftly return to the true Imperial Way” (Kanō [1936] 1958: 111). This, however, was not enough to diminish public interest in the materials, which persisted well into the twenty-first century.

Of course, religious founders producing imaginative cosmologies is absolutely nothing new. On the contrary, this is something that most people would expect them to have done. The truly interesting aspect of the Amatsukyō, however, is the way this cosmology was presented. While most founders of religious groups institutionalized during the Meiji period, such as Ōmoto and Tenri, produced their revelatory texts through some form of direct communication with the gods, Takeuchi presented his as the *historical rediscovery* of a once glorious past. However, like every other individual, the founder of Amatsukyō was also a product of his time: besides the fact that, during the 1930s, discourses positioning the Japanese emperor as the center of a global spiritual order became increasingly prevalent, Takeuchi was not the only person who, around this period, claimed the discovery of previously lost or secret sources.

Take, for instance, the *Utsufumi* 上記, a late Edo-period text that, like the *Takeuchi Documents*, described the rule of the seventy-two emperors before Jinmu 神武 (who, as per the *Nihon shoki*, would have been Japan's first emperor). It was finally (re)published in 1935, despite having been ruled a forgery several decades earlier in a debate that included interventions from prominent figures such as Léon de Rosny and Basil Hall Chamberlain.⁷ Similarly, in 1941, the so-called *Kukami Documents* (*Kukami monjo* 九鬼文書, or *Kuki*, in an alternative reading of the Chinese characters—see Harada 2018: 66–7), another set of ultra-ancient materials, was circulated to a limited audience. Although as *texts* per se these documents were never widely accessible, their contents nonetheless became known—particularly for asserting, among other things, that the emperor descended not from the sun goddess Amaterasu, as stated in the “official” sources, but from her younger brother Susanoo, a claim that later drew significant public criticism. The individual responsible for editing the *Kukami Documents*, Miura Ichirō 三浦一郎 (1904–1977), was arrested in May 1944 due to the subversive character of his publication (Harada 2018: 46)⁸—curiously, a few months later in the same year, Takeuchi Kiyomaro was found not guilty of the accusation of *lèse-majesté* by the Japanese Supreme Court. Be that as it may, the search for sources of an alternative past, often linked with

ultranationalist perspectives that seemed threatening to the already conservative Japanese government of the early Showa years,⁹ was not uncommon.

Between the mid-1930s and early 1940s, sources such as the *Takeuchi Documents* and the *Uetsufumi*, while still attracting attention for their secrecy and inaccessibility, had nonetheless gained enough recognition that observers began to group them together, noting their similarities and treating them as part of the same category (Fujino 2000a: 233–4). And despite the fact that Takeuchi and Miura would have undoubtedly rejected it, one such label that was ultimately applied to the materials they had claimed to uncover was, precisely, *gishi*. This Sino-Japanese term consists of two characters: *gi* 偽—or *wěi*, in modern Mandarin pronunciation—meaning “falsehood” or “forgery,” and *shi* 史—or *shǐ*, in Chinese—meaning “history.” Note that, in the original East Asian historiographical context, *wěishǐ/gishi* were necessarily used in relation to another term, *zhèngshǐ/seishi* 正史, whose characters evoke the sense of “true” or “correct history.” In early imperial China, the latter term was used to describe not “true,” but “official”—in the sense of state-sanctioned—dynastic histories, while the former was used to portray histories of dynasties perceived as “illegal.” Despite these meanings not entirely disappearing over the course of the twentieth century, in Japan, at least, most people today would take them at face value and understand them in the literal sense of “true” versus “false” history. And it was in this more literal and, let us add, negative sense, that the *Takeuchi* or *Kukami* texts came to be labeled as *gishi*.

According to most scholarly accounts on the topic of *gishi*,¹⁰ one of the earliest instances of this labeling phenomenon—which, unsurprisingly, coincided with the emergence of alternative narratives of Japanese history—occurred during a roundtable discussion held in 1943 and published in the journal *Kōron* 公論. In the following sections, we will examine this debate in detail, considering not only its implications within the context of wartime Japan but also its broader impact on the intellectual landscape of the postwar period.

Denouncing *Gishi*: The (In)Famous *Kōron* Roundtable

On July 26, 1943, four individuals convened to discuss this trend, leading to a heated and ultimately, at least for some participants, somewhat disastrous debate. They were Shimada Haruo 島田春雄 (1906–1976), Fujisawa Chikao 藤沢親雄 (1893–1962), Miura Ichirō, and Kotera Kojirō 小寺小次郎 (dates unknown)—all of whom were published authors at the time. Shimada, at

the time, was a professor at the Shinto-affiliated Kokugakuin University. In this capacity, he joined others in defending what contemporary mainstream academic nationalism regarded as the two most authoritative sources of ancient Japanese culture: the *Nihon shoki* and its companion text, the *Kojiki* 古事記—finished in 712, this latter work was considered, especially from the eighteenth century onward, the oldest extant chronicle of the Kingdom of Yamato.

Fujisawa, too, was highly educated, having graduated from the law department at the Imperial University of Tokyo and taught political history and international relations at Kyushu Imperial University. At the time of the debate, he was involved in the Japanese colonial endeavor in China. Miura, like Fujisawa, also participated in the same enterprise, but in Korea—he was responsible for bringing into the world the aforementioned *Kukami Documents* a few years prior and would, as mentioned above, ultimately be arrested for it, partly due to the repercussions of this roundtable discussion. Kotera, perhaps the least known of the four, was the director of the Research Center for the Culture of the Age of the Gods (*Jindai Bunka Kenkyūjo* 神代文化研究所). By that time, he had authored *An Introduction to the Study of Kotodama* (*Kotodama kenkyū nyūmon* 言霊研究入門), first published in 1940 by the Research Center itself and reissued for a broader audience through a commercial publisher in late July 1943, coinciding with the timing of the debate.

Before delving into the contents of the roundtable, it would be helpful to first provide a brief overview of the events that preceded it. According to Mori (1986: 25), the roots of the gathering can be traced back to an article published by Fujisawa in May 1943, in the journal *Kannagara no michi* 惟神道. By the time of this publication, Fujisawa had already authored over a dozen works on various topics, but two, in particular, were significant for the subject of the debate: *The Prophecy of the Century* (*Seiki no yogen* 世紀の預言), released in March 1942, and *The Mission of Divine Japan* (*Shinkoku nihon no shimei* 神国日本の使命), in February 1943. He seemed particularly fond of the former work, as he also published a short English pamphlet summarizing its contents in the very same month, titled *The Great Shinto Purification Ritual and the Divine Mission of Nippon: A Prophecy of the Dawn of a New Age*.

In this work, Fujisawa asserts that recently discovered sources “testify to the authenticity of the descriptions of the Japanese ancient annals,” revealing that in the prehistoric age, humankind formed a single worldwide family system with the Japanese emperor as its head. He refers to Japan as the “land of parents,” while all others are termed “lands of children” (Fujisawa 1942: 9). Although Fujisawa’s language mirrors the contemporary political ideology of the “Family

State” (*kazoku kokka* 家族国家), he also presents arguments connecting Japan to the origin of the Sumerian civilization, the lost continent of Mu, and even the Christian Bible, ultimately contending that for the world to become one “family community,” a “great purification” ritual (*ōharai* 大祓) was necessary (1942: 34–5). That is, essentially, at this stage, Fujisawa’s ideas were more closely aligned with those found in the *Takeuchi* or *Kukami* texts—and therefore with Miura and Kotera—than with the more orthodox stance that the likes of Shimada would have espoused.

At the time of the roundtable in late July 1943, however, there was a noticeable shift underway. Perhaps influenced by the intense interrogation-style questioning by Shimada, Fujisawa made it evident during the debate that he no longer supported the central narrative of the *Takeuchi Documents*. In fact, the interaction among the four men resembled less of a debate and more of a heresy trial, with Shimada assuming the role of inquisitor. On the very first page of the written record of the meeting, Shimada begins by questioning Fujisawa, who responds as follows:

I wonder if the criticism I am currently facing stems from the perception that I disregard the absolute sacredness of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* ... This is a misunderstanding ... I will state it clearly: my research on Japan’s divine path has, of course, been based on the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. However, later on, other materials related to ancient times caught my attention, and I took an interest in them to some extent. The reason is that, having traveled to Europe several times and about twelve or thirteen times to the continent, I felt a strong desire to teach other ethnic groups about Japan’s true great mission. To do this, I thought it was necessary to provide some kind of explanation that they could understand. Amid my search, various people I know showed me parts of documents such as the *Ishihara Documents* (Takeuchi manuscripts), the *Kukami Documents*, the *Mononobe Documents*, and the *Utsufumi*. (Shimada et al. 1943: 82)

Note that, in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, the two gods Izanami and Izanagi are described as giving birth to Japan, referred to in these texts as the “Great Eight Islands” (*ōyashima* 大八島). Fujisawa, however, could not help but “intuitively feel that the term refers not only to Japan, but also to the birth of all the other islands of the world” (Shimada et al. 1943: 82–3). In some of these newly discovered documents, he encountered what he perceived as conclusive validation of his views. Although Fujisawa’s belief in Japan as the cradle of world cultures seems to have remained steadfast, he now aligned with Shimada in condemning Takeuchi and his alleged ancient sources as fraudulent.

In this sense, the initial segment of the roundtable primarily consists of a lengthy *mea culpa* by Fujisawa, in which he elucidates the context behind his previous convictions and subsequent change of stance. In the latter portion, Shimada redirects his focus toward Miura, who, as previously mentioned, had been responsible for disseminating the *Kukami Documents*, albeit within a restricted circulation. The quotation below exemplifies the inquisitorial—and proselytizing—tone adopted by Shimada toward his fellow participants.

Shimada: That book you published [*A Study of the Kukami Documents*], it traces the ancestry of our Emperor [not to Amaterasu, but] to Susanoo-no-Mikoto. Why? Did you publish [the book] to show [people] what not to believe?

Miura: I published it because that's what the *Kukami Documents* say.

Shimada: [The *Kukami Documents*,] which you translated from the Age of the Gods script ...

Miura: I published it as a document transmitted within the Kuki family, but I included a note advising readers not to take everything it says at face value.

Shimada: But think about it. For instance, would you publish the entire *Communist Manifesto* with a note saying not to believe it? If you did that, it would cause an uproar. Despite Japan being big as it is, you are the first who, to this day, presented a genealogy that traces His Imperial Highness's legitimate lineage to Susanoo-no-Mikoto. Is that acceptable?

Miura: It would be a problem if people took it that way.

Shimada: Nevertheless, in practice [that is what you are saying] ...

Miura: The *Kukami Documents* mention various things, [including] materials on collateral lineages ...

Shimada: Please answer my question; it is as a Japanese that I ask you. Since childhood, we have believed that His Imperial Highness's legitimate lineage traces back to Amaterasu Ōmikami. So, that [assertion to the contrary in the *Kukami Documents*] must be a typographical error, right?

Miura: Yes, just consider it a typo, if you will.

Shimada: Then please make that known to everyone.

Miura: People kept asking me to release the *Kukami Documents*, so all I did was address their requests.

(Shimada et al. 1943: 109–10)

After the event, Fujisawa sent a letter to the journal's editorial department, stating that he had taken the necessary steps to recall all remaining copies of *The Prophecy of the Century* and *The Mission of Divine Japan*, effectively making these works unavailable to the public (Shimada et al. 1943: 112). This was very likely one of the reasons why the editors of *Kōron*, in the afterword of the issue containing the roundtable discussion, proudly declared that the debate had put an end to all *gishi* narratives that, in the eyes of more mainstream nationalist ideologues like Shimada, threatened the legitimate thread of Japanese history ("Henshū kōki" 1943: 130).

Of course, Shimada's apparent triumph did not mark the sudden disappearance of belief in ultra-ancient narratives. The texts continued to circulate, sustaining a devoted following for whom the label *gishi* held little significance. Yet, in terms of intellectual history, Shimada's sweeping denunciation of alternative materials—and his classification of them under *gishi*—did have a lasting impact on later categorizations, as we will examine hereafter.

Beyond the *Utsufumi*, *Takeuchi*, and *Kukami* materials mentioned earlier, Shimada also addressed the *Mononobe Documents* (*Mononobe monjo* 物部文書), which, like their predecessors, reinterpreted the official creation narrative presented in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. However, Shimada did not limit his critique to these alternative "primary" sources; he also targeted writers who, whether drawing upon these materials or not, constructed what he considered rival narratives of Japanese origins. For instance, he brings up Kimura Takatarō 木村鷹太郎 (1870–1931), who in the late Meiji period concluded, from parallels between Japanese and Greco-Roman myths, that the Japanese had once dominated the world, implying a future return to power; alongside him is the aforementioned Sakai Katsutoki, who had firsthand experience in Palestine and suggested that the Japanese Imperial Family had Jewish ancestry. Additionally, he also refers to Oyabe Zen'ichirō 小谷部全一郎 (1868–1941), who, like Sakai, supported theories of Japanese-Jewish common ancestry but was also famous for advocating the thesis that Genghis Khan was, in fact, a renowned Japanese medieval warrior who fled to the continent; and last, but not least, the Anarchist author Ishikawa Sanshirō 石川三四郎 (1876–1956), who in a 1921 work, proposed a Hittite origin for Japanese myths (Shimada et al. 1943: 90).

Note that Shimada does not use *gishi* in the traditional sense—that is, in relation to more classical notions of "official history"—but rather in the more literal sense of "false history." In other words, in his modern usage, *gishi* represents the antithesis of *seishi*, and is therefore deemed deleterious to the national polity.¹¹ Despite the pejorative connotation of the term, this wartime

discussion marks perhaps the first instance of grouping together under the banner of *gishi* both works and authors that were previously not necessarily associated with the term. In essence, this Shimada-led inquiry produced, for both good and bad, a preliminary canon of documents and authors that would guide our understanding of the topic into the postwar era, even if writers more sympathetic to these ideas would refrain from the *gishi* label.

Into the Postwar Period: Agō Kiyohiko and the *Uetsufumi*

In this section, we will focus on how these themes were addressed following the conclusion of the Second World War, a period marked by the emperor's loss of divine status and his "declaration of humanity" to the Japanese populace. Our examination will begin with the perspectives of Agō Kiyohiko 吾郷清彦 (1909–2003), who was profoundly shaped by the wartime environment described above. His contributions have had a lasting impact on our understanding of "alternative histories," particularly—as we will examine in detail below—following the surge of popular interest in "the Occult" after the mid-1970s.

Agō Kiyohiko is perhaps one of the key figures in understanding the development of *gishi* narratives into the postwar years. He was born Mitani Tetsuo 三谷哲夫 in 1909, in Shimane Prefecture.¹² After graduating from Ōda Middle School, Agō continued his studies on the continent, graduating in March 1935 from the Ryojun (Lüshun) Institute of Technology in the Manchurian Peninsula of Liaodong. While working at the Manchuria Electric Company, he encountered Fujisawa's *The Prophecy of the Century*—one of the works recalled after the debate—which apparently sparked a lifelong interest in alternative perspectives on ancient Japanese history. While in Tokyo sometime between 1942 and 1943, Agō even visited the Research Center for the Culture of the Age of the Gods, where he met Kotera Kojirō, the de facto administrator of the institute and a participant in the fateful roundtable ("Kaisetsu" 1979: 130).

Agō's interest in nonorthodox sources, however, did not diminish after the wartime anti-*gishi* backlash. In the less restrictive period following the war and particularly toward the end of the Allied occupation of Japan, he himself would emerge as one of the central figures in the field. In 1951, he founded the Center for the Systematic Study of the Ancient Way (*Kodō taikei kenkyūjo* 古道大系研究所), which published the monthly periodical *Kodō Taikei* 古道大系, of which apparently no copies remain today. He also became a regular contributor to other journals of the time, such as *Nihon Shingaku* 日本神学

and *Shinrei Kenkyū* 心靈研究, where he published articles that later formed the basis of several of his works, including the two volumes of *Shinto Theology from the Perspective of Geometry* (*Nihon shingaku no kikagakuteki haaku* 日本神学の幾何学的把握) in 1953 and *A Meticulous Transmission of the Uetsufumi* (*Uetsufumi no korizute* ウエツフミのコリヅテ), which was also published in two volumes between 1954 and 1955. Hailed by one colleague as a second coming of Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長—the Edo-period founder of Nativism and father of philological studies of the *Kojiki* (Fujii 1954)—Agō put incredible effort into reimagining “Shinto” as it would have existed before the ascension of the first Japanese emperor. However, despite serious efforts, it would take about two more decades for his message to truly reach—and, furthermore, impact—a broader public.

In 1972, Agō released a work through Tairiku Shobō, one of Japan’s most popular publishing houses at the time. Titled *Pre-Kojiki Texts: A Study of the “Uetsufumi,” a Document from the Age of the Gods* (*Kojiki izen no sho: Jindai monjo “Uetsufumi” no kenkyū* 古事記以前の書: 神代文書「ウエツフミ」の研究), the book was immediately promoted in *Rekishī dokuhon* 歴史読本, a well-known Japanese historical magazine aimed at the general public. Despite its relatively high price of 1,500 yen—for reference, this amount would have been enough at the time to purchase, perhaps with some change back, ten bottles of beer or, for a more relevant comparison, around eight Japanese pocket-style *shinsho* books or ten weekly magazines—it appears to have achieved a certain level of success, as a new edition was released three years later, in 1975. This was perhaps the first time in modern Japanese history that the *Uetsufumi* and its contents reached a genuinely wide audience.

However, what is essential for us to understand here is the broader context that enabled Agō to transition from a relatively niche author to someone whom major publishing houses now expected to engage with the public. The fact is that, from the mid-1960s, collective perspectives on ancient history in Japan shifted in complex yet intriguing ways. Although by the 1960s the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* no longer held the status of “official history” they had maintained until 1945, Japanese politicians began discussing the possibility of, in a sense, re-sacralizing Emperor Jinmu’s ascension to the Chrysanthemum Throne. In June 1966, the conservative-leaning Diet—under the same Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that has continued to rule Japan well into the twenty-first century—voted to (re)establish a holiday for celebrating the national foundation, which had been abolished by the occupying Allied forces back in 1948.

The establishment of the (new) National Foundation Day was not without controversy. Amid protests against the Vietnam War, Japanese intellectuals criticized the holiday as anti-constitutional and a revival of the prewar Emperor-centered system (Tōyama 1968: 1–3). In creating this national holiday, Japan could have followed the example of its former European allies in choosing more contemporary and significant dates—Germany had, for instance, commemorated the 1953 anti-Soviet uprisings as its “Unity Day” since 1963, while Italy began celebrating its new national day in June 1947, marking the previous year’s referendum that transformed the nation from a monarchy to a republic. However, the LDP-led Diet chose February 11—equivalent to January 1 in the lunar calendar, the purported date of the mythical Emperor Jinmu’s ascension to power in the year 660 BCE—as the date to signify Japan’s “founding.” Despite the criticism, this process sparked debate about the historicity of “the Age of the Gods”—professional historians overwhelmingly denied its validity, while conservative, pro-LDP pundits and public intellectuals sought to relativize it in ways that bolstered the existing political status quo.

Amid these public debates, in January 1967, Shimabara-born author Miyazaki Kōhei 宮崎康平 (1917–1980) published his debut work, which would become one of the year’s bestsellers. Previously serialized between 1965 and 1966 in the literary magazine *Kyūshū bungaku* 九州文学, the book titled *The Illusive Land of Yamatai* (*Maboroshi no Yamataikoku* まぼろしの邪馬台国) blends fact and fiction as it follows the author’s own quest: a visually impaired railroad worker, Miyazaki, with the crucial support of his partner Kazuko 和子, embarks on a journey to uncover the true location of the ancient kingdom mentioned in Japan’s earliest historical chronicles. For this novel, Miyazaki and his wife received the inaugural Yoshikawa Eiji Cultural Prize in April 1967, further boosting its popularity.

The book had a twofold effect: first, it expanded the debate on the historicity of Yamatai beyond academic circles to a much broader public; second, it presented the mythical narratives of early eighth-century sources as “mysteries” deserving of resolution—secrets waiting to be uncovered by modern detectives who devoted enough effort to deciphering them. And, furthermore, these detectives did not need to be academics; they could be anyone willing to delve into the enigmas (Harada 2009: 64–8). As the author repeatedly asserted, “myths are not simply myths”—“they are the stories of gods that actually existed” (Miyazaki 1967: 195). Simply put, there was truth to the Age of the Gods, and uncovering its meaning held critical relevance for contemporary society.

In the years following the publication of Miyazaki's novel, more than a dozen books on the "truth" about the land of Yamatai were published, authored by both academics and nonacademics. This growing fascination arguably culminated in the sensational 1971 work *There Was No "Land of Yamatai"* ("Yamataikoku" wa *nakatta* 「邪馬台国」はなかった) by historian Furuta Takehiko 古田武彦 (1926–2015). In the work, he argued that, closely read, third-century Chinese sources about Japan do not actually mention the eponymous kingdom, leading him to uncover what he believed to be the real historical facts. This wave of interest in ancient Japanese history as *mystery* was not, however, limited to the land of Yamatai and its location within the archipelago; it also extended to other figures from the "Age of the Gods," such as Jinmu. For instance, in 1971, Marxist-turned-ultranationalist Hayashi Fusao 林房雄 (1903–1975)—a popular novelist once hailed by the renowned Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫 (1925–1970) as his mentor—published a work asserting that Japan's first emperor was not a mythical creation but a historical figure. To justify his claims, Hayashi relied on alternative materials, such as the *Utsufumi*—sources that he himself would most likely have dismissed as spurious just three decades earlier. That is, not only had interest in the historicity of ancient myths expanded into other areas, but sources once dismissed as *gishi* were now making a comeback to justify these new narratives. It was within this very context that Agō Kiyohiko emerged at the forefront of the publishing world.

Again, it was in 1972, inspired not only by Hayashi's book but also by Suzuki Tei'ichi's 鈴木貞一 (1897–1980) *The Mystery of Japan's Early Antiquity* (*Senkodai Nihon no Nazo* 先古代日本の謎), which was also published the previous year, that Agō released his *Pre-Kojiki Texts*. For him, these texts were, despite all criticism to the contrary, a genuine source for the ancient history of Japan, and Agō systematically attempts to debunk opposing assertions (1972: 31–5). Regarding the *Utsufumi*'s distinctive characteristics compared to other texts, he lists the following:

1. [The *Utsufumi*] is written in ancient Japanese characters (*kodai waji* 古代和字).
2. It features a remarkably large number of deities, and their activities are described in great detail.
3. It presents the Ugaya dynasty as having lasted seventy-three generations.
4. It accurately conveys Emperor Jinmu's conquest of the East (*go tōsen* 御東遷).
5. It includes many secret formulas (*himegoto* 秘言) and songs (*kayō* 歌謡).
6. Its contents possess the characteristics of an ancient encyclopedia.
7. It is a book of science (*kagaku no sho* 科学の書).

8. It is a book of spiritual matters (*shinrei no sho* 心靈の書).
9. It has a strong popular character (*shominteki shikisai* 庶民的色彩).
10. It is an excellent ancient text as supplementary commentary to the *Kojiki* and a corroborative document for the *Nihon shoki*.
11. It is a purely Japanese intellectual work (*jun nihonteki shisōsho* 純日本の思想書), unaffected by Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism.

(Agō 1972: 30–1)

The *Uetsufumi* was, in other words, both aristocratic and popular, divine and human, scientific and spiritual: it was a type of panacean text that, if accessed correctly, could provide not only answers to ancient enigmas but also to contemporary dilemmas. For instance, Agō argued that the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, as the “sacred national records,” concentrated exclusively on the creation narratives of Japan’s “inner islands.” According to him, this narrow historical perspective contributed to the “closed country” policy (*sakoku* 鎖国) of the Edo period, as well as the pro-imperial isolationist policies of late Edo and early Meiji Japan. However, in the era of increasing globalization in the 1970s, when Japan was essentially compelled to engage with other nations, the rediscovery of a text like the *Uetsufumi*—which recounted not only the history of Japan but also the creation of the “outer eight great continents”—was nothing short of providential (Agō 1972: 454). It was, in his view, exactly what Japan needed at that moment.

The Classification of *Gishi* in the 1970s “Occult” Context

As readers will recall from previous sections, such claims of globalism are not unique to Agō’s work in the 1970s; similar rhetoric is also evident, for instance, in the writings of prewar intellectuals such as Fujisawa Chikao. Nevertheless, the emphasis does shift—while wartime rhetoric championed globalism with Japan positioned firmly at the center of the world, the more “democratic” atmosphere of the 1970s reframed these documents, as seen above, to support anti-chauvinistic claims of cosmopolitanism. That said, a strong nationalist, Japan-centric undertone remained unmistakably part of the narrative. A more distinctive feature of Agō’s work, however, lay in his coining of more “user-friendly” terms to group materials that earlier critics had identified as *gishi*—and which, as we will see below, popular media would later, once again, label the same way.

In “Lecture Six” of his *Pre-Kojiki Texts*, Agō proposes a categorization that ultimately gave rise to a term which, in contrast to *gishi*, was used to describe

the set of ultra-ancient texts in a positive light, establishing a template that influenced many subsequent works (Agō 1972: 167). Here, he divides the texts pertaining to the ultra-ancient Japanese tradition into three groups: (1) the “four classics” (*koten* 古典), (2) the “three archaic histories” (*koshi* 古史), and (3) the “three ancient transmissions” (*koden* 古伝). The first category comprised, besides the aforementioned *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, the *Sendai kuji hongei* 先代旧事本紀, which some claim to be as old as the two former texts, and the early ninth-century *Kogo shūi* 古語拾遺. Except perhaps for the *Sendai kuji hongei* and its dating, these consist mostly of uncontroversial mythohistorical texts widely accepted by academics as sources for the study of the Asuka (538–710), Nara (710–794), and early Heian (794–1185) periods. The novelty of Agō’s work lies in the next two categories: the “archaic histories” and “ancient transmissions,” or in the original, *koshi* and *koden*.

The *koshi* group includes, in addition to the *Takeuchi* and *Kukami* texts discussed in previous sections, the *Fuji*—or *Miyashita*—*Documents*. A digest version of these materials, allegedly written by the legendary third-century BCE Chinese alchemist Xu Fu 徐福, first appeared in 1921 and claims that an ultra-ancient Japanese civilization was centered around the eponymous mount. The *koden* group included sources said to have been written in the “characters of the Age of the Gods”—or, as Agō refers to them, “ancient Japanese characters” (*kodai waji*). This group encompassed the *Uetsufumi*, as well as the *Hotsuma tsutae* ホツマツタエ and the *Mikasa fumi* ミカサフミ, both of which first appeared during the Edo period and were written using the same set of characters now referred to as *woshite* フシテ. Although Agō would later add one more work to both the *koshi* and *koden* categories—and even introduce a completely new category, *iroku* 異録, or “alternative records”—thus expanding his framework into a four-by-four classification, this foundational structure of *koshi* and *koden*, as noted earlier, would go on to shape many subsequent studies of these sources.¹³

Agō’s efforts to systematize and publicize these “forgotten” and “secret” sources were instrumental in pushing further the field. In 1974, he released a two-volume abridged version of the *Uetsufumi*, followed by a complete five-volume translation of the text from ancient characters into modern Japanese, published between 1975 and 1976. Beyond his work on the *Uetsufumi*, Agō expanded his scope during this period to provide more comprehensive analyses of these alternative documents. For instance, in 1975, he published *Characters of Japan’s Age of the Gods: An Overview of Ancient Japanese Scripts* (*Nihon jindai moji: Kodai waji sōran* 日本神代文字：古代和字総覧), and in November 1976, he released *Sources on Japan’s Ultra-Ancient Secret History* (*Nihon chōkodai hishi*

shiryō 日本超古代秘史資料). This latter work not only described numerous other texts in relation to each other but also significantly developed the categorization he had first proposed in 1972, offering a more detailed template for understanding these sources. In other words, during the early 1970s, Agō played a central role in *shaping a canon* that, though later referred to by various terms, consistently centered around a similar set of foundational works, which have remained largely unaltered to this day.

Indeed, as noted previously, a narrative emerged in the 1940s that sought to unify all the “newly discovered” sources on ultra-ancient Japan into a single framework. However, Agō’s impact on the media landscape of the 1970s was markedly different, recasting these sources in a new light—they were now consumed as part of the “occult boom” sweeping Japan at the time. Notably, between the publication of Agō’s *Pre-Kojiki Texts* in 1972 and his subsequent works beginning in 1974, the country saw the 1973 release of the Japanese translation of Colin Wilson’s 1971 bestseller *The Occult*. This book played a pivotal role in introducing the eponymous term—rendered phonetically as *okaruto* オカルト—into contemporary Japanese vocabulary. Its commercial success, in turn, sparked a wave of publications that prominently featured the word in their titles—a phenomenon that led contemporary intellectuals and journalists to refer to the surge of interest in the topic as an “occult boom” (*okaruto būmu* オカルトブーム).¹⁴ That is, although the Wilson phenomenon in Japan represents just one facet of a much broader historical trend that had been unfolding since at least the previous decade, it assured mid-1970s Japanese publishers that a substantial *occult market* remained ripe for exploration.

One example of this new media and its appropriation of contemporary debates on “ultra-ancient” Japanese history was the periodical *Chikyū roman* 地球ロマㇺ, first published in April 1976. While its title literally translates as “Earth Romance,” in keeping with a somewhat common Japanese practice of assigning English titles unrelated to the original, the publication featured the tagline *Believe It or Not!* on its cover, revealing its initial influence from the famous Robert Ripley (1890–1949) brand—it even reproduced, likely without a license, the exact logo of the franchise (see Figure 3.1). The “editorial note” at the end of the issue—where Japanese editors often outline their goals and occasionally share anecdotes about the publication process—provides information of particular relevance to our discussion in this chapter:

What is the reason behind this unusual surge of interest in the Yamatai Kingdom? Why is ancient history being revisited? Beyond the obvious



Figure 3.1 Cover of the inaugural issue of *Chikyū roman*, published in April 1976. The logo above the magazine title closely imitates that of the *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* franchise. The feature title on the right reads, “Tracing the Last Mysteries of the 20th Century.”

intention of reexamining history, we believe this resurgence of interest is also underpinned by a sense of “romance.” The archaeologist and author [Victor] von Hagen [1908–1985] once remarked that “history is art.” This statement, we believe, carries various meanings, [one of which is that] we must confront true history without hesitation. We must not lose the resolve to face facts as they are. (“Henshū kōki” 1976a: 246)

Indeed, while it maintained the same tone as the Ripley franchise, featuring articles on UFO sightings and curiosities about parts of the world that 1970s Japanese audiences might have deemed exotic, it also included pieces responding to the ancient history boom—perhaps reflecting what the editors saw as an example of “confronting true history.” This first issue of *Chikyū roman* included, for instance, a six-page feature titled “Christ, the Extraterrestrial,

Died in Japan!?” The article, attributed to one Satō Rintarō 佐藤林太郎—likely a pseudonym for one of the editors—presented the well-known narrative of Jesus in Aomori, even referencing the *Takeuchi Documents*. However, it does introduce a novel twist not found in prewar depictions: Jesus was, in fact, an alien. The piece cites the then-forthcoming Japanese book by Yamamoto Yoshito 山本佳人, *Christ as an Extraterrestrial* (*Kirisuto uchūjin setsu* キリスト宇宙人説), which was itself inspired by the works of Theosophist-turned-ufologist George Adamski (1891–1965). Adamski’s theories had been widely popular in Japan since the mid-1950s, and his 1955 book *Inside the Space Ships*, in which he proposed that Jesus was an extraterrestrial being who had reincarnated on Earth, had just received its second Japanese translation in 1975, a year before the magazine’s publication.

Here, we see a clear example of how “ultra-ancient” sources like the *Takeuchi Documents* were rediscovered and recontextualized within the 1970s occulture movement. This process of appropriation, however, extended even further. After publishing just two issues in April and May 1976 and experiencing poor commercial performance (Takeda and Yokoyama 2024: 89), the magazine went on a brief hiatus before returning in August 1976 with new editors and a noticeably different English tagline. Now managed by Itō Yasuo 伊藤裕夫 (b. 1948) and Takeda Yōichi 武田洋一 (b. 1950, a.k.a. Sūgen 崇元)—the latter becoming a legendary figure in Japan’s postwar occulture scene—the journal adopted the title *Mvndvs Mysticvs* (see Figure 3.2). The editorial note at the end of the volume begins as follows:

There is likely no era in which terms like “occultism” (*okarutizumu* オカルティズム) and “heresy” (*itan* 異端) are imbued with such superficial connotations as they are today. Yet, the very reason we have chosen to edit a magazine like this during such a time is our desire to reexamine the concepts of “occultism” and “heresy.” The present age is an age of “madness” (*kyōki* 狂気), but true “madness” remains hidden in the shadows, never surfacing in mass media. This true “madness,” which underlies “occultism” and “heresy,” is what makes these phenomena so difficult to uncover in today’s world, where they are rendered as superficial trends. It is precisely because of this that the task of uncovering them is both challenging and meaningful. Inspired by the boundless visionary spirit of those medieval individuals who declared, “this world is a dream; let us go mad!,” we aim to press forward with this endeavor and humbly ask for the support of our readers. (“Henshū kōki” 1976b: 246)

For the main theme of this inaugural issue of the magazine’s new era, which aimed, as stated above, to celebrate, through “occultism,” the “madness” of contemporary



Figure 3.2 Cover of the first issue of *Chikyū roman* following its rebranding, published in August 1976. The tone is notably more esoteric. The cover announces the start of a serialized publication of G. I. Gurdjieff’s *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

society, the editors selected none other than the alternative histories of ultra-ancient Japan. The feature was cleverly titled *Gishi Wajin den* 偽史倭人伝, a pun on a section from the late third-century Chinese text *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sānguó zhì* 三國志) that contains what is considered the earliest account of the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago—the people of Wa 倭—and their legendary female shaman-ruler, Himiko 卑弥呼.¹⁵ By substituting the Chinese term *wèizhì* 魏志, meaning “Chronicle of Wei” and read in Japanese as *gishi*, with the homophonic compound meaning “false history,” the new editors of *Chikyū roman* created a double entendre that transformed the original title, “The Account of Wa in the Chronicle of Wei,” into “Accounts of Wa in False Histories.”

The above demonstrates, first and foremost, that the mid-1970s' interest in what the *Chikyū roman* editors labeled as *gishi* should indeed be understood as part of a much broader trend of interest in the "true history" of ancient Japan, one that had been evolving at least since the 1950s. The second point to highlight is how the journal editors defined *gishi*. In addition to introducing texts that would have been familiar to contemporary readers, alongside the standard sources of ultra-ancient Japan—such as the *Miyashita*, *Mononobe*, and *Kukami* documents (Takeuchi 1976: 78–91)—the feature also expanded the category to include works that, while sometimes drawing on these sources, did not necessarily rely on them exclusively. The editors also gave considerable attention to and reproduced excerpts from authors who, particularly during the early twentieth century, used what historians might consider official sources to produce fringe theories—these ranged from claims about one of Japan's most important ancient clans having Middle Eastern Jewish origins, to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* being inspired by East Asian sources, to theories about the Babylonian origins of the Japanese people, or even Genghis Khan being a Japanese medieval warlord, among others (Henshūbu 1976).

In this sense, the *Chikyū roman* issue not only built on earlier perspectives on *gishi* by wartime critics such as Shimada Haruo and later cataloging efforts by figures like Agō, but also expanded the canon to include a wide array of fantastical interpretations of the past, often disconnected from the more established "classic" works like the *Takeuchi Documents*. Moreover, it firmly positioned these narratives within the realm of *okaruto* and, in doing so, transformed them into a commodity within Japan's burgeoning literary market. This trend is evidenced by the reprinting of many of these earlier works throughout the 1980s,¹⁶ and their enduring presence in Japanese popular publications to this day.¹⁷

Conclusion

At the heart of modern *gishi* discourse lies a paradox. On the one hand, narratives found in texts such as the *Takeuchi Documents*, the *Uetsufumi*, and the *Kukami* materials reflect imaginative cosmologies that intertwine mythology, pseudohistory, and nationalist rhetoric. These accounts often positioned Japan at the center of a grand, global narrative, extending beyond the "official" histories like the *Nihon shoki*. On the other hand, these same texts and their proponents frequently faced rejection, criticism, and outright denouncement by academic and political establishments. This tension between acceptance

and marginalization underscores the duality of *gishi*: simultaneously dismissed as “false histories” in the pejorative sense and valued as reservoirs of cultural imagination and political action.

Needless to say, the evolution of *gishi* narratives reflects broader shifts in Japanese society and identity. During the wartime period, figures like Shimada Haruo condemned alternative histories to uphold a cohesive national ideology rooted in “official” historical interpretations. However, the postwar resignification of the emperor’s image created space for the resurgence of these marginalized narratives within a transformed cultural landscape. Agō Kiyohiko’s categorization of ultra-ancient texts into *koshi* and *koden* introduced a new framework for engaging with these sources, while the 1970s “occult boom” recontextualized them within a growing market for esoteric and alternative knowledge. The commodification of *gishi* narratives during this period highlights their adaptability—periodicals like *Chikyū roman* tapped into public fascination with mysteries and alternative histories, blending scholarly critiques with sensational claims to produce content that was both entertaining and provocative. By situating *gishi* within the broader context of “the Occult,” such media extended their appeal beyond niche audiences, embedding these narratives in the cultural zeitgeist of the time.

In short, this study attempted to show that “the Occult” is anything but a static Euro-American export; it is a fluid category, constantly renegotiated through local taxonomies, media circuits, and political stakes. By tracing how *gishi* narratives morphed from wartime “false histories” to a postwar tool for cosmopolitan self-fashioning and, ultimately, into a mass-market commodity, this chapter reveals how local gatekeeping terms—older ones like *seishi* and *gishi*, alongside newer coinages such as *koshi* and *koden*—shaped “the Occult” far more than any off-the-shelf Western rubric. The Japanese case also disrupts the notion that commodification inevitably erodes secrecy: as *gishi* texts moved from private circulation in the 1930s–40s to mass production in the 1970s–80s, a hybrid marketplace emerged in which spiritual prestige and commercial value reinforced one another. More specifically, from the 1970s onward, sacred textual authority and savvy media entrepreneurship worked in tandem to sustain—and even amplify—the public appetite for *okaruto*.

In this sense, the story of *gishi* narratives in modern Japan offers a striking reminder of why a global religious history approach matters in the study of esotericism. The emergence of a discursive field around *okaruto* was not—despite appearances, given the term’s derivation from English—merely a case of Western diffusion. Rather, it was the outcome of deliberate choices, rooted

in cultural logics that, in the case of *gishi* and related phenomena such as *jindai moji*, reach well beyond the confines of modernity itself (Strube 2024). To understand “the Occult” as a truly global phenomenon, we must grapple with these local entanglements—ones that traverse not only “religion” but also modern historiography, publishing culture, and the wider architectures of knowledge production.

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Who Talks About Esoteric Shinto, and Why?

Avery Morrow

The terms “occult” and “esoteric” invoke a history of global communication, civilizational discourse, and concepts of secrecy and hidden truths (Strube 2021, 2023). What do these terms mean when we connect them to Shinto? Furthermore, in phrases such as “esoteric Shinto,” what exactly is the “Shinto” being referred to? In short, why have past writers tried to connect Shinto to the esoteric or occult, and how have they defined these terms? As we work toward constructing a history of global philosophical and religious exchanges, it is important that we keep these concepts meaningful and avoid misunderstandings that arise from muddling different historical contexts.

The term “esoteric” is generally translated into Japanese as *hikyō* 秘教, an exceedingly obscure term rarely used today outside of specialists invoking the Western concept. Occult, as *okaruto*, is much more popular (Gaitanidis and Klautau 2024). As Ioannis Gaitanidis and Justin Stein (2019: 6–7) have observed, the loanword *okaruto* オカルト took off in Japan in late 1973, as a Christmas Eve demonstration of Uri Geller’s metal-bending abilities brought attention to a new translation of Colin Wilson’s famous book on the subject. Han Sangyun (2021) has demonstrated that the Geller-Wilson combination was building on preexisting interest in *mikkyō* 密教, that is, the “esoteric Buddhism” of Kūkai 空海 (774–835), which was being portrayed as a Japanese precursor to parapsychology. *Okaruto* thus bridged East and West, tradition and science. This *okaruto* genre evolved in tandem with interest in Western magic, folklore, and witchcraft, as Hashisako Mizuho (2019) has shown in her study of the 1980s magazine *My Birthday*. With the decline of the *okaruto* boom in the 1990s, following the Aum Shinrikyo attacks and other controversies, *My Birthday* changed focus from “witches” and “spells” to the “psychology test” (*shinri tesuto* 心理テスト) as a more lighthearted replacement.

Laura Miller's (2024: 8) recent work on the twenty-first century spiritual marketplace popular with Japanese women proposes that "traces of Shinto" are visible in the "occult domains" she surveys. As explained above, *okaruto* has historically been linked to parapsychology, Kūkai's Buddhism, and Western witchcraft, while the products and services surveyed by Miller are more often called "spiritual" (*supirichuaru* スピリチュアル) or "healing" (*iyashi* 癒し) in Japan (Gaitanidis 2024: 114–15). They are not sold at *okaruto* events, but at events with names such as "spiritual conference" (*supikon* スピコン) or "healing fair" (*iyashi fea* 癒しフェア), which are specifically designed to avoid the stigma associated with religion and the occult (Hashisako 2008). Miller does not engage with the past work by Gaitanidis, Stein, Han, or Hashisako, but instead explains that she adopted the word "occult" in English in order to document her findings "fully, including humorous, ironic, or irreverent uses" (Miller 2024: 7). However, it seems possible that informants might feel that even a humorous application of the term "occult" depicts their activities in a negative or deviant light, and they might prefer more common phrases such as "spiritual" or "healing." We must also consider whether the ancient historical connections noticed by Miller, such as Princess Himiko and prehistoric *haniwa* statues, are considered "Shinto" by spiritual consumers, since they lie outside the carefully constructed boundaries of modern Shinto knowledge. Miller may seem to be on to something, but what is that something grounded in historically?

A mirage of a parallel can be found in the phrase "esoteric Shinto" used by Bernhard Scheid in his chapter on the *Yuiitsu Shintō Myōbō Yōshū* 唯一神道名法要集, a medieval instruction book for visualization and prayer based on a complex mixture of Chinese and Buddhist vocabularies of correspondence. Scheid (2000: 117–18) explains that the *Myōbō Yōshū* "presents itself as an 'esoteric' transmission, which is to say that its doctrines are more or less by definition secret, obscure, and not immediately intelligible." Putting aside the question of the exact Japanese word being rendered as "esoteric," it is not the *Myōbō Yōshū*'s self-presentation but the historical context that renders the phrase "esoteric Shinto" problematic. Premodern Japan was replete with secret transmissions, associated with all kinds of skills and techniques including martial arts, drama, and tea ceremony. Some people claimed to possess secret transmissions associated with the *kami* 神 (divinities). Because no one considered this to contradict familiar knowledge about *kami*, this was a useful kind of legitimacy claim. Therefore, the name Shinto at the time almost implied a kind of secrecy. The early modern thinker Nakamoto Tominaga (1715–1746) even wrote that "the bad habits of Shinto are divine secrets, secret traditions,

and initiatory traditions; the bad habits of simply concealing things” (Nakamoto 1990: 70). Scheid himself (2000: 17) acknowledges that the *Myōbō Yōshū* was the principal text of “one of the most influential brands of Shinto.” “Esoteric Shinto” is therefore problematic here because it is redundant; it implies an “exoteric Shinto” that did not exist at the time.

The intent of Scheid’s deployment of “esoteric” is understandable. “Esoteric Shinto” may have been redundant at the time, but a scholar of Japanese religion will recognize that the *Myōbō Yōshū* is a different kind of Shinto than what we are familiar with today. This is because Shinto today is largely defined by historic boundary work that began with the 1868 Meiji Restoration. But how does this help us understand the process of historical development? Both Scheid’s and Miller’s terminology stabs in the direction of familiar imagery and ideas before shifting to their own research concerns. The problem is that heuristic deployment of these terms, relying on unexamined stereotypes, does not contribute to historical understanding. The question remains: what is modern Shinto, and why are some things identified as “esoteric” or “occult” within or nearby it?

In this chapter, I will mainly discuss two works that engaged with the labels of occult and esoteric while problematizing the 1868 redefinition of Shinto. The first is “esoteric Shinto,” introduced in 1893 by Percival Lowell (1855–1916). Although Lowell was an archetypical American Orientalist, his thinking provides insight into the concept of the esoteric as well as the social construction of Shinto. The second is Koshintō 古神道 (“ancient Shinto”), used by various Japanese writers in the postwar period. Koshintō is a Japanese coinage, but it straddles the border of insider and outsider terminology, casting a vague judgment onto the nineteenth-century attempt to resurrect the ancient. Although neither of these concepts provides a simple solution to the problem of terminology, we can use them to see how words like “esoteric” relate to the historical boundaries of the nineteenth-century construction of Shinto.

The Remaking of Shinto in 1868–72

Even today, Shinto is sometimes introduced to readers as the so-called ethnic religion of Japan, a set of unbroken traditions carried on from primordial times to the present.¹ There are ways in which this image is true: some shrines to local ancestral spirits, or *kami*, have certainly existed for many centuries. But these shrines were not historically united by collective practices or beliefs. When premodern Japanese intellectuals attempted to characterize them, Buddhism

and Confucianism were often used as framework. It was only around 1800 that some philologists began to contemplate using ancient texts to reconstruct a single set of beliefs and practices, similar to how modern European neo-pagans use records of a long-lost past.

The first philologist of this kind was Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), who focused on close reading of ancient texts to recover ancient language and beliefs, but soon Norinaga's mantle was inherited by Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), whose loose epistemology won appeal far from Japan's capital. Atsutane's method was eventually dubbed the study of the nation, or *kokugaku* 国学. It involved wiping away everything that they saw as extraneous accretions from over the centuries, including Buddhism and any secret transmissions, and replacing them with a firm pronouncement that the Japanese imperial household was descended directly from the Sun Goddess, who had given the mortal emperors an eternal commission of legitimate rule. The two ancient history texts *Kojiki* 古事記 and *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀, which indeed contained this message, were the main reference points for this *kokugaku*. In 1868, after *kokugaku*-inspired forces claimed the authority of the emperor and overthrew the shogunate, certain officials of the new Meiji regime announced that the nation's Shinto shrines needed to be “purified.” This involved the elimination of all previous schools of Shinto ritual and teaching, and the legal destruction of Shinto traditions such as ritual dances and anything perceived to be linked to Buddhism (Breen 2013).

A number of unexpected, perplexing problems soon arose. It was incumbent on the new government to instruct its subjects in how to adhere to the new imperial program. In particular, a small number of Japanese in Urakami, Nagasaki, had converted to Christianity, so literati from the capital were sent as missionaries to instruct them in knowledge of the emperors and their origin in the ancient deities. The Urakami Christians were educated enough to know the verse about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but there was no consistent answer to this from the missionary side, so this resulted in confused theological discussions (Maxey 2014: 45–9). Many other issues arose with this missionary program, and in 1872, it was discontinued and replaced with a program that aimed to harness trusted, well-connected institutions in local communities, namely Buddhism and local faith healing communities. However, neither Buddhism nor these local communities were in any way based in *kokugaku*. The latter groups had origins in various folk practices such as mountain religion, and *kokugaku* experts attempted to “Shintoize” them by stripping out Buddhist influence, introducing patriotic rituals, and bringing in references to the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*.

Additionally, the ongoing discussions about theology and epistemology had led to the formation of new groups considering themselves to have inherited or revived ancient *kami* traditions, sometimes with real survivals of earlier customs. By the 1880s, both the Shintoized faith healing communities and these new religious groups had come to be described as Sect Shinto, defined as a religious, private approach to an ultimate ideal of “Shinto,” in contrast with the ancient shrines that the government now considered public, nonsectarian, and even nonreligious in character—“Shrine Shinto.” An ongoing process continued to strip these ancient shrines of their traditions to ensure that they retained this nonreligiousness (Nitta 2013). It was in this context that we see Percival Lowell introduce the phrase “esoteric Shinto” into the English language.

Percival Lowell’s “Esoteric Shinto” as Social Construct

History remembers Percival Lowell (1855–1916) as an eccentric astronomer, famous for claiming to have seen canals on Mars, and for spurring the search for a ninth planet, which ended with the discovery of Pluto. Lowell was born into one of the upper crust families called Boston Brahmins and graduated from Harvard but quit his father’s business in 1883 to travel to Japan (Baron 2025). Over the following decade, he spent many years in Japan and Korea and wrote several books outlining their cultures. In 1893, he delivered a talk to the Asiatic Society of Japan entitled “Esoteric Shintō.” The following year, he expanded his thoughts considerably into a book entitled *Occult Japan*, which uses the terms “esoteric” and “occult” almost interchangeably. Lowell’s work on East Asia drew interest from American literati, but *Occult Japan* would be his final book before he changed careers to astronomy. Its depiction of Japan is generalizing and Orientalist in tone, and the contemporary preeminent Western scholar of Shinto, W. G. Aston, denounced Lowell’s idea of esoteric Shinto. However, the famed writer Lafcadio Hearn received *Occult Japan* positively and retained some aspects of Lowell’s conceptualization of the Japanese mind even as he broke from Lowell in later years (Strauss 1993).

Occult Japan appears at first to exoticize Japan by describing strange and fascinating practices in obscure religious groups. However, there is another aspect of *Occult Japan* that deserves attention: Lowell’s thoughtful and astute construction of the esoteric. Where other Japan hands around him were translating official representations of ancient texts or conveying what state officials said, Lowell instead conducted fieldwork with independent groups,

sought out liminal experiences, and formulated his own independent theory about what these supposedly marginal cases tell us about Japan. The terms that he uses, *occult* and *esoteric*, seemed lurid to some readers, but in my opinion, he finds an appropriate use for them, and we will see why.

What did Lowell find esoteric? In his opening pages, after describing a mountain ritual, he equates esoteric Shinto to the practice of spirit possession that he saw on sacred mountains. Not everything he describes is possession or mediumship, but these ideas seem to organize his thoughts. Prayer healing gets its own chapter, and it seems he links it to possession, since it involves summoning a kami. There is one chapter on vivid spectacles performed by Sect Shinto specialists, such as placing a hand in boiling water or walking on hot coals, some of which are still occasionally practiced today.² Lowell considers all these miracles to be magic tricks and describes them sarcastically.

Another chapter is devoted to austerities performed by devout ascetics. Lowell takes these more seriously. One still hears skepticism behind his judgment that these painful practices “reduce the brain to an inactive state” (Lowell 1894: 122), but he understands the connection between elimination of ego and openness to divine revelation. He is aware that mountain religion, including what we would now call Shugendō, is not exactly the same thing as Shinto, and tries to home in on which aspects of mountain practices are considered specifically Shinto. He acknowledges the influence of Buddhism and airs his confusion about what “real Shinto” is meant to be, a confusion that many Japanese people at that time would have shared.

Finally, there are diverse chapters organized loosely around possession experiences. Most of these practices were rarely described even in Japanese, and a few are entirely unknown. For instance, Lowell watched what he described as a “kindergarten,” an evening training session at the Sect Shinto group Shinshūkyō 神習教 where children were induced into a state of trance and danced around the room in a symbolic fashion. Apparently, Lowell is the only person to have ever reported on this secret kindergarten. When his book was translated into Japanese in 2013, the translator did not know what it was (Sugawara 2013: 149). According to Shinto researcher Kurokawa Yūtsuki 黒川斎月, this sort of trance was initially practiced by child attendants called *monoimi* 物忌 who made offerings at Ise Jingū in the Tokugawa period. The *monoimi* institution was abolished in 1871 (Jingū shichō 1968: 191). Kurokawa proposes that an individual *kokugaku* practitioner Takahama Seishichirō 高浜清七郎 (1813–1893), who styled himself the final head of the ancient Shirakawa hereditary school of

Shinto, must have secretly taught it to the leader of Shinshūkyō, Yoshimura Masamochi 芳村正乗 (1839–1915), who personally invited Lowell to watch it.³

So this was a practice that had previously been a tradition of Japan's most prestigious imperial shrine, and was now marginalized as a secret program within a privatized Sect Shinto group. It was preserved because some people sincerely found it important, but it became secret and privatized to avoid tainting the imperial ancestral shrine with charges of superstition or barbarism. The *kagura* dance mentioned by Lowell was similarly banned from Ise Jingū and privatized in this way.⁴ As Lowell himself observes, Ise “is esoteric no longer.” His observation of remnants of earlier practices proves, to his satisfaction, that “in early days the possession cult was common to all Shintō, and not as now the heirloom only of certain sects” (Lowell 1894: 276)—but this brings us to the earlier issue we saw with Scheid's article, that “exoteric Shinto” would not have existed at that time.

Lowell does not offer any systematic theory of why the word “esoteric” is an accurate description for these practices. This problem is touched on several times. He observes several times that these practices have been marginalized within Shinto: “It is probable that originally they were the common property of all Shintoists, but they are not so today” (Lowell 1894: 32). In another section, he notes that even modern “possessions are not in the least bit hierarchic. In theory esoteric enough, in practice they are, in the older sense of that word, profane” (Lowell 1894: 99). Here, “profane” means vulgar, or belonging to the common people rather than an esoteric inner circle. But what is he implying when he says that possession is “in theory” esoteric?

Superficially, Lowell seems to be claiming that possession is the core higher knowledge behind Japanese religion, which is not true, but he's not quite saying that. He's saying that possession is an object of cultivation in Japan, for example, in the secret kindergarten he encountered, which he finds unusual and fascinating. Lowell never provides a proper definition of what makes this esoteric, and perhaps he did not organize his thinking about it systematically. But a core insight slips out at one point, and I find it the most brilliant line in the book. Halfway through the book he describes authorization documents that Sect Shinto groups issue to practitioners and the vague way in which they are written:

The reason the certificates read so beautifully vague is not that religion conceives her esoteric cults to be profoundly secret, but that the government imagines them to be barbarous because not in keeping with foreign manners and customs.

At the same time, the paternal powers-that-be dare not proscribe them. The fact is, they are both too Japanese to be countenanced and too Japanese to be suppressed; so the authorities wink at their practice. (Lowell 1894: 103)

Lowell recognizes that possession is not inherently secret, nor is it barbaric. It becomes esoteric only because the Meiji government has adopted socially constructed definitions of civilization and barbarism based on Western religious and social mores. Esotericism is an unwritten “wink” by the Japanese government that allows Sect Shinto to continue conducting prayer healings and possessions, under the pretense that they are marginal activities carried out by private persons. The secret involved is an open one, a legal fiction intended to mollify secularists whose concern with Western social constructs drives them to hate any open acceptance of “superstition.” This is the trick that Lowell describes as esoteric.

As mentioned above, the Meiji government had trouble propagating the *kokugaku* view on Shinto in the 1870s, which is how these prayer groups and mountain religions became Sect Shinto. From the very beginning, prayer healing was part of their calculus. They knew they had to permit possession and prayer healing to keep Shinto alive as a politically useful concept, but they limited and regulated possession and prayer healing in order to import the biopolitics and morality of Westernization, precisely as Lowell said they did. Lowell shows no indication of knowing the specific events that led to these vague certificates, but his intuition was on the mark.

Lowell does not seem to be totally conscious of the socially constructed definition of “esoteric” he is producing, nor was such an exploration the intent of his fieldwork. Instead, he seems to have begun with an inquiry into the role of possession in Japan, which he judged to be esoteric and occult *a priori*. This can be seen in his original report to the Asiatic Society of Japan, where “esoterism” is deployed in one instance as a synonym for possession practices (Lowell 1893: 265).⁵ This recalls Julian Strube’s (2021: 354) thesis that the esoteric and occult are often linked into the orientalist quest for “primitive universal origin.” Lowell’s fieldwork, for instance, at Ise, relies on these orientalist preconceptions, and he reaches the foregone conclusion that possession was not only widespread in the past but also somehow “imbedded in the very heart and core of the Japanese character and instinct” (Lowell 1894: 13). Rather than further interrogating the historical process by which possession became esoteric, he therefore closes the book with a lengthy psychological thesis about what the prominence of possession in Japanese religion says about the national character and psyche.

Occult Japan's final chapter interrogates the concept of “possession” and how it relates to the ideas of selfhood, personality, and will. Although Lowell is clearly skeptical of much of what he witnessed in the Sect Shinto groups, this lengthy chapter seems to be in dialogue with recent developments in psychological and psychical research which were the object of fierce debate in academic circles and polite interest and curiosity from Boston Brahmins (Raia 2019; Blum 2006). Drawing on these debates, Lowell sees personality as impermanent and ever-changing, suggesting that hypnosis and possession can describe more than just temporary states. Ultimately, to Lowell, the rapid modernization of Japan is itself a magic trick: “Japan at this moment is affording the rest of the world the spectacle of the most stupendous hypnotic act ever seen, nothing less than the hypnotization of a whole nation, with its eyes open” (Lowell 1894: 288).

Lowell's Japanese translator believes he saw Japan as uncivilized or undeveloped, but a much more careful analysis has been provided by Timothy Yamamura (2017). Both in Asia and on Mars, Lowell was searching for what he described as “his double.” Elsewhere, he wrote:

It is because the far-East holds up the mirror to our own civilization,—a mirror that like all mirrors gives us back left for right,—because by her very oddities, as they strike us at first, we learn truly to criticise, examine, and realize our own way of doing things, that she is so very interesting. (Lowell 1886: 107)

The mysterious cultures of Asia, like the possibilities of Martian canals, could be juxtaposed with the West like a stereoscope to perceive new depths in the human soul. From the world-spanning canals Lowell saw on Mars, he concluded that Martians formed a technological society like Earth's which had overcome political differences to join their world together; perhaps technological advances might join Earth together in a similar way (Yamamura 2017). *Occult Japan* provides similarly grand and generalized insights into the human condition. Drawing from the various experiences that he grouped as “esoteric Shinto,” Lowell saw Japan's hypnotized or possessed subjects as demonstrating the feminine side of all human souls, and the individualism and will of European empires as delusions of the masculine side, which when taken to extremes deny the power of the unconscious (Lowell 1894: 280–5).

Lowell's descriptions of esoteric Shinto are frequently sarcastic, and his conclusions about the suggestibility of the Japanese mind are accordingly uncharitable: he calls Japanese people “unoriginal” and at one point even proposes that “a Japanese does not think” (Lowell 1894: 288, 323). His reviewers blamed his lowly choice of subject matter for inspiring such grim conclusions.

The Atlantic ("Recent Books on Japan" 1895) wrote that Lowell had perhaps "shown himself supersensitive to the repulsive side of the lower forms of Shintō," and that "the mental weaknesses of a gifted and amiable race are not kindly treated in this rather satirical volume." W. G. Aston, the famed translator of the *Nihon Shoki*, made a similar criticism in his landmark 1905 study of Shinto. Aston quotes Lowell from time to time, acknowledging the value of his ethnography. But he also makes a very harsh criticism of Lowell saying that it is unfair to call possession "esoteric Shinto" because it's an aberration and demeaning to the true, higher callings of Shinto.

It is hardly fair to Shinto to call this sort of thing "esoteric Shinto," as Mr. Lowell does. Spiritualism is not esoteric Christianity but a diseased excrescence on it. The higher Shinto functionaries do not condescend to such practices and indeed they are commonly performed by laymen, or even by Buddhist priests. (Aston 1905: 356)

It is true that the Shrine Shintoists Aston encountered would not stoop to practice fire walking or the various possession techniques witnessed by Lowell. But with the context of Sect Shinto history, we can see that Lowell had struck on an accurate insight of which Aston was ignorant. The separation of Shrine Shinto and Sect Shinto, and the purging of trance states from solemn imperial shrines like Ise Jingū, had only occurred a few decades earlier; Lowell was witnessing a form of Shinto that had only recently been privatized, and this specifically to appease specific, Western-influenced concepts of proper religiosity. This boundary work that claims that the field sites that Lowell dubbed "esoteric Shinto" are a "diseased excrescence" and a blight on "higher Shinto" would be judged as a fascist "State Shinto" ideology by later scholars (Maxey 2014: 239).

This is not to say that the practices deemed esoteric by Lowell provided political resistance to Japanese nationalism. The political consequences of Sect Shinto boundary work are complex (cf. Stalker 2007: 52–3). Rather, Aston accepted the modern definitions as normative, whereas Lowell pierced through the illusion by using the term "esoteric" to point to practices marginalized in the intellectual sphere but pervasive in his perception of Japanese society. While *Occult Japan* is burdened by Lowell's demeaning attitude toward the Japanese intellect and appears to be a breakup letter with Japan ending his years of intense curiosity about Japanese culture, his fieldwork remains uniquely valuable, and his social constructionist use of "esoteric" is a real insight produced from that fieldwork.

That being said, when Japanese people began to ask themselves what had been “left out” of the modernization of Shinto, the story they told themselves was not principally about possession, nor was it principally about secret transmissions or esotericism. Many doctrines and practices seen as marginal in modern Shinto have come to be called Koshintō (ancient Shinto) in Japanese, so let us now see what is meant by that term.

The Postwar Quest for “Ancient Shinto”

As the initial section of this chapter may suggest, there was room for criticism of the “Shinto restoration” of 1868–72. Rather than reverting the nation of Japan to the original ways of the *kami*, it had produced a bunch of new small sects and eliminated much of the traditions of the ancient shrines. Kurita Hidehiko (2023: 173) points to the formal separation of Sect Shinto from Shrine Shinto in 1882 as the end of the dream of uniting the Japanese populace around Shinto beliefs as a rival to the role of Christianity in the West. As Kurita observes, the attention of the Shintoists now turned to the trend for psychical research in the West as a possible grounds for national morality.

As this discussion developed, the concept of Shinto was gradually reified. In Japanese poetry and in early *kokugaku*, the *shintō*, meaning the realm or way of the divinities, was a sort of dreamtime accessible by various means in the present day, as suggested by ancient poetic terms such as *kannagara* 惟神 (“in accordance with the divine realm” / “as it was *in illud tempore*”) (Teeuwen 2002). Entering the 1920s, we begin to see Shinto historicized, a recognition that the “restored Shinto” of the Japanese Empire had become something different from the ideal ancient “Shinto” which the *kokugaku* movement had associated with the prehistoric Japanese people. The Japan Society for Psychical Research (*Nihon Shinrei Gakkai* 日本心霊学会) began using terms such as Koshintō or “primeval Shinto” (*genshi shintō* 原始神道) to theorize that the ancient Japanese practiced something closer to shamanism, and that communication with the gods was ongoing and common in prehistoric Japanese communities (Watari 2022: 149). This primeval Shinto was presumed to be lost; the psychical researchers did not believe it had continued to the present day or could be resurrected.

The Second World War brought with it the destruction of the *kokugaku* dream of Shinto world order, and Shinto became seen as an imperial relic. The idea of Koshintō, hidden traditions suppressed by the 1868 restoration, began to slowly emerge as an alternative narrative. Although there were small groups such as the

Third Civilization Society (*Daisan bunmei kai* 第三文明会) and the magazine *Sasura* さすら which kept the idea of Koshintō alive through the 1950s–70s, there was no specific text that caused a Koshintō boom. Instead, specific Japanese ideas began to attract attention as local equivalents to the Western “occult” in 1980s culture and slowly came to be regarded as “ancient Shinto” of some kind or another. Let us therefore take, as an attempt to delimit and explain Koshintō, the book *Koshintō no hon* 古神道の本, released for Gakken Publishing’s Books Esoterica series in 1995. Gakken’s general-audience Books Esoterica series included overviews of such diverse topics as love magic, prayer rituals, breathing techniques, Buddhism, astrology, martial arts, mantras, and Chinese medicine.

Koshintō no hon recasts Shinto restoration as an unfinished dream with spiritual components, not primarily oriented around possession, but rather around spiritual knowledge and power. In a 2024 conversation with Takeda Sūgen 武田崇元 (b. 1950), editor-in-chief of the Koshintō publishing house Hachiman Shoten, I learned that *Koshintō no hon* was largely written by editors of the monthly magazine *Mū* which was launched during Japan’s 1980s “occult boom” and often treats related subjects. Takeda furthermore observed that *Koshintō no hon* did not sell particularly well compared to other Books Esoterica volumes. After summarizing the contents of the book, I will evaluate how its intended audience and its authorship affect its concept of Koshintō.

Koshintō no hon describes Koshintō as originating with Hirata Atsutane, who we met above as the most important figure of nineteenth-century *kokugaku*. This may be a slightly unexpected progenitor, since Koshintō is supposed to be both ancient and neglected, but it is true that Atsutane’s *kokugaku* envisioned a much broader and more spiritual idea of Shinto than the emperor-worshipping State Shinto that eventually came to be implemented in the Meiji Restoration. Atsutane therefore becomes a betrayed prophet, whose pioneering study of lost knowledge handed down by the gods of ancient Japan has been mischaracterized and unjustly cast aside. The remainder of *Koshintō no hon* covers many topics that Atsutane either investigated or pioneered, so it is somewhat necessary to adopt this perspective on him from the outset.

After introducing Atsutane, the book turns to twenty-six short biographies of persons who propagated Shinto-influenced bodily practices, founded some of the modern Shinto sects, or are otherwise labeled as Koshintō. It is notable here that all of these figures were either Atsutane’s contemporaries in the early nineteenth century or postdate him. Again, although Koshintō means “ancient Shinto,” *Koshintō no hon* paradoxically confines itself to figures active after 1800. A diagram at the front of the book offers a supposed genealogy of transmissions

to link these modern Shintoists to hypothetical premodern traditions, which have no names associated with them.⁶

Following the biographies is an interesting selection of obscure symbology, chants, numerology, and divination techniques. These techniques are much broader than what Lowell had highlighted in his book, and mostly exist outside of Sect Shinto as well as Shrine Shinto. This section was written by Ōmiya Shirō 大宮司朗 (dates unknown), a prominent figure in the worlds of Koshintō and martial arts who styles himself as a genuine initiate into a Koshintō lineage (cf. Miller 2024: 94). Ōmiya's work has a tendency toward mystification and this section puts an emphasis on genealogy from unnamed ancient sources. For instance, he describes the *Tohokami* chant as a mysterious ancient transmission from Shirakawa Shinto. Janine Sawada has clarified that the bodily practices associated with this chant were first taught by Inoue Masakane 井上正鐵 (1790–1849), who did not join Shirakawa Shinto until after he had a revelatory dream in 1833 (Sawada 2004: 61).

The next chapter, entitled “Esoteric Theories of Japan” (*hikyōteki Nihonron* 秘教の日本論), deals not with beliefs or practices but with world history. The author introduces various books that are purported to be ancient history books handed down from a lost Japanese world empire. In a previous general-audience publication (Morrow 2014), I described these texts as “parahistories” because they deal more with metaphysical ideas than historical facts. The modern theory that Japanese people are derived from a lost tribe of Jews is also included here, because of the premise that some aspect of ancient Japanese history was suppressed and unknown to mainstream historians. The final pages of this chapter describe these “occult theories of Japan” (*okaruto Nihonron* オカルト日本論) as a “Japanese madness” and compare the vision of ancient global empire in these texts to Religious Zionism. This makes it clear that the chapter author finds some aspects of parahistory distasteful and the terms “occult” and “esoteric” are meant to place some distance between himself and the theories he is representing (Toshima 1994).

The parahistories have an unusual postwar pedigree that deserves close attention. Although Hirata Atsutane found the parahistories dubious, postwar proponents are often tantalized by the possibility of harmonizing academic historiography with the Shinto mythology that had been taught to children as fact in the prewar period. In this way, they form a building block of modern Koshintō despite the sometimes unusual statements within them. Furthermore, they were called “pseudohistory” in the wartime period due to their contradictions with the mythology, but were later spoken of as *suppressed* histories and have attracted

intellectual attention for this reason.⁷ Suga Hidemi's book 1968, a massive theory of the militant left of the 1960s, describes how Ōta Ryū's "subaltern studies," a term Ōta adopted from better-known South Asian critique, pivoted into exploring visions of an ancient, peaceful, Japanese-speaking pan-Asian polity described in parahistories. Suga (2006: 220, 229–30) proposes that this kind of "pseudohistorical imagination" resonated with the "entire New Left," presumably referencing anti-colonial readings of the famous Horserider Theory popular at this time. Kurita Hidehiko's and Orion Klautau's contributions to this volume contain more information on parahistories and the New Left.

The next chapter of *Koshintō no hon* lays out legends of ancient Japanese technologies and scientific practices. This idea of Shinto science can actually be traced back to Hirata Atsutane's *kokugaku*, but the chapter author develops the concept of science in a qualitative way and draws analogies to Goethe. Finally, the book provides us with a bibliography that includes some Sect Shinto texts but again falls largely outside of Sect Shinto, with heterodox theories about vanished ultra-ancient Japanese writing systems and lost histories from the age of the gods.

I have chosen *Koshintō no hon* to represent Koshintō because its place in the Books Esoterica series drove the *Mū* editors to attempt an encyclopedic summary of all things Koshintō. The editors were aware that the concept of Koshintō was not well-known and attempted to appeal to curiosity seekers with no particular background in *kokugaku* or Shinto. In order to intrigue this intended readership, this book is replete with strange, unfamiliar diagrams and illustrations reproduced from texts identified as Koshintō. (Despite this valiant effort, as Takeda Sūgen mentioned, the book did not sell well.) As a matter of necessity, the structure of the book is therefore based heavily around briefly introducing the written texts and authors behind these diagrams.

Furthermore, there are two major conflicts of interest that drive *Koshintō no hon*'s construction of the Koshintō category. First, Ōmiya Shirō is a noteworthy proponent of the concept of a multitude of secret Koshintō martial arts and other techniques, so the idea of Koshintō is appealing to him. In contrast, many proponents of the parahistory text *Hotsuma Tsutae* reject the labels of Shinto or Koshintō and instead position themselves as having recovered a real oral epic from the Jōmon period (14000–300 BCE).⁸ In this way, they can reject any association with other parahistories or other strange texts, not to mention the implied connection to early modern *kokugaku* ideologues such as Hirata Atsutane. The concept of Koshintō implies a way of looking at the mass of proposed ancient teachings which bundles them together and tries to make sense

of them collectively. This is more appealing to practitioners such as Ōmiya Shirō who can claim to evaluate these teachings through some secret transmissions.

Second, the biography section was written by Takeda Sūgen, the editor-in-chief of Hachiman Shoten that reprints books by most of the names he selected. It is only natural that he wrote up biographies of real historical figures with well-documented biographies and published writings, rather than legendary figures of ancient Japan like Ashiya Dōman who left us no writings and whose historical existence is dubious, and who would be accordingly hard to place on a Koshintō genealogy diagram. Furthermore, real premodern *kami* traditions might overlap with other categories like Buddhism or mountain religion, but this would make a mess of the Koshintō category and overlap with other books in the Books Esoterica series. Again, this reveals insider-outsider tensions at work in *Koshintō no hon*. Proponents of specific ideas within Koshintō may believe that they can trace their teachings to Buddhist figures or legendary ancient ascetics, but this would unsettle Takeda and Ōmiya's neat narrative of a limited number of Koshintō figures all "purely Shinto" in origin and associated with specific texts.

These caveats aside, there are interesting consequences of *Koshintō no hon*'s concept of Koshintō that need to be examined. First, while the cover of the book promises "esoteric spiritual studies" (*hikyō reigaku* 秘教靈学), the main use of the word "esoteric" within the text is to place distance between the writer and the subject matter. Hirata Atsutane is not described as esoteric, because indeed he is not: his *kokugaku* became the official ideology of the imperialist forces in 1868 and engendered the total reform of Japanese religion. Instead, Koshintō—Ancient Shinto—has been chosen as an organizing concept to connect Atsutane's imaginative *kokugaku* research to various marginal ideas and practices. As I have mentioned, the word Koshintō contains an unusual reduplication. The Meiji Restoration was meant to return Shinto to ancient purity. To claim that real Ancient Shinto is a separate thing from modern "restored" Shinto necessarily implies taking an antagonistic view toward the *kokugaku* theorists who took power in the Meiji government. Accordingly, none of those theorists have any presence in this book; we may assume they were all unfaithful to Atsutane.

Second, the Koshintō of *Koshintō no hon* has developed in an unusual direction compared to other concepts discussed in this chapter. The categories it showcases have little overlap with the possession techniques emphasized by Percival Lowell or the hypothetical ancient shamanism of the Japan Society for Psychical Research. Instead of a single major belief, we have many different things: lost symbols, ritual chants, divination, alternative science, and remnants of forgotten history along the lines of Atlantis and Mu. These seem to point

in different directions and are bound together chiefly by the Koshintō idea of unlikely survivals from an undocumented and forgotten past. The reader may only imagine that these survivals came from unwritten traditions passed down for countless hundreds of generations, or maybe in a more vague way from divine revelation or racial memory. Koshintō therefore implies not a specific philosophy or belief system, but a specific type of epistemology and Japan-centric historical thinking.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, we have seen very different reasons why the word Shinto could be connected to terms like “esoteric” or “occult.” Heuristic use of these English terms can be misleading. Premodern teachings called Shinto were, by and large, secretive and initiatory, while the reformed or “restored” Shrine Shinto of 1868 was intended to be wholly public and nonsectarian in character. However, modern Shinto became somehow bound up with practices that the government felt the need to privatize, both inside and outside of the formal category of Sect Shinto. Some of these privatized practices were dubbed “esoteric Shinto” by a Bostonian observer, and others have come to be labeled as “ancient Shinto,” Koshintō, by some postwar writers. Koshintō does not directly translate as “esoteric Shinto,” but postwar usage has been linked to the translations for the words “occult” (*okaruto*) and “esoteric” (*hikyō*). The figures and manuscripts associated with Koshintō are all early modern or modern in origin, although they generally invoke some sort of ancient pedigree.

As I have written in the past (Morrow 2018), I see the term “esoteric” as describing a kind of magician’s trick, which advertises through its claim of concealment, in the manner of Leo Strauss’s esoteric writing. In his moment of insight, Percival Lowell used the term in this way, perceiving the legal structure of Sect Shinto as a trick of the Meiji regime. The term Koshintō serves a similar purpose. Within *Koshintō no hon*, Koshintō is a marketing label that revitalizes Hirata Atsutane’s imaginative idea of a primeval divine age, freeing Atsutane from the baggage of imperial Japan and its destructive wars of colonialism and aggression by connecting his work to ideas of forgotten or purposefully concealed knowledge. As a native Japanese term, Koshintō is fruitful for further investigation. For example, we might hypothesize that the mysterious aesthetics of Koshintō have made ancient Japan “cool” as a theme for the spiritual products documented by Laura Miller. Nevertheless, as I have pointed out, Koshintō is

not an entirely emic term. The writers who define it have specific interests, and some who believe in the texts named as Koshintō reject the label.

The mainstream historical understanding of Shinto is that the study of ancient ritual, theology, and symbols became prominent in the Tokugawa period, especially under Hirata Atsutane, and was further elevated to the status of an official government pursuit during the Meiji Restoration. Both Lowell's "esoteric Shinto" and the Books Esoterica version of "Koshintō" were created in order to emphasize a narrative of concealment that stands outside this official government pursuit. Both do this with a degree of irony or distance, describing complex cultural constructions as skillfully concealed by unnamed agents, and thereby casting an ambiguous judgment onto the topics they describe. Scholars intending to characterize and evaluate these ideas, their history, and their reception should be cautious of the value judgments implied by terms like esoteric, occult, or Koshintō.

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For Now We See Through a Distorted Lens, Darkly: In Search of Buddhist Masters

Toshio Akai

Those Gazing at a Distorted Lens

This chapter aims to offer a compelling elucidation, occasionally drawing from sources in Japanese that may be challenging for my readers to access, regarding the historical context that led to the initial interaction between Japanese Buddhism and Theosophy, along with the subsequent divergence from it, as well as the underlying spiritual orientation or religiosity that influenced these developments. At the outset, I wish to clarify that I will employ the metaphor of a “distorted lens” throughout the explanation to facilitate a clearer understanding for my readers. Due to the distortion of a lens, it inherently fails to accurately capture the true images. Individuals who gazed through the lens might have recognized this reality; however, they chose not to reject it, as the reflections presented were aligned with their desires. More directly, what they sought to observe was so foreign and unrecognizable that it could only be perceived through a warped perspective. It is intriguing that the image under scrutiny was simultaneously directed toward the same lens, observing the observer in return. No matter how distorted the lens was, it was necessary for those looking from both sides to communicate with each other. As the difference of their religiosity was unfathomably great, people on either side of the lens were speaking incomprehensible words to each other, but strangely enough, through the distortion of the lens, they seemed to be able to communicate. The lens was useful as long as it projected images that were convenient for both observers to communicate with each other, but the honeymoon period did not last long. As both became able to bear looking directly at each other, the lens was eventually discarded, and no one remembered or tried to record that it had developed

eyesight that could withstand looking directly at each other. When the lens was no longer needed and was discarded, its former usefulness was forgotten, or perhaps more accurately, deliberately forgotten. The memory of peering into a distorted lens and feeling enchanted was so embarrassing (it would have been objectively ugly and foolish) that it had to be sealed away. This process will be examined in detail in my chapter.

As will be detailed in this chapter, modern Japanese Buddhist historiography has tended to deliberately overlook the encounters between late nineteenth-century Japanese Buddhist reformers and the Theosophical Society. Although there were occasional individual works that partially addressed this theme—such as Tsunemitsu Kōnen's *Nihon Bukkyō Tobeishi* (1964), on which the present study is based—no serious attempt had been made to elucidate the subject from an international perspective. The immediate stimulus for this research came not from academic institutions but from independent, civilian scholarship. Satō Tetsurō's *Dai Ajia Shisō Katsugeki* (2008) was the first substantial attempt to recover forgotten primary materials and to grasp the overall structure of the problem, clearly indicating both a new direction for Japanese Buddhist studies and the intellectual premises underpinning it. The study began as a web-based series, and even after its publication in book form, the online version has continued to be updated intermittently with newly discovered sources, remaining active to this day.

Yet even Sato's achievement would not have gained deeper academic traction had it not been developed further by Yoshinaga Shin'ichi. Taking the initial encounters between Japanese Buddhist reformers and the Theosophical Society as his point of departure, Yoshinaga posed a fundamental question: *How did foreign conceptions of Buddhism shape the modernization of Japanese Buddhism?* In addressing this problem, he laid the foundations for a broad, international, and interdisciplinary network of scholarly exchange. His question definitely came from his extensive study of modern Buddhism in Japan and the contemporary occultist movements in the Western world, and he introduced Sato's achievements into the academic arena and established a genealogy that traces the evolution of this interaction from its beginnings to the present, and it was also he who bridged that genealogy to the most recent works of Snodgrass (2003) and Bocking et al. (2014).

Moreover, Yoshinaga's research extended to concrete archival inquiries—including his classification survey of Hirai Kinza's complete diaries and a partial collection of Hirai's correspondence, as well as a comprehensive, item-by-item examination of the entirety of the personal effects of Nishū Utsugi (1893–1951),

a member of the Kyoto Lodge of the Theosophical Society. Through these investigations, he brought to light aspects of the lodge's activities that had previously circulated only as rumors, thereby opening new avenues for considering how these engagements influenced the intellectual formation of Suzuki T. Daisetsu (1870–1966), who served as the lodge's president (Yoshinaga 2011, 2021).

Regrettably, Yoshinaga's writings remain scattered across specialized academic journals and monographs that are largely inaccessible to general readers. Before his research could be systematized and published as a comprehensive volume, his untimely death brought an abrupt end to his work. Nevertheless, the concrete analytical perspectives he articulated in those monographs have been carried forward by the next generation of scholars, continuing to develop within specific subfields of Buddhist and religious studies.

Yoshinaga's analytical posture opens the way to the following metaphorical insight: It is misunderstanding and overestimation that produce the lens distortion, and their source is ignorance. However, it is important to consider the specific spirituality of the era in which this distorted communication occurred, in the sense that it was nurtured from the cultural background of the time when it was taken seriously. It is interesting that such a misconception was frequently aroused in the milieu where the esoteric trends of different cultures were intersected with each other, and sometimes the misconception was strengthened by those who attempted to modernize their own legacies. The rediscovery of Buddhism of East Asian countries and the contribution of Theosophy to it are the best example to certify how this cultural phenomenon took place.

As historical research reveals, the first Buddhism Westerners came across was Theravada, even though the fact that its Northern younger brother Mahayana was a dominant religion across the vast region from Tibet to the Far East was vaguely known. When Western academia embarked on the study of Theravada scriptures, the Buddhist monks of the Far Eastern countries, for instance, those in Japan who were an intellectual stratum of the established society, were ignorant of the Western interest in Buddhism, and this kept them dismissing their elder brother as the less-valued Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle). Thus, the first step of "overestimation and misunderstanding" was made ready. Northern Buddhism was seen as more "advanced" than its older sibling Southern Buddhism, even by those who believed that Japanese Buddhism required reform. In demonstrating the authentic significance of Japanese Buddhism to the West, they frequently constructed their arguments based on this premise. As Japanese Buddhism was historically founded by assimilating large numbers of adherents and structuring them into a religious order with the purpose of their salvation, even the reformers

acquainted with Western knowledge struggled to articulate arguments beyond the framework of a religious order, because it offered them a foundational framework for existence.

However, this sense of superiority would have been greatly shaken if they had known that Victorian intellectuals tended to identify Mahayana Buddhism with the Roman Catholic Church. According to the survey the missionary reported from China, it seemed obvious that the Far Eastern Mahayana Buddhism had something undesirable, equivalent to the vices Catholicism committed if seen from a Protestant perspective (Almond 1988: 123–6). It took a long time for the Japanese Buddhists to understand that the contempt for ecclesiastical organization was hidden in their negative view of Mahayana Buddhism, whereas the purity of Theravada Buddhism was more favorable in the eyes of Westerners. Max Müller (1823–1900) regarded Mahayana Buddhism as “the silly and mischievous stories of Amitabha and his Paradise” (Snodgrass 2003: 110), a perspective that found resonance among many scholars of Buddhism. Consequently, the pressing challenge that the Buddhist reformers in Japan then faced was to convince Westerners of the preeminence of Mahayana in comparison to Hinayana, whose doctrines and religious practices appeared more “puritan” and aligned with the original teachings of Lord Buddha in their perspective.

The decline of Japanese Buddhism after the Meiji Restoration has been well documented and analyzed (Snodgrass 2003; Keitelaar 1990). The disintegration of feudal society unavoidably stripped Buddhist clergy of the social status and capital they formerly possessed before the Restoration. Following the revocation of their privileges granted by feudal warlords, denunciations of corruption among Buddhist monks, primarily articulated by newly arrived Christian missionaries, intensified public skepticism toward Buddhism as a religion of the Greater Vehicle, which ostensibly aimed to facilitate the salvation of the common populace, irrespective of differences between clergy and laity. As Judith Snodgrass notes, “Buddhist institutions had entered the Meiji period devastated by persecution, confiscation of property, withdrawal of patronage, forced retrenchment of a large part of their clergy and stripped of the connection with the state that they had enjoyed for over a thousand years” (Snodgrass 2003: 117). Institutionally, this attack on Buddhism came to the forefront as part of the Meiji government’s effort to establish State Shintō—which ultimately failed—and through the accompanying *haibutsu kishaku* (anti-Buddhist) movement (Klautau and Krämer 2021: 1–36). The critical state surrounding them enables us to understand how hopeful and valuable it looked in the eyes of Japanese Buddhists when Theosophists emerged before them as a “fellow” Buddhist. The

news that interest in Buddhism was increasing in Christian nations (even if false) reignited their diminished passion, thereby fostering the idea of disseminating Buddhism internationally. They were either unaware of the distortion in the lens they discovered or deliberately chose to disregard it.

The Distorted Lens and Mahayana Buddhism

As I have already discussed elsewhere, three agents were considered when the concept of overseas missionary work was first conceived (Akai 2009: 187–90). Each of these three were somewhat involved in the movements of the Theosophical Society, and they were chosen as interlocutors because the reformers had no other way of knowing what was happening abroad in the initial stage. The first was Captain Charles Pfoundes (1840–1907), an Irish-born early visitor to Japan whose involvement in Japanese Buddhism and his purpose to do so have already been discussed in detail in the work written by Boxing, Cox, and Yoshinaga (Boxing et al. 2014), and will be discussed later from the point according to our context. The second was Herman Carl Vetterling (1849–1931), alias Philangi Dasa, a Swedish-American author of *Swedenborg the Buddhist, or The Higher Swendenborgianism: Its Secrets and Tibetan Origin* (1887) whose activities have not yet been fully studied and will hardly be mentioned here (Akai 2024: 45–6; Dodin 2001: 171–2).¹ The third entity was the Theosophical Society, which historically stood as the most significant and influential agent. The interaction between Japanese Buddhist reformers and Theosophy occurred through two primary channels, the first being with the headquarters in Adyar, India. The interaction between the Adyar Theosophists and Japanese Buddhist orders, along with a number of lecture tours conducted by H. S. Olcott (1832–1907) in Japan during 1889, has been examined to a commendable degree; however, there is a noticeable deficiency in the cross-examination of the Adyar materials (Sato 2008, 175–214). My contributions to this discussion are minimal, as the exemplary relationship he cultivated with the Japanese Buddhists has been extensively documented in various Japanese sources.² Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that their shared interest was not enduring. As I will discuss later, the relationship concluded unexpectedly when the “overestimations and misunderstandings” became evident.

The second but less-known channel was initiated by Matsutarō 松太郎 aka Matsuyama Ryokuin 松山緑陰 (?–1906) to contact William Q. Judge (1851–1896), then the president of the Theosophical Society in America. This

happened as early as in 1887, when Matsuyama was the teacher of a reformist school for young Buddhist students of Nishihonganji sect, later reorganized to Ryukoku University. The only reliable study we have currently is Tsunemitsu Kōnen's *How Japanese Buddhism Came to America* (1964), where he points out that how it started was documented in *The Three Hundred Years of Ryukoku University*. He summarizes the report in this school history as follows: In 1887 several Japanese newspapers carried news from the Russian media reporting on the spread of Buddhism in America, which inspired Matsuyama to write a letter to the American Theosophical Society a month later.

Recently I discovered that Matsuyama's letter was published in *Sun* on May 22, 1887, under the title "Buddhism in New York," about two months after he had sent it.³ In that article, he explains what prompted him to write to Judge as follows: having read a report in a Russian newspaper claiming that Buddhism had recently been introduced in New York and Brooklyn, with a growing number of converts and plans to establish a Buddhist temple, he felt both surprised and cautiously skeptical. He therefore sought confirmation of these reports and requested further details regarding the alleged Buddhist movement in America. Matsuyama and his colleagues expressed their pleasure at the idea of Buddhism spreading among Westerners but emphasized their desire for reliable information before offering to share accounts of Buddhism and other religions in Japan. The letter is signed by K. Hangio, T. Horinchi, and Matsuyama himself. Shawn Higgins's study reveals to us that the author of the article is David A. Curtis (1846–1923), a well-known journalist at the time and one of the earliest Theosophists to refer to the Arya Samaj (Higgins 2025: 178–80). Curtis was a friend of Judge since he started to work as a clerk near the City Hall in Manhattan in the early 1870s (Higgins, n.d.).

Judge responded immediately, enclosing their journal *The Path* to validate the Russian news reports. As Judge's message convinced Matsuyama that "the Theosophical Society is working for the expansion of Buddhism and the results of their activities are beginning to bear fruit" (Tsunemitsu 1964: 22), he and other volunteers embarked on a plan to send Buddhist missionaries overseas. Certainly, further research is necessary to shed more light on the background of this incident. A closer look at *The Path* in these years allegedly will reveal the articles or reports reflecting the correspondence between Judge and Matsuyama that will be important in understanding how the Theosophists viewed Japanese Buddhism at that time. It is highly likely that Judge was in pursuit of a Buddhist, or more broadly, an Eastern Master to advance his Theosophical objectives; we shall briefly address the context of this later. However, even without such

information, we can fathom out to some extent the context in which reports of Buddhism spreading in America were appreciated in Japan, and thereby we can recognize that the “distorted lens” was already at work. At this point, it would have been exceedingly challenging for Matsuyama and his fellow Buddhist reformers to comprehend that Judge was discussing from a distinctly Theosophical context, specifically regarding the channel through which the authentic messages from the Mahatmas could be accessed. The context Judge then depended upon shall be discussed later.

Identifying this Russian newspaper is now rather difficult, but it seems strange that the Russian press would pick up an incident related to Buddhism, especially in America. Curtis’s article “Buddhism in New York” discusses that his recent publication of several articles relating to “the growth of Buddhistic ideas in this country, and the work of the Theosophical Society in this direction” gathered attention internationally, eventually a Russian paper translated it (Higgins 2025: 178). As I will mention later when discussing H. P. Blavatsky’s (1831–1891) sources, Russia had a means of accessing Buddhism (especially Mahayana Buddhism) different from the West, but this article does not seem to have been written in that context. Therefore, we cannot ignore the possibility that this Russian “newspaper” itself was Theosophical.⁴ Matsuyama may have been unaware of this. However, considering his communication with Judge established in a short period, it is highly probable that Theosophy was mentioned in the original article. The article may have mentioned specific Theosophical doctrines, but it is rather doubtful whether Matsuyama would have understood them. It would not be surprising if he interpreted the Theosophical Society as a Buddhist organization or an organization dedicated to the spread of Buddhism. Due to their ignorance, the lens was distorted enough to show the Japanese reformers what they wanted to see.

Matsuyama actually regarded Judge as a person representing Western Buddhists. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that he or his fellow Buddhist reformers had not been aware of the “Buddhist Affairs Overseas.” Ironically, Judge’s response was partially translated in Japanese and published in *Buddhist Affairs Overseas*, a journal of the Buddhist Propagation Society, the organization Matsuyama was closely related with. As the name suggests, this society was founded to spread *their own* Buddhism abroad, but at this point it was still at the idea stage and no missionaries had actually made inroads abroad. The journal therefore had no choice but to widely introduce the activities of “Overseas Buddhists” and to emphasize the optimistic expectation that their own religion had the potential to be widely accepted abroad. The report of Buddhist

activities outside Japan the journal carried reveals their heavy dependence upon Theosophical information, proving that the Theosophical Society then was the organization trustworthy to them. Because no one was knowledgeable enough to point out their misunderstanding and overestimation, their honeymoon time with the Theosophical Society lasted nearly a decade before abruptly ending when Japanese Buddhism formed a stable link with Western academics conducting Buddhism research. It was at this point that they discovered that Theosophical Buddhism was not the same as their own or the Buddhism acknowledged by Western academia.

Nevertheless, a close examination of the Theosophy-related articles published in *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* reveals the possibility that the journal's editors harbored a significant skepticism over the authenticity of the Theosophical Society as a genuine Buddhist institution and tried to ignore their own suspicion, or at least to make their readers unaware of it. This is attested by their sensitive dealing with the Mahatma problem. Accepting the existence of the Mahatmas and the veracity of the teachings they delivered was a sort of *credo* for Theosophists, but obviously ordinary Buddhists living in Japan found it difficult to believe in the existence of the 'Trans-Himalayan superhumans' brotherhood with extraordinary longevity, let alone the miraculous way their messages appeared. *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* deliberately limits referring to the Theosophical Masters, and even when it is unavoidable to mention them, it refrained as much as possible from delving into the Masters' miraculous origins and otherworldly abilities. Definitely, such miracle stories would have immediately made the journal's readers (who wished to reform Buddhism through modernization) suspicious of the Theosophical Society and its commitment to Buddhism. The Theosophical Society's occultist view of Buddhism must have seemed not only contrary to the traditional teachings of the Japanese Buddhist sect, but also to their goal of modernizing Buddhism.

However, no matter how skeptical of the Mahatma problem, *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* was by no means free from the eccentric interpretation of Buddhism that was prevalent in the contemporary Western world. For example, it published an article reporting that traces of Buddhism's ancient spread across the Bering Strait to the New World remain in Mayan and Aztec ruins. In another part of the same issue, they are introducing Hargrave Jennings's (1817–1890) theory (probably based on his *Buddhism: The Religion of The Philosophers*), which was welcomed by some amateur researchers at the time (Godwin 1994: 264–6). Jennings's idea is in the lineage of the "Dual Buddhas Theory," put forward by William Jones (1746–1794) at the end of the eighteenth century, claiming that

there was another Lord Buddha who founded Buddhism in ancient times other than Gautam Siddhartha we know as a person (Almond 1988: 17–20). Although Jennings's idea on the spread of Buddhism in ancient Europe cannot be deemed "scientific" by contemporary standards, the notion of the dissemination of a primordial religion was a fundamental aspect of comparative religion studies in his age, and the doctrine of Theosophy rested upon it. It is difficult to conceive that *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* was well-acquainted with such a common sense of the contemporaneous Orientalist scholarship as early as 1890; yet, it may have had some comprehension of the dissemination of such religious perspectives through its engagement with Theosophical publications. Nevertheless, this magazine article has a clear purpose. The claim that the origin of Buddhism is older than any other religion would have been very satisfying to the journal's readers. Also important to know is that this article entitled "Buddhism in Ancient Europe" appeared after the publication of Pfoundes's message criticizing Theosophy, the significance of which will be discussed below. Considering that the information Pfoundes delivered to Japan was decisive for Japanese Buddhists' departure from Theosophy, it is obvious that when this essay was published, *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* was no longer in a neutral position. Even after openly criticizing Theosophical occultism, *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* did not hesitate to boldly introduce the extraordinary theories like Hargrave Jennings's if they proved the superiority of Buddhism. This shows the lens distortion was so deep that trying to understand it with common sense doubt makes no sense.⁵

The letters Judge wrote to Matsuyama are missing, only remaining in the form of abridged Japanese translations in several parts of *Buddhist Affairs Overseas*, and, considering that his passages were quoted only to meet the journal's context, it is exceedingly difficult to figure out what was behind Judge's ardent reactions to Matsuyama's contact. For example, in his letter of July 1888, Judge mentions the prejudice toward Buddhism prevailing in his country, emphasizing the necessity of Buddhist savants to expand Lord Buddha's teaching among common Americans (*Buddhist Affairs Overseas* 1889: 122–3). We cannot accept his words literally, as they were certainly printed with the editor's will to make Judge's request of sending learned Buddhist preachers to America satisfying the readers' sense of superiority, or fulfilling the ultimate goal of the Buddhist Propagation Society, which is to send Buddhist missionaries overseas. Understanding the development of the Theosophical Society alone gives us the clue to discover what sort of "misunderstanding and overestimation" Judge and his colleagues had when they expected something from Mahayana Buddhists, and what prompted them to have this idea. This is also to explain how the Theosophist's lens was distorted.

In Search of a Buddhist Theosophical Master

We may assume that Judge's request for the dispatch of a learned scholar was due to his idea that by interacting with such a person American Theosophists would learn the secrets of "Esoteric Buddhism," a notion that is the natural conclusion to be drawn from a straightforward interpretation of Blavatsky's teachings. In several parts of her writings, Blavatsky underlines the importance of Buddhism in terms of its long-enduring commitment to the ancient "Wisdom Religion" tradition, the nucleus of Theosophical secret doctrines in her idea. In her understanding,

no mysteries or esotericism exists in the two chief Buddhist Churches, the Southern and the Northern. Buddhists may well be content with the dead letter of Siddhartha Buddha's teachings, as fortunately no higher or nobler ones in their effects upon the ethics of the masses exist, to this day. But herein lies the great mistake of all the Orientalists. There is an esoteric doctrine, a soul-ennobling philosophy, behind the outward body of ecclesiastical Buddhism. The latter, pure, chaste and immaculate as the virgin snow on the ice-capped crests of the Himalayan ranges, is however, as cold and desolate as they with regard to the post-mortem condition of man. (Blavatsky 1974: 71)

No matter how fascinating Blavatsky's insight into Buddhism's dual structure appears, it unavoidably raises questions about the source of her knowledge. Her own story of learning "esoteric" Buddhism in Tibet cannot be taken at face value. Blavatsky's biography, especially before her arrival in New York in 1873, contains many ambiguous parts due to the lack of evidence to certify her statements, and her contemporary opponents turn suspicious eyes to her report of entering Tibet around 1854 and learning the secret lore of Vajrayana under the guidance of her own Masters around 1862. Even her *chela* (disciple) A. P. Sinnett (1840–1921) struggled to authenticate her alleged seven-year stay in Tibet while writing her biography (App 2021: 160–1).

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that few Westerners, including academic authorities of Pali canons, were aware of the real state of Tibet, when Blavatsky made public of her profound knowledge of the Buddhism there. Representing the lack of Western knowledge is Laurence Waddell's (1854–1938) study like *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism, With Its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology and in Its Relation to Indian Buddhism* (1895), where Tibetan Buddhism was treated as a deteriorated form of Lord Buddha's original and, therefore, genuine doctrine and thus

had these various influences warped the Buddhist doctrine in India, ere it reached Tibet, and there the deep-rooted demon-worship made Lamaism what it is: a priestly mixture of Shamanist cults and poly-demonist superstitions, overlaid by quasi-Buddhist symbolism, relieved by universal charity and other truly Buddhist principles, and touched here and there by the brighter lights of the teaching of Buddha. (Waddell 1895: 154)

Apart from internment reports like those Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969) made, few records revealing the real state of the Tibetan Buddhism have leaked from the mysterious land, until Chinese annexation of Tibet in the middle of 1950s, the incident inducing the exodus of many Tibetans to the West. A Japanese monk, Kawaguchi Ekai 河口慧海 (1866–1945), sneaked into Tibet ten years before Alexandra David-Néel and trained himself in a number of Buddhist temples there. The fact that the Theosophical Publishing House quickly translated the travelogue he left behind into English demonstrates to us the significance that Tibetan Buddhism held in the Theosophical environment at that time (Kawaguchi 1909). In contrast to Waddell's prejudiced views of Tibetan religion, Blavatsky's appreciation of Tibetan (Mahayana) Buddhism looks fairly advanced, and this tempts us to assume that she knew the Buddhism not only by written literature she could gather but by contacting real Buddhists living somewhere in the world.

The only hypothesis we can propose at the present stage concerns the possibility of her contact with Tibetan Buddhism in the place other than Tibet. In the middle of nineteenth century, she is believed to have traveled across the wide range of areas including Georgia, Armenia, and Russian marches facing with Turkish and Persian Empires. In many cases exactly where she was is still unknown to us, but her visit to the land of Kalmyk people in her "blank years" is a feasible presumption. The Kalmyks, a branch tribe of a race known as Oirats, is a small ethnic group of Mongols who, disbanded from their main body once forming a strong kingdom in the present-day Turkistan, settled in the north of Caspian Sea in the seventeenth century, and their faith in Buddhism was significant in terms that it enabled them to keep united as a single ethnic entity through many of difficult years of hardship. Most likely, Blavatsky entered their territory and shared everyday lives with them, and naturally she was introduced to practice many of Buddhist rites among them as one of the earliest European observer and participant. Russians in Blavatsky's younger years occupied the position, geographically as well as societally, easier to access Lamaist Buddhism than their counterparts living in Western Europe. John Snelling states that during Agvan Dorzhiev's (1853–1938) visit to the Russian Tsar as the official emissary

of the thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1898, the Buddhist population in St. Petersburg was swiftly growing, primarily comprised of young Kalmyk and Buryat officers serving the Tsar (Snelling 1993: 54). Blavatsky departed her homeland prior to the onset of the Silver Age, a period marked by a dramatic proliferation of Orientalism in Russia. However, given her father's assignments as an Imperial official, it is highly probable that she encountered Kalmyk Buddhism during her formative years. Alexander I granted the Kalmyks considerable autonomy for their contributions during the Napoleonic Wars, incorporating them into the Russian cavalry and facilitating access to the higher echelons of Russian society (Snelling 1993: 56). A Buryat physician Peter Badmaev's (1851–1920) endeavors may have facilitated the dissemination of Tibetan medicine, rooted in Tibetan Buddhism, among the Russian elite, potentially increasing their fascination with Buddhism (Suvorov et al. 2021: 24–5).

The collateral evidence of her enrollment to a Mahayana Buddhist order among Kalmyks can be found in a letter she wrote, as early as in 1884, to the editor of the Spiritualist magazine *Light*. For a few years after her embarkation on The Theosophical Society, Blavatsky emphasized her profound knowledge of Buddhism, and thus her apartment of 47th Street, New York, was called The Lamasery. This letter was written to refute the accusation of her own ignorance of Tibetan Buddhism, and the person who provoked this controversy was Arthur Lillie (1831–1911), who noticed Buddhist transmigration as a principle that can explain psychic phenomena. Lillie was a self-ordained Buddhist who tried to interpret Buddhist doctrine of transmigration in his Spiritualist context, thus arousing heated disputes with Blavatsky and her Indian colleagues at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶ Presently, a few remember this controversy, together with Lillie's eccentric works, but his extremely arbitrary interpretation of Buddhism is worth remembering in terms that the Theosophical Master Koot Hoomi warned his disciple Sinnett, who was writing *Esoteric Buddhism* then, to ignore Lillie's works on the ground that his discussion was full of inaccuracy and misunderstandings (App 2021: 156). Blavatsky wrote:

I was quite familiar with the Lamaism of Thibetan [*sic*] Buddhists. I passed months and years of my childhood among the Lamaist Kalmucks of Astrakhan, and with their great priest. However "heretical" in their religious terminology, the Kalmucks have still the same identical terms as the other Lamaists of Thibet (from whence they came). As, however, I had visited Semipalatinsk and the Ural Mountains with an uncle of mine, who has possessions in Siberia, on the very borderland of the Mongolian countries where the "Harachin Lama" resides, and

had made numerous excursions beyond the frontiers, and knew all about Lamas and Thibetans before I was fifteen. (Blavatsky 1954: 293)⁷

As one of her earliest followers, Judge was well aware of Blavatsky's emphasis on Buddhism's importance in the Theosophy. Due to the shortage of firsthand evidences, it is still uncertain if she really initiated her closest disciples to the esoteric practices of Vajrayana school, but we are not altogether wrong to assume that the extent such a secret lore was shared among her followers was extremely limited, and this condition, by no means, helped to salvage them from "overestimation and misunderstanding." They were likely still heavily impressed by her strong allusion to Esoteric Buddhism even after her departure to India in 1879, and began to look for another source of it. Ryokuin Matsuyama's message reached Judge in such a circumstance. Judge's ignorance of Japanese Buddhism made him embrace an excessive expectation of affluent outcome if he had established the close communication with Japanese Buddhists.

Considering that this happened in the period between the publication of A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) and Blavatsky's *The Voice of the Silence* (1889), we can understand that his overestimation deserves no ridicule. What he wanted to know was, we can assume, the practical way of Mahayana meditation, or other secret methods of enhancing psychic capacities, by means of distinct physical practices. This idea casts a new light on what he wanted to mean in the aforementioned letter of July 1888. The editor of *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* interpreted this to be his request of a formal Buddhist mission to America, but we cannot ignore the possibility that Judge's true purpose was to have a Mahayana *guru* who would reveal the hidden lore of Buddhism to American Theosophists, just as Koot Hoomi and other Masters did to Blavatsky in a Tibetan monastery a few decades ago. He may also have been inspired by Sinnett's claim that the sources for his work was Tibetan Mahatmas.

As evidenced by his 1890 correspondence with Blavatsky, Judge actually was in pursuit of an "Eastern Prophet" to advance the initiatives of his Theosophical Society, particularly its American branch (Forray 2016: 172). Despite his determined inclination toward Western occultism, which was clearly manifested in his vision of establishing "in the West of a great seat of learning where shall be taught and explained and demonstrated the great theories of man and nature which she [Blavatsky] brought forward to us, where western occultism, as the essence combined out of all others, shall be taught" (Forray 2016: 196), he nonetheless required an Eastern Master to advance this initiative, and this notion was perhaps already conceived when he started correspondence with

Matsuyama. I prefer not to continue this discussion, as it necessitates delving into the specifics of the debate regarding the Masters' aspect as *Nirmanakaya*, which pertains to the "Judge Case" concerning the authenticity of the number of the Mahatma's messages that reached Judge, or the conspiracy theory involving "black magicians" influencing his rival Annie Besant (1844–1937) to disrupt the Theosophical Society. Sufficient for us here is that Judge's sense of necessity persisted, at least until the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893, where he sought to depend significantly on a Hindu Brahmin G. N. Chakravarti (1861–1936), despite Chakravarti serving as Besant's advisor and mentor during the event (Forray 2016: 192–5). If Judge was indeed looking for a Theosophical Master, the editors of *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* were not mistaken in their instinctive perception of the occultism hidden within the Theosophical interpretation of Buddhism even before they discovered the true nature of this Society. When his correspondence with Matsuyama began, Judge had no chance to know that "the Dual Buddha theory" Sinnett expounded in *Esoteric Buddhism* bewildered, or at least confused, Japanese Buddhists who opened the book to seek something identical with their own Buddhism. In this period, Sinnett's work was sometimes mentioned in the Buddhist publications in Japan, but no review was written to criticize the contents in detail. As I previously stated, some Spiritualists were interested in the Buddhist idea of reincarnation (Harlass 2022: 204–5), which may have been the reason why Koot Hoomi warned Sinnett not to refer to Lillie's studies of Buddhism. From the perspective of Japanese Buddhists, the arguments of both parties were so far removed from their own comprehension that it was difficult for them to understand them, even though the only works they had then at hands were those of Sinnett.

As I pointed out before, Judge was a senior disciple of Blavatsky, indicating he likely reviewed the majority of her writings on Buddhism. She authored a collection of essays titled "The Mystery of Buddha," which she initially planned to incorporate into *The Secret Doctrine* but eventually abandoned; these essays were subsequently included in the Volume 3 posthumously. Judge was almost certainly familiar with them from the time of their first publication. Blavatsky is citing Joseph Edkins's (1858–1917) *The Chinese Buddhism* (1893) to support her claim that esoteric Buddhism does not exist in Southern (Theravada) Buddhism while only Northern (Mahayana) Buddhism hardly retains it. Blavatsky, following Edkin, asserts that Buddhism comprises two branches: the doctrinal Eye Doctrine and the spiritual Heart Doctrine, with the latter embodying esoteric Buddhism, which is connected to her Masters' teachings. With the ascendance of the Eye Doctrine in a Buddhist community, the Heart Doctrine

leader Bodhidharma journeyed extensively to China to disseminate Buddhism through physical meditation rather than through textual teachings. In short, esoteric Buddhism is synonymous with Zen (Blavatsky 1897: 579). Urs App's study indicates that Blavatsky may have viewed mysterious *The Book of Dzyan* as the origin of her doctrine because Zen is known as *Dhyana* in Sanskrit, although *ch'an* in Chinese when it was brought to China (Blavatsky 2023: 275). She also interprets "Western heaven" written in Chinese Zen scripture is Shambhala, from where Bodhidharma brought his secret doctrines to Eastern world, and this "Western heaven" is "no fiction located in transcendental space. It is a bona fide locality in the mountains or, to be more correct, one encircled in a desert within mountains. Hence, it is assigned for the residence of those students of Esoteric Wisdom—disciples of Buddha—who have attained the rank of Lohans and Anâgâmins (Adepts)" (Blavatsky 1897: 578, 775). The Japanese pronunciation of "Zen" is absent in Edkin's *The Chinese Buddhism*, even though this main source for Blavatsky shortly references Zen's transmission to Japan. Currently, we lack evidence to determine if Blavatsky had comprehensive understanding of Zen's enduring popularity in Japan. The temporary reception of Pfoundes at Blavatsky Lodge in London before 1889, the incident I will mention later, may have sprung from her effort to tackle the information deficit concerning Japanese Buddhism.

Blavatsky's assertion that Zen qualifies as esotericism due to its physical meditation practice is not a novel concept attributed to Edkin or herself, but rather is rooted in the Western tradition of religious studies. Julian Strube argues that the bifurcation of Japanese Buddhism into exoteric and esoteric streams, with Zen positioned at the core of the latter, is a distinction that originated with the Jesuits who visited Japan in the sixteenth century and has been perpetuated in European religious studies, suggesting that Edkin's (and also Blavatsky's) classification may adhere to the historical notion that the "divide between the 'two types' of Japanese doctrines, in which Zen Buddhism was depicted as the inner teaching reserved for the learned, and the Pure Land worshippers of Amida as the one for the uneducated masses" (Strube 2024: 16). No documents exist to verify whether the Judge intended Zen Buddhism when he initially sought to engage with Japanese Buddhists; however, it is reasonable to conjecture that his purpose to connect with Japanese Esoteric Buddhism was to appoint a guru as his own Master, and acquire the skills necessary to further develop his psychic abilities. Judge's request for a high priest to be dispatched to America, as stated at the outset of this section, can also be interpreted within this framework. In Japan, Esoteric Buddhism typically denotes the two sects of Shingon and Tendai, established by Kūkai and Saichō, respectively. These two sects share the same

origins as Tibetan Buddhism and were derived from the Vajrayana tradition. The earliest academic mention of those sects is found in Nanjō Bun'yū's *A Short History of the Twelve Japanese Buddhist Sects* (1866), where the words "hidden or secret doctrine" are applied to them in contrast to "apparent doctrine," which is identical with our Exoteric Buddhism (*kengyō* 顯教). However, the recent study by Fumihiko Sueki reveals that Zen referred to Esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō* 密教) in the Japanese translation of The Rev. W. Lobscheid's *An English and Chinese Dictionary* (1883) (Sueki 2024: 3–6), and this might reflect the traditional dichotomy of Japanese Buddhism already discussed. I do not now have the resources necessary to assess whether earliest Buddhist reformers were aware of this distinction or if they were aware of it but chose to disregard it. However, as a detailed study is necessary to conclude this problem, I do not go further than pointing this out, but it may be interesting to note these points; first, an article entitled "Mahayana's Difference from Hinayana" published in *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* in 1890 affirmed that Esoteric Buddhism was a school included in the Mahayana Buddhism in Japan, as this may have been an attempt to answer a question issued from American Theosophists (*Buddhist Affairs Overseas* 1890c: 4–5).

As stated earlier, Theosophy's interest in Esoteric Buddhism stems from their tenet that the ancient universal religion is firmly preserved inside the secret doctrines. The idea that all the civilizations should have a one single origin was by no means surprising in the people's mentality in the nineteenth century, and certainly this prompted the notion that once there were ages when Wisdom Religion was prevailing across the world. Most of present religions were a degenerated form of it in terms that diverse errors, mainly produced by superstitions, clung to their bodies to pollute the purity of the original doctrine. This pattern of thinking guaranteed the newly created mythology that a certain arcane brotherhood existed somewhere in a remote place of this world to preserve the true and original knowledge the ancient religion had contained, and being a disciple of the secret order was the only way to access the ancient wisdom. It is undeniable that Theosophical religiosity is created heavily depending upon this occultist way of thinking. As Robert Ellwood specifies, the dogmatic diversities of different religions "are also expressions of any religion's need to explore all the potential within its central vision. Theosophy speaks of each religion as stemming from the presentation of the Ancient Wisdom by a master of the wisdom for a particular time and place" (Ellwood 2022: 12). It is not altogether unnatural for Judge to seek a new circuit to reach his Masters' wisdom among Japanese Esoteric Buddhists. This was another case that ignorance created

overestimation. As I will explain later, Judge could not have predicted that the Japanese delegation would use a strategy emphasizing the importance of their own religious orders to demonstrate that Japanese Buddhism has a sophisticated ethical philosophy comparable to Christianity until they made a presentation at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. What they presented was completely different from what Judge (and, eventually, the conference audience) expected.

No trace is left to reveal Japanese Buddhists' interest in this mythology of the Ancient Wisdom and Trans-Himalayan White Brotherhood. As I discussed before, even in the days when their correspondence with Theosophists was most animated, the Theosophists' dependence on the Masters and the necessity of apprenticeship under their guidance were rarely referred to in Japanese Buddhism's official publications. They were never discussed as a serious issue, reported plainly as hearsay evidence even in the case where the Masters were mentioned briefly. Without doubt, the emphasis on mystical Adepts went against their ultimate goal of the modernization of Japanese Buddhism and this made them reluctant to consider it seriously. Considering that all those reformers of Japanese Buddhism belonged to the first generation who were bestowed great benefits by the newly introduced Western-style education, the idea of Ancient Wisdom sustained jealously by a secret order of the Adepts were likely looked ridiculous, at least superstitious, for their eyes. This explains properly the reason Japanese Buddhists disbanded themselves from any of Theosophical movements as soon as the communication with Western academia was established, and since then they have done their best to conceal the past intimacy with Theosophists. This fact has not been revealed in full scale until my colleagues started a comprehensive study of it a decade before. However, the antipathy they showed against Theosophist favor of esoteric revelation simultaneously indicates that they were still in a state not "progressed" enough to appreciate a Westerner's struggle in seek of divine wisdom. Allegedly, few Japanese Buddhist reformers could understand the Western occultists' passion for discovering one's hidden and genuine Self, the destination that can be attained personally only by refining one's own spirituality, regardless of any assistance from an established church.

Pfouder's Entry and the Divorce He Caused

Captain Charles Pfouder was one of the earliest Westerners who stayed long in Japan to introduce (somewhat inaccurately) Japanese culture to the Western

world. He came to Japan in the 1860s (probably immediately after the Meiji Restoration) as an *HMCs* midshipman and later worked for several English papers in Japan by contributing chiefly folkloric or religious issues he observed in this country (Cox 2013: 222–3). Pfoundes was one of the few foreigners who could see Japanese Buddhism without the distorted lens, because, having visited Japan during the Meiji Restoration, he had a good understanding of the reality of Japanese Buddhism, including the hardships they suffered from the anti-Buddhist policy the new government adopted. In that sense, he was highly trusted by Japanese Buddhists, and the information he delivered was believed to be reliable.

Among the news media Pfoundes wrote for, *Japan Mail* is particularly important in terms that the major articles for his *Fuso Mimi Bukuro* (1878), a collection of his folkloric and religious surveys of early Meiji Japan, were first published in this English paper. For a time, this booklet was virtually the only source of information about Shinto, an indigenous religion unknown to the Western world. Blavatsky referred to it when writing *The Secret Doctrine*, and the Blavatsky Lodge's journal *Lucifer* also reprinted his articles on Japanese oral histories (Bocking et al. 2014: 8). Pfoundes's relationship with the Theosophical Society was delicate and controversial. When he was delegated by the Buddhist Propagation Society in Japan and became its London branch chief (probably alone) in 1889, his relationship with the Theosophical Society was changing. Certainly, Pfoundes was on good terms with the Society prior to this, as certified by the fact that his letters were published in *Lucifer*. He may have had a (short-term) friendship with Blavatsky herself, and the Theosophical Society may have respected him as an expert on Japanese Buddhism.

One of the reasons for Pfoundes's departure from Theosophy was, no doubt, his approach to Spiritualism, and from 1889 onward his main publication shifted to *The Two Worlds*, a journal published by the Spiritualist society organized by Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899). This may have been related to the fact that he began to earn a living by lecturing on Spiritualism. Bocking and others have pointed out that Pfoundes's emphasis on Buddhism changed as he became more sympathetic to Spiritualism (Bocking et al. 2014: 8). Perhaps this means that Pfoundes himself was seeking to adopt a new lens through which Buddhism could be viewed favorably in the eyes of his fellow countrymen, and here we must remind ourselves of the intense antagonism between Theosophy and Spiritualism. Julian Strube observes that the Theosophical Society's divergence from Spiritualism became increasingly apparent as its focus on Eastern religions intensified, leading to mutual incompatibility (Strube 2021: 306). Pfoundes's endeavors were to “demystify” or “disenchant” the enigmatic Theosophical

Buddhism, drawing from his authentic encounters with Mahayana Buddhism in Japan. However, the remaining materials do not provide conclusive evidence that he actively sought to leverage Buddhism's religiosity for the promotion of Spiritualism, aside from correcting a factual inaccuracy in understanding Buddhism attributed to the Theosophical Society. Nevertheless, this change in Pfoundes's attitude did not fail to affect his sponsors, that is, Buddhist reformers in Japan.

Buddhist Affairs Overseas No. 10 (1890a) includes a letter in which Pfoundes expressed his beliefs upon his appointment as the London branch chief of the Buddhist Propagation Society, in which he clearly expressed his distrust and criticism of Theosophical interpretations of Buddhism. To summarize his statement, he always intends to lecture in England to preach the genuine doctrine of Buddhism, while distancing himself as much as possible from Theosophy, which is currently the subject of controversy in the West and Asia. Blavatsky claims to teach Buddhism, and Olcott claims to be a Buddhist. However, Pfoundes says, it is difficult to understand how, while both are equally Theosophists, one can teach Buddhism and the other can be a Buddhist at the same time (*Buddhist Affairs Overseas* 1890a, 31–5).

The journal *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* also published an article about Takakusu Junjirō's visit to Pfoundes in the following issue. In this article, Pfoundes's claim that Theosophy contained no Buddhist elements, along with his view that the "Buddhism" Blavatsky claimed to have discovered was actually her own modification of Swedenborg's philosophy, was introduced (Sato 2008, 308–9). Considering that Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 (1866–1945) was, as I point out later, the person who was dispatched to England in order to gain legitimate admission into Western academia in the field of Buddhist studies and, in a broader sense, religious studies, it is obvious that the Japanese Buddhist reformers were at this point taking a turn toward separating themselves from Theosophy. It is difficult to locate all that was happening in the correct chronology without the discovery of new material, but it seems likely that Pfoundes turned totally to Spiritualism because his relationship with the Theosophical Society or the Blavatsky Lodge deteriorated. Perhaps Pfoundes had tried unsuccessfully to establish himself as an expert on Buddhism among Theosophist circles in London. In the process of this shift, he was appointed London branch chief of the Buddhist Propagation Society, and there he was visited by Takakusu, who had come to England to study.

Takakusu became a student of Max Müller at Oxford University and began to study Buddhism in a Western academic approach, which further

distinguished Japanese Buddhism from Theosophy. Japanese Buddhism was now able to interact with Western academia of Buddhism research through Takakusu, but this meant that the “dubious” circuit of Theosophy on which it had previously relied was obsolete. Takakusu returned to Japan in 1897, having earned degrees from a number of European universities, including Oxford, to chair a Sanskrit course at Tokyo Imperial University. Later, Takakusu’s students established the most powerful academic faction in Buddhist studies, restoring Japanese Buddhism to its former intellectual dominance before modernization began in the Meiji Era. No wonder, Japanese Buddhism tried to forget the previous interactions with Theosophists, and actually did forget them.

The following concerns should be noted here as potential future subjects, but I do not have the space to go into detail at this time. Takakusu’s studies in Oxford were motivated not solely by personal desire, but were conducted under the unofficial patronage of the Nishihonganji sect. Due to his intimate association with the Buddhist reformers of this Order, his statements and acts were documented in *Buddhist Affairs Overseas*. As Takakusu studied Buddhism under Müller’s tutelage, to comprehend Müller’s “scientific” approach to religion, he was likely to know his mentor’s spiritual journey leading to the establishment of contemporary religious studies. Recent research indicates that the influence of Theosophy in the formation of the contemporary religious studies was significant (Mühlematter and Zander 2021: 1–13). The religious studies were founded significantly influenced by the concepts of syncretic religion, a prevailing global trend at the time, with Theosophy, Unitarianism, and Hindu revival movements as integral components of this tendency. Jason Josephson-Storm asserts that Theosophy serves as the historical doppelgänger to what Müller refers to as *Religionswissenschaft* (Josephson-Storm 2017: 115–16). It is probable that Takakusu was aware of his mentor Müller’s correspondence with Olcott over the Upanishads and that this exchange significantly influenced him. If so, his comprehension of Theosophy must have been more intricate than the surface perception of an enigmatic organization disseminating falsehoods. Takakusu left numerous manuscripts, the majority of which are assembled in his *Complete Works*; but, as Orion Krautau observes, the editing and compilation procedure omitted elements that might clarify his accomplishments within the historical context. Takakusu’s comprehension of Theosophy necessitates a fundamental reevaluation via the prism of Japanese literature he bequeathed (Krautau 2020: 160).

The Parliament of the World's Religions and a Forgotten Legacy

Was modern Japanese Buddhism able to discard its distorted lens by breaking away from Theosophy? Certainly, in so doing, it barely escaped from being involved in the trend of fanatic interpretation of Buddhism in which occultist cosmology and historicism were dominant. In spite of it, a certain period was necessary for Japanese Buddhism to accurately present the vehicle of Mahayana to Westerners, the idea it had been proud of for so many years as a signifier of differentiating them from Theravada. The Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 was the nearest touchstone they were tested with this problem. It should come as no surprise that the speakers who were dispatched to Chicago did not adequately reflect the Japanese Buddhist community existing during that period. As I have argued elsewhere, it is probable that certain Buddhist sects, such as Nichiren Buddhism, were purposefully left out of the discussion (Akai 2024: 47–8). On the other hand, there is no question that progressive reformers were chosen to represent the delegation from a variety of different sects, and there is also no doubt that they were highly cohesive in their views toward the objective of modernizing Buddhism.

In the introductory part of his *How Buddhism Came to America*, the study I referred to earlier, Tsunemitsu Kōnen is entirely correct when locating Matsuyama's correspondence with Judge at the beginning of a series of events that eventually culminated in The Parliament of the World's Religions. Although the American Theosophists did not find the Master they had hoped for in Japanese Buddhist world, the reformers there mobilized all their sources and connections (whose number was extremely limited and all connected to Theosophy) to make their delegates ready to speak in the Parliament. Referring to the discussion I developed elsewhere is useful for my readers to understand the confused responses they showed to the invitation from the Parliament Council (Akai 2024: 47–8), as their bewilderment was too dispersed to summarize in a very simplistic manner. Here, I will focus on how the idea of religious syncretism fascinated the Japanese Buddhist reformers.

Although Japanese Buddhist reformers were skeptical of Theosophy's occultist interpretation of Buddhism from the beginning, Theosophy's strong tendency toward religious syncretism aroused keen interest among Buddhist reformers. In Theosophy, tolerance for other people's belief or religious customs was the natural reflection of the concept that all religions sprang from the same

single source. As noted in the preceding section, the propensity for syncretic religion or religious syncretism was a widely visible occurrence globally during this period, seen in both religious reformers and the formulation of intellectual theories. More important for our discussion, however, is that it had a specific meaning for the Japanese reformers in that it provided an innovative scheme in which all religions, whether long extinct or still alive, could be valued equally, and this implied the possibility that their own Buddhism could be compatible with overwhelming Christianity on the same terms. One source of evidence is a lecture given by Hirai Kinza 平井金三 (1859–1916) to the Chicago Parliament.

Hirai is remembered as one of the key figures who attempted to invite Olcott to Japan for the first time in 1889. Several members who went to Chicago were closely related to this earliest invitation of Olcott. Hirai was also known for his high eloquence among the speakers Japanese Buddhism delegated to make an apology for their true religious values. The rhetorical strategy he adopted in the speech is to emphasize the equivalence of ethical or spiritual values found among diverse religions, in particular, common features between Buddhism and Christianity, thereby appealing for a syncretic religion, in which the original figure of the root religion (the Wisdom Religion in Theosophical ideology) was restored by shaking off alien substances. It is reported that his stress on a rational belief system, the idea capable to be developed equivalently before the culturally diversified people, was gladly welcomed by the audience of the Parliament (Hirai 1894).

As emphasized above, preference for religious syncretism is definitely not Hirai's own invention but frequently observed in the modern history of Eastern countries when an indigenous culture was challenged by other dominant culture armed with overwhelming economic and military strength. Typical is Rammohun Roy's (1772–1833) theological interpretation of Hindu pantheon, in which, simply speaking, he understood multiple gods and goddesses of India as the diverse manifestation of one and only God, and thus he attempted to fill the gap between Western monotheism and Eastern polytheism. His exegesis is similar to Hirai's syncretic religion in terms of erecting their own culture/religion beside the counterpart of those invading them by reading their own culture/religion in the context of the opponent, thereby integrating them into a universal religion, a belief system the people in every culture can understand with their own reason. Strube's study clarifies that a distinct trend arose in America and India from the exchanges between Unitarians and the Brahmo Samaj, with Max Müller's idea of comparative religion serving as an extension of this movement (Strube 2021: 294). Less evidence is available to us to determine

how much Hirai and his colleagues knew about Brahmo Samaj, but it is not altogether wrong to locate Hirai's syncretic religion at the end of the genealogy of Hindu reform movements as a sample of a Buddhist mutation. Fascination with religious syncretism was so great that Hirai left later Buddhism to embrace Unitarianism, although briefly, whose doctrine of syncretizing diverse schools of Christianity fascinated him.

It is almost impossible for us to understand definitely how profoundly this idea of the syncretic religion charmed the people living in the world more than a century before, who regarded it as the key answer to resolve any of the social inequality the cultural differences produced. Recent study in Japan is revealing that this Theosophically inspired inclination to syncretic religion impacted not only on the limited circle of Buddhist reformers but its influence reached far wider. Andō Reiji lately discovered a long-forgotten booklet *The Gospel of Two Sages*, a Buddhist reformer Fuji Musen published in 1905. This was written for uncovering the similarity between Two Sages, the founders of Christianity and Buddhism, to consider the possibility of eventual integration of the two great religions. Undeniable is that the source of his idea was works created around somewhere in the Theosophist stream. He wrote plainly that the references he depended upon were Paul Carus's *Gospel of Buddha* (to which Suzuki T. Daisetsu wrote the introduction), and Arthur Lillie's *Buddhism in Christendom, or Jesus the Essene* (1887) and *Buddha and Buddhism* (1900). I have already pointed out that Lillie's works aroused a heated controversy with Blavatsky and her Masters. Although Lillie's Spiritualist interpretation of Buddhism helped to highlight the religion's universality in the case of Fuji Musen, Koot Hoomi, who was more closely aligned with Buddhism in South Asia, felt that Lillie's argument was a forced simplification that omitted crucial aspects of Buddhist doctrine.

As far as depending upon Lillie's interpretation, Fuji Musen's arguments were unable to go without "inaccuracy and misunderstandings." He died young in 1908 and his small book in search of religious syncretism would be entirely forgotten if it were not appreciated by his friend (and probably lover) Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953) aka Shaku Chōkū 釈超空, one of the founders of Japanese folklore studies as well as an innovative scholar of Japanese classic literature. Later Orikuchi became the giant of modern study of Japanese Shintoism. Ando and his colleagues have revealed that Fuji's ideas, especially his wild dream of an integrated single religion, inspired Orikuchi profounder than past critics of him assumed, and, although he, by no means, accepted his friend's idea literally, it provided the essence of his study of Japanese folklore, the research field his own analysis of the correspondences with Shinto spirituality

enabled to establish. This can be evidenced by the fact that Fuji's idea of the integrated religion permeated into Orikuchi's literary masterpiece *The Book of the Dead* (first published in 1939), whose title was obviously taken from *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Ando 2016: 398–419).

There is a reason why we should focus on Orikuchi's novels rather than his religious studies here. Shintoism has neither doctrines systematically established nor scriptures. In Japan, even before modernization began, academic research has been carried out to confirm Shintoist spirituality within the poetry tradition that has continued since ancient times. Many of Orikuchi's literary works must be placed in this lineage, and *The Book of the Dead* is the result of his folkloric research expressed in literary form. However, it is not simply a revival of an older interpretation of Shintoism. Here we can confirm the expectations for a religious syncretism that Orikuchi (through Fuji) shared with his contemporaries such as Hirai Kinza.

I have discussed elsewhere that the speeches of the representatives of Japanese Buddhism at the Parliament of the World's Religions attracted a certain amount of attention, but were far less popular than those of Vivekananda and Dharmapala, who spoke on behalf of Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism, respectively (Akai 2024: 49–55). One reason for this is that Vivekananda and Dharmapala were educated in English in colonial India and were therefore far more skilled in oratory. However, the greatest reason is that while the representatives of Japanese Buddhism tried to explain “what Japanese Buddhism is,” Vivekananda appealed to the audience's interest in personal salvation and “enlightenment.” The audience had no interest in the profound theological speculations on the Bodhisattva concept that the representatives of Japanese Buddhism spoke about (though they would have been very interested if they had been explained how to become a Bodhisattva instead).

However, we should understand that the representatives of Japanese Buddhism could not have adopted any other strategy. Above all else, they had to make it crystal clear that Japanese Buddhism as a religion had established a systematic doctrine comparable to Christianity upon which a solid moral code was formed to meet ethical demands in a modernized society. This was mainly due to political, not religious, reasons for the revision of the trade treaty, but I will refrain from going into detail here as I have already discussed it elsewhere (Akai 2024: 52–3). It is more important to confirm the following point here: For the Japanese Buddhists moving toward abolishing the Theosophical interpretation of Buddhism, it was necessary to correct the distortion of the lens and present to Western audiences a complete picture that had at its core a highly rational religiosity free from magical properties.

The error they made was that they believed that if they were able to get rid of their distorted lens, people would value them for who they are. This reveals that, as was indicated before, they finally failed to comprehend the Theosophists' passion to purify their spirituality through physical practices and thereby reach a higher Self, nor did they recognize that the Theosophists were seeking a Master for this purpose. Furthermore, their greatest mistake was in failing to understand that the occultists' pursuit of self-liberation through physical practices was, by no means, an isolated case, but merely an extreme manifestation of the religious desires of the general public, and that appealing to this point would therefore be the most cost-effective means of cultivating fresh interest. The distrust and disgust a modernized man tends to have for ecclesiastical structure is something they ultimately failed to realize, as was noted in the opening of this study. Rather than focusing on individuals, Japanese Buddhism places an emphasis on the *sangha*, religious orders that govern the larger community. This is because the tenet of Japanese Buddhism claims that compassion is essential for the salvation of people as well as the redemption of society. They called this the Greater Vehicle, or Mahayana, and it was supposed to be the basis for their supremacy over the Lessor Vehicle. If they sought to dissociate from the Theosophical interpretation of Buddhism, they would have been compelled to elucidate this theory to their audiences and enhance their comprehension, something they ultimately failed to do. Snodgrass was absolutely accurate when she pointed out that this was due to "the modern Western assumption that religion belonged to the private sphere, divorced from the realms of politics and economics" (Snodgrass 2003: 12). Their explanations did not include any specific methods for gaining personal salvation, and as a result, they failed to capture the curiosity of the people who were listening to them.

They did not come to the realization that this strategy was flawed until almost half a century had passed. When Suzuki T. Daisetsu presented the Zen practices to modern Westerners in a form that was easy to understand, Japanese Buddhism had just recently begun to gain attention on a global scale. However, by this point, they had forgotten that they had once communicated with the West through a distorted lens, even if it was only for a short period, and that even after they had abandoned that lens, their genuine worth had not been recognized. At the same time, the memory that the "Esoteric Buddhism" Theosophy had long sought as the nucleus of their teaching and endeavored to uncover within Japanese Buddhism was, in fact, present in the lineage of Zen Buddhism, as explained in Edkin's study, to which Blavatsky referred while writing *The Secret Doctrine*, was lost, as was the accurate analysis of sixteenth-century Jesuits who considered Zen to be the esoteric cult of Japanese Buddhism.

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Delineating the “Esoteric”: The Development of the “Identity of the Purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings” (*enmitsu itchi*) in Medieval Tendai Buddhism

Takahiko Kameyama

Introduction

Hermeneutics of “Esotericism” in Japan

Broadly speaking, the discussions in this volume can be regarded as focusing on the unique contexts of diverse histories and societies that have produced and maintained the concept “esotericism,” examining its cultural depth based on individual methods of Religious Studies, Linguistics, Sociology, and History. The argument developed in this chapter is essentially the same. It focuses on medieval Japanese Buddhist thought and culture, and examines the unique hermeneutics of “esotericism” organized by certain monks from the perspective of Buddhist Studies.

It is assumed that this hermeneutics of “esotericism” has been mainly developed in the context of “Esoteric Buddhism” (Jp. *mikkyō* 密教) in Japan. As will be explained later, however, the hermeneutics developed by incorporating the scripture such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the tradition such as Tendai 天台 which are basically not classified as Esoteric Buddhism in terms of its content. The central purpose of this chapter is to clarify the historical development and structure of this hermeneutics.

Point of the Discussion: The “Identity of the Purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings”

There is no doubt that the *Saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra* (Ch. *Fahua jing* 法華經, Jp. *Hoke kyō* 法華經, hereafter *Lotus Sutra*) has had a comprehensive and profound

influence upon Buddhist cultures and teachings all over the East Asian region.¹ This scripture was translated into Chinese three times from around the third to seventh centuries by monks such as Dharmarakṣa (?–316), Kumārajīva (344–413 or 350–409), Jñānagupta (523–605), and Dharmagupta (?–619) (Kanno 2001: 84–6). Each Chinese translation has been continuously and enthusiastically worshipped and studied in East Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Japan. For example, there remain no comprehensive commentaries on the *Lotus Sutra* other than the *Fahua lun* 法華論 (*Treatise on the Lotus Sutra*) attributed to Vasubandhu in India. On the other hand, a vast number of Buddhist monks (e.g., Fayun 法雲, Zhiyi 智顗, or Jizang 吉藏 in China; Wonhyo 元曉 in Korea; Saichō 最澄, Kūkai 空海, or Nichiren 日蓮 in Japan) attempted to produce multiple interpretations of the *Sutra* such as the *Fahua wenju* 法華文句 (T. 1718: 34), *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義 (T. 1716: 33), or *Hokekyō kaidai* 法華經開題 (T. 2190: 56) in East Asia.

Based on the descriptions in the *Lotus Sutra*, monks also developed unique doctrinal discourses such as the 3,000 realms in a single thought-moment (Ch. *yingnian sanqian*, Jp. *ichinen sanzen* 一念三千), original enlightenment (*hongaku* 本覺), and identity of the purport of what has been termed Perfect and Esoteric teachings (*enmitsu itchi* 円密一致),² the main subject of this chapter. In this context, the term “Perfect teaching” (Ch. *Yuanjiao* 圓教, Jp. *engyō* 円教) signifies the orthodox Tendai Buddhist teaching based on the *Lotus Sutra*. The identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings is basically the doctrinal discourse which expounds the reciprocal relationship between such Perfect teaching and the “Esoteric Buddhism” (Ch. *mijiao*, Jp. *mikkyō* 密教), the Buddhist tradition whose central element is the secret oral transmission of teachings. As I will mention below, the discourse was gradually developed since the early Heian 平安 period (around the ninth century) within the Tendai Buddhist tradition (*tendai shū* 天台宗), Japanese branch of the Chinese Tiantai 天台.

This chapter will discuss the development of the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings after the early Heian period, specifically after the establishment of the full-fledged Tendai Esoteric Buddhism (*taimitsu* 台密) by Annen 安然 (841–?). In more detail, the chapter will investigate the text called *Nyū shingonmon jū nyojitsuken kōen hokke ryakugi* 入真言門住如実見講演法華略儀 (*Abbreviated Procedures of Entering the Gate of Shingon, Abiding in the View That Accords with Reality, and Giving a Lecture on the Lotus Sutra*, hereafter *Kōen hokke gi*) which might be written sometime from the tenth to early twelfth centuries by a Tendai Buddhist monk who belonged to the lineage of Enchin 円珍 (814–891). It will demonstrate that this text expanded the boundary of

the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings in the unique way which Annen might not have employed.

Generally speaking, the *Kōen hokke gi* is a commentary on the following three sutras from the perspective of both the Esoteric Buddhism and every Buddhist teaching other than the Esoteric generally called Exoteric Buddhism (*kengyō* 顯教): *Lotus Sutra*, *Wuliangyi jing* 無量義經 (*Sutra of Innumerable Meanings*), and *Guan puxianpusa xingfa jing* 觀普賢菩薩行法經 (*Sutra of Contemplating the Practices of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*, hereafter *Guan puxian jing* 觀普賢經), that is, the *Sutra* and its opening sutra (*kaikyō* 開經) and closing sutra (*kekkyō* 結經) (Misaki 1978: 47a; Mizukami 2008: 226–7). However, it does not seem to be the principal purpose of the *Kōen hokke gi* to rigorously annotate these scriptures in accordance with a specific exegetical tradition. For example, we are able to find the following statement in the text: “We have to know that every sentence in the main section of the *Lotus Sutra* is the meaning and aspects of the Esoteric five wisdoms and lotus flower of eight petals without exception” (NDZ. 466: 80, 56a). Mizukami Fumiyoshi 水上文義, a scholar of the Esoteric Buddhism in Japan, points out that the clarification of the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings is the principal purpose of the *Kōen hokke gi*.³

It is also noteworthy that the Esoteric symbolic objects such as the lotus flower of eight petals (*hachiyō renga* 八葉蓮華), moon disk (*gachirin* 月輪), and syllable *a* (*aji* 阿字) play a significant role in accomplishing the aforementioned purpose in the *Kōen hokke gi*. Specifically, these objects which are the principal components of the Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques are directly inserted into multiple narratives of the aforementioned *Lotus Sutra*, *Wuliangyi jing*, and *Guan puxian jing*, and function as a kind of mediation through which their profound secret interpretations (*jinpishaku* 深秘釈) are extracted.

Though there are manifold references to the Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques in Annen’s writings on the one hand, his discussions concerning the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings seem to be still limited within the realm of doctrine in the Tendai Buddhist tradition on the other.⁴ In the *Kōen hokke gi* written after Annen, however, the same discussions evidently go beyond the realm of doctrine and reach to that of Esoteric Buddhist practices or rituals. According to Lucia Dolce’s investigation, the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings is “esoterically ritualized” in this text.⁵

It is frequently stated that Annen completed the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings (Ōkubo 2014: 84–5).⁶ This chapter carefully investigates the *Kōen hokke gi* and attempts to reveal the fact that we can find the further developments and expansions of this doctrinal discourse after Annen. This chapter

consists of five sections: the first and fifth sections are respectively the introduction and conclusion. In the second section, I summarize the developmental history and ideological source of the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings in the Tendai Buddhist tradition mainly based on the study of a Japanese Buddhist scholar Ōkubo Ryōshun 大久保良峻. In the third section, I briefly discuss the characteristics of an anonymous author of the *Kōen hokke gi* and the background of the text and examine the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings revealed in this text in the fourth section. In conclusion, I will delineate the theoretical genealogy of the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings from a new perspective through a series of discussions.

Significance of This Chapter

It is highly possible that this case study of the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings invites a much broader reconsideration of the concept “esotericism” as well as the category “esoteric” in Japan: how the “esotericism” and “esoteric” (*himitsu* 秘密) have been defined and redefined within alternative historical and cultural contexts. It seems that the symbolic and ritual integration seen in the text *Kōen hokke gi* reflects the discursive structure of multiple values unique to premodern East Asian and Japanese Buddhist discourses. This historical and cultural phenomenon will also expand our perspective mainly through differentiating and relativizing the modern and contemporary appropriations of “esotericism” within East Asia.

The chapters in this volume, although focusing on later historical periods, similarly explore how esoteric vocabularies, and the concept “esotericism,” have functioned within changing religious, social, and political frameworks. The discussion in this chapter, I believe, will cultivate new fertile ground and perspectives for the development of these discussions.

The History and Source of the Identity of the Purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings

It is considered one of the significant differences between the Japanese Tendai and Chinese Tiantai Buddhism that the former includes the manifold Esoteric Buddhist discourses ranging from the exegesis of *abhiṣeka* (Ch. *guanding*, Jp. *kanjō* 灌頂) to doctrinal idea “attaining Buddhahood within this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏). In China and Korea, there historically remain few

traces of Tiantai monks who comprehensively studied, practiced, or preached the Esoteric Buddhism other than Yixing 一行 (683–727) who translated the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* (Ch. *dari jing* 大日經, Jp. *dainichi kyō* 大日經) into Chinese and wrote its commentary called the *Dari jing shu* 大日經疏 or *Dari jing yishi* 大日經義釋 (revision of the *Dari jing shu*) with an Indian monk Śubhakarasiṃha (637–735) in the Tang dynasty. On the other hand, as frequently pointed out in previous works, Japanese monks such as Saichō 最澄 (766/767–822), Ennin 円仁 (794–864), Enchin, and Annen enthusiastically learned the Esoteric Buddhist doctrines and practices both in China and Japan, mixed them with the traditional Tiantai teaching, and constructed the “Tendai” complex system unique to Japan.

In addition, the idea called the identity of the purport of the Perfect and Esoteric teachings (*enmitsu icchi*) has been necessarily referred to in a series of discussions on the characteristics of the Tendai Buddhist system. In this context, as I said above, the Perfect teaching (*engyō*) solely signifies the teaching of the Tiantai/Tendai tradition whose principal scripture is the *Lotus Sutra*. The identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings is the Tendai ideological discourse which reveals the fundamental equality and integrity between the doctrines and practices of the Perfect teaching and those of Esoteric Buddhism. With respect to the genealogy and developmental history of this discourse, Buddhist scholars such as Shimizutani Kyōjun 清水谷恭順, Asai Endō 浅井円道, Misaki Ryōshū 三崎良周, and Ōkubo Ryōshun have previously advanced multiple discussions (Shimizutani 1972; Asai 1973; Misaki 1994). Based on them, Ōkubo describes the outline of the history and source as follows.

Where did the concept (*enmitsu icchi*) come from? In terms of doctrine, the commentary of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* by Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing, the *Darijing yishi* 大日經義釋, played a major role. In terms of Japanese Tendai Esoteric Buddhism (Taimitsu) history, Saichō 最澄 (766/767–822) was the source of the teaching. Ennin 円仁 (794–864) and Enchin 円珍 (814–891) took *enmitsu icchi* as the premise for many of their remarks. However, Annen 安然 (841–?) is particularly noteworthy as the thinker who completed the full exposition of the teaching. In the process of introducing Tendai doctrines into Esoteric Teachings, he systematized the whole of Tendai thought. The result was that the harmony and identity of the purport of the Perfect and Esoteric teachings became a fundamental tenet of the classification of teachings. (Ōkubo 2014: 84–5)

First, Ōkubo points out from the doctrinal perspective that the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings has its own roots in the *Dari jing*

yishi written by Yixing and Śubhakarasiṃha. Though there is no clear mention in Ōkubo's paper, he seems to suppose the following two descriptions in the *Dari jing yishi* as the ideological source of the discourse.⁷ According to the text, "Within this secret treasury, both the womb of the great compassion (Ch. *dabei taizang* 大悲胎藏, Jp. *daihi taizō* 大悲胎藏) and the lotus flower of the wondrous dharma (Ch. *miaofa Lianhua* 妙法蓮華, Jp. *myōhō renga* 妙法蓮華) are considered to be the most profound and auspicious" (DNZ 438: 23, 454c).⁸ It is also stated that "this body of the fundamental ground (Ch. *bende zhi shen* 本地之身, Jp. *honji no shin* 本地之身) of Mahāvairocana Buddha is equated with the most profound and secret state (Ch. *zuishen mimi chu* 最深秘密處, Jp. *saijin himitsu sho* 最深秘密處) of the lotus flower of the wondrous dharma" (DNZ 438: 23, 355c).⁹ Needless to say, the "womb of the great compassion" connotes the womb mandala (Ch. *taizang mantuluo* 胎藏曼荼羅, Jp. *taizō mandara* 胎藏曼荼羅) and principal teachings preached in the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*.

Second, Ōkubo explains that Ennin and Enchin who practically initiated and successively sophisticated the Tendai Esoteric Buddhism viewed the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings as the "premise for many of their remarks." In other words, they regarded it as the significant presupposition on which Japanese Tendai Buddhist monks constructed their Esoteric Buddhism. In addition, Ōkubo also describes that Annen "completed the full exposition of the teaching." With respect to this point, it is stated in the quotation that the "harmony and identity of the purport of the Perfect and Esoteric teachings" was the "fundamental tenet" when Annen established the "classification of teachings" (Ch. *jiaopan* 教判, Jp. *kyōhan* 教判) and "systematized the whole of Tendai thought."

Historical Background of the *Kōen hokke gi*

Antecedent Discussions on the Author of the *Kōen hokke gi*

In the beginning of the *Kōen hokke gi*, Enchin, an eminent Tendai monk during the early Heian period, is evidently referred to as the "author" of this text. According to the postscript in the second fascicle of the text, the *Kōen hokke gi* was the accurate record of his lecture that was given in the lecture hall (*kōdō* 講堂) of the Enryakuji 延暦寺 temple on June 867 CE, one year before he became the fifth abbot of this temple (NDZ 466: 80, 73a).¹⁰ As Mizukami Fumiyoshi points out, the overall style and some descriptions of the *Kōen hokke*

gi seem to accord with those of records of lectures by eminent Buddhist monks (Mizukami 2008: 229). For example, the first fascicle of the text is opened with the following line: “The practitioner who ascends to the high seat for a lecturer (*kōza* 高座) first has to enter the lotus *samādhi* (*hokke zanmai* 法華三昧) and clearly visualize the meaning of the lotus flower of a heart (*shinren* 心蓮)” (NDZ 466: 80, 46a).

With respect to the authorship of the *Kōen hokke gi*, Shōshin 証真 (dates unknown), an influential Tendai scholar-monk during the early Kamakura 鎌倉 period, describes the following assumption in the *Tendai shingon nishū dōi shō* 天台真言二宗同異章 (*Chapter on Homogeneity and Heterogeneity Between Tendai and Shingon Schools*, hereafter *Nishū dōi shō*).

The *Kōen hokke gi* by the great master of wisdom and enlightenment (*chishō daishi* 智証大師) interprets the *Lotus Sutra* from the perspective of the gate of Shingon (*shingon mon* 真言門) and states as follows; “[these interpretations are revealed] for the purpose of saving those who misunderstand the teaching, strongly argue that the statements in the *Lotus Sutra* are absolutely separated from the secret school (*hishū* 秘宗), and are destined to go to the three evil realms (*san akudō* 三惡道) due to attacking the Buddhist Dharma.” (T. 2372: 74, 418a)

Needless to say, the “great master of wisdom and enlightenment” (*chishō daishi*) in the quotation is the posthumous title of Enchin. In the *Nishū dōi shō*, the *Kōen hokke gi* is evidently attributed to Enchin. Buddhist scholars such as Shimaji Daitō 島地大等 and Hazama Jikō 裕慈弘 may be based on the *Kōen hokke gi* and such Shōshin’s view and consider Enchin to be the author of the text (Shimaji [1929] 1986: 368b; Hazama 1927: 84–6).

On the other hand, however, not a few people have questioned whether Enchin was actually regarded as the author of the *Kōen hokke gi* since the medieval period. According to Tajima Tokuon 田島德音, for example, a Tendai monk Seishun 政春 (?–1180) criticized this issue as follows in the *Shisetu shū* 師説集 (*Collection of Verbal Teachings from Masters*): “It is a completely wrong understanding (*higagoto* 僻事) to regard Enchin as an author of the *Kōen hokke gi*” (BKD 3: 399c). Mizukami reveals the fact that the *Kōen hokke gi* is included in the “section of apocryphal texts” (*giroku bu* 偽録部) in the *Chitsugai shinjō chishōdaishi shoroku* 帙外新定智証大師書録 (*Newly Determined Catalogue of Texts Written by the Great Master of Wisdom and Enlightenment Outside Folding Cases*) compiled by Sontsū 尊通 (1427–1516), a monk during the Muromachi 室町 period (Mizukami 2008: 228).

The question as to the authorship of the *Kōen hokke gi* seems to be mainly derived from the following two problems: (1) lack of reliable evidence to demonstrate that Enchin had the lecture which would be the source of the *Kōen hokke gi* in the Enryakuji temple in 867 CE; (2) a lot of descriptive and theoretical contradictions between the *Kōen hokke gi* and genuine Enchin's texts. With respect to the first problem, Mizukami points out that there are no references to Enchin's lecture in the Enryakuji temple in his biographies such as the *Chishō daishi nenpu* 智証大師年譜 (*Chronicle of the Great Master of Wisdom and Enlightenment*) (Mizukami 2008: 228).¹¹ In the *Nishū dōi shō*, however, Shōshin does not refer to any evidence to demonstrate his assertion.

In addition, scholars such as Mizukami and Misaki Ryōshū carefully compare some phrases and sentences in the *Kōen hokke gi* with those in genuine Enchin's texts and point out both the descriptive and theoretical contradictions between the *Kōen hokke gi* and *Sasa gimon* 些々疑文 (*Trivial Questions*), *Kan fugenbosatsu gyōbō kyō mongu ki* 觀普賢菩薩行法經文句記 (*Record of Phrases in the Guan puxianpusa xingfa jing*), or *Daibirushana kyō shiki* 大毘盧遮那經指歸 (*Gist of the Mahāvairocana sūtra*) (Misaki 1978: 48a; Mizukami 2008: 229–49). According to the aforementioned scholars, the contradictions are able to be discerned generally concerning following four points: (1) view of the reciprocal relationship between Mahāvairocana Buddha, Śākyamuni Buddha, and Amida Buddha; (2) way of dividing and interpreting phrases and sentences in the *Guan puxian jing*; (3) discussion on the syllable *om* in the *Shouhu guojiezhū tuoluoni jing* 守護國界主陀羅尼經; and (4) quotations from the *Dari jing yishi* and *Dari jing shu*. Mizukami is based on these discussions and assumes that the *Kōen hokke gi* was written by a monk other than Enchin after his death in 891 CE and before the *Nishū dōi shō* and *Shisetu shū* written during the middle of the twelfth century (Mizukami 2008: 228–9).

The Esoteric Buddhist Visualization Techniques and the *Kōen hokke gi*

From another perspective, it is also reasonable to presume that the *Kōen hokke gi* was written by a different Tendai monk sometime between the tenth and early twelfth centuries. With respect to this issue, we seem to be able to further suggest the following two points of argument: (1) reference to the Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques for the purpose of attaining Buddhahood within this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*); (2) Esoteric interpretation of the term *myōhō rengo* or *miaofa lianhua*, Chinese translation of the Sanskrit *saddharma*

puṇḍarīka by Kumārajīva. Mainly based on the first point, the *Kōen hokke gi* is assumed to be written after Annen who significantly developed the theory of the Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques within the Tendai Buddhist tradition. The second point also enables us to suppose that the text had some kind of connection with the Shingon Buddhist tradition at the end of the Heian period.

As I described above, the *Kōen hokke gi* is basically the commentary on the *Lotus Sutra* and its “opening sutra” and “closing sutra,” that is, *Wuliangyi jing* and *Guan puxian jing*. In the *Kōen hokke gi*, these three sutras are carefully interpreted in accordance with the following procedure: “revealing the outline” (*myō taikō* 明大梗), “explaining the significance of the title” (*shaku daimei* 釈題名), and “judging and interpreting each sentence” (*nyūmon hanjaku* 入文判釈). These parts are also frequently divided into two standpoints such as the Exoteric Buddhism (*kengyō*) and Esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*).¹² In the part “judging and interpreting each sentence” of the *Guan puxian jing* in the second fascicle of the *Kōen hokke gi*, the author refers to a certain Esoteric Buddhist visualization and the doctrinal idea of attaining Buddhahood within this very body as follows:

This interpretation was solely introduced in order to undoubtedly lead the masters of Exoteric Buddhist commentaries (*kengyō soshi* 顯教疏師) to the view that these sutras possess the fundamental source (*hongen* 本源). If [a practitioner] aspires to ascend to the state of enlightenment (*kakuchi* 覺地) by maintaining his or her ignorant body (*bonshin* 凡身), he or she should visualize the meaning of the lotus flower of a heart (*shinren*) even during the time of one thought-moment (*ichinen*). (NDZ 466: 80, 72b)

The phrase “to ascend to the state of enlightenment with holding his or her ignorant body” in the quotation evidently means attaining Enlightenment within this very body of an ignorant person (*bonbu* 凡夫) frequently discussed in the Tendai Buddhism. In the *Sositsuji kara kyō ryakusho* 蘇悉地羯羅經略疏 (*Abbreviated Commentary on the Suxidi jieluo jing*) written by Ennin, it is also called attaining Buddhahood within the ignorant state (*bon'i no jōbutsu* 凡位成仏), and regarded as the paraphrase of to attain Buddhahood within this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*), that is, the eminent doctrinal concept developed in Japanese Esoteric Buddhist traditions.¹³

The “meaning of the lotus flower of a heart” is, as I mentioned above, described as the object of the lotus *samādhi* (*hokke zanmai*) in the first fascicle of the *Kōen hokke gi*. The lotus flower of a heart (*shinren*), however, is principally one of the main components of Esoteric visualization techniques such as the

visualization of the syllable *a* (*ajikan* 阿字觀) or that of the lotus flower of eight petals (*hachiyō renga kan* 八葉蓮華觀) in both the Shingon and Tendai Buddhist context. In other words, to “visualize the meaning of the lotus flower of a heart” in the quotation basically means practicing these visualizations. It is stated in the *Kōen hokke gi* that an Esoteric Buddhist practitioner is able to attain Buddhahood within this very body through these practices.

As pointed out in multiple previous works, Saichō, a patriarch of the Tendai Buddhist tradition, began the doctrinal discussions on the idea of attaining Buddhahood within this very body in this Buddhist tradition. On the other hand, it is frequently said that he did not fully develop a series of discourses on the specific practices such as Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques through which a Tendai practitioner was able to attain Enlightenment immediately. According to Fumihiko Sueki 末木文美士, the successors of Saichō attempted to resolve this problem and further develop the theory of attaining Buddhahood within this very body in the Tendai tradition (Sueki [1995] 2006: 278–81).

As Asai Endō carefully points out, however, Enchin does not expound the efficacy of Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques in terms of attaining Buddhahood within this very body in his texts other than the *Kōen hokke gi* (Asai 1973: 583–7, 594–9, 613–14). According to Sueki, Annen developed the discourses on them in the Tendai Esoteric Buddhist tradition after Enchin (Sueki [1995] 2006: 281, 331–7). Based on these investigations, it is assumed that the *Kōen hokke gi* that evidently refers to both the idea of attaining Buddhahood within this very body and Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques was written after Annen who lived from the middle of the ninth century to the early tenth century.

The *Kōen hokke gi* and the Shingon Buddhist Tradition

As for the Esoteric interpretation of the term *myōhō renga* (or *miaofa lianhua*), there are the following sentences in the part “explaining the significance of the title” of the *Lotus Sutra* in the first fascicle of the *Kōen hokke gi*:

In addition, if we attempt to explain the title of this sutra in accordance with the gate of Shingon, first, the word *myōhō* is the moon disc (*gachirin* 月輪) of the self-enlightenment (*jishō* 自證) of Mahāvairocana Buddha in the diamond realm (*kongō kai* 金剛界). Second, *renga* is the lotus flower of a heart of eight petals (*hachiyō shinren* 八葉心蓮) in the womb of great compassion (*daihi taizō*) ... We should know that though the two sections (*ryōbu* 兩部) are different from one another, their fundamental bodies (*tai* 体) are inseparable. Thus, it

is also noteworthy that *myōhō* is equated with *renge*, and vice versa. There is no discrimination between them. (NDZ 466: 80, 52b–53a)

In the quotation, *myōhō rene*, the Chinese title of the *Lotus Sutra*, is first divided into two parts *myōhō* 妙法 and *renge* 蓮華. They are respectively equated with the diamond realm of the *Vajraśekhara sūtra* (Ch. *Jingangding jing* 金剛頂經, Jp. *Kongōchō kyō* 金剛頂經) and the womb realm (*taizō kai* 胎藏界) of the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*, as well as their symbolic objects, a moon disc (*gachirin*), and lotus flower of eight petals (*hachiyō rene*). In addition, in the *Kōen hokke gi*, it is also clearly stated that the two parts *myōhō* and *renge* are definitely able to be unified into one because of the inseparability of the fundamental bodies of the diamond and womb realms.¹⁴

Generally speaking, as Mizukami examines, there are some references to the correspondence between the *Lotus Sutra* and the diamond and womb realms in the Tendai Esoteric Buddhist texts other than the *Kōen hokke gi*. For example, according to the *Shijūjō ketsu* 四十帖決 (*Collection of the Forty Notebooks*) and *Gyōrin shō* 行林抄 (*Compendium of the Forest of Practices*), the womb realm is equated with the first fourteen chapters in the *Lotus Sutra* that are called the “derivative gate” (*shakumon* 迹門), and the diamond realm with the second fourteen chapters called the “fundamental gate” (*honmon* 本門). Unlike the *Kōen hokke gi*, however, they do not refer to the correspondence between the title of the *Lotus Sutra* and the two realms. In addition, this discourse has not yet been discovered in any texts of the Tendai Esoteric Buddhism other than the *Kōen hokke gi*.¹⁵

On the other hand, according to Kagiwada Seiko 鍵和田聖子, Saisen 濟暹 (1025–1115), a Shingon Buddhist monk in the end of the Heian period, quotes in his *Taikon hiyō shō* 胎金秘要鈔 (*Compendium of the Secret Essence of the Womb and Diamond Realms*) following sentences in the *Kōen hokke gi*: “We should know that though the two sections (*ryōbu* 兩部) are different from one another, their fundamental bodies (*tai*) are inseparable. Thus, it is also noteworthy that *myōhō* is equated with *renge*, and vice versa. There is no discrimination between them” (Kagiwada 2013: 590a–591a). In addition, Kakuban 覺鑾 (1095–1144), a Shingon monk at the end of the Heian period, also describes the significance of the term *myōhō rene* as follows in the *Hoke kyō hishaku* 法華經秘釈 (*Secret Interpretation of the Lotus Sutra*):

In addition, *myōhō* [of the term *myōhō rene*] is considered to be the mind (*shin* 心), wisdom (*chi* 智), and diamond realm. On the other hand, *renge* is the body (*shin* 身) and principle (*ri* 理), and called the womb realm. (T. 2191: 56, 187a)

In this text, the term *myōhō rengo* is also first divided into two parts *myōhō* and *rengo*; and the former *myōhō* is equated with the diamond realm, mind of a sentient being, and Buddha's wisdom, while the latter *rengo* with the womb realm, body of a sentient being, and the principle of the dharma realm.

As frequently discussed in previous works, the manifold dichotomies between the womb and diamond realms, a body and mind, principle and wisdom, and the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* and *Vajrasekhara sūtra* were the main components of the Esoteric Buddhist exegesis developed in the medieval Shingon Buddhist tradition. In the *Hoke kyō hishaku*, Kakuban evidently follows these multiple dichotomies and attempts to sophisticate his interpretation of the title of the *Lotus Sutra*. In addition, according to the *Taikon hiyō shō* written by Saisen, some sentences in the *Kōen hokke gi* are considered to be one of the valuable sources of Kakuban's interpretation and the dichotomies in the medieval Shingon exegesis (Kagiwada 2013: 591b–592a). These facts also suggest the significant connection between the *Kōen hokke gi* and Shingon Buddhism during the Heian period.

According to Lucia Dolce, two “competing traditions,” that is, the branches of the Sanmon 山門 (lit. mountain gate) and Jimon 寺門 (lit. temple gate), were largely developed within the Tendai Esoteric Buddhism from around the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. They respectively regarded Ennin and Enchin, the third and fifth abbots of the Enryakuji temple, as the founders of the lineages, and organized a “set of distinctive rituals that legitimized their reciprocal existence.” As for the characteristics of these Sanmon and Jimon branches, Dolce points out that the lineage, ritual system, and related discourses inherited in the Jimon branch whose founder was Enchin were “too close to Tōji lineages” (Dolce 2011b: 744–5). Needless to say, “Tōji” signifies the Tōji 東寺 temple (formally called Kyōō gokokuji 教王護国寺) in Kyoto, one of the head temples of the Shingon Buddhist tradition.

An anonymous author of the *Kōen hokke gi* apparently attributed this text to Enchin in order to authorize it as the orthodox interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra* in the Tendai Esoteric Buddhism. This fact suggests that those who belonged to Enchin's lineages were deeply concerned with the production of the *Kōen hokke gi*. In addition, when interpreting the title of the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Kōen hokke gi* relies on the manifold theoretical dichotomies inherited continuously in the Shingon Buddhist tradition, and the texts written by influential Shingon monks at the end of the Heian period also refers to a similar interpretation. These facts demonstrate the significant connection between the *Kōen hokke gi* and the Shingon Buddhist tradition during the medieval period. It is highly possible that the *Kōen hokke gi* was written sometime from the tenth to early twelfth centuries

by a Tendai monk who belonged to the Jimon branch that regarded Enchin as the founder and maintained the strong connection with the Shingon Buddhist tradition. In other words, the *Kōen hokke gi* is considered the intermediary text in terms of the history, institution, and doctrine through which the concept of identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings is multiply developed.

The Identity of the Purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings in the *Kōen hokke gi*

The Identity of the Purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings and Esoteric Symbolic Objects

In the *Kōen hokke gi*, the author interprets the principal scriptures of the Tendai Buddhist tradition, *Lotus Sutra*, *Wuliangyi jing*, and *Guan puxian jing*, mainly from the perspective of the Esoteric Buddhism, and seems to attempt to comprehensively clarifying the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings.

Asai has already summarized the whole procedures and actual contents of these interpretations carefully (Asai 1973: 494–509). According to Asai, for example, the twenty-eight chapters of the *Lotus Sutra* are first divided into the following three sections: “introduction” (*jobun* 序分), “main section” (*shōsetsu bun* 正説分 or *shōjū bun* 正宗分), and “dissemination section” (*ruzū bun* 流通分). The twenty-six chapters of the main section are further classified into the eight groups that respectively correspond to the eight petals of the lotus flower of a heart depicted at the center of the womb mandala. Based on such correspondence, the twenty-six chapters are also connected with the five Buddhas and four Bodhisattvas who are seated on the eight petals (Asai 1973: 451–2, 499).¹⁶ Needless to say, the lotus flower of eight petals represents the manifold minds of sentient beings and is the necessary component of Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques such as the visualization of the syllable *a*. In this interpretation, the descriptive structure of the *Lotus Sutra* is evidently connected to the lotus flower of eight petals, the symbolic object of the Esoteric Buddhism, through which it is also incorporated into the wider ideological network of this Buddhist teaching.

Generally speaking, in the *Kōen hokke gi*, the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings is asserted through similar procedures. It is also noteworthy that the author of the *Kōen hokke gi* employs not only the lotus flower of eight petals but also other symbolic objects such as the moon disk and

the syllables *a* and *vaṃ*, in order to develop the discussions on this discourse. As I said above, they are diversely inserted into the narratives of the *Lotus Sutra*, *Wuliangyi jing*, and *Guan puxian jing*, and hoped to function as a kind of mediation that extracts their profound secret interpretations. In this section, I attempt to introduce a few examples of them.

We attempt to explain the significance of the title. Concerning the words *myōhō renge*, *myō* is called inconceivable (*fukashigi* 不可思議), and *hō* signifies both the expedient and true dharmas (*gonjitu no hō* 權實法) of the ten realms (*jikkai* 十界) and ten suchnesses (*jūnyo* 十如), one hundred realms (*hyakkai* 百界) and one thousand suchnesses (*sennyō* 千如), and three thousand worlds (*sanzen seken* 三千世間). *Renge* is likened to these expedient and true dharmas. In addition, if we attempt to explain the title of this sutra in accordance with the gate of Shingon, first, the word *myōhō* is the moon disc of the self-enlightenment of Mahāvairocana Buddha in the diamond realm. Second, *rengē* is the lotus flower of a heart of eight petals in the womb of great compassion. (NDZ 466: 80, 52b–53a)

This is the quotation from the section “explaining the significance of the title” of the *Lotus Sutra* in the first fascicle of the *Kōen hokke gi*. In this section, the author first examines from the perspective of the Exoteric Buddhism (or Tendai Perfect teaching) the meanings of the characters *myō*, *hō*, and *rengē* which consist of the Chinese title of the *Lotus Sutra*, and also attempts to reveal the Shingon Esoteric views of the similar characters. In the latter views, as I discussed above, the title *myōhō rengē* is first divided into two parts *myōhō* and *rengē*. They are respectively equated with the diamond realm of the *Vajraśekhara sūtra* and the womb realm of the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*, that is, two central mandalas preached in two principal scriptures of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, as well as the Esoteric symbolic objects, a moon disc and lotus flower of eight petals.

According to the *Putixin lun* 菩提心論 (*Treatise on the Bodhi Mind*), the Esoteric Buddhist scripture that has been attributed to Nāgārjuna (dates unknown), the omniscience and purified enlightened mind of the Buddhas is likened to a pure white moon disk (T. 1665: 32, 574b). With respect to a lotus flower of eight petals, a completely opened flower similarly symbolizes the Buddhas’ purified mind, while an unopened one (*gō rengē* 含蓮華) is considered to represent a heart (Sk. *hṛdaya*, Jp. *shin*) of an ignorant sentient being, that is, his or her inherently pure mind (T. 1665: 32, 574b). Such moon disk and lotus flower of eight petals are both the indispensable elements of the Esoteric visualization techniques such as the five stages of realization (Sk.

pañcābhisambodhi, Ch. *wuxiang chengshen guan* 五相成身觀, Jp. *gosō jōshin kan* 五相成身觀), visualization of the syllable *a*, and that of the lotus flower of eight petals.¹⁷

In the *Kōen hokke gi*, not only the twenty-six chapters of the *Lotus Sutra* but also the title, *myōhō renga*, are connected to multiple concepts and symbolic objects of the Esoteric Buddhism, and deeply incorporated into their ideological network. It is assumed that the *Lotus Sutra* is conferred the enormous virtue that completely transcends the realm of the Exoteric Buddhism and reaches to the Esoteric Buddhism through such connection and incorporation.

The Bodhisattva Never Despising and the Syllable *Vaṃ*

In the twentieth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, “Chapter of the Bodhisattva Never Despising” (*Jō fukyō bosatsu hon*), the background and multiple meritorious deeds of the Bodhisattva Never Despising (Sk. *Sadāparibhūta*, Jp. *Jōfukyō bosatsu* 常不輕菩薩) are vividly described (T. 262: 9, 50b–51c). Needless to say, a lot of Buddhist monks in Japan paid great attention to the narrative of this Bodhisattva Never Despising and continuously examined its significance. In the *Kōen hokke gi*, his meritorious deeds are also interpreted from the Esoteric Buddhist perspective as follows:

If [interpreting the descriptions] in accordance with the gate of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism ... It is said in the sentences that “This bodhisattva did not exclusively engage in the recitation of scriptures. He solely performed the worship (*raihei* 禮拜) [to those who practiced the bodhisattva pass].” This signifies the worship of the nature of the Buddhas’ five wisdoms (*gochi* 五智). [The bodhisattva who] did not exclusively engage in the recitation of scriptures had profound faith in the gate of the syllable *vaṃ* (*banji mon* 鑰字門) and worshiped the nature of Mahāvairocana Buddha who is seated on the central platform (*chūdai* 中台) [of the mandala]. These acts are also called one worshiping (*ichirei* 一礼). (NDZ 466: 80, 67a–b)¹⁸

This is the quotation from the section “judging and interpreting each sentence” of the *Lotus Sutra* in the second fascicle of the *Kōen hokke gi*. In the quotation, the Bodhisattva Never Despising’s act of “solely performing the worship” is equated with the act of worshiping the five wisdoms of the five Buddhas and Mahāvairocana Buddha who stays at the center of the womb and diamond realm mandalas. It is also said that this Bodhisattva maintained profound faith in the syllable *vaṃ* (*banji* 鑰字) which represents Mahāvairocana Buddha in the

diamond realm of the *Vajraśekhara sūtra*. In other words, the Bodhisattva Never Despising is described as the enthusiastic devotee of not only the *Lotus Sutra* but also the Esoteric Buddhism, who ceaselessly worshiped the secret symbolic objects such as the syllable *vaṃ*.

The Correspondence Between the Great White Ox Cart, Lotus Flower, and Moon Disc

With respect to the “parable of the burning house,” one of the seven eminent parables preached in the third chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Kōen hokke gi* attempts to expound the significance of the great white ox cart (*dai byaku gosha* 大白牛車) as follows:

In the passage *jia yi bainiu* 駕以白牛 (the carts were respectively connected to the white ox), the character *jia* 駕 means connecting. For example, with respect to the aforementioned wheel of syllables (*jirin* 字輪), the wheel of five syllables is compared to the cart and the moon disk is compared to the white ox. The wheel of five syllables [as the cart] is connected (Ch. *jia*, Jp. *ga* 駕) to the ox of the moon disk. In addition, the eight petals [of the lotus flower] (*hachiyō* 八葉) are compared to the great cart and the moon disk is compared to the great ox. The great cart of the eight petals is connected to the white ox of the moon disk. On the other hand, the moon disk is compared to the cart and the eight petals are compared to the ox. If the character *jia* [between them] is removed, each has both the functions of the subject and object ... If the meaning of the character *jia* is merely discussed as to the moon disk, there is the wheel of five syllables on the moon disk. The wheel of syllables is regarded as the subject of the connection, while the moon disk is regarded as the object. With respect to the Esoteric Buddhist visualizations, the wisdom which performs them is called the subject of the connection, and things which are visualized are called the object. (NDZ 466: 80, 60b)¹⁹

This is the quotation from the section “judging and interpreting each sentence” of the *Lotus Sutra* in the first fascicle of the *Kōen hokke gi*. First of all, the white ox and cart that constitute the great white ox cart are interchangeably compared to the wheel of syllables, moon disk, and lotus flower of eight petals in a series of sentences. In other words, as I said above, Esoteric Buddhist symbolic objects are directly inserted into the eminent parable and largely transform its significance.

It is also noteworthy that not only these symbolic objects but also the “Buddhist visualizations” are evidently referred to and connected to the components of the parable at the end of the quotation. According to the *Kōen hokke gi*, the

“most secret *samādhi* of the eight Esoteric hand-postures” (*hachiin saihi zanmai* 八印最秘三昧) is also revealed in this third chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* (NDZ 466: 80, 61b).

Conclusion

An Overview of the “Identity of the Purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings” in the *Kōen hokke gi*

According to texts such as the *Nishū dōi shō*, the *Kōen hokke gi* was written by Enchin, an influential Tendai Buddhist monk during the early Heian period. The investigation in the third section (“Historical Background of the *Kōen hokke gi*”), however, suggests that the text was completed after Enchin, sometime from the tenth to early twelfth centuries, by a Tendai monk who belonged to the Jimon branch that regarded Enchin as their founder and maintained a strong connection with the Shingon Buddhism.

In this *Kōen hokke gi*, as I examined in the fourth section (“The Identity of the Purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings in the *Kōen hokke gi*”), the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings is discussed and interpreted in the unique way that the Tendai monks such as Annen might not employ. That is, the multiple symbolic objects that are the principal elements of the Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques are integrated into the narratives of the *Lotus Sutra*, *Wuliangyi jing*, and *Guan puxian jing*, through which the narratives are deeply incorporated into the ideological network of the Esoteric Buddhism. In the second fascicle of the *Kōen hokke gi*, for example, the author directly inserts the syllable *vaṃ* that represents Mahāvairocana Buddha into the narrative of the Bodhisattva Never Despising in the *Lotus Sutra* and attempts to describe him as the enthusiastic devotee of the Esoteric Buddhism who ceaselessly worshiped the aforementioned syllable. In this respect, the discussions on the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings in the *Kōen hokke gi* seem to go beyond the realm of doctrine and reach to that of Esoteric Buddhist practices or rituals.

On the other hand, there still remains the following question with regard to this issue: what is the reason why the aforementioned way of interpreting the *Lotus Sutra* was significantly developed during the middle or the end of the Heian period? This question, however, seems to transcend the boundary of the Tendai Buddhist doctrine and practices and relate to the broader epistemological

foundation of the medieval Japanese Buddhist exegesis. For example, we are able to discern the structural similarity between the methods of interpreting the *Sutra* in the *Kōen hokke gi* and those of interpreting the Pure Land Buddhist scriptures in Kakuban's texts: Kakuban also immediately inserts the Esoteric symbolic objects such as the syllable *a* into the narratives of the Pure Land Buddhist scriptures and attempts to describe the equality and integrity between various discourses of Esoteric Buddhism and those of the Pure Land Buddhism in his *Gorin kuji myō himitsu shaku* 五輪九字明秘密釈. The examination of such similarity may enable us to fully answer the above question.

Cultivating the Multiple Perspectives on the Concept “Esotericism”

This chapter specifically discussed in multiple sections the establishment and expansion of the Buddhist concept “Esoteric Buddhism” (*mikkyō*) within the alternative historical and cultural context, that is, Heian Japan. According to these discussions, the text such as the *Kōen hokke gi* developed the strong reciprocal relationship between the Esoteric Buddhism and other Buddhist tradition such as the Tendai, through which the significance of the Esoteric Buddhism was basically determined. It is also assumed that this unique relationship between Esoteric Buddhism and other Buddhist traditions was formed in the intermediary sphere including both the doctrinal and practical elements. This religious phenomenon is considered one of the important characteristics of the comprehensive concept “esotericism” in Japanese ideological and cultural history.

As indicated through numerous Buddhist philological and philosophical works, including this chapter, it is also noteworthy that Buddhist monks in premodern Japan were fully aware of the circumstances and characteristics of the periods, societies, and traditions in which they lived. In fact, they clearly grasped their own intellectual and ideological background. The author of the *Kōen hokke gi* is no different in this respect. As stated above, the *Kōen hokke gi* was produced based on a strategic collection and meticulous reconstruction of contemporary Buddhist doctrinal and practical discourses. It is highly possible that, in these circumstances, Buddhist monks deeply examined the semantic field of the concept “esotericism” from multiple perspectives on their knowledge and language and attempted to expand the role and function of the category “esoteric.” The identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings discussed in this chapter can be seen as the trajectory of their rich considerations.

Abbreviations

- BKD** Ono, Genmyō, ed. *Bussho kaisetsu daijiten* 仏書解説大辞典. Rev. ed. Tokyo: Daitō Shuppan sha, 1964–88.
- DNBZ** Bussho kankō kai, ed. *Dainihon bukkyō zensho* 大日本仏教全書. Rev. ed. Tokyo: Meicho fukyū kai, 1978–83.
- DNZ** Kawamura, Kōshō, Satoyoshi Maki, and Fumiyoshi Matsuki, ed. *Shinsan Dai nihon zokuzō kyō* 新纂大日本続藏経. Rev. ed. Tokyo: Kokusho kankō kai, 1975–89.
- NDZ** Zaidan hōjin Suzuki gakujutsu zaidan, ed. *Zōho kaitei nihon daizō kyō* 増補改訂日本大藏経. Rev. ed. Tokyo: Zaidan hōjin Suzuki gakujutsu zaidan, 1973–8.
- T.** Takakusu, Junjirō, ed. *Taishō shinshū daizō kyō* 大正新脩大藏経. Rev. ed. Tokyo: Taishō shinshū daizō kyō kankō kai, 1988–92.

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Part 2

Reconfiguring Esotericism Through Politics and Transnationalism

The Theosophical Movement and Asian Unity: Perspectives from Prewar China and Japan

Chienhui Chuang

Introduction

Theosophy has often been discussed within the framework of “Western esotericism,” but in reality, its development unfolded through transregional contacts and circulations, particularly involving East Asia. Wouter Hanegraaff has pointed to the necessity of close collaboration between researchers from “Western” and “non-Western” contexts in the study of esotericism, as well as the need to confront the painful legacies of Western imperialism and colonialism (Hanegraaff 2015: 86). Meanwhile, Julian Strube (2022, 2024) has emphasized that the very category of “esotericism” was historically constructed within colonial contexts, and has argued that its analysis requires deconstructive and comparative perspectives. It is indeed crucial to examine how esoteric ideas, such as Theosophy, were reinterpreted and reconstructed within diverse regional contexts.

This line of inquiry has already begun to emerge in studies such as *Theosophy Across Boundaries* (Krämer and Strube 2020), which address the development of Theosophical movements in non-Western contexts. Particular attention has been paid not merely to the reception of Theosophical ideas, but to the ways in which Theosophy has been transformed through its entanglement with local intellectual frameworks and political concerns.

In modern East Asia, Theosophy was not merely imported but was recontextualized through its interaction with Buddhism, Confucianism, and currents of modern mysticism. Yoshinaga Shin'ichi (2021) has examined the relationship between Theosophy and the Buddhist reform movement in Japan,

demonstrating how the Theosophical movement was interwoven with Japan's modern religious reform. I have also analyzed how Theosophy was received in both China and Japan by adapting itself to local religious and intellectual environments (Chuang 2014, 2020, 2021, 2022). Furthermore, the Japanese-language volume (Yoshinaga et al. 2022) investigates the impact of Theosophy in East Asia from transregional and interdisciplinary perspectives, revealing how its reception was shaped through colonial infrastructures, local print cultures, and the circulation of international journals. The case studies in this volume demonstrate how Theosophical networks intersected with Buddhist reform and nationalism, and how their development was closely linked to the dynamics of imperialism and transformations in media.

From its founding in 1875, the Theosophical Society advocated the recovery of ancient wisdom that had been forgotten by nineteenth-century Western material civilization, and upheld the ideal of the "Universal Brotherhood of Humanity." Its second president, Annie Besant (1847–1933), gained attention from Japanese pan-Asianist organizations due to her support for the Indian anti-colonial movement. Saaler and Szpilman (2011) point out that, in post-First World War Japan, there was a growing tendency to link spiritual and religious ideals with the political liberation of Asia. In this context, the French poet Paul Richard (1874–1967), who was connected with the Theosophical Society, stayed in Japan during the 1910s and influenced the right-wing intellectual Ōkawa Shūmei 大川周明 (1886–1957). Together with the Theosophist James Cousins (1873–1956), he advocated for the spiritual unity of Asia in the English-language publications of Japanese Pan-Asianist groups (Krämer 2022).

This chapter focuses on the Indian scholar Hari Prasad Shastri (1882–1956), who was active within this broader context. He stayed in Japan from 1916 to 1918, engaging in intelligence activities while also making contact with figures active in Japan, such as Richard and Ōkawa. In 1919, he became the head of the local branch of the Theosophical Society in Shanghai, and during the 1920s, he organized pan-Asianist associations and established ties with the Zionist movement. Was his involvement with Theosophy motivated by genuine ideological commitment, or was it merely a strategic instrument for political ends? This question provides a lens through which to examine the place of Theosophy in East Asia as a site where thought and politics, religion and empire, intersected.

This chapter analyzes the transformations in Theosophical thought and practice as reflected in the actions of Shastri, against the historical backdrop of colonial rule, racism, and xenophobia, based on primary sources. Particular

attention is given to the formative stage of his intellectual trajectory leading up to the establishment, in 1933, of the Advaita Vedānta-based meditation center “Shanti Sadan” in London, following his departure from Shanghai in 1929. Through this analysis, the chapter aims to clarify how Theosophy, as a form of esotericism, was transformed and transregionally constructed within the religious, political, and intellectual networks of China and Japan.

Shastri's Intellectual and Political Activities in Japan

In modern China and Japan, Buddhist communities sought internationalization as part of broader revival movements, during which closer ties with the Theosophical Society emerged. Among the Western missionaries who visited East Asia, some also attempted to understand religion through the lens of Theosophy, engaging in comparative religious endeavors (Chuang 2024: 11). However, it is important to note that these developments cannot be simply characterized as instances of “reception.” The activities undertaken by various local branches of the Theosophical Society, as well as the networks formed by the individuals involved, were marked by complexity and diversity. Intellectuals in different regions who took interest in Theosophy actively developed their own movements, shaped by their specific concerns and local contexts.

This section examines the fact that, in Tokyo during the 1910s, Theosophists were also active within the networks connecting Japanese pan-Asianists and Indian independence activists. Previous scholarship has repeatedly pointed out that, from the late Meiji period onward, Japanese pan-Asianists supported Indian exiled revolutionaries. For instance, it is well known that Rash Behari Bose (1886–1945), who arrived in Japan in 1915, came into contact with the prominent nationalist Ōkawa Shūmei and received protection from Toyama Mitsuru 頭山満 (1855–1944), the leader of the Japanese pan-Asianist organization, the Black Dragon Society (*Kokuryūkai* 黒龍会). While staying in Tokyo in November 1915, Bose held a meeting with fellow Indian independence activists such as Heramba Lai Gupta (1884–1950) and Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), as well as Japanese supporters including Ōkawa Shūmei. On that occasion, Lala Lajpat Rai's criticism of British policy toward India provoked the resentment of the British ambassador to Japan. Under pressure from Britain, the Japanese government issued a warrant for Bose's extradition. In the end, however, Bose went into hiding in Tokyo with the assistance of Toyama Mitsuru (Mukherjee 1966: 142–3). At that time, Lala Lajpat Rai was accompanied by a secretary

named Kesho Ram Sabarwal (1894–1981). Indian independence activists who had taken refuge in Japan were often placed under surveillance by both Japanese and British intelligence agencies. For example, a report submitted by a British intelligence officer in 1917 contained the following information. According to a British intelligence report written by a British intelligence Agent P, he monitored Indian revolutionaries such as Bose's secretary, Sabarwal and Vidya Dhari Bakshi (dates unknown)¹ in Japan. The report records a conversation in which Sabarwal expressed the fear of British surveillance and even discussed plans for radical retaliation.² Agent P's real name was Hari Prasad Shastri.³ Shastri arrived in Japan in 1916 ("Passengers" 1916: 59), where he stayed for approximately two years before relocating to Shanghai. There, he married Ogawa Yachiyo 小川八千代 (1898–1965), a Japanese woman he had met during his time in Japan. He later recounted his time in Japan in his book *Echoes of Japan 1916–1918*. Based on this work and other biographical materials related to Shastri,⁴ Maeda (2019) published *Kokoro ni Hibiku Nihon 1916–1918: A Hindu Thinker's Impressions of Japan*. Upon his arrival in Japan, Shastri "did not know even a single word of Japanese, nor did he have any understanding of Japanese customs or mentality. He first went to the third-rate Pacific Hotel in Yokohama and then visited the British Consulate to seek advice." Furthermore, "he wrote letters to professors of Sanskrit at various universities, requesting permission to give lectures" (Maeda 2019: 95). Shastri recalled that Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 (1866–1945), who was teaching at the University of Tokyo at the time, responded to his letter by inviting him to deliver a lecture at the Imperial University on the materialist philosophy of the Cārvāka school (Maeda 2019: 95). Another scholar who invited Shastri to a Japanese university was Professor Takeda Toyoshirō 武田豊四郎 (1882–1958) of the Department of Philosophy at Waseda University. Regarding his teaching at Waseda, Shastri stated: "I was asked by the Japanese University to lecture on Indian Philosophy. Dr. Takada, professor of 'Indology,' as it was called, translated my lectures into Japanese" (Shastri 1952: 65).

An article published in *Waseda Gakuho* in 1917, the official organ of Waseda University, noted that Professor Takeda Toyoshirō (1882–1958) and Shastri had established the Waseda Gita Society at the university. It introduced Shastri as the primary missionary of an Indian religious group called the Bhārat Dharma Mahāmaṇḍala ("Waseda Gita Society Naru" 1917: 13).⁵ Shastri stated that this "Gita Society" met regularly with around twenty students each week under his guidance (Shastri 1952: 65). The Bhārat Dharma Mahāmaṇḍala, one of several Hindu orthodox religious organizations that emerged in Bengal at the end of the nineteenth century, was also established with the involvement of Henry Steel

Olcott (1832–1907), one of the founders of the Theosophical Society. “The BDM set up 600 branches, was affiliated with 400 institutions, and employed nearly 200 preachers. Yet, it remained a markedly elitist organization funded by princes and other members of the social élite, and whose agents were pandits rather than common people” (Strube 2023: 96). According to the article published in *Waseda Gakuhō*, Shastri delivered a lecture at the Gita Society’s first official meeting, entitled *Sri Krishna and Gita and Its Place in Indian Philosophy* (“Waseda Gita Society Naru” 1917: 13).

Then, what kind of human network did Shastri possess in relation to the Waseda Indology Society? The December 1916 issue of *Waseda Gakuhō* carried a report on a lecture meeting organized by Takeda for the Waseda Indology Society, at which Shastri delivered a lecture entitled “On Ātma.” The article notes that the attendees included “Mr Bakshi, Mr Sabarwal, and other Indians,” Madame Richard of France, and Ōkawa Shumei (“Indogakukai Kinkyō” 1916: 14). Both Bakshi and Sabarwal were Indian revolutionaries and had been under surveillance by Shastri. In fact, it was at Shastri’s invitation that Ōkawa attended the lecture and, after the lecture, Shastri introduced Mr. and Mrs. Paul Richard to Ōkawa (Ōkawa 1941: 47–8). After rumors began to circulate among Indian students in Tokyo that Shastri was a British intelligence agent, Richard reportedly said to Ōkawa: “Mr. Shastri’s mission was to introduce us” (Ōkawa 1941: 48). Although Ōkawa Shūmei stated that he “did not particularly sympathize with Mr. Shastri’s ideas,” Shastri was nevertheless perceived in Japan at the time as an Indian scholar with expertise in Hindu philosophy and Sanskrit literature, and it appears that he established his personal network under such credentials.

In intellectual settings, Shastri frequently initiated conversations with topics related to Indian philosophy and religion. These discussions would then often shift toward issues of international and political relevance—such as Indo-British relations or ideological tendencies in Japanese nationalist movements—which were highly pertinent to his information-gathering activities.⁶ Another illustrative example of Shastri’s dual position is found in a letter from Indian revolutionary Taraknath Das (1884–1958), dated September 26, 1917. In the letter, Das, addressing him as “my friend,” encouraged him to pursue philosophical work, especially on “Positivism in Hindu Philosophy.”⁷ The letter reflects genuine trust in Shastri’s scholarly identity. Yet this very letter was later submitted to British intelligence—revealing that while Shastri was admired as a fellow intellectual, he was also reporting on such individuals to colonial authorities.

In Tokyo, he was publicly regarded as an intellectual and a scholar of Indian philosophy, and was able to enter communities that harbored anti-British

sentiments. At the same time, however, he was secretly engaged in intelligence work. His task was to gather and report information on Indian independence activists residing in Japan, as well as on Japanese intellectuals and nationalists who supported the Indian independence movement.

Meanwhile, in June 1917's Japan, Shastri had spoken about Theosophy at a railway station with Beatrice Erskine Lane Suzuki (1878–1939), a founding member of Japan's first Theosophical branch and wife of Suzuki T. Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966), as recorded in her diary (Hioki 2023: 48). Around the same time, certain foreign intellectuals with interests in spirituality and Asian revivalism also became involved with nationalist circles in Japan. Notably, the French esotericist and poet Paul Richard—who maintained close ties with Theosophists—later served as literary correspondent of the Black Dragon Society's English-language organ, working alongside the Irish Theosophist James Cousins. Another Theosophist active in this milieu was K. R. Sabarwal. While under surveillance by Japanese and British police and intelligence agents, Sabarwal, together with Cousins and D. T. Suzuki, established Japan's first Theosophical lodge, the Tokyo International Lodge, in 1920. It is said that throughout the 1920s, he frequently visited Dr. Suzuki's house (Kirita 2005: 37, 73–4, 81, 88). Sabarwal was connected to Bose and the Black Dragon Society, and contributed to the Society's English organ as well (Stolte 2013: 152). These facts suggest that some foreigners on the periphery of the Black Dragon Society were also connected through another network, that of the Theosophical Society.

The British intelligence agencies became strongly interested in Japan's support for Indian revolutionaries during the First World War, as the Indian independence movement intensified. Shastri's connections with nationalists and intellectuals in Japan made him a valuable source of information for British intelligence agencies. His dual philosophical and political position was a means through which he provided useful information to the British authorities. Through Ōkawa, Shastri also gained information about key pan-Asianist figures such as Tōyama Mitsuru and Uchida Ryōhei 内田良平 (1874–1937), both central to the Black Dragon Society.⁸ Tōyama and Uchida came from former samurai families. The Black Dragon Society, which they led, played a significant role in the nationalist movements of modern Japan and advocated a distinctive form of Eurasianism that further developed conventional pan-Asianist thought. This society had a Japanese-language journal, *Ajia Jiron* 亜細亜時論, which reprinted Shastri's article "The Future of Democracy in Japan" in 1919.⁹ In an intelligence report, Shastri recorded that Ōkawa had told him the Japanese government was behind the journal in question.¹⁰ This society had

a Japanese-language organ titled *Ajia Jiron*, which, in its March 1919 issue, even reprinted an article by Shastri entitled “The Future of Democracy in Japan,” written after his move to Shanghai (Shastri 1919b: 52–4). In February 1920, the Black Dragon Society launched an English-language periodical titled *The Asian Review*. The “Editorial Foreword” of its inaugural issue called for the fusion of the “Spirit of Asia” with other civilizations, aiming to build a more complete humanity (1920: 1–2).

At the launch event for *The Asian Review*, Uchida Ryōhei explained the reason for publishing the magazine by stating: “It is nothing other than the hope to frankly reveal the will of us, the Japanese people, before the eyes of the peoples of the various nations of the world” (“Shimai zasshi *Eshian Rebyū* hakkan hiroōkai” 1920: 78). The June 1919 issue of *Ajia Jiron* included a short article reporting that Besant had praised its affiliated English-language journal, *The Asian Review*, in an editorial published in the *New India* newspaper. In particular, Besant had responded to Uchida’s assertion that “Asia is for the Asiatics” by writing, “I sincerely hope that India will undertake this great enterprise” (“*Eshian Rebyū-shi ni taisuru hihyō*” 1920: 82). The notion of “spiritual unity” as a foundation for Asian solidarity was further elaborated by James H. Cousins, an Irish Theosophist and professor of Keio University¹¹ who also served as the Literary Correspondent for *The Asian Review* (Cousins 1920: 43–4). As is well-known, after Cousins relocated to India in 1915 at the request of Besant, the politicization of the Theosophical Society under her leadership was further advanced, and in 1916, together with George Arundale (1878–1945), a British Theosophist and a radical supporter of Indian self-rule, the Home Rule League for All India was established (Viswanathan 1998: 204–5). It would seem that Cousins’s involvement in the activities of the Black Dragon Society, which had already expressed support for the Indian independence movement, was not a mere coincidence. Cousins argued that Asia must offer a spiritual alternative to the materialism of the West and described the role of cultural and spiritual leaders as vital in guiding this process. Like Cousins, who emphasized spiritual unity, another coordinator, Richard, expressed similar views at the “Second Conference for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,” organized by the Black Dragon Society (Richard 1919: 23–7). In April 1919, Japan proposed a clause concerning the elimination of racial discrimination in the Covenant of the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference. In response, the Black Dragon Society held this “Conference for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.” The discourse advocating spiritual unity in Asia, which was published in the Black Dragon Society’s magazine, emerged in the historical context of the post-First

World War period, during which a new international order was being discussed worldwide with the establishment of the League of Nations.

However, in confronting the issue of race, linking it to Asia's spiritual unity evokes the Theosophical ideal of "universal brotherhood." *The Asian Review* also featured an article introducing the Theosophical movement as represented by both Cousins and Besant. Richard is also known to have had a period of interest in Theosophy (Yoshinaga 2008: 95; Krämer 2022). The Black Dragon Society originally introduced the Indian self-rule movement on a frequent basis. And the name of Besant, who became the president of the Indian National Congress in 1917, often appeared in its articles as well. For example, in the March 1918 issue alone, *Ajia Jiron* featured a translated text of a petition from the Indian Home Rule movement, including the reading delivered by "Mrs. Annie Besant, Delegate of the Committee" ("Indo Jichi Kiseikai no Chinjōsho" 1918: 92). In another article on the 32nd session of the Indian National Congress, a speech made during the session by "Mrs. Besant, President," concerning the Home Rule movement, was also introduced ("Dai sanjūni-kai Indo Kokumin Gikai" 1918: 135). Furthermore, in the March 1919 issue, an article introducing the extraordinary session of the Indian National Congress held to deliberate the reform proposal for Indian Home Rule passed the previous year referred to her as "the well-known British Mrs. Besant," and presented excerpts from her speech (Editor 1919: 45–6). Ōkawa Shumei, who wrote under the pen name "Kōriyama 氷山" in *Ajia Jiron*, also published articles describing the situation in India and criticizing British colonial rule over the country. In his 1916 article titled "The Present State and Origins of the Nationalist Movement in India," he introduced Besant as "known worldwide as the president of the Theosophical Society and a passionate supporter of the Indian people" (Ōkawa [1916] 1962: 556–67).¹²

What can be discerned from the above is that Theosophy was not merely a religious philosophy, but was functionally appropriated by Japanese nationalist organizations for political and ideological purposes. For groups such as the Black Dragon Society, the Theosophical ideals of spiritual universalism and the revival of Asia held particular significance as ideological tools in resisting Western imperialism. Moreover, leading figures of the Society, including Tōyama Mitsuru and Ōkawa, were known supporters of the Indian independence movement and adopted an anti-British stance. It is therefore reasonable to assume that they paid close attention to the activities of Annie Besant, who led nationalist movements under British colonial rule in India.

Furthermore, in response to the racial discrimination that became increasingly apparent in the international order following the First World War,

the Black Dragon Society began to promote the slogan “Asia for the Asiatics.” In doing so, it is noteworthy that they actively incorporated the Theosophical notion of “spiritual unity of Asia” into their pan-Asianist ideology. Such ideas served to lend an appearance of spiritual universality to pan-Asianist discourse, thereby functioning to legitimize its political objectives. In this context, the appointment of the Theosophist Cousins as the Literary Correspondent of the Society’s English-language journal may be seen as a telling example of how international Theosophical networks were intertwined with Japanese political developments. In this way, the universalist discourse of Theosophy functioned both as a spiritual and a strategic framework in shaping racial and geopolitical imaginations in Asia at the time. The following section will turn to the activities of Shastri, in order to examine his involvement in the discourse surrounding “Asia for the Asiatics” within this historical current.

Shastri’s Relocation to Shanghai and Admission to the Theosophical Society

While Shastri’s intellectual stance allowed him access to various networks, his relationship with British intelligence began to spread around the end of 1917, gradually arousing suspicion among Indian nationalists residing in Tokyo.¹³ As such suspicions increased—and perhaps also because the British had once selected him as a candidate for an intelligence post in China¹⁴—Shastri left Japan and moved to China. Shastri moved to Shanghai in 1918, and in 1919 his name was listed as the head of the Shanghai branch of the Theosophical Society.¹⁵ This Theosophical lodge in Shanghai was the result of a study circle that began in the 1910s, when Eastern and Western intellectuals with a keen interest in Theosophy gathered in Shanghai. It was only in the summer of 1919 that the lodge was finally established. However, Shastri’s name seems to have come up for the first time when the matter of a lodge president was discussed, suggesting that he had not been involved in the activities of the study circle until then (Carter 1920: 19–20).

However, whether Shastri’s admission to the Theosophical Society represented an ideological conversion or a strategic shift remains a matter of debate. This section examines both his pan-Asianist activities during his time in Shanghai and his role within the Theosophical Society, in order to reflect on his Theosophical involvement in Shanghai within its historical context. Shastri disembarked in Shanghai on April 20, 1918.¹⁶ He soon became acquainted with Nissim Elias

Benjamin Ezra (1880–1936), a prominent Jewish figure in Shanghai (Chuang 2021).¹⁷ N. E. B. Ezra was one of Shastri's key contacts in Shanghai, and it was through Ezra's introduction that Shastri also secured a teaching post at a university supported by Silas Aaron Hardoon (1851–1931), a Jewish millionaire in Shanghai (Shastri 1952: 66). Besides, he also began contributing to the American English-language newspaper *Millard's Review of the Far East* 密勒氏評論報 (Shastri 1952: 171). According to my research, Shastri contributed to the *Miller's Review of the Far East*, later serving as one of its editors. Following his move to Shanghai, he positioned himself simultaneously as a scholar and a journalist. Many of the articles he published in newspapers around 1918 concerned Japan. During this period, Japan was involved in the Siberian Intervention and the Shandong Problem, among other issues. In a 1918 article, Shastri warned Japan that its calls for pan-Asian unity were perceived across Asia as politically self-serving, rather than sincerely liberatory (Shastri 1918b: 333).

In Shastri's memoirs, published in 1952, he said: "My criticism of Japan did not please some Indians in Tokyo who were protected and financed by the Japanese Black Dragon Society which aimed at the annexation of China and also India in the Japanese Empire." He said that in 1920, he received a letter asking him to "send 'a contribution of Yen 500' to the President of the Black Dragon Society, abstain from writing 'anti-Japanese' articles or face death by a bullet." Though John Benjamin Powell (1886–1947), the chief editor of *Millard's Review* and an American, told Shastri that he need not worry about the threat, as he was a member of staff at an American newspaper (Shastri 1952: 171). However, when examining the articles Shastri published in English-language newspapers in Shanghai in 1920, a certain shift becomes apparent.

First, in the article titled "An Open Letter to Young China," published on February 28, 1920, he appealed to the nature of patriotism in the twentieth century, stating, "20th century patriotism must carry with it the seeds of universal brotherhood." He also commented on the Shandong question:

The world tendency to-day is towards peace but you are moving contrary to it. Had you applied your energy to the cause of education or industrial lot. The Shangtung question is an insignificant question and judging from the recent utterances of Vis-count Uchida, Japan is quite willing to return it to China. But you seem to be bent on keeping the gulf between China and Japan widen. (Shastri 1920a: 574)

His writings from this period often addressed Japan's role in regional conflicts, such as the Siberian Intervention and the Shandong Problem. In these articles,

he adopted a more conciliatory tone toward Japan, emphasizing the importance of reconciliation between Japan and China. Not long afterward, Black Dragon Society's *The Asian Review*, reprinted the aforementioned article by Shastri. The article appeared in the "Contemporary Views" section, where the editorial office introduced it at the beginning with the following remark: "The writer is a distinguished Indian scholar and a great Veduntist" (Shastri 1920b: 323). These developments suggest a significant shift in Shastri's political positioning during this period.

While engaging in his work as a scholar and journalist, on November 18, 1918, Shastri delivered a lecture at the Quest Society in Shanghai titled "The Mysticism and Mystics of India" ("Local and General" 1918: 6). Shastri's encounter with the Quest Society in Shanghai was through the introduction of the aforementioned N. E. B. Ezra. At the Society, Shastri gave lectures such as "Elements of the Hindu Philosophy" and "Shri Krishna," and it is said that several Jewish attendees became friends with him (Shastri 1952: 169). The Quest Society was a splinter group from the Theosophical Society, founded in 1909 by the British esotericist George Robert Stow Mead (1863–1933). Mead had formerly served as secretary to one of the Society's founders, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). The Quest Society had previously introduced movements in comparative religion—such as those associated with Wu Ting-fang 伍廷芳 (1842–1922)—in its journal during the 1910s, and even after the establishment of the Shanghai branch of the Theosophical Society, it was not uncommon for Theosophists to give lectures at the Quest Society. Subsequently, in June 1919, the first Theosophical branch in Shanghai, the Saturn Lodge, was established. Shastri's efforts to spread Theosophy at the time were mentioned in the writings of Spurgeon Medhurst (1860–1927), who, alongside the renowned Wu Ting-fang, was one of the pioneers of the Theosophical movement in Shanghai (Medhurst 1921: 279–80). Although the Shanghai branch of the Theosophical Society went into decline following Wu's death, it was reestablished in December 1922 as the Shanghai Lodge. From that point, it began engaging actively in initiatives such as plans for the translation and publication of Theosophical literature and the training of Chinese Theosophists.¹⁸ Even in the 1925 March–April issue of *Far Eastern T. S. Notes*, the journal of the Theosophical branches in East Asia, one finds a passage by Shastri discussing "Theosophy in Daily Life" (Shastri 1925d: 5–6). In the same year, 1925, a Chinese Theosophist named Wang Hee also spoke about Theosophy, saying:

The greatest blessing that Theosophy has brought us is the Raj Yoga taught us by Prof. Shastri. We cannot sufficiently praise the Raj Yoga. It has proved so

peace-giving and so splendid to us, Prof. Shastri has been lecturing on Buddhism to our great advantage. The teachings of Damo have calmed the lower activities of our mind. This Lodge has been following the old teachings of Damo and other sages of Buddhism. Under the light of Theosophy and Raj Yoga we have understood our old teachings better. (“Address by Dr. Wang Hee, Treasurer of ‘China Lodge’” 1925: 11)

However, in fact, in June 1923, Shastri resigned from his position as head of the Theosophical branch and informed the members of his wish to withdraw from the Society.¹⁹ In the end, he was only permitted to resign from the leadership position, but according to reports from members, he had apparently not attended Theosophical meetings for quite some time. Nevertheless, in October 1923, it was reported that he held a meeting with Gilbert Reid (1857–1927) and others for the cause of peace in China.

Gilbert Reid was one of the founders, along with Wu Ting-fang and Medhurst, of the Society for the Study of World Religions in the 1910s, when no Theosophical branch yet existed in Shanghai (Chuang 2020). In the 1910s, Wu and others who were interested in Theosophy often held public lectures on the subject at The International Institute of China (*Shangxiantang* 尚賢堂), which was operated by Reid (Chuang 2020). In 1923, Shastri and Reid participated in a gathering for peace in China at the International Museum in the Shanghai French Concession. Following the opening remarks by Shastri and Reid, it is reported that Sir Robert Hotung 何東 (1862–1952) and several Chinese participants each gave presentations on Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, and Buddhism (“Men and Events” 1923: 282). Sir Robert Hotung was a prominent Eurasian businessman and philanthropist of Jewish descent on his father’s side, who played a key role in the economic and social development of colonial Hong Kong. What should be noted here is that, although Shastri distanced himself from the Shanghai branch of the Theosophical Society during this period, it appears that he continued his work in comparative religion and comparative philosophy.

Between Pan-Asianism, Theosophy, and the Zionist Movement

In October 1924, the Shanghai Lodge of the Theosophical Society established the China Lodge, a branch consisting exclusively of Chinese members. In a report dated October 22 to the Adyar headquarters, the Lodge President Dorothy

Musgrave Arnold (1889–1982) wrote: “Professor Shastri is reconciled with us and shows every indication of working in the right frame of mind,” indicating that Shastri, who had previously distanced himself from the Theosophical Society, was now involved in guiding this Chinese branch.²⁰

Same in 1924, Shastri established the Asiatic Association (*Da Ya Xiehui* 大亞協會) in Shanghai in June 1924 together with the Japanese physician Tongū Hiroshi 頓宮寛 (1884–1974), as well as Filipino and Chinese colleagues.²¹ Shastri served as the English editor of the Association’s journal, *The Asiatic Review*, this journal featured articles in both English and Chinese, with Shastri serving as the English editor, alongside Chinese editors who were responsible for the Chinese-language content.²² In *The Asiatic Review*’s issue no. 37 from 1925, the journal introduced its Chinese editors, Dr. Chang and Dr. Hee, as “who are also the Theosophical movement among the local Chinese,” and promoted their regular Theosophical lectures (“News and Notes” 1925: 37–8).

In this journal, Shastri published several articles on Besant. He praised her as someone who “has discovered that only the Asian wisdom will save the world from the narrow ideas of greed, exploitation, and imperialism,” and expressed the hope that by reading her spiritual writings, the readers of *The Asiatic Review* would “bring about a thorough understanding between East and West” (Shastri 1924d: 6). Shortly before the founding of this organization, in April of the same year, the United States passed legislation excluding Japanese immigrants. Following this, pan-Asianist arguments advocating Sino-Japanese friendship began to surge within Japan, and organizations named the Asiatic Association, involving Japanese participants and promoting pan-Asianism, began to be established across various parts of China. Within this context, the Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and the Chinese thinker Ku Hung-ming 辜鴻銘 (1857–1928) were also invited to Japan in 1924; Tagore visited China before arriving in Japan. In 1925, the English-language newspaper *The China Press* 大陸報, published in China, reported on Shastri and the Japanese Tongū’s Asiatic Association, stating: “The Asiatic Association has started a campaign for pure nationalism for China, India, Burma and other Far Eastern countries” (“Nationalism China’s Need, Indian Speaker Asserts” 1925: 1). In the same year, also as a member of the Asiatic Association, he contributed an article entitled “A Creed for Young Chinese” to *The China Press*, in which he offered several recommended “creeds” to young Chinese. The sixth stated: “I believe that my way to success in my mission is through universal co-operation” (Shastri 1925a: 12). In this way, as a member of the Asiatic Association, Shastri consistently appealed to the Chinese people regarding the importance of

international cooperation. In *The Asiatic Review*, the aims of the organization were stated as follows:

1. To promote brotherly relation and friendship among the peoples of the different countries of Asia.
2. To establish connections with men representing the public opinion in China, Japan, the Philippines, and India.
3. To advance the moral, social, cultural, and commercial conditions of the said countries.
4. To work for the general welfare of the peoples of China, Japan, the Philippines, and India.

("The Aims of the Organisation" 1924: 3)

In his 1924 article "Asia for the Asiatics," in the Association's journal, *The Asiatic Review*, Shastri cited a conversation with Professor Ichimura Mitsue (1875–1928) of Kyoto Imperial University as evidence of Japan's sincere commitment to Asian unity. He described Japan as moving beyond Meiji-era imperialism toward democratic, benevolent patriotism (Shastri 1924c: 21–2). However, intelligence reports from 1917 reveal that Shastri had met Ichimura as part of his espionage activities, aiming to gauge anti-British sentiment and gain introductions to political figures such as Gotō Shinpei 後藤新平 (1857–1929). This suggests that Shastri's engagement with Japanese intellectual and political circles was closely connected to his covert intelligence mission, rather than reflecting a shared ideological commitment. During their meeting, Ichimura stated: "It was essential that India should awaken and establish herself as a nation, and Japan fully realized that it was her mission in the world to liberate the Asiatic nations from the clutches of the white men."²³ Furthermore, according to the records, Ichimura was "anxious that all Asiatic countries should obtain their freedom through Japan," because "England," he said, "would never grant independence to India, but Japan would not hesitate a moment to do so."²⁴

It is likely that the article Shastri published in 1924 was based on the information he obtained during this meeting. In the article titled "International Co-Operation," published in the same journal in 1925, Shastri emphasized that "the suspicious existing in the mind of China against Britain and Japan will prove to be mere hallucinations, if the Chinese co-operate with British and the Japanese," insisting that Britain and Japan would become China's "good-fellows" (1925c: 24–5). Likewise, in another issue of the same year, his article "Japan and Peace" began with the statement: "I hold brief for militarists and imperialists of any nation" (1925b: 23–4).

The idea, articulated by Shastri, that China, Japan, and India share a common foundation in spiritual civilization is not based on racial or ethnolinguistic theories, but rather on a universalist perspective rooted in moral and cultural affinities. While this discourse bears certain similarities to expressions found in journals associated with the Black Dragon Society, it is doubtful whether it derives from Aryanist thought. Rather, it should be situated within the context of the spiritual universalism promoted by the Theosophical Society under the banner of “comparative religion” and “universal brotherhood of humanity.” In fact, during the 1920s, not only Shastri but also another Indian Theosophist, K. R. Sabarwal, participated in a Tokyo-based pan-Asianist group called the “Pan-Asia Society” (*Dai Ajia Kyōkai* 大亜細亜協会), together with Japanese (*Dai Ajia* 1922: 34). In these cases, Theosophy may be seen to have functioned as a conceptual and institutional platform within the broader framework of Asianism directed against Western dominance, mediating an idealistic form of nationalism grounded in shared spiritual values in Asia.

However, while Shastri was active in these ways, it is worth introducing the report of D. M. Arnold, who at the time was the head of the Shanghai Lodge and also the principal of the Shanghai Theosophical Girls’ School. On December 8, 1924, she wrote to the Adyar headquarters regarding Shastri: “Chinese members, hypnotized as they are by Shastri, it is a serious difficulty and has given me much pain and strain. Thank goodness I have never allowed him to come near my Chinese students, else that Lodge would probably also have had their minds poisoned in like manner.” In lamenting the situation and seeking a solution, she added: “The wisest thing to do in connection with that Lodge is to wait until Shastri has left Shanghai—if ever.”²⁵ Although Arnold did not specify exactly what had occurred, it is evident that in 1924 she was deeply troubled by her relationship with the Chinese Theosophical members under Shastri’s influence, particularly given his role in guiding Chinese members at the time. Then, in 1927, when a certain pan-Asiatic conference was reported in an English-language newspaper in Shanghai, the organization of Shastri and Tongū was mentioned as follows: “This Pan-Asiatic business started in Shanghai two or three years ago. At the time Dr. Tongū and Mr. Shastri attempted to organize a similar conference,” and it was written that such a conference had been organized because they had received money from a sponsor (“The Pan-Asiatic Conference” 1927: 255).

As Sugimoto (2010) has pointed out: “The Theosophical Society emerged from outside India and infused Indian nationalism with a universalist principle of the ‘pursuit of truth.’ At the same time, precisely because it was supra-religious, as reflected in its slogan ‘There is no religion higher than truth,’ it brought into

relief subtle distinctions between itself and local forms of nationalism” (Sugimoto 2010: 182–3). In the case of the Black Dragon Society, which is the focus of this chapter, spiritual rhetoric resembling Shastri’s was mediated by figures such as Cousins and Richard and can be seen in the process of being reorganized into Japanese nationalism. In other words, it was strategically incorporated into and reformulated as a vision of pan-Asianism centred on Japan. Furthermore, with Shastri’s pro-Japanese stance after relocating to Shanghai, the concept was refined in his own Asiatic Association, where the theme “Japan is peace-loving and non-aggressive” recurs. These examples suggest that even ostensibly shared spiritual discourses were, in practice, subject to local adaptation and redeployment within the context of regional nationalisms.

Incidentally, during his activities in Japan as British intelligence, when asked about the Indian independence movement, he would consistently answer: “I had no faith in the so-called revolution.”²⁶ In one meeting with Ōkawa and others in 1916’s Japan, Shastri made the following remarks:

I pleaded the immediate necessity of social reform in India and proved that India could never without the help of England hope to attain this end. I conclude by saying that Japan’s mission was to ameliorate the condition of the whole of Asia and that the British Government was fully competent to give self-government to India when she found her fit to rule herself.²⁷

This quotation suggests that Shastri was not a supporter of the Indian independence movement at the time, but rather held a position that endorsed British imperial rule in India. He advocated a “universal brotherhood” that transcended national and racial boundaries in the spiritual dimension. However, when this ideal was applied to the concrete challenges of social reform in India and China, it presupposed guidance and protection by the British Empire and the Empire of Japan. This way of thinking not only recalls the observation that “pan-Indian nationalism was fundamentally coloured by elitism” (Sugimoto 2010: 182–3). Indeed, the Chinese-language regulations of Shastri’s Asiatic Association include the following membership criterion: “Those who have not received higher education are not eligible for membership.”

What deserves particular attention next is the list of patrons recorded in the journal. Among those named as patrons were Joe Vadu (姬覺彌, a.k.a. 姬佛陀, 1885–1964), Mrs. S. A. Hardoon (羅迦陵, 1864–1941), and Lady Ho Tung (張蓮覺, 1875–1938). Key supporters included Buddhist philanthropists like Mrs. Hardoon and Lady Ho Tung, who maintained close ties to Theosophists and Jewish elites. As Chuang (2014, 2020, 2022) has shown, this human network

illustrates how Chinese Buddhists at the time often referred to Theosophy as “Western Buddhism,” and it was not uncommon for them to associate with local members of the Theosophical Society (Chuang 2014).

And another connection to be noted is the network of Jewish residents in Shanghai. There were many Jewish members in the Theosophical Society, and the prominent David Sassoon Gubbay (1866–1931) was a pioneer of the Theosophical movement in Hong Kong. Likewise, the involvement of Jewish members can be observed in the Shanghai Lodge in Shanghai.²⁸ For example, *Israel's Messenger* 猶太月報, the official publication of the Zionist Movement in Shanghai led by N. E. B. Ezra, reported their members' activities as Theosophists (“Social and Personal” 1922a: 21).²⁹ As can be seen from this, there were Theosophists within the Zionist Movement organization in Shanghai, and their activities were introduced multiple times in the official publication of the movement.

From the statement made by Besant—“Step forward, then, brothers, and take your rightful place among the Nations. Israel has a future and a work to accomplish therein” (Besant 1927: cover page)—it is evident that the Society held a supportive position. However, the activities of the Shanghai branch of the Theosophical Society were, perhaps unexpectedly, closely connected with the Jewish community (Chuang 2020). As mentioned above, after moving to Shanghai, Shastri became acquainted with Jews through N. E. B. Ezra at meetings of the Quest Society. In addition to this, on October 28, 1918, *Israel's Messenger* published a special issue commemorating the first anniversary of the British Palestine Declaration. There are numerous records of Shastri attending meetings of the Shanghai Zionist Association and giving lectures.³⁰ Before the publication of the aforementioned “An Open Letter to Young China” on February 28, 1920, there was a debate between Shastri and a Chinese individual reported in the English-language press in Shanghai in 1919. In November 1919, Shastri defended Wang I-Tang 王揖唐 (1877–1948), who was criticized for being pro-Japanese, stating: “Mr. Wang I-tang is determined to fulfil his mission of peace ... Supposing that Mr. Wang is pro-Japanese, still why should they not meet him?” (Shastri 1919a: 376) In response, a Chinese reader referred to the recent case of the Twenty-One Demands made by Japan to China and argued against Shastri, explaining Japan's threat to China. At the end of the article, he pointed out the connection between the two by writing: “I do not like to enter into personalities, but there is a Mr. Shastri who is teaching in Mr. Hardoon's School and as everybody knows Mr. Wang I-tang lives in Mr. Hardoon's garden. If your correspondent is the same Mr. Shastri, then much

is explained by propinquity” (Tong 1919: 377).³¹ Before the university where Shastri taught was established, there had been a Buddhist university in 1914 on the same site, and due to Mrs. S. A. Hardoon’s connections, it was not unusual for Buddhist figures to gather at the Hardoon residence (Sun 2018).

Following the 1917 Balfour Declaration, the Shanghai Zionist Association actively sought support from East Asian governments. Japan responded positively in 1919 has shown (Maruyama 1983: 86), while figures such as Shastri promoted religious universalism linking Zionism with Theosophical ideals. Subsequently, when examining *Israel’s Messenger*, the official publication of the Shanghai Zionist Association in the 1920s, one finds clear evidence—such as in the October 1922 issue—that the Association regarded Japan as an ally (“What We Owe to Japan” 1922: 12). Shastri and *Israel’s Messenger* had already begun their interaction shortly after his arrival in Shanghai in October 1918. In the October 27, 1918, issue of *Israel’s Messenger*, alongside a portrait of Shastri, he was introduced as “Professor H. P. Shastri (Indian Journalist and Lecturer on Hindu Philosophy),” and an article titled “Hindu View of the Jewish Outlook” (Shastri 1918a: 37). In this article by Shastri, he argued that in a tense international situation caused by the “misunderstood Japan,” whose true nature was not recognized, it was the Jews—who possessed the finest qualities of both East and West—who were best suited to serve as mediators. He expressed hope in a nation founded upon such Jews and their ideals of “universal brotherhood and universal good will.” In the June issue of the same year, under “Editorial Notes,” his name was listed among those expressing “Hindu Sympathy with the Zionist Movement” (1920: 8).

In the September 8, 1922, issue of *Israel’s Messenger*, Shastri’s article entitled “Awake Israel!—A Hindu View” was published, in which he warned that only those Jews who possessed inner spiritual values, rather than being bound by materialism, would be guided to their nation:

What will it avail the Jews if they get Palestine while their hearts are ruled by Satan? Palestine itself will invite the Jews—if their hearts are full of spiritual wealth. If each Jew realizes Zion in his heart, no power in the world can stop them from possessing their original land. The Jews, and not the materialists hearing Jewish names and forms, are wanted in Palestine. (Shastri 1922: 30)

Shastri told the Jewish Youth that “India, China and Japan will help you in your national aspirations, if you do not forget that you are an Eastern people” (Shastri 1923: 15). Then in 1924, Shastri, as vice-president of the Asiatic Association, declared as follows:

To-day Asia needs unification more than anything else; and it is not unreasonable to think that the Jew will add to the unification of Asia. Japan, China and Siam have already given their moral support to the Jewish aspiration. Others will also support the Jewish national aspirations if the Jews remain true to their Asiatic ideal and their ancient traditions. (Shastri 1924a: 15)

These statements reveal that Shastri's support for Zionism was grounded not in Western political nationalism, but in a Theosophically inspired vision of spiritual unity among Eastern peoples. By framing the Jews as inherently Asiatic and urging them to uphold their ancient traditions, Shastri positioned Zionism within a broader discourse of Asian solidarity. His appeals reflect a consistent attempt to reconcile spiritual identity with geopolitical aspiration, suggesting that transnational cooperation among Asian nations—including Jewish participation—was possible only through a shared ethical and cultural foundation rooted in the East.

Shastri referred to Theosophy for the first time in *Israel's Messenger* in his article "Theosophy in the Jewish Writing," published in December 1924, although it appears that he was referring to Theosophy in a broad sense in this context. In the article, he stated that upon reading *The Guide for the Perplexed* by the Jewish Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1138–1204), which he had borrowed from N. E. B., he found within it everything that he had discovered in Theosophy (Shastri 1924b: 17). It is also noteworthy that the 1920s witnessed the rise of Hindutva thought in India, particularly through the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), such as *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923). However, when viewed in light of the discourse presented by Shastri, his support for Zionism appears to have stemmed not so much from a form of religious nationalism as from a Theosophical conception of spirituality and a sympathy for universal values. His statement that he found in the book of the Rabbi the very "Theosophy" he had been seeking reflects an international and integrative perspective on religious traditions—one that stands in stark contrast to the essentialist and majoritarian framework characteristic of early Hindutva ideology.

Shastri left Shanghai in 1929 and relocated to London. In February 1931, he became a member of the English section of the Theosophical Society Point Loma, which differed from the Adyar branch of the Theosophical Society he had joined while in Shanghai. There he delivered public lectures and conducted study classes for the English section of the Point Loma Theosophical Society ("A. Trevor Baker's Inaugural Address" 1930: 7). Recognized as "a scholar of distinction and an able Theosophical lecturer," he was conferred the degree

of Hon. D.Litt. by Theosophical University in 1931 (“Honorary Degrees Conferred by Theosophical” 1931: 92). His activities were still reported in 1932 (“Theosophical News and Works” 1932: 134).

On the other hand, in a letter sent to N. E. B. in December of the same year, he offered a harsh assessment of Theosophy, stating: “The modern theosophy is neither a philosophy nor a plausible theory,” and further: “It is the true theosophy and it does give peace to its readers. Only those Jews who are blind to the great beauties of their own literature will pay any attention to the astral-philosophy of the half-educated theosophists” (Shastri 1932: 12). Moreover, in a letter to N. E. B. in 1935, Shastri reported that he had established a “cultural centre” in London—Shanti Sadan—“for the study of the deeper philosophy of the Hindus and other religions.” He also wrote: “Your article on ‘Quietism’ has struck a high note in mysticism and goes to show how futile it is for the Jews whose classics are so rich in mystic lore to beg at the door of Theosophy of Besant or any other modern cult” (Shastri 1935: 24).

Shastri’s activities in Shanghai during the 1920s illustrate how personal conviction and political calculation were intricately intertwined within a space where multiple ideologies—Theosophical spirituality, pan-Asianism, and Zionism—intersected. While praising Besant and speaking of universal values, he approached Japanese-led pan-Asianism and sought collaboration with Chinese Buddhists and Jewish nationalists. His actions provide a concrete example of how Theosophy was politically and strategically recontextualized in the non-Western world. In the end, he rejected modern Theosophy and turned instead to an ancient Theosophy of Hindu origin. That he ultimately turned to healing and self-cultivation in London reveals the limitations of spiritual universalism when confronted with national realities and colonial dynamics. Shastri’s trajectory stands as a symbolic case of the mediating and fluid role that esoteric discourses played in the interstices of empire and nationalism.

Conclusion

The trajectory of H. P. Shastri in East Asia, as examined in this chapter, is more than just the personal history of an individual. It symbolically illustrates how, in early twentieth-century Asia, Theosophy became a point of intersection between international politics, anti-colonial movements, intelligence activities,

and cultural exchange. Although Theosophy promoted ideals such as universal brotherhood and spiritual evolution, Shastri's case shows that in East Asia, these ideals were often reinterpreted and used within political and strategic contexts.

Shastri moved across multiple discursive spaces—including Theosophical universalism, pan-Asianism, support for Zionism, and Japan's emphasis on pacifism—and seemed to take on different roles depending on the local context. However, rather than seeing him as inconsistent, his path shows how Theosophy itself functioned not only as a spiritual philosophy but also as a mediating discourse at the intersection of religion, empire, and politics. The Theosophical Society's ideals were not received in the same way everywhere. In Japan, Theosophy was strategically adopted by nationalist groups. For organizations such as the Black Dragon Society, Theosophy held particular meaning as an ideological tool to resist Western imperialism.

Moreover, in the post-First World War international order, as racial discrimination became increasingly visible, the Black Dragon Society and Shastri promoted the idea: *Asia for the Asiatics*. In doing so, it is notable that they actively integrated the Theosophical concept of "Universal Brotherhood of Humanity" into their pan-Asianist ideology. In this way, the universalism of Theosophy served not only as a spiritual framework, but also as a strategic tool for shaping racial and geopolitical imagination in Asia at the time.

Shastri's case also reveals the limitations of such universalist discourse. While Theosophy offered a language of international solidarity and conceptual flexibility, its development was often guided by unequal power relations and strategic interests. This reminds us that Theosophy in the colonial modern period played a dual role—being both transcendent and tactical, inclusive and exclusive at the same time.

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Japan's Occult Monsters: Esotericism and the New Left in Post-1960s Japan

Hidehiko Kurita

Introduction

In Japan, the earliest introducers of ideas and practices often closely associated with the contemporary concept of esotericism—such as the Theosophical Society, Swedenborgianism, mesmerism, spiritualism, and psychical research—were reformist Buddhists, Shintoists, and Japanese Christians influenced by liberal theology. At the end of the nineteenth century, these developments occurred in the context of Buddhism and Shinto losing their social status under modernization (and, in the case of Christianity, the struggle to find a more indigenized path), reflecting attempts to reform or reinterpret these traditions in “modern” ways. Already at this early stage, a mutually embedded fusion between these traditions and so-called esoteric elements had begun to emerge. By the 1900s, individuals in secular domains—such as educators, agronomists, journalists, and politicians—began launching new ideological movements while incorporating such “esoteric” knowledge. Their practices, referred to as *seishin ryōhō* 精神療法 (psychotherapy or mind cure), *reijutsu* 霊術 (spiritual techniques), or *shūyō* 修養 (self-cultivation of mind and body), formed unique spiritual-intellectual movements. These movements, in turn, influenced broader spiritual trends in East Asia, particularly in the context of Japan's imperial expansion into the region.¹

However, no single emic term adequately encompasses the diversity of these movements in Japan. Thus, even though the elements that would later be subsumed under the concept of “esotericism” were being fused within these movements, calling them “esotericism” is inappropriate for two primary reasons. First, the very act of defining “esotericism” remains highly contested even today

(Gaitanidis and Klautau 2024: 223–6). Second, the terms “esotericism” (esoterism; fr. *ésotérisme*) and “occultism” (fr. *occultisme*) had no established translations before the 1930s and were largely unfamiliar to most people. Similarly, the English adjective “esoteric” was only occasionally used in a transliterated way by the intellectuals proficient in Western languages during the early twentieth century and influenced by A. P. Sinnett’s writings and Western “esoteric” elements—for example, to describe differences in modes of transmission in Brahmanism and Buddhism, or to characterize forms of communication that do not rely on language, such as clairvoyance and telepathy (Shibue 1909: 53–69; “Inoue Honkai Kaichō no Kōen” 1917: 74–5; Inoue 1918: 24–5). Even if the concept of “esotericism” could be somehow overlapped with some local conceptual framework—such as the Buddhist terms *mikkyō* 密教 and *kenkyō* 顕教—we must avoid readily equating them with something “esoteric.” The reason for this caution is that such local concepts, when connected to the modern Western concept “esotericism,” become incorporated into new intellectual discourses and are inevitably reorganized within hegemonic power relations.

Therefore, in order to provide a historical overview of the prehistory of the present chapter’s subject, the “occult” milieu, I will tentatively refer to them here as an etic term, the Modern Japanese Spirituality Movement, for convenience. It was the 1930s onward when transliterations of esotericism and occultism, *esoterishizumu* (*esoterisumu/ezoterisumu*) and *okaruteizumu*, began to appear sporadically in translations of European literature and introductions to the related ideas and movements. However, the term “esotericism” and its translations have only become relatively well-known among intellectual circles through works of figures such as Luc Benoist (1893–1980), Roland Edighoffer (1923–2017), Serge Hutin (1927–1997), and Antoine Faivre (1934–2021), translated by Japanese scholars of literature studies specializing in Western European languages, especially French, since the 1970s. (Even today, the term is not widely used as part of general vocabulary.)² Therefore, when esotericism is referred to in Japanese using translated terms such as *hidenshugi* 秘伝主義, *inpigaku* 隠秘学, and *hikyō* 秘教 along with its transliterations, they generally denote *Western* esotericism, which Western scholars and thinkers forged.

This also explains why the research object of the Japanese Modern Spiritual Movement since the Meiji period has been largely overlooked in Japanese religious studies until the 1970s. Research in this field, stimulated by the aforementioned Western studies of esotericism, began to develop through the work of independent researchers from the late 1970s onward, as will be clarified in this chapter. It was only in the late 2000s, building upon this foundation of

independent research and primarily through the writings of Yoshinaga Shin'ichi 吉永進一 (1957–2022), that studies in this field finally began to gain traction within academic institutions. Until then, elements of the Japanese Modern Spiritual Movement were typically treated merely as a form of indigenous or folk thought and practice in Japan, with little attention paid to its connections with the international spread of modern “esoteric” elements.³ Given that the concept of esotericism, which treats this domain as a coherent field, had been developed primarily within literary studies in Japan, and considering that interdisciplinary exchange between disciplines was limited, such a delay may have been inevitable in religious studies.

Instead, modern religious studies in Japan have predominantly focused on new religions. This term “new religions” refers to religious groups that emerged and developed in Japan, and research on them has largely emphasized institutions and organizational structures. In this context, *Seishin Sekai* 精神世界 (“spiritual world,” the Japanese counterpart of the New Age movement) from the 1980s and the spirituality boom in the 2000s have been seen as outcomes of the individualization and privatization of (new) religious movements, while their intellectual and practical engagement with the traditions of modern esotericism has not been given much attention beyond being merely treated as contextual background.⁴ This trend has been primarily driven by scholars including Shimazono Susumu (b. 1948), Nishiyama Shigeru (b. 1942), and Inoue Nobutaka (b. 1948) from the generation that participated in or closely experienced the so-called Zenkyōtō 全共闘 movement around 1968.⁵

Zenkyōtō is the abbreviation of Japanese terms meaning the All-Campus Joint Struggle Committees, and the movement refers to a large-scale student protest movement that occurred at universities across Japan. It was triggered by various issues such as tuition fee hikes, university misconduct, and systemic problems in education, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and opposition to the Japan-US Security Treaty. Here, let us briefly review the history of postwar Japanese student movements. The 1960 Anpo Struggle (protests against the US-Japan Security Treaty) was a mass movement that, while broadly involving the general public, also marked an important early instance of student activism, preceding similar student movements worldwide. It was known for the active role of the Communist League, or Bund, one of the groups later called the New Left, which had broken away from the Japan Communist Party (JCP). A few years prior to the formation of Bund, another New Left group—the Japan Trotskyist Federation (JTF), later known as the Japan Revolutionary Communist League (Kakukyōdō 革共同)—had already emerged, formed by young (former) members of the JCP including Ōta Ryū (1930–2007).

Although this group, based on a long-term revolutionary strategy, was more focused on party-building and less oriented toward mass or student movements compared to Bund, it nevertheless maintained a subsidiary student organization and, around 1968, had mobilization capacity comparable to that of Bund. As will be discussed later, figures associated with these groups and their splinter factions would also come to play a significant role in shaping the student uprisings, revolutionary movements, and revolutionary ideologies that unfolded after 1968.

At any rate, the young momentum of Bund in 1960 helped ignite the anti-Vietnam War movement as a form of citizen activism, and on campuses, it evolved into opposition to tuition hikes. In the late 1960s, as many nonsectarian students joined the struggle, these tensions culminated in the Zenkyōtō movement, which erupted in universities and high schools across Japan, criticizing not only the government but also the university system and academic institutions that underpinned the modern nation-state. In response, University administrations brought in riot police to suppress the student protests, leading many students to return to everyday life, while some activists turned to bombings and armed uprisings. Others, feeling the need for tightly organized groups with Leninist-style “iron discipline,” formed sects and descended into unending internecine conflict. Because of this series of developments, the Zenkyōtō movement has generally been regarded as a “defeat” or “setback.”⁶

However, many former activists carried the experience with them into new arenas: not only into parliamentary politics and new social movements such as environmental and antidiscrimination campaigns but also into fields such as journalism, the entertainment, art, and mass media industries, and education. They gradually permeated society with the critical consciousness that had been raised during the Zenkyōtō movement. One such field was research activities, including the study of religion. That is, some former Zenkyōtō students went on to graduate school, where they criticized the traditional religious studies that had often neglected the study of new religions, which they regarded as reflecting the will and desires of the lower or ordinary people, in the sense used by Marxists and New Leftists. Methodologically, they drew on anthropological fieldwork and sought to rewrite the history of modern religions. Some of these scholars connected their work to the broader social trend of criticizing Japan's excessive modernization and sought to appeal to Japanese society. Just as the study of new religions grew out of the research on folk religions, a key characteristic of this research trend was that scholars engaged directly with new religious groups through fieldwork, analyzing their desires and perspectives on society, and thereby identifying the main agents and variables of social change.

In contrast, it was nonacademic intellectuals who advanced research on the prewar Modern Japanese Spiritual Movement under the name of “occult” (*okaruto* オカルト)—a new concept that began circulating in the 1970s, as will be discussed later—and former Zenkyōtō activists also entered this field. These individuals were primarily active in the publishing industry as journalists and editors and sometimes wrote books to spread “esoteric” knowledge to the public. Yoshinaga, mentioned earlier, is an example of a scholar who entered academic religious studies by way of such nonacademic studies on the “occult.” The aforementioned scholars of new religious movements were mostly outsiders who sympathized with (and were sometimes critical of) religious organizations, while being embedded in structurally ingrained hierarchical power dynamics between university intellectuals and the religious masses. In contrast, the relationship between these researchers of the occult and the occult milieu was more complex. First of all, they did not hold academic positions and were both researchers and producers of occult knowledge. They were neither simple believers nor founders of any specific doctrine or practice. Their positions, although characterized by both empathy and critique, could not be easily reduced to a binary of insider/outsider; their internal and external aspects were intertwined in a rhizomatic fashion—complex and entangled.

A representative figure of such independent intellectuals is the magazine editor. Unlike the popular audiences of New Age movements or spirituality, and unlike the charismatic leaders who lead such movements or the clients who gather around them, as analyzed in the framework proposed by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (University of California Press, 1985), editors themselves played a significant role in shaping the Japanese “occult” scene from the late 1970s onward. By taking on the role of mediators of occult knowledge through magazines, rather than through mass media such as television, which promoted the pop occult or occulture, they played a crucial role in forming a more “hardcore” occult milieu and guiding the direction of occult movements.

The information and topics provided by such “occult” magazines have consistently stimulated the broader “occult” scene, including the pop occult and occulture. When examining the history of the postwar Japanese “occult,” it is precisely the editors who should be researched in detail. There is scarce academic research that focuses on these individuals,⁷ but the first clue is the collection of dialogues and interviews titled *The Chronicles of Japan's Occult Monsters (Japan Okaruto Kaijū-ki 2017)*. The “Occult Monsters” interviewed in this book refer to three editors, Takeda Sūgen 武田崇元 (b. 1950), Moriya Hiroshi 守屋汎 (b.

1944), and Shiba Hidetaka 志波秀宇 (b. 1945), who were ex-student activists in the 1960s and exerted a colossal, monster-like influence on Japan's "occult" scene, as well as Ishii Takeshi, the president of the most prolific occult publisher Hikaruland, who was influenced by them.

This paper primarily focuses on these three editors, with a threefold aim. First, it explores how "occult" phenomena became intertwined with Japan's political context, particularly their relationship with the New Left and the Zenkyōtō movement of the late 1960s. As noted earlier, when the ideas of the Zenkyōtō movement were linked to the study of new religions, scholars evaluated these religions as ideological movements of the "lower classes" or "ordinary people" and ultimately attempted to intervene from the elevated standpoint of university intellectuals. In contrast, occult studies led by independent researchers—especially editors—emerged from a position that could not be reduced to such a binary opposition between researcher and subject. In this respect, they represented a consistent inheritance of the critical perspective of the Zenkyōtō movement, which had aimed its critique directly at the university system itself. As this paper will show, these editors often established certain connections with prewar ideologies such as ultranationalism and pan-Asianism. Why did such affiliations emerge? This question leads to the second aim of this paper: to clarify the ideological and cultural role that the "occult" scene played at the intersection of radical leftist and radical rightist thought.

Through this investigation, I hope to position the history of esotericism and the occult not merely as a subset of Western or global history, but rather—deliberately—as part of "Japanese history" or "Asian history." In short, I aim to portray the postwar Japanese occult milieu, in which esotericism became explicitly intertwined, not as a case of the global diffusion of Western esotericism nor as merely a local and global entanglement within "esotericism" as the research subject, but rather as a transformation within the Modern Japanese Spirituality Movement. This attempt constitutes the third aim of this chapter. Specifically, it is a conscious demonstration of two things: first, both an exploration of the very task proposed in this volume's introduction—that is, understanding the global entanglements of "esotericism" as a research subject—and a critical reflection on the inherent politics and violence of that same task; and second, an exploration of what kind of historical narrative can possibly emerge from such a reflection. The former attempt serves to point out that deconstruction of the East/West binary and the academic endeavors that seek to depict a cultural hybridity (as discussed by Homi K. Bhabha⁸) ultimately become entangled with other forms of global power. The latter attempt is to consider how resisting it generates the

connection to another power. In other words, by employing the concept of the Modern Japanese Spirituality Movement, I am intentionally attempting to stage a certain kind of academic violence, power, resistance, and politics. In turn, this third aim involves clarifying the characteristics of the *concept* or *subject* of “esotericism” as an ideology, and—following the global student uprisings of the 1960s that challenged the power of the university and academic knowledge—considering what form scholarly knowledge is compelled to take.

The Dawn of the Modern Japanese Spirituality Movement: The Awakening of the Japanese People and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

Before moving on to “Japan’s Occult Monsters,” I will first provide an overview of the Modern Japanese Spirituality Movement, that is, several preexisting factors and situations that influenced the emergence of the postwar “occult” scene in the early 1970s. This overview will set the stage in its proper historical context.

As noted above, factors that were later often regarded by postwar scholars as constituting esotericism, such as the Theosophical Society, Swedenborgianism, spiritualism, and mesmerism, were introduced to Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through various channels. These movements were of great interest to religious seekers, new religious movements, modern Buddhism, modern Shinto, and the Japanese mind cure movement (Kurita et al. 2019), because they were seen as having the potential to reform their traditional religions. Therefore, they were transformed and assimilated with traditional Japanese practices, and led to the creation of new ideas, practices, and groups. Moreover, figures like Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921) and Percival Lowell (1855–1916) identified “occult” and “esoteric” qualities in Japanese mainstream religions such as Buddhism and Shinto, thereby reinforcing the perception of Japan as a spiritually rich and “esoteric” culture (Lowell 1895; Sinnett 1883).⁹ Some of modern “esoteric” movements, often regarded—frequently self-representing—as being in opposition to secular Western civil society and Christianity, contributed to the reevaluation of Eastern religions and cultures, while also playing a role in assimilating “esoteric” elements into mainstream Eastern culture.

Such ambivalence can be observed in the Japanese context. In the prewar period, Japanese spiritual knowledge was linked to the liberal education and democratic ideals of the Taishō period (1912–25). A good example is the Still

Sitting Meditation (*seiza* 静坐) developed by Okada Torajirō (1872–1920). Okada promoted his own thought and practice of cultivating inner spirituality by referring to Swedenborg's breathing methods, R. W. Emerson's philosophy, J. J. Rousseau's educational theory, and the thought of the agrarian reformer Ninomiya Sontoku (1787–1856). His ideas gained significant support from educational reformers (Kurita 2013: 239–67). However, as such reformist spiritual movements became radicalized, they subsequently gained hegemony within nationalistic education, ideologies, and journalism in the early Shōwa period (1925–45). By the time of the outbreak of the Pacific War, parts of these spiritual ideas had even infiltrated the core of the Ministry of Education (Kurita 2024a: 65–7, 74–5).

One representative figure was Fujisawa Chikao (1893–1962), a member of the National Spiritual Culture Research Institute managed by the Ministry. He discussed the lost continent of Mu, first proposed by Augustus Le Plongeon (1825–1908) and popularized by James Churchward (1851–1936), who identified it with “Lemuria,” which Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) had considered the ancestral land of a highly civilized humanity. Fujisawa incorporated this concept into “ultra-ancient history,”¹⁰ drawing on *Utsufumi* and *Takeuchi Monjo*, which are generally considered pseudohistorical sources, and claimed that during the age of the Japanese gods, Japan's imperial ancestors ruled Mu. On this basis, he argued that all the world's civilizations ultimately derived from ultra-ancient Japanese culture, thus supporting the slogan of “Hakkō Ichiu” 八紘一宇 (The Eight Corners of the World under One Roof) and the vision of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.¹¹ Interestingly, he said that *kan-nagara-no-michi* 神惟らの道 (the way of the gods), envisioned here as an ideal form of humanity, had to be based on *shinchi-reikaku* 神智霊覚 (theosophical and spiritual senses) and that it was understood as the rediscovery of spiritual beings that straddle the visible *kenkai* 顕界 (manifest world) and the invisible *yūkai* 幽界 (hidden spiritual world) (Fujisawa 1943a: 36, 44–5). One may indeed discern an “esoteric” perspective in this formulation. Although Fujisawa faced criticism from other nationalists, there were a considerable number of intellectuals who articulated similar visions of world history. Through rivalries and interactions among competing nationalist ideologies, they collectively played a multifaceted role in shaping the policies and ideologies of Japan at the time (Kurita 2024a: 73–81). Amid the military struggle with the Allied powers, who were portrayed in wartime slogans as embodiments of greedy Western modernism, these ideologies served a form of chauvinism. It explained Japan's

world-historical and civilizational mission and latent power, and justified the fight against and rejection of Anglo-American individualistic liberalism in the name of Asian liberation (a cause that was inextricably linked to securing Japan's supply lines and territorial ambitions).

After the Second World War, such spiritual, or “esoteric,” chauvinism appeared to have almost been wiped out from the intellectual class, primarily due to two factors: the 1945 Shinto Directive issued by the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ), which aimed to dissolve “State Shinto” and guarantee “perfect” freedom of religion to Japanese people; and the revival of “orthodox” Marxism, which had previously promoted the anti-religious movement. However, at this time, several groups served as gateways to the global spirituality movement and laid the foundations for the postwar occult movement in Japan. These included the new religious organization Seichō-no-Ie 生長の家 that grew from a Japanese mind cure (New Thought) group; the Shinto reformation group Japanese Shinto Theologian League (日本神学連盟, Nihon Shingaku Renmei); the Theosophical and yogic group Ryūōkai (竜王会); the spiritualist Japan Psychic Science Association (日本心靈科学協会); and several UFO cults. For example, during the occupation period, Seichō-no-Ie translated and introduced elements of the American New Thought movement and Yogananda's yoga philosophy, despite having propagated far right, spiritually tinged ideologies during the war. Seichō-no-Ie maintained extensive networks with other groups and was the most influential actor within the Japanese pre-occult scene around 1950. The Japanese Shinto Theologian League initially founded as a reform movement within the Nichiren Buddhist sect, gradually evolved into a multireligious occult group that incorporated elements of Shinto, yoga, theosophy, mind cure practices, Christianity, and even the Indonesian spiritual movement Subud. One of its members, Sekiguchi Nobara (1888–1967), an ex-socialist and Japanese immigrant to the United States who was incarcerated in US concentration camps¹² during the Second World War, was the first to introduce to Japan the concept of “the Aquarian Age,” as articulated in Levi H. Dowling's *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1908) and later popularized by Alice Bailey (1880–1949).¹³

However, we must not oversimplify this shift to a straightforward transition from close-minded nationalism to open-minded internationalism or globalism. From the very prewar era, this milieu had been internationally absorbing “esoteric” knowledge—forming international solidarity with specific nations and ideologies while simultaneously exhibiting exclusionism toward others.

Exclusionism and inclusivism are two sides of the same coin. This structural characteristic remained largely unchanged even in the postwar period, but it could be said that while opening solidarity to liberalism, their exclusionist tendencies became seemingly attenuated. Therefore, the ideology of these postwar Japanese Spirituality groups can be summarized as religious or spiritual liberalism, nationalistic inclusivism, and pacifism. Seichō-no-Ie clearly inherited the wartime Japanese nationalism, even though it was necessarily weakened during the occupation. These groups that had various ties to Seichō-no-Ie shared, to a greater or lesser extent, these political stances. For example, Nakazato Seikichi (1916–2002), an ex-Marxist activist against the US army's reign over Okinawa, an English teacher, and a lecturer for Seichō-no-Ie, was introduced to the Theosophical Society through Ryūōkai, whose founder, Miura Sekizō (1883–1960), referred to Alice Bailey in the earliest issues of his magazine *Shijō Ga no Hikari* (1954–), and, in 1969, Nakazato became the translator of many books related to her Arcane School.¹⁴ He explained his reason for taking on the translation work: “At a time when the student movement was running wild, and there was a great deal of turmoil, and it felt like a communist revolution was about to occur,” and, “although it may be a little presumptuous, I wanted to help awaken and develop the Japanese national spirituality, even if only a little” (Uritani 1985: 210).

What becomes evident from this historical trajectory is the paradoxical transformation of spiritually reformist intellectuals—those who were inspired by and took advantage of spiritual or “esoteric” discourses—into proponents of nationalist ideologies. While many of these figures initially engaged with spiritual knowledge as a means of inner cultivation, social reform, and the revitalization of traditional spirituality, their ideas were increasingly co-opted by, or actively aligned with, discourses of national destiny, civilizational mission, and cultural exceptionalism. This transformation was not necessarily a betrayal of their reformist aspirations but rather a rechanneling of them: some universalist aspirations embedded in spiritual liberalism were often reconfigured into culturally specific, ethnonationalist frameworks, while other universalist ideologies such as modernism, liberalism, and Marxism became embodied in specific nation states or cultures, especially during wartime. As a result, their religious and intellectual activities were characterized by a unique blend of spiritual inclusivism and political exclusivism, eclectic syncretism and ideological rigidity. These tendencies—oscillating between spiritual universalism and national particularism—would go on to shape Japan's postwar occult landscape in deeply ambivalent and influential ways.

The “Tokyo Occult Network” in the Late 1970s: The Occult Boom and Its New Left Turn

The Japanese spirituality scene underwent a decisive turn in the late 1970s. Some scholars, writing about the “occult” boom of the 1970s, have specifically discussed its cultural differences from the 1960s and noted that it was driven by the media strategy of the new religious group Agon Shū and by intellectuals of Shingon Buddhism who capitalized on the trend.¹⁵ The present chapter points out that the aftermath of the Zenkyōtō movement of 1968 played a pivotal role in shaping an important core of this boom.

To clarify that, let us examine the “Tokyo Occult Network Diagram” (see Figure 8.1, Figure 8.2), drawn by Yoshinaga Shin'ichi, who was, at the time, a figure within Takeda's intellectual circle and a contributor to his journal *Meikyū* (*Labyrinth*; Yoshinaga 1979: 38). Among groups on the diagram, GAP (established in 1961, a group inspired by Adamski's UFO theories, its journal *UFO to Uchū* [*UFO & Space*] first published in 1973), UFO Education Group (established in 1977, later led by Nirasawa Jun'ichirō [b. 1945], who became

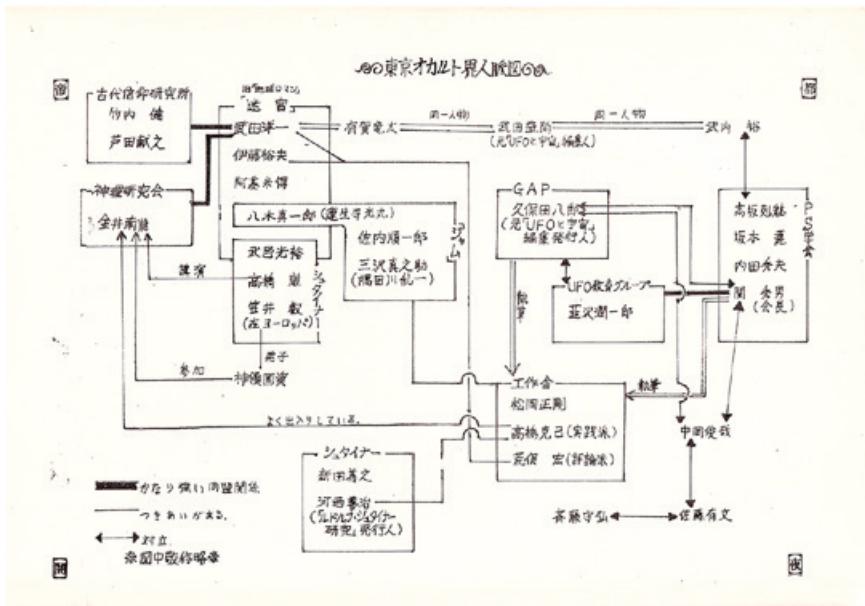


Figure 8.1 Tokyo Occult Network Diagram (*Tōkyō okarutokai jinmyakuzu* 東京オカルト界人脈図). Drawn by Yoshinaga Shin'ichi, originally published in *Piramiddo no Tomo*, no. 4 (1979), p. 38. Used with permission from his wife, Yoshinaga Yukari.

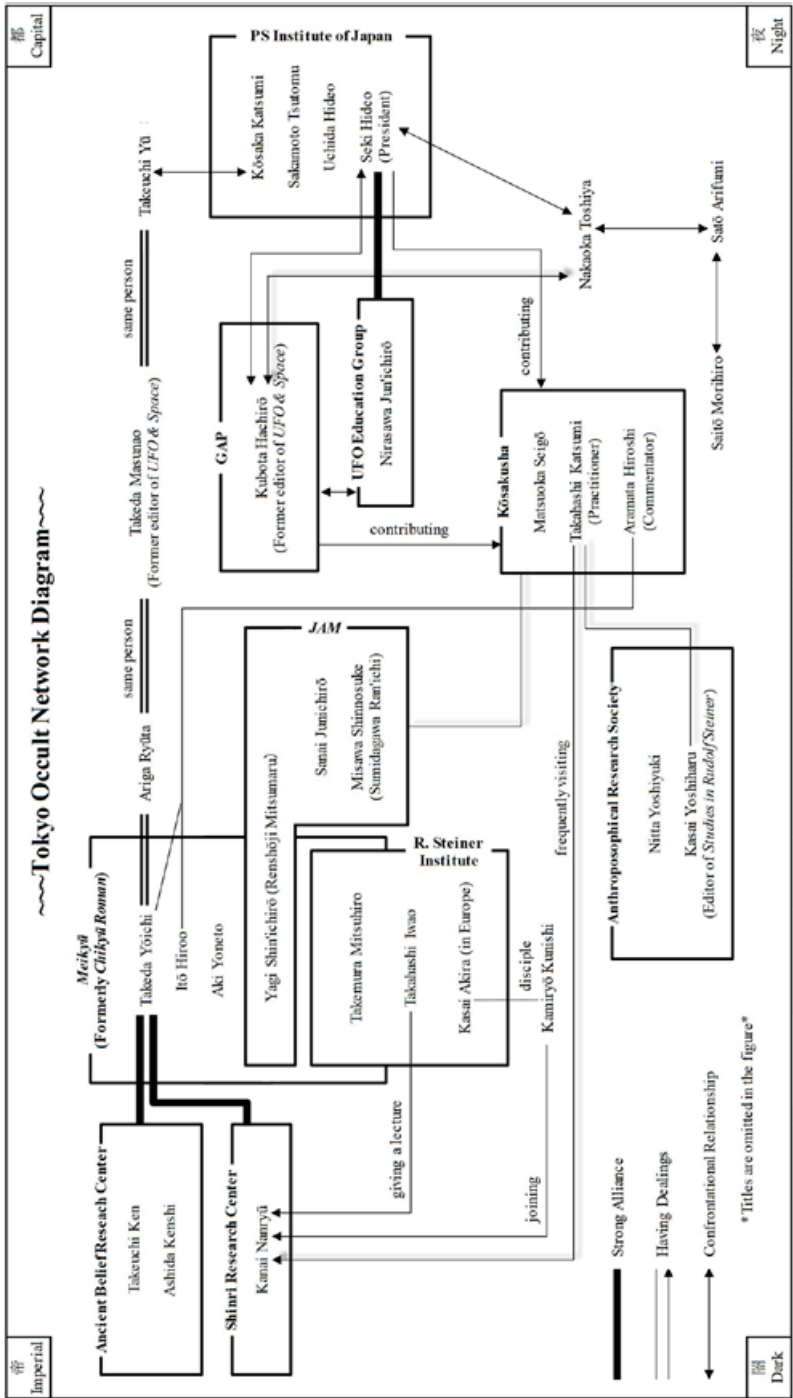


Figure 8.2 Tokyo Occult Network Diagram (English translation). Redrawn and translated by the author based on the original figure by Yoshinaga Shin'ichi. Translated and used with permission from Yoshinaga Yukari.

president of Tama Publishing), and the PS Institute of Japan (established in 1976) emerged from the previously mentioned milieu that included Japanese Shinto Theologian League and the immediate postwar UFO cults. They were interested in paranormal phenomena and aimed to conduct “scientific” research on them. They also introduced the Theosophical knowledge of Edgar Cayce and Alice Bailey, as well as New Thought, while exhibiting a conservative orientation, promoting traditional prewar Japanese values such as loyalty, filial piety, reverence for ancestors, and devotion to gods (Seki 1981: 249). In contrast, groups and publishers with ties to the New Left, or individuals with experience in the student movements of the late 1960s, included Kōsakusha (founded in 1971; its journal was *Yū*) managed by Matsuoka Seigō (1944–2024), an ex-member of a Kakukyōdō offshoot named the Revolutionary Marxist Faction (*Kakumaru-ha* 革マル派), Takeda Yōichi’s (later known as Sūgen) *Chikyū Roman* 地球ロマン (first published in 1976, later *Meikyū*, 1979), the Rudolf Steiner Institute (founded in 1981; its journal *Anthropos* first published in 1981; it later became the Japanese Anthroposophical Association from 1985, with its journal *Anthroposophy* first published in 1986), and the Anthroposophical Research Society (its journal *Modern Mysticism* first published in 1976, and *Studies in Rudolf Steiner* starting in 1977) led by Kasai Yoshiharu (1946–2009), who was a leading activist of Chuo University’s Zenkyōtō in 1968.¹⁶

Among the former groups, GAP, due to financial difficulties, underwent a change in the management of its journal *UFO and Space*, during which Takeda served as editor-in-chief. The two-way arrows shown in Figure 8.1 indicate that the former groups were fundamentally in opposition to both GAP and Takeda. Moreover, judging from the network of their interactions, it is evident that there was a clear divide between the former and the latter groups. Although it is difficult to succinctly articulate the differences between them, one notable characteristic of the latter groups is their emphasis on media strategy. This is particularly evident in the publications of Kōsakusha¹⁷ and the works produced by Takeda, where the design is clearly more sophisticated, often more pop-oriented, and the content is more diverse. This is immediately apparent when comparing the covers and table of contents of *UFO and Space* during Takeda’s tenure as editor-in-chief with those from other periods. Whereas the former groups essentially consisted of practice-oriented or research-oriented groups, with their journals serving no more than as a means of specialized information dissemination, the latter groups, composed of individuals with New Left backgrounds, envisioned broader business ventures, including founding publishing houses and selling merchandise. Through these efforts, they clearly attempted to popularize occult

knowledge, transforming it from a niche interest of a handful of enthusiasts into something more accessible to the general public.

The second point is the introduction of political elements, and the direct confrontation with the dangers it brings—namely, “madness” and “violence.” For the former groups, Marxism and revolutionary movements, including extreme nationalist movements, were merely objects of criticism. However, the latter groups actively discuss such topics in the context of the occult, occultism, esotericism, and mysticism, among which the latter three concepts had already been introduced by the 1970s. Furthermore, editors themselves agitate for some form of spiritual political movement through their journals and, at times, even establish organizations.

The third point is the element of critique or humor. In the former groups, whether it was the Japan Theological Federation or the UFO group, there was only the perspective of whether to support or oppose them, or whether to view them as external or internal, critics or believers. However, in the latter groups, there is a unique positioning of critical affirmation or humorous seriousness. This, too, can be attributed to the editors’ characteristic, as they, rather than being part of a movement or a group, carefully select and encourage certain thinkers and writers in accordance with their own intellectual or hobbyist inclinations, while simultaneously reading the trends of the times and attempting to spark a boom.

The Trajectory of Takeda Sūgen

After identifying three characteristics of the post-1960s occult milieu in Japan, especially its integration of research and practice, it can be observed that these features are most clearly exemplified by Takeda Sūgen (real name: Yōichi), who currently serves as the head of the publishing house, Hachiman Shoten. The following discussion will describe his trajectory and the influence he has exerted on the Japanese occult scene.¹⁸

In 1968, when the university protests in Japan were at their peak, Takeda enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo. It is unclear to what extent he was involved in the student movement, but it is highly likely that his interest in the New Left began during his years at Naga High School (Kobayashi 2012: 50–84, 188–90; Takeda and Yokoyama 2024: 50–68). It is certain that he was not affiliated with any faction of Bund; rather, it seems that he has maintained a lasting interest in Trotskyist thought and Kakukyōdō-lineage groups. In his

university days, he primarily studied fantasy literature and Romantic literature in the seminar of Yura Kimiyoshi, a scholar of English literature. Notably, Yura's seminar produced intellectuals such as Takayama Hiroshi and Yomota Inuhiko, who later introduced Western mysticism and esotericism into Japan in the literary field. According to Yomota, Takeda came to know Itō Hiroo, a later cofounder of *Chikyū Roman*, through a circle called "Bungaku Shūdan" (the Literary Group) and they "shared a deep scepticism toward the optimistic mood of recovery that had begun to dominate the campus after the student protests had subsided" (Yomota 2007: 68).

After graduating, Takeda briefly worked for a company but soon resigned. During this time, there was a surge in the popular occult boom, including the publication of the translation of Colin Wilson's *The Occult*, the boom of Goto Ben's *Nosutoradamusu no Daiyogen* (*Nostradamus's Great Prophecies*; 1973), and the rise of mass interest in Uri Geller (1974). At the same time, the aesthete Takahashi Iwao (1928–2024) published *Shinpigaku Josetsu* (*Introduction to Occult Science*; 1975), positioning Steiner within the history of philosophy while introducing occultism in a manner that could withstand academic scrutiny. Amid these developments, Takeda made his debut as a writer under the pen name Takeuchi Yū with *Nihon no Piramiddo* (*The Pyramids of Japan*; Tairiku Shobō, 1975), and later became the editor-in-chief of *Chikyū Roman*. What Takeda sought to achieve here was the establishment of a political and critical discourse of the hardcore occult that both aligned with and diverged from these prevailing trends. His political stance was clearly new-leftist, especially post-1968, reflecting a postcolonial turn that critiqued civil society and focused on minorities. From this perspective, he reinterpreted the discourses of Japanese new religions and ultra-ancient history not as reflections of the popular mentality but as expressions of Japan's hidden revolutionary movements and highly technological discourse.

For example, in *Nihon no Piramiddo*, Takeda reinterpreted the Judeo-Japanese common ancestry theory advocated by the prewar Christian missionary Sakai Katsutoki (1874–1940), who had aligned himself with the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere ideology. Rather than accepting Sakai's view, Takeda proposed that an ultra-ancient civilization had once existed in Japan, capable of constructing pyramids considered to be devices for controlling the Earth's geomagnetism some twenty to thirty thousand years ago. He argued that the indigenous people of Japan (the Jōmon people, the indigenous people said to have inhabited the Japanese archipelago before the arrival of the Yayoi) had been oppressed by the imperial state centred on the emperor system. These

Jōmon people, he claimed, were one of the lost tribes of Israel, the original Jews, and shared a common ancestry with Jesus, who rebelled against the Pharisees, as well as with Trotsky, who not only led the Russian Revolution advocating world revolution but also later rebelled against Stalin's Soviet Union. Consequently, Takeda incited the view that overthrowing the emperor-centered state, the descendants of the Yayoi people, and liberating the indigenous Jōmon people—the original Jews—would itself constitute a world revolution. From this perspective, he expressed a sense of “historical fate” in seeing that Ōta Ryū, founder of JTF, also known as the Japanese section of the Fourth International, was moving from advocating the liberation of the Ainu people toward calling for the liberation of the Jōmon people (Takeuchi 1975: 103).

Moreover, the book claimed that this ultra-ancient civilization not only possessed iron-making techniques far ahead of the conventional view that such techniques began around four thousand years ago in Western Asia, but also had implemented biological transmutation of elements—a concept that had stirred debate after being “discovered” by Louis Kervran (1901–1983) in the early 1960s, and which was regarded as pseudoscience by the late 1960s. The supporting evidence for this claim is found in the concept of “Mitorokaeshi” described in the ultra-ancient text *Katakamuna Bunken*, as well as the electromagnetic control technology attributed to the arrangement of megaliths, referred to as “Iyashirochi” in the documents. While other ultra-ancient texts, such as *Takeuchi Monjo*, *Hotsuma Tsutae*, and *Miyashita Monjo*, were either established or “discovered” before the war and are primarily historical records, *Katakamuna Bunken* was transmitted by the electrical engineer Narasaki Kōgetsu (1899–1974) in 1949 and is regarded as an ancient technological manual. This characteristic makes it distinct, as it reflects not nostalgia for the ancient world but rather a progressive hope for unknown scientific advancements that even modern science cannot grasp. This theory is repeated in *Nihon no Kirisuto Densetsu* (*The Christ Legend of Japan*; Tairiku Shobō, 1976) written under the same pen name, and later expanded upon in Takeda's ally Aki Yoneto's *Nazo no Katakamuna Bunmei: Hikyō Kagaku no Saishū Mokushi* (*The Mysterious Katakamuna Civilization: The Final Revelation of Occult Science*; Tokuma Shoten, 1981), where it is detailed in connection with esoteric traditions such as alchemy and occult principles.

At the same time, in relation to the discourse developed in not only these books but also *Chikyū Roman* and *Meikyū*, a book titled *Mokushiroku no Daihakyoku* (*The Great Catastrophe in the Apocalypse*; 1980) argued that these works “attempt to subtly infiltrate the intellectual and academic spheres with

strange teachings from the so-called hidden Shinto, including the theory of the common ancestry of the Japanese and Jews, along with European occultism,” labeling them as forms of “left-wing nationalism” or “occult fascism.” Its writer, using the pen name Ariga Ryūta after Agarthā (a mystical underground world in occult traditions), was in fact Takeda. Under the name Ariga, Takeda engaged in criticism of fascism while simultaneously promoting conspiracy theories based on apocalyptic end-times prophecies (Ariga 1980: 203–4).

While mimicking left-wing factional conflicts within the occult scene in this way, it cannot be said that Takeda was merely joking or engaging in ironic criticism. In a later 1988 interview in a critique magazine *GS*, Takeda retrospectively observed that, given the collapse of the radical New Left movements after 1970, he had anticipated that their next vector would be directed toward natural foods and ultra-ancient history. He remarked, “I already had the calculation at the time that I should give that situation a little kick in the back” (Takeda 1988: 112). Such a “calculation” surely existed in him, and it retained a critical nuance but also carried a strong sense of practical engagement. In the early 1980s, he stated, “rather than having a hundred thousand social democrats read it, it’s better to have three hundred fascists! That’s the catchphrase of *Meikyū*. ... By ‘fascists,’ we mean something closer to the Bolshevik concept among ordinary citizens ... that is, the Children of Light (Illuminoids), those superhuman individuals endowed with spiritual activism” (Takeda 1981: 12–20; Hisayama 1993: 89–90). In 1983, adopting the pen name Sūgen for the first time, Takeda wrote *Deguchi Onisabrō no Reikai karano Keikoku* (*Deguchi Onisaburō’s Warnings from the Spirit World*; Kōbunsha). In this book, he reinterpreted Deguchi Onisaburō, conventionally seen as a leading figure of the new religious group “Ōmotokyō,” as a prophet of the technological advancements of modern media, closing the work with the hope for a future leader who would inherit the mission of spiritual revolution. Here we find Takeda not as a planner executing a strategy from a lofty perspective, but rather as one engaging in practical agitation through repeated trial and error. That same year, he even went so far as to engage in clear factional, vanguard-like activities, holding a dialogue with the nationalist right-winger Tsune Hironaru in the magazine *Reconquista* published by a famous nationalist group Issuikai, forming the Buddhist Bund “Bodhisattva Party,” and founding the New Order Study Group (Hisayama 1993).

However, this attempt to form a political party ultimately appears to have failed. Afterward, Takeda focused on his work at Hachiman Shoten, and the company has since become a publisher known for releasing high-quality underground religious materials and related works, catering to the core occult

scene as well as certain academicians. However, the new discourse created by Takeda's books and journals would come to have a profound influence on the Japanese occult milieu after the 1980s.

Moriya Hiroshi and Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories

Takeda's hardcore occult discourse not only circulated through his own publications and books but also found demand in educational magazines for children. In 1979, Gakken, the publisher of these magazines, noticed this and planned to launch a magazine specializing in the occult. Takeda joined the planning team at its inception. This magazine is now Japan's most famous and popular occult information magazine, *Mu*, and Takeda still serves as its advisor.

The success of *Mu* prompted major publishers to seriously consider launching occult magazines and books. From the 1980s to the 1990s, commercial publishers released several occult-themed magazines, including: *Fukashigi* (Meibunsha, 1983–?), *Twilight Zone* (Successor to *UFO to Uchū*, World Photo Press, 1983–9), *God Magazine* (Tokuma Shoten, discontinued within 1985), *Wonder Life* (Shogakukan, 1988–92), *AZ* (Shin Jinbutsu Ōraisha, 1987–95), and *Borderland* (Kadokawa Haruki Jimusho, 1996–7). All these magazines were short-lived, but here we focus on Tokuma Shoten and Shogakukan, because from these two companies emerged two “Occult Monsters”: Moriya Hiroshi and Shiba Hidetaka.

Although Tokuma Shoten is known as the publisher that played a central role in establishing Studio Ghibli in 1985, it also launched the occult magazine *God Magazine* that same year to rival *Mu*. The magazine, which was discontinued after just three issues, had Moriya Hiroshi as its editor-in-chief. Moriya, during his time at Keio University, had been the chairman of the student council in the Faculty of Law.¹⁹ After the 1960 Anpo Struggle, student activism temporarily declined nationwide. However, at Keio and a few other universities, student protests against tuition hikes gained momentum, paving the way for the 1968 student movements. Many nonsectarian students participated in the protests, although a New Left student organization influenced by Palmiro Togliatti's strategy controlled the student self-governing association. From the perspective of Japanese history of social movements, Moriya can be seen as a transitional figure between the mass protests of the 1960 Anpo Struggle and the 1968 Zenkyōtō movement. After graduating, Moriya joined Tokuma Shoten, though he initially had no particular interest in the occult.

Moriya's involvement in the occult world began in the late 1970s to early 1980s. During this period, he associated with figures such as Takeda Sūgen, Kanai Nanryū (1917–1989, a hidden Shinto activist), Yagiri Tomeo (1914–1987, an independent historian), Uryū Ryōsuke (1935–2012, a pioneer of Japanese avant-garde theater and acupuncturist), Saji Yoshihiko (1924–2009?, an independent scholar of ancient history), Kōsaka Katsumi (1947–2002, a researcher of UFO and non-canonical Japanese ancient texts), and Nishigaito Kensuke (1942–2014, a New Left–related lawyer and author on Ainu and Jōmon cultures). Thus, he frequented a milieu where the aforementioned Tokyo occult scene, the New Left circles, and the independent historians' world intersected. Inspired by these interactions, Moriya began to enthusiastically take on the role of editor for the books of Yamada Kuehiko (1937–), who claimed that a form of mystical science far surpassing modern science existed in ancient times, based on his unique interpretation of the *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*).²⁰

However, the writer to whom Moriya was most deeply devoted was Ōta Ryū. Moriya directly conversed with Ōta at the publication party for Ōta's *Shiteki Sengo Sayoku Shi* (*A Private History of the Postwar Left*; 1985) (Ōta Ryū Kinenkai 2016: 315). Ōta was known as one of the earliest figures in Japan to shift from being a member of the Communist Party to a Trotskyist in the mid-1950s, founding JTF, or Kakukyōdō, and becoming a pioneer of the Japanese New Left movement. He was involved in both the 1960 Anpo Struggle and the 1968 student movements, and after the 1970s, he supported the Ainu ethnic movement and became an ideological backbone of the East Asian Anti-Japan Armed Front, which committed a series of bombings including the 1974 Mitsubishi Heavy Industries bombing. Through this trajectory, he developed his ideas on the indigenous peoples of Japan, became engrossed in one of Japan's ultra-ancient texts, *Katakamuna Bunken*, and eventually found himself drawn to the natural food movement and natural farming practices. By the 1980s, he had become known as one of the early leaders of Japan's environmental protection movement. From there, he moved into animal rights activism, the campaign for the abolition of animal testing, and later to conspiracy theories about the pharmaceutical-industrial complex, and then the conspiracy theories about the Committee of 300, Jewish conspiracy theories, and even reptilian conspiracy theories.

Ōta's conspiracy theories were developed under the influence of works by the wartime anti-Semitic conspiracy theory group Kokusai Seikei Gakkai, with which Sakurazawa Yukikazu (1893–1966), the founder of macrobiotics whom Ōta deeply admired, had been involved. At the same time, as demonstrated by

the collaboration between a faction of Bund, the Japanese Red Army, and the PLO, the Japanese New Left had already maintained an anti-Israel stance since the 1970s. In addition, there is no doubt that one of the key factors behind the interest in the “Jewish question” among people in New Left circles from the 1980s onward was Israel’s invasion of Lebanon. Oda Makoto (1932–2007), a prominent Japanese anti-Vietnam War activist, launched a major campaign in solidarity with the PLO and against Israel in 1983 (Itagaki et al. 1985).²¹

Moriya greatly admired and was deeply influenced by Ōta, but it is highly likely that, conversely, Moriya played a significant role in supporting Ōta’s rise to prominence as a conspiracy theorist. Indeed, Tokuma Shoten began handling works related to Jewish conspiracy theories even before Ōta. In 1986, Tokuma Shoten published a two-volume book by Uno Masami (b. 1942) titled *Yudaya ga Wakaru to Sekai ga Miete Kuru* (*When You Understand the Jews, the World Becomes Clear*), which sold over a million copies. Uno had a profound understanding of the Old Testament and had published some works in which he interpreted global affairs based on his own biblical study. His early works were clearly pro-Jewish, presenting a positive view of the influence of Jews on world affairs, and Uno even had meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (Uno 1982: 2). His two-volume bestsellers also praised the intellectual abilities of the Jewish people, while incorporating *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as a source. However, his questioning of the Holocaust sparked criticism from the international community. This controversy led Uno to clearly shift toward anti-Zionism (Uno 1993: 2),²² and Tokuma Shoten subsequently ceased publishing his works. Nevertheless, due to the book’s commercial success, Tokuma Shoten continued to publish books on Jewish conspiracy theories by other authors, and Moriya played a significant role as an editor for such works. According to Moriya, however, these books did not “delve into the true nature of Judaism in such a direct manner.”²³ Compared to other conspiracy theory books published by Tokuma Shoten during this period, which focused on economic analysis and the exposure of conspiracies by American or Jewish international capital, Ōta’s discussions extended into a comparative study of Japanese and Jewish civilizations and explored their differences from ancient historical origins, leading up to present-day lifestyle issues, including the natural food movement. In fact, like Ōta, Moriya also paid attention to lifestyle matters such as natural food, which even included alternative medical treatments such as urine therapy.

At any rate, the publication of conspiracy theory books by the company around 1990 progressed amid the tension between the dual motivations of Moriya’s personal beliefs and the publication of bestsellers on the one hand, and Tokuma

Shoten's self-censorship as they were promoting Studio Ghibli in international markets on the other. Due to the need to respond to self-censorship, instead of publishing direct works, Moriya released Ōta's translation of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory work, John Coleman's *The Conspirator's Hierarchy: The Story of the Committee of 300*, in 1994. However, according to Moriya, because the book "went into reprint and sold well," it "caught the attention of the company's surveillance mechanism and was forced out of print through self-censorship" (Ōta Ryū Kinenkai 2016: 316–17). This led to Moriya leaving Tokuma Shoten in 1997 to establish a publishing production company, through which he proposed and published translations and original works by Ōta Ryū to various publishers.

Shiba Hidetaka's *Wonder Life* and the Ancient Imperial Army of Zain

Now, let us move on to the final occult monster. Shiba Hidetaka originally aspired to become a manga artist and was a member of a university manga club during his college years. However, feeling a lack of talent, he gave up on his dream of becoming a manga artist. Nevertheless, determined to be involved in manga production in some way, he joined Shōgakukan 小学館, a publisher of comic magazines, in 1967. In 1969, he became an editor for the comic magazine *Big Comic*, where he was assigned as the editor-in-charge of Tezuka Osamu (1928–1989), the most famous manga artist in Japan (Satō 2018). It is worth noting that Waseda University, Shiba's alma mater, was also known for being an early focal point of the Zenkyōtō movement. At the end of 1965, fierce student protests against tuition hikes and control of the student hall broke out, to which the university authorities responded by bringing in riot police. Although Shiba described himself as "non-sectarian" and "non-political," he recalled that, during the deployment of riot police at the university, he had become enraged and rushed to the campus, joining a faction of demonstrators throwing stones (Shiba 1993: 51–2). At that moment, he clearly recognized that "state power" and the riot police as "its symbol" were "my enemies" (Shiba 1993: 52). However, it seems that Shiba did not have much experience with activism. Rather, it was through his work at Shōgakukan and his involvement with occult magazines that his political awakening took place.

Shōgakukan, founded in 1922, is a leading Japanese publishing house that produced a large number of educational magazines for children. Furuoka Hideto (1908–1994), the founder of Gakken, was originally an employee of Shōgakukan

as well. After working in the *Big Comic* editorial department, Shiba moved to the editorial team of the educational magazine *Shōgaku Rokunensei* (lit. the Sixth Grader), where he served as deputy editor-in-chief, while also submitting a proposal in 1987 to the company for an occult magazine titled *Monthly SIVA* (which, notably, references both the Hindu god and his own name). Shiba himself did not expect the project to be approved so quickly, but it was immediately accepted, and the following year, the bimonthly magazine launched under the new name *Wonder Life* (Wandā Raifu in Japanese pronunciation), with Shiba serving as editor-in-chief (Shiba et al. 2017: 165–7). This smooth start was likely supported by the rise in popular interest in occult and spiritual matters during the 1980s and the success of the magazine *Mu*.

In fact, early issues of *Wonder Life* covered an extremely wide range of topics: Nessie, the Yeti, New Science, extraterrestrials and UFOs, the afterlife, healing, channeling, Celtic folklore, life-energy, tarot, science fiction, reincarnation, ancient civilizations, apocryphal histories, spirit photography, prophecy, Qigong, Buddhist ritual magic, occultism, psychic powers, and *yōkai* (Japanese supernatural creatures), among others. One could say that the magazine's content was comprehensive in a positive sense, or derivative of *Mu* in a negative one. However, a decisive turning point came with Issue No. 9 (January 1990). In this issue, the magazine established the Wandara Special Investigation Unit (Wandara is an abbreviation of the magazine title), through which it began issuing missions to readers and reporting their findings in the following issue.

The first mission was “Decode the arrangement of ancient ruins remaining around you!” Subsequent missions included “Investigate the secrets behind your family name!” (Mission No. 3), “Observe UFOs!” (Mission No. 4), “Attempt time travel!” (Mission No. 8), “Defeat the word monsters!” (Mission No. 12), and “Embrace ambition, agents!” (Mission No. 13), among others. Those whose reports were accepted received a membership card with an agent number and a commemorative gift. Accumulating points could lead to promotions in rank, and sometimes the special investigation unit engaged in group activities such as hiking or building hot air balloons. This style of actively involving readers became a major hallmark of *Wonder Life*. By the magazine's final issue, the number of agents (i.e., those whose mission reports had been accepted) had reached 173. Rather than simply contributing to the magazine's sales, it brought about the excitement of participating in the formation of a movement that went beyond the ordinary relationship between editor and reader. In September 1991, the Wandara Special Investigation Unit launched its own newsletter, *Sendō* (義道, meaning a small tunnel leading into the main chamber of a *kofun*, an ancient

burial mound) and after *Wonder Life* was discontinued due to financial losses, the unit continued its activities.

Behind this development was an editorial policy that prioritized ideology over sales. According to Shiba's statement in the final issue, *Wonder Life* had steadily increased its circulation up to Issue No. 11, but growth stalled thereafter. Since it was no longer financially sustainable, the editorial team considered changing the magazine's direction. However, they were unwilling to pursue "popular spiritual topics, questionable information about UFOs, discussions of guardian spirits or ancestor worship, or features introducing new religious movements." They also rejected "sensational topics that irresponsibly stirred up end-of-the-century anxieties," because they had declared a commitment to "pursuing the truth" and firmly believed in an "epochal transformation at the turn of the century" (Shiba 1992: 211). This conviction stemmed from the deep devotion of Shiba and the magazine's core editorial members to occult sciences, particularly to one systematized by a Theosophist astrologer Kojima Rokan (b. 1940). Yasuda Ryūichi, an editorial staff member and the leader of the Wandara Special Investigation Unit, became a passionate supporter of the Ancient Imperial Army (also known as Zain),²⁴ led by Kojima, and through Yasuda's introduction, Shiba also joined as a "soldier" of the group. After Kojima's first contribution to the magazine in Issue No. 12, his articles were published in almost every issue thereafter. By the final issue, the magazine's "Information Corner" was filled exclusively with various "initiations" offered by Zain and recruitment advertisements for soldiers and auxiliary soldiers of the Ancient Imperial Army.

Here, let us briefly explain Zain. In 1986, Kojima Rokan first appeared in the occult milieu through his collaboration with Nakazato Seikichi to translate Alice Bailey's *Initiation: Human and Solar* into Japanese. Later, in 1988, following the conjunction of Uranus (the star of revolution) and Saturn (the star of conservatism), Kojima proclaimed that the world had entered an era of "conservative revolution," that is, a "restoration of monarchy" (Kojima 1992a: 3–5).²⁵ He asserted that the resurrection of the ancient empire (the Zain Empire), already completed in Heaven, must now be realized on Earth through what he called the "Z Plan" or "Heaven's Plan." According to Kojima, this ancient empire governed the continent of Mu and was later inherited by the royal dynasty established by Ho-no-Ninigi (Ninigi-no-Mikoto), the mythical ancestor of the Japanese imperial family, in ancient Japan (Kojima 1992a: 3). At the core of Kojima's theory lay Theosophical astrology, particularly as interpreted by Alice Bailey. However, unlike Bailey's Theosophy, which just anticipates the Reappearance of the Christ (or Maitreya), Kojima assigned himself the political

mission of physically realizing the empire on Earth. Therefore, in 1990, he established the Galactic Imperial Army (renamed the Ancient Imperial Army in the following year) as the political organization to undertake this task. Thus, in the later period of *Wonder Life*, especially through the activities of the Wandara Special Investigation Unit, the magazine functioned as a recruitment platform for Zain. In fact, most of Zain's early core members were originally readers of *Wonder Life*. Based on astrological interpretations, Zain predicted a major earthquake would strike the Tokyo metropolitan area in July 1994. The group increasingly voiced its critiques of modern civilization through publications and street demonstrations. Within the Ancient Imperial Army, it came to be believed that Zain would eventually launch an armed uprising, seize political power, and restore the monarchy. The (ex-) *Wonder Life* readers actively participated in military training to prepare for this armed uprising (Temochi 2013).

Shiba commented on *hikyō* sciences and Kojima as follows:

I am strongly attracted to what is called the *hikyō* [esoteric or occult] scientific system. At first, I dismissed it outright, assuming it to be merely part of the so-called *Seishin Sekai*, and did not even bother to read about it. My interest was much stronger in cutting-edge physics and astrophysics. The turning point came when I encountered *Katakamuna Bunken*. Although these documents were considered an apocryphal work, they contained astonishing claims such as cold nuclear fusion and biological transmutation of elements. ... I believe that Mr. Kojima Rokan has mastered such an occult scientific system and even developed his own unique methods of interpretation. However, although he himself denies it, his words and actions sometimes give the impression of being those of a religious figure. As for religion, I personally cannot accept it at all. Mr. Kojima possesses a certain charisma, and that probably makes it difficult for him to be accepted by the general public. ("Wandara Kurabu" 1992: 203)

Shiba's understanding of *Katakamuna Bunken* can be seen as having been mediated through the *Chikyū Roman* group such as Takeda and Aki, and this clearly led him to a reevaluation of occult sciences. However, what deserves particular attention here is that, although Shiba deeply acknowledged Kojima in terms of "occult science," he did not become as devoted to him as Yasuda did, maintaining a certain critical distance. After the discontinuation of *Wonder Life*, Yasuda and others launched the Mahoroba Project ("Mahoroba" means an ideal land in old Japanese) continuing *Sendō* as a de facto organ of Zain's propaganda: the aforementioned prediction of the major earthquake first appeared in this magazine.

In contrast, Shiba and his editorial team, the End-of-Century Countermeasures Committee, launched a new journal, *Setsudan* (切断, Cutting). While they showed a deep admiration for Kojima, going so far as to have him decide on the journal title, they also allocated an equal amount of space to the writings of Ōta Ryū, whose view on *Katakamuna Bunken* Shiba found sympathetic, and to those of the group associated with Tokuma Shoten's network, who discussed the Jewish problem as part of world affairs analysis. This editorial policy invited criticism from Kojima and Yasuda, and after a debate in *Setsudan* in July 1994, Shiba ended his relationship with them. Zain failed in its earthquake prophecy, moved on to selling expensive amulets and talismans, and later attracted journalistic attention as a so-called sex cult; however, since this chapter focuses on editors, a more detailed description of Zain will have to be omitted.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have traced the trajectories of occult editors from the late 1970s to the 1990s. The new left-wing political turn of the occult, led by Takeda, can be seen as having evolved in the case of Moriya into more populist conspiracy theories, and in the case of Shiba into activities that could be described as "occult-fascist." As mentioned at the outset, these editors were deeply involved in the occult milieu and engaged in the production of occult knowledge, yet they were neither simple believers nor charismatic leaders of any group. However, this does not mean that they treated occult knowledge merely as a commodity, nor that they lacked their own political beliefs. Rather, it can be said that they translated into occult knowledge the radical tendencies toward a transformation nurtured by the political atmosphere of the 1960s and early 1970s, such as world revolution, armed uprising, anti-modernism, and criticism of modern civilization. This tendency was distinct from both the peace movement-influenced pre-occult atmosphere immediately after the Second World War and the spirituality after the 2000s, which has focused more on inner transformation. It should be clearly noted that, amid this intersection of radical transformation and occult aspirations, the well-known series of incidents caused by Aum Shinrikyo emerged.

Since the Aum Shinrikyo incidents, it is often said that, with the exception of *Mu*, occult magazines met their demise, radical occult discourse declined, and a more individualistic and inward-looking spirituality became mainstream. However, there are several problems with this kind of generalization. Here, there

are two points that need to be addressed. First is the problem of nationalism. As we have seen, radical occult discourses were not necessarily confined to anti-civic, small groups like Aum Shinrikyo or Zain. In all the cases discussed here, we observed how the anti-Western modernism seemingly inherent in the occult justified a reevaluation of ancient, or Jōmon, Japan, which in turn contributed to the awakening of a broad sense of nationalism. Alternatively, through critiques of modern societal problems, conspiracy theories emerge, and within this framework, Japan is discussed as the victim of the conspiratorial agents or the possessor of a civilization distinct from that of these agents. Criticism of modern civilization and anti-modernism are not irrelevant to the supposedly individualistic spirituality either. Such critical consciousness can deeply and plurally connect with nationalism and foster a sense of collectivity.

The second point is the issue that by focusing too much on groups or individuals, the political nature of the media and editors themselves tends to be overlooked. The occult milieu (and, more globally, the esoteric milieu) is neither a specific group nor an individual, but rather a space of discourse and ethos constituted by media and the editors who connect them. Since research on new religions has centred on religious organizations and their believers, it has rarely taken up media and editors as primary subjects. As a result, esotericism, which has continuously transformed within this milieu, remained difficult to perceive. Similarly, those who engage in political agitation do not necessarily belong to a specific group or clearly present a particular ideology in an easily understandable way. The editors discussed here did not lose their radical political orientation after the Aum incident. Takeda, in his revised edition of *Deguchi Onisaburō's Warnings from the Spirit World* (Gakken, 2013), reinterprets Onisaburō's prophecies in connection with Antonio Negri's discussion on "Empire" and his concept of the "multitude," as well as Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*. Moriya, having revived the publications of Ōta Ryū (who passed away in 2009), has vigorously continued to launch publishing projects with the mission of promoting his books and attempting to intervene in the recent conspiracy theory trends. Shiba, after breaking away from Zain, has deepened his ties with nationalist right-wing groups and appears to have seriously explored the potential for a "conservative revolution" (or "right-wing revolution," as Shiba would say in the first issue of *Sotsuaku*²⁶) that Zain had abandoned (Yamato 1994: 74), all while steadily climbing the corporate ladder at Shōgakukan until retirement.

Furthermore, all three figures have, in various ways, connected back beyond the postwar pre-occult atmosphere to the discourses of imperial Japan in the 1930s, which also ties into the previously mentioned issue of the plurality of

nationalism. In this regard, it is particularly interesting that Shiba's latest book on *Katakamuna Bunken* (Kita 2015) weakens the discussion about ultra-ancient civilizations and acknowledges its fabricated nature, instead focusing on the role of its discoverer Narasaki Kōgetsu's activities when he worked with military personnel during wartime and immediately after the end of the Second World War in terms of why he fabricated *Katakamuna Bunken*, and even extending to a reconsideration of the Japanese Army's activities in Manchuria. Although Shiba's narratives are not always consistent, his perspective on so-called pseudo-history and occult science resonates with recent academic research on pseudo-history. This is not meant to praise Shiba's work uncritically. Rather, it highlights the fact that researchers themselves, while neither simple believers, charismatic leaders, nor mere critics, inevitably become political media who engage in the reproduction of such discourses.

Therefore, in the study of the occult and esotericism, one must pay attention not only to the novelty and critical nature of one's arguments but also to the underlying political implications. What role are we currently playing, and what kind of discourse are we weaving amid the present political transformation? These are the very questions we must direct toward ourselves—even as we continue to engage in the production of such discourse through scholarly research. For, in the aftermath of the Zenkyōtō movement, which carried out thorough critiques of the university system and institutional academia, the position of universities, of academia, and of researchers can no longer claim political neutrality. Just as researchers of new religions, by relying on the “lower classes” (“subaltern masses”) or “ordinary people,” could only conceal rather than escape their own political privilege, so too is it no longer straightforward to claim that deconstructively criticizing the Eurocentrism and essentialism of “Western esotericism” and depicting the complex entanglement between “global” and “local” (in this case, “Asian”) under the research perspective of “esotericism” necessarily overcomes the former. These are not merely structurally equivalent. Rather, the very attempt to deconstructively dismantle and complicate categories like “the West,” “the East,” and “Japan”—the last of which readers may replace with their own ethnicity—can itself serve as a more sophisticated form of political concealment, particularly as the capitalist politico-economic system originating from Western modernity continues to envelop the entire globe, simultaneously absorbing local particularities into its folds. The outcome of the Zenkyōtō movement posed a sharp challenge not only to universities and the nation state but also to New Left factions and their “internationalism,” exposing the violence lurking behind claims to universality in such endeavors. It is no coincidence

that the occult editors influenced by the New Left, instead of leaping too readily toward universality or confining themselves to deconstructive descriptions of a “Japanese occult history,” have, through a process of deconstructive dismantling, attempted to confront and take on what might be called “Japanese madness” and deliberately reconstruct that history anew. The more one confronts this problematic, the more unavoidable such an approach becomes.

Actually, approaches such as these editors adopted have been inherited by some religious scholars and have become a significant aspect of Japanese religious studies since the 2000s. This is evident in the research on modern Buddhism, esotericism, and Japanese mind cure movements by Yoshinaga Shin’ichi (2021, 2024), influenced by Takeda Sūgen,²⁷ and in the study of German modern religious history, including the *völkisch* religious movement, by Fukazawa Hidetaka (2006), an ex-member of Kasai Yoshiharu’s Anthroposophical Research Society. Both researchers position religious practitioners and religious scholars simultaneously as research subjects within the processes of decontextualization and recontextualization of “religious” knowledge. Their works, while keeping an editorial distance from the field, were created through their self-reflective examination and acceptance of the reality that religious scholars, as media producers, are compelled to provide practical knowledge about religion. Furthermore, inheriting the 1968 Zenkyōtō movement’s critiques of academic knowledge, their works reintroduce these questions back into academia. Moreover, it is this very integration of research, practice, and the reproduction of knowledge that consciously constitutes the esoteric endeavor itself. This very perspective, which has become a blind spot for scholars of new religions due to their tendency to obscure their own positionality (including privileges as university intellectuals, as well as nationality/ethnicity, citizenship, and political stance), is one of the key reasons why esotericism has emerged as a field of growing scholarly attention.

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The Transformation of Korean *Tanhak* Through Globalization: The New Age Movement and the Worldwide Expansion of Dahn World

Mitsuaki Sassa

Introduction

In contemporary Korea, the term “esotericism” is not commonly used by the general public, and even among scholars specializing in religious studies, few pay much attention to this concept. In Japan and China, the term “esotericism” is often translated as *hikyō* 秘教 (Ch. *mijiao*), but in Korea, this term is rarely used. However, this is not to say that there has been nothing comparable to esotericism in Korean history. In Korea, there are religious traditions comparable to what is called esotericism in the West. One representative example is *tanhak* (단학 [丹學]), a form of Chinese Daoist alchemy. Alchemy is an important part of Western esotericism (Hanegraaff 2013: 24), but it also developed in China as a technique for producing the elixir of immortality.

Chinese alchemy is classified into *waidan* 外丹 (external alchemy, which produces the elixir of immortality through chemical techniques) and *neidan* 內丹 (internal alchemy, which aims to achieve an immortal body through the cultivation of one’s own spiritual power). Of these, the practice of *neidan* was transmitted to Korea (Murakami [1983] 1993: 297). The exact time when Chinese *neidan* was introduced to Korea is not known. Historical documents indicate that at least by the middle of the Chosŏn period (1392–1910), the *neidan* training method was secretly transmitted through personal relationships between masters and disciples (Ch’a 1990: 60–2). *Neidan* was closely related to the practices of *yangsheng* 養生 (health preservation) and was also known as *xiandao* 仙道 (Kr.

sŏndo [선도]), the Way of Immortal) within Chinese Daoism, but in Korea it was known as *tanhak*, the study of making the elixir *tan* (단[丹]).

This chapter examines the fact that the *tanhak* practice, systematized during the Chosŏn period, has been revived in contemporary Korea and has become widely known as a mind-body exercise for health. In this regard, this chapter focuses on how the existing *tanhak* practice was significantly transformed by modernization. The *tanhak* practice of Korea was originally introduced from China. However, in contemporary Korea, *tanhak* is recognized as a uniquely Korean practice that has been transmitted since ancient times. Furthermore, the content of *tanhak* training methods practiced in contemporary Korea has undergone significant changes to accommodate modern lifestyles. This chapter aims to examine how both the discourse surrounding *tanhak* and its associated training methods underwent transformation in the course of modernization.

To this end, this chapter focuses on the activities of Dahn World (단[丹]월드).¹ It was originally named Tanhak Sŏnwŏn (단학선원[丹學仙院], Tanhak Immortal Academy) and was founded by Yi Sŭng-hŏn (이승헌[李承憲]) in 1985. At its founding, it was a small organization for health promotion, but it was reorganized as a joint-stock company in 1993 and subsequently developed into a major corporation. While Yi expanded training centers throughout South Korea, he changed the company name to Dahn World in 2002 and actively pursued overseas expansion starting from a base in the United States. At present, Dahn World is the largest health meditation enterprise in South Korea (Sassa 2004b). This chapter examines the modern transformation of *tanhak* in contemporary Korea, using Dahn World as a case study, from two perspectives.

The first is that Dahn World was significantly influenced by the Western New Age movement in the process of expanding globally. In South Korea, interest in the New Age movement began to emerge around the late 1980s, particularly within the publishing industry. Dahn World significantly transformed the content of traditional *tanhak* training methods under the influence of the Western New Age movement. This chapter analyzes why traditional *tanhak* practice was transformed in the activities of Dahn World, in relation to the New Age movement that flowed into South Korea through globalization. Secondly, despite Dahn World presenting itself as a health meditation enterprise, it exhibits strong religious characteristics. It is thought that the religiosity of Dahn World is derived from the influence of Taejonggyo (대종교[大宗教]), a Korean new religion founded in 1909. This chapter analyzes why Dahn World was influenced by Taejonggyo from the perspective of nationalism that emerged as a backlash against globalization.

The New Age movement, which continues to expand globally in the present day, is considered to have the characteristics of a secularized popular culture of esotericism (Hanegraaff 1998: 409, 517). Korean *tanhak*, which originated from Chinese *neidan*, is considered one of the esoteric traditions of East Asia. This chapter argues that Dahn World not only transformed the *tanhak* tradition under the influence of the New Age movement, but also played a role in making *tanhak*, an esoteric tradition of East Asia, visible to the world by engaging with the global New Age movement. Moreover, this chapter demonstrates, through the case of Dahn World, that the contemporary New Age movement constitutes a “cultural arena of negotiation,” integrating esoteric traditions from East Asia and other regions.

Modernization in Korea and the “Discovery” of *Tanhak*

The origin of Korean *tanhak* is generally considered to lie in the *neidan* practice of Quanzhenjiao (全真教), a sect of Chinese Daoism (Ch'a 1990: 239). However, the *tanhak* practice that developed during the Chosŏn period was not transmitted to modern Korea in its original form. In fact, Korean *tanhak* was newly discovered as a “unique Korean tradition” in the process of modernization. The “discovery” of *tanhak* is deeply related to the establishment of Taejonggyo in modern Korea. During Japan's colonial rule from 1910 to 1945, the prewar Japanese State Shinto (*Kokkashintō* 国家神道) was imposed. The doctrine of *kokutai* 国体 (national polity) and reverence for the *Tennō* 天皇 (Emperor of Japan) were enforced in colonial Korea. Taejonggyo was established as an indigenous Korean new religious movement in opposition to Japanese State Shinto.²

Taejonggyo was founded in 1909 by Na Chŏl (나철[羅喆], 1863–1916), an activist in the Korean independence movement. At the time of its foundation, it was called Tangungyo (단군교[檀君教]). In the historical text *Samguk Yusa* (삼국유사[三國遺事]), written in the 1280s, there is a myth about Tangun (단군[檀君]) who is said to have founded the first Korean nation. Tangungyo was a religion established to regard Tangun as a historical figure and to venerate him as the national ancestor of the Korean people. In 1910, one year after its founding, Korea was annexed by Japan. At that time, Na Chŏl removed the term “Tangun” from the name of the religious organization and renamed it Taejonggyo (meaning Teaching of God-Man). Because “Tangun” was regarded as a symbol of Korean independence, it became a target of surveillance by the Government-General of Korea. Subsequently, Taejonggyo moved its headquarters to China

in 1914 and actively engaged in the anti-Japanese independence movement. Taejonggyo can be regarded as a product of Korean nationalism to resist Japanese imperialism (Sassa 2021).

During the colonial period, the Government-General of Korea implemented various policies to control religious activities. Japanese scholars of religion also conducted research emphasizing the primitiveness and savagery of Korean religions from a binary perspective that contrasted the superiority of the colonizers with the inferiority of the colonized. As a result, Korea's traditional folk beliefs were regarded as superstitions that opposed modernization and therefore became targets to be overcome. In response to this, a notable scholarly movement emerged among Korean intellectuals. It was a movement aimed at awakening the spiritual independence of the Korean people, based on the Tangun ideology advocated by Taejonggyo. Yi Nŭng-hwa (이능화[李能化], 1869–1943) was one of the leading scholars involved in this movement. Although he was a Buddhist, he not only studied Buddhism but also conducted extensive research on a wide range of Korean religions, including Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, *musok* (무속[巫俗], shamanism), and *p'ungsu* (풍수[風水], Ch. *feng shui*). He left behind a vast body of scholarly work, and today, he is regarded as the “father of Korean religious studies” (Kim 1993: 289).

Yi Nŭng-hwa was not a follower of Taejonggyo. However, he gradually became devoted to the Tangun ideology of Taejonggyo through his interactions with its believers. As a result, he became convinced that an indigenous Korean religion had existed prior to the influx of foreign religions. Moreover, he named this original religion *Singyo* (신교[神敎]) and concluded that all religious phenomena in Korea were derived from *Shingyo*.³ One of the most noteworthy features of his *Singyo* theory is that he regarded the two traditions developed during the Chosŏn period—*musok* (shamanism) and *tanhak* (internal alchemy)—as residual forms of ancient *Singyo*, and understood them as deriving from Tangun. Specifically regarding *tanhak*, Yi Nŭng-hwa conducted extensive historical research on Korean Daoism editing them as *The History of Korean Daoism* (조선도교사[朝鮮道敎史], 1927). In this book, he asserted that the origin of Daoist immortal legends (신선설[神仙說]) lay in Tangun, and he regarded these legends as originating in Korea's indigenous religious thought, which developed from *Tangun Singyo* (Yi 1992: 355).

What is particularly noteworthy in his achievements is that he discovered sources related to Korean *neidan* practice, such as *Haedong chŏndorok* (해동전도록[海東傳道錄], 1610) and *Haedong ijŏk* (해동이적[海東異蹟], 1666). These texts were first discovered by Yi Nŭng-hwa among the encyclopedic

books compiled by Neo-Confucian scholars during the Chosŏn period. Based on the lineage of *tomaek* (도맥[道脈]) recorded in *Haedong chŏndorok*, he collectively referred to Korean *neidan* practitioners as *Sŏnpa* (선파[仙派]) and specifically called those originating in Chosŏn period the *Tanhak* school (단학과[丹學派]) (Yi 1992: 438). Interestingly, in *Haedong ijŏk*, Tangun is listed as the first figure of Korean *Sŏnpa*. Based on these fragmentary records, he considered Tangun to be the origin of Korean *tanhak*.

Yi Nŭng-hwa's research can be understood as an attempt to preserve and reevaluate Korea's religious culture—which had been marginalized and regarded as “savage” by Japanese scholars during the colonial period—in a scholarly manner. What is particularly noteworthy in relation to the theme of this chapter is that he was the first scholar to present a systematic account of Korean *neidan* practice using the term *tanhak*. Furthermore, he was the first to propose the discourse linking *tanhak* with Tangun. Consequently, the *tanhak* he discovered was revived in post-liberation Korea and eventually became widely recognized among the general public.

The first trigger for the popularization of *tanhak* in modern Korea was the founding of Kuksŏndo (국선도[國仙道], meaning National Way of the immortals). Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. However, it subsequently underwent a turbulent historical process marked by the division between the North and the South and the ensuing Korean War. Afterwards, South Korea entered a period of military dictatorship under President Park Jeong-hui. In the midst of this military regime, Ko Kyŏng-min (고경민[高庚民], 1936–1984) founded Kuksŏndo, through which traditional *tanhak* training methods were made accessible to the general public. He used the pen name Chŏngsan (청산[靑山], meaning blue mountain) and is commonly referred to as *sŏn* master Chŏngsan Sŏnsa (청산선사[靑山仙師]).⁴ According to him, he met a mysterious elderly *sŏndo* master at the age of thirteen. He then followed the master, traveling across the mountains of South Korea undergoing rigorous training for sixteen years. Subsequently, in 1970, Chŏngsan established a training center in Seoul and began to promote the training methods he had learned from his master, calling it Kuksŏndo. The name was derived from the pronunciation of Chinese characters, and when written in pure Korean it was called *paktolbŏp* (박돌법, meaning the method of rotating Light).

Chŏngsan revealed details about his background and the process of establishing Kuksŏndo. What is particularly noteworthy in his statement is that even in postliberation South Korea, there existed practitioners who conducted the *sŏndo* practice deep in the mountains, and that these training methods

had been transmitted from master to disciple through personal instruction. According to his statement, the master who trained him was called Master Chǒngun (청운[靑雲], meaning blue cloud). He also had a master called Muun (무운[無雲], meaning no clouds, clear sky). Chǒngsan attributes the roots of Kuksǒndo to these masters. It is also noteworthy that the Kuksǒndo training promoted by Chǒngsan was almost identical to *neidan* practice of Chinese Daoism. In *neidan* practice, breathing is emphasized, and a special technique called *tanjǒn hohŭp* (단전호흡[丹田呼吸], meaning *tanjǒn* breathing) was developed to accumulate *ki* (기[氣], Ch. *qi*) energy within the body. The *tanjǒn* (단전[丹田], Ch. *dantian*) is in the lower abdomen, about 10 centimeters below the navel, and is regarded as the “sea of energy.” *Tanjǒn* breathing refers to diaphragmatic breathing performed with focused attention on the *tanjǒn*. The training methods of Kuksǒndo are also based on *tanjǒn* breathing, similar to *neidan* practice.

However, Chǒngsan did not simply inherit traditional *neidan* practice in its original form. He systematized *haenggong* (행공[行功]) exercises to circulate *ki* collected in the *tanjǒn* throughout the body. It consists of the 9 *Tan* methods, 37 stages, and 433 movements (Chǒngsan 1993). Based on *haenggong*, he developed the training program with sessions of approximately one hour and twenty minutes, including warm-up exercises such as stretching. In this way, he reformed *tanhak* practice, which had previously been conducted primarily in the mountains, to make it possible to train in the middle of a city. It can be argued that this modification of *tanhak* reflected the historical changes confronting modern Korean society. The period when Chǒngsan was active coincided with the time of developmental dictatorship under a military government. The “faith in power,” symbolized by military strength, was widespread throughout society during that period. Korean people were expected to possess both physical and mental resilience to sustain rapid economic growth. In response to this, Chǒngsan transformed *tanhak* into a form of national health practice that enabled anyone to train both body and mind.

In this way, Chǒngsan established numerous training centers and promoted Kuksǒndo as a form of contemporary mind-body training. Consequently, some military officers and politicians took an interest in Kuksǒndo and attended Chǒngsan’s training center. However, in 1984, Chǒngsan suddenly disappeared into the mountains. Regarding his disappearance, it has been suggested that he may have been caught up in the turmoil following the transition of power from President Pak Chǒng-hŭi to President Chǒn Tu-hwan.

The Reception of the New Age Movement in Contemporary Korea

Even after Chŏngsan went missing, the *sŏndo* training organization did not cease to develop. On the contrary, numerous similar training organizations emerged, and mind-body training began to spread as part of popular culture. This phenomenon can be considered to have resulted from the influence of the New Age movement that was introduced to Korea from the 1980s onward (Chŏn 2009: 129). In South Korea, marking the transition to a democracy, the Declaration of Democratization was issued in 1987, the Seoul Olympics were successfully held in 1988, and overseas travel was liberalized in 1989. As a result, Western popular culture flowed into South Korea in earnest, ushering in an era of individualistic consumer culture. Along with these historical changes, the Western New Age movement was introduced to South Korea. It is particularly noteworthy that the New Age movement in South Korea developed by capitalizing on the *seishinsekai* 精神世界 (spiritual world, Ko. *chŏngsin segye* [정신세계]) boom in Japan. In the West, the New Age movement emerged around the 1970s, while in Japan, a similar movement flourished from the 1980s under the term *seishinsekai*. Under the influence of the *seishinsekai* boom in Japan, the Western New Age movement also began to flow into South Korea in earnest.

At that time, there existed an organization that served as the key agent behind the dissemination of the New Age movement in South Korea. It was Chŏngsin segye-sa (정신세계사[精神世界社], Spiritual World Company), which was established in Seoul in 1984 as a publisher. The period when Chŏngsin segye-sa was established in South Korea coincided with the time when major bookstores in Japan set up permanent *seishinsekai* sections. The term *chŏngsin segye* used by this publisher is thought to have been directly borrowed from the Japanese term *seishinsekai*. In fact, Chŏngsin segye-sa in South Korea prominently used the term *chŏngsin segye* not only for Western New Age thought but also for the Eastern esoteric traditions emanating from India, China, and Japan, as well as for Korea's traditional mystical thought, branding all its publications as "Books of *chŏngsin segye*." The activities of this publisher are particularly significant from the perspective of the development of esotericism in South Korea. Through the dissemination of Western New Age thoughts, the books on mysticism, occultism, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy—previously unfamiliar to the general Korean public—were translated into Korean and began to be introduced to the masses.

Furthermore, in 1993, Chŏngsin segye-wŏn (정신세계원[精神世界院], Spiritual World Institute) was established to develop the latent potential of the human spirit and to research various training methods. In this Institute, various seminars on Western New Age philosophies—such as positive thinking, psychotherapy, and self-improvement—were conducted. In fact, many of the instructors who led the seminars had traveled to the United States, and some had even obtained instructor qualifications. Through the seminar activities of this Institute, New Age practices such as meditation, mystical experiences, consciousness expansion, enlightenment, reality creation, New Science, holistic psychology, natural healing, and alternative medicine were introduced (Sassa 2004a: 152–86).

Around the year 2000, at the beginning of the new millennium, the activities of Chŏngsin segye-sa became particularly active. Through the *seishinsekai* boom in Japan, interest in apocalyptic prophecies predicting the end of the world also arose in South Korea toward the end of the twentieth century. However, following the smooth transition to the new millennium, Chŏngsin segye-sa further intensified its efforts to promote the New Age, proclaiming the advent of the new “Age of Aquarius.” From 2000, an informational periodical called *Monthly chŏngsin segye* (월간 정신세계[月刊 精神世界]) began publication. In its inaugural issue, the new millennium was proclaimed as the “Age of Liberation,” in which a “new human being with open spirituality” would be born. In connection with the *seishinsekai* boom in Japan, Shimazono collectively referred to the free and loosely organized, network-based movements—aimed not at an institutionalized “religion” but at the cultivation of individual “spirituality”—as *shinreisei undō* 新靈性運動 (new spirituality movements). He also defined them as the movements aimed at individual “self-transformation” and “spiritual awakening,” while holding the awareness that the era of “religion” had ended and a new era of “spirituality” had begun. He also regarded it not as something transmitted unilaterally from the West to other regions, but as a global phenomenon unfolding interactively and simultaneously in multiple locations, particularly in major cities where consumer culture has developed in advanced capitalist countries (Shimazono 1996: 46–53). The activities of Chŏngsin segye-sa in Korea can be regarded as an example of the *shinreisei undō* proposed by Shimazono.

At the same time, Chŏngsin segye-sa also developed notable activities that were not observed in either the West or Japan. The publisher advocated the discourse that Korea possessed an indigenous spiritual culture older than those of the West or other regions of Asia. In this regard, it is particularly noteworthy that the publisher gave significant prominence to a figure named Kwŏn T’ae-hun

(권태훈[權泰勳], pen name Pongu [봉우, 鳳宇], 1900–1994) and promoted him as an authority on Korean *tanhak*. In fact, he was a follower of Taejonggyo who was elected the thirteenth *ch'ongjŏngyo* (총전교[總典敎], General President) in 1982. Subsequently, following internal conflicts, he left Taejonggyo and independently engaged in promoting the *tanhak* movement. A novel titled *Tan* (단[丹]), modeled on Kwŏn T'ae-hun, was published by Chŏngsin segye-sa in 1984 and became a bestseller, selling over one million copies. The content of the novel claims that Korea possesses a unique spiritual training method inherited since the age of Tangun, and prophecies that in the future, the north and south will be unified by a superhuman who has acquired supernatural powers through this training method, ultimately making a unified Korea a great world power. In fact, it was the success of the novel *Tan* that prompted Chŏngsin segye-sa to begin seriously translating and publishing New Age books.

Subsequently, in 1986, Kwŏn T'ae-hun established Korean Tanhakhoe Yŏnjŏngwŏn (단학회연정원[丹學會研精院], the Tanhak Practice Society, Institute for Spiritual Cultivation) and became its president. After publishing many books appealing to the patriotism of the Korean people, he passed away in 1995 at the age of ninety-five. From the perspective of the contemporary development of Korean esotericism, it is noteworthy that while Chŏngsin segye-sa introduced the New Age movement from the West, it simultaneously promoted *tanhak* as an indigenous Korean spiritual training method originating from Tangun. While introducing the New Age concepts such as “spiritual development,” “expanded consciousness,” and “supernatural powers,” Chŏngsin segye-sa also leveraged these concepts and terms to promote *tanhak* to the public as a uniquely Korean practice for achieving self-realization. This can be interpreted as indicating that the New Age movement imported from the West not only transformed Korea's indigenous esoteric practice but also served as a catalyst for its revival.

Activities of Dahn World

Global Expansion of Dahn World and the Transformation of *Tanhak* Training Methods

In the development of the New Age movement in Korea, a company emerged that sought global expansion while significantly transforming the traditional *tanhak* practice. The company was founded by Yi Sŭng-hŏn,⁵ who began teaching

tanhak in a park in Anyang City, Gyeonggi Province in the 1980s and established Tanhak Sŏnwŏn (단학선원[丹學仙院], Tanhak Immortal Academy) in Seoul in 1985. At present, there are no records indicating that Yi had any relationship with Kuksŏndo. However, when he first founded Tanhak Sŏnwŏn, the training method he practiced was based on traditional *tanjŏn* breathing. From this, it can be inferred that Yi was initially influenced by Kuksŏndo. Furthermore, Tanhak Sŏnwŏn was founded precisely one year after the publication of the bestselling novel *Tan*. It can be considered that Tanhak Sŏnwŏn was founded amid the so-called *Tan* syndrome phenomenon that swept through Korean society. However, in Yi's case, he promoted *tanhak* in a manner different from Chŏngsan and Kwŏn T'ae-hun. He sought to develop Tanhak Sŏnwŏn as a global enterprise while flexibly transforming the content of *tanhak* training methods. Such transformation was highly responsive to the temporal demands of Korean society. The following explains the *tanhak* movements developed by Yi in the context of historical changes in Korean society.

The first significant turning point in Yi's *tanhak* movement was when he incorporated Tanhak Sŏnwŏn as a joint-stock company in 1993, adopting a for-profit enterprise model while simultaneously pursuing overseas expansion. At that time, South Korea was experiencing an economic bubble driven by a craze for stock investment under the civilian-led government of Kim Yŏng-sam. It was also a period when the country's global expansion was being promoted under the slogan of *segzehwa* (세계화[世界化]). It can be assumed that Yi was also influenced by such historical circumstances. However, a critical turning point subsequently occurred in South Korea. In 1997, South Korea was hit by the Asian financial crisis and fell under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The "IMF crisis" acted as a pivotal catalyst for South Korea's full-scale integration into the global economy under neoliberal policies. This transition, in turn, facilitated the international export of Korean cultural content, exemplified by the *Hallyu* (한류[韓流], Korean Wave) phenomenon. Yi also capitalized on this boom, attempting to export the *tanhak* training methods globally while promoting their modernization and commercialization.

In 1997, Yi purchased land in Sedona, Arizona, United States, built the Sedona Dahn Retreat (now renamed the Sedona Mago Retreat), and established it as a base for his overseas activities. In the same year, 1997, he began a new training program called "Brain Respiration" (뇌호흡[腦呼吸], *noe hohŭp*). To make a serious entry into the United States, Yi boldly transformed the traditional *tanhak* practice to make it more understandable to Westerners. The original training

method of *tanhak* was based on *tanjŏn* breathing. This is a type of abdominal breathing that focuses on the *tanjŏn* located in the lower abdomen. However, the concepts of *tanjŏn* and *tanjŏn* breathing were completely unknown to Westerners. Meanwhile, in Europe and the United States, scientists and medical professionals showed great interest in brain activity, and notable research findings were emerging in the field of neuroscience. Observing such global trends, Yi devised a new training method that focused on the brain. In this way, he devised Brain Respiration as an alternative to *tanjŏn* breathing. It can be considered that this was an attempt to present *tanhak* as a scientifically grounded worldview that could be understood by people around the world (Woo 2011: 47).

Subsequently, in 2002, Yi changed the company name from *Tanhak Sŏnwŏn* to *Dahn World*. This can be seen as an attempt at full-scale global expansion, as the name itself clearly suggests. The year 2002 marked the successful cohosting of the FIFA World Cup by Japan and South Korea. Around the same time, a notable trend also emerged. The term “well-being (웰빙)” rapidly spread throughout Korean society, eventually developing into a major boom. Although this term was originally imported from the United States, in South Korea it came to be recognized as a new lifestyle that encouraged a reassessment of the materialistic, profit-driven way of life and aimed for a slow life characterized by spiritual values and inner fulfillment. This trend of “well-being” sparked a boom in physical and mental training, as well as meditation. Notably, it also led to a heightened interest in Indian yoga. At that time, in Europe and the United States, forms such as Diet Yoga, Therapy Yoga, Power Yoga, Stretch Yoga, and Pilates were popular. In South Korea as well, many female entertainers promoted yoga as a typical practice of “well-being”, introducing these modern forms of yoga through the media. This, in turn, triggered a surge in yoga practice in South Korea (Sassa 2006). In the context of these global trends, Yi renamed his company from *Tanhak Sŏnwŏn* to “*Dahn World*” and further attempted to promote *tanhak* internationally under the name “*Dahn Yoga*.”

In the process of modernizing *tanhak* practice, Yi also attempted to westernize the Eastern terminology of *tanhak*. In the same way as other training organizations, he explained the principles of *tanhak* practice using the concept of *ki* (Ch. *qi*). This is a fundamental concept in East Asian philosophy, referring to the primordial life energy of the universe. In this regard, when he established the meditation center in Sedona, United States, he referred to the concept of *ki* as a “vortex energy.” Later, he explained *ki* as “*prāṇa*” to emphasize its connection with yoga. He also explained the tripartite theory of *jing-qi-shen*

(精-氣-神, Ko. *chŏng-ki-sin*) as “physical body-energy body-spiritual body” (Yi 2002a: 12). In other cases, he used terms such as “self-discovery” or “healing” instead of *suryŏn* (수련[修練]), “master” or “healer” instead of *sabŏm* (사범[師範]), and “healing society” instead of *Suryŏn tanchŏ* (수련단체[修練團體], meaning *ki* training organizations) (Yi 2001a). By using these New Age terms popular in the West, he made esoteric Eastern *tanhak* practice recognizable to Western society.

As a result of these efforts, Dahn World achieved significant success abroad. Recently, a new term called “Brain Education” (뇌교육[腦教育], *noegyoyuk*) has been proposed, which combines various academic fields such as pedagogy, medicine, psychology, and philosophy related to the brain, including Brain Respiration training. This “Brain Education” (formerly known as “Brain Respiration”), developed for overseas audiences, was also practiced in South Korea. Under the neoliberal economic system, South Korea had become a highly competitive society, and the “Brain Education” became popular as a means of cognitive development aimed at cultivating elites.

Furthermore, since 2010, economic stagnation in South Korea has continued, and a social demand for “healing (힐링)” has emerged, particularly among young people who have been unable to succeed in the job market. Thus, after the “well-being” boom subsided, “healing” emerged as a new cultural code in Korean society. In South Korea, as in the West, mindfulness based on Buddhism became popular, and there was a strong interest in meditation that alleviates mental stress. Dahn World capitalized on this “healing” boom and further expanded, promoting itself as a cutting-edge “meditation industry.” As a result, Dahn World became the largest meditation and wellness enterprise in South Korea. Currently, Dahn World operates more than 340 training centers in South Korea and runs centers in seven overseas countries, including Japan, the United States, Canada, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and Russia. While its numerous subsidiaries and affiliated companies are too many to track, it can be observed to have grown into a major comprehensive enterprise centered on health and healing.

Promoting the National Studies Movement and the Earth Human Movement

While developing Dahn World as a meditation and health enterprise, Yi also pursued a nationalist agenda. In essence, it was a cultural movement that sought to revere Tangun, the founder of ancient Chosŏn, as a symbol of the entire Korean nation. Such a movement had already developed in the early days

of Tanhak Sŏnwŏn. Yi founded the Han Cultural Institute (한문화원[韓文化院]) in 1988 and promoted the Tangun worship movement under the name of the Han Cultural Movement. It is thought that he engaged in such a movement under the influence of “Tangun nationalism” advocated by Taejonggyo. From the inception of Tanhak Sŏnwŏn, Yi regarded *Chŏnbu-gyŏng* (천부경[天符經], Heavenly Code Scripture), *Samil Singo* (삼일신고[三一神誥], The Divine Teachings of the Triune God), and *Chamjŏn Kyegyŏng* (참전계경[參仝戒經], The Scripture of the Holy Commandments), which were produced by Taejonggyo, as the three major canonical texts uniquely transmitted to the Korean people. He also regarded *chigam* (지감[止感], stopping a sensation), *chosik* (조식[調息], breathing exercise), and *kŭmchŏk* (금촉[禁觸], limiting physical contact), outlined in the *Samil Singo*, the fundamental scripture of Taejonggyo, as the core concept of *tanhak* practice (Yi 2002b: 90–7).

In the late 1990s, Yi's ideology of reverence for Tangun became increasingly radical. In 1998, he launched a campaign to erect statues of Tangun in public places under the name “Movement to Erect 360 Statues of Tangun, the National Ancestor, to Pray for National Reunification” (Woo 2006: 44). As a result, between late 1998 and 1999, statues of Tangun were erected one after another in the schoolyards of primary, middle, and high schools across the country, totaling 360 statues. Unsurprisingly, this provoked a strong backlash from Christian groups. Conservative Protestants, particularly the Christian Council of Korea (한국기독교총연맹[韓國基督教總聯盟]), led the campaign against the erection of the Tangun statues. More than seventy statues of Tangun were destroyed, some even beheaded, which caused great public controversy (Chŏng 2015: 168, 179). Through this controversy, Tanhak Sŏnwŏn led by Yi came to be labeled as a *saibi chonggyo* (사이비종교[似而非宗教], pseudo-religion). In South Korea, this term is used to refer to a destructive religious cult.

For that reason, from the 2000s, he began to refrain from openly expressing his belief in the veneration of Tangun. He consciously pursued a policy of “de-religionization” and shifted toward conducting an academic and educational movement under the name of *kukhak* (국학[國學], National Studies) (Yi 2002c: 16; Kang 2013: 116). Subsequently, in 2002, Yi founded Kukhakwŏn (국학원[國學院], the Institute for Traditional Korean Cultural Studies) in Cheonan City, South Chungcheong Province. Using this research institute as a base, he established the Graduate School of International Peace Studies (국제평화대학원대학교[國際平和大學院大學]) in 2003, which was renamed the International Brain Education Graduate University (국제뇌교육종합대학원대학교[國際腦教育綜合大學院大學], IBEGU) in 2008. This graduate university upholds the

founding principle of *hongik ingan, ihwa segye* (홍익인간 이화세계 [弘益人間 理化世界], meaning “widely benefit humanity, rightly harmonize the world”), which is derived from the Tangun myth in the *Samguk Yusa*. The IBEGU is headed by President Yi and currently has six departments. Among them is the Department of Korean Studies, which conducts academic research on the history of the ancient Tangun Chosŏn and the thought of *tanhak*.

However, the National Studies movement developed in this way was still under the influence of Taejonggyo. In 2002, Kukhakwŏn launched a campaign to “correctly understand the father of the independence movement, Grand Master Na Chŏl.” In 2008, the “Korean History and Culture Park” was established on the IBEGU campus. A bronze statue of Na Chŏl and a 33-meter statue of Tangun were erected in the park. Academic research at Kukhakwŏn also attempts to explore the lost ancient history of the Korean people, treating Taejonggyo scriptures and newly fabricated historical texts such as *Hwandan kogi* (환단고기 [桓檀古記], Old Records from the Hwandan Period) as academic research subjects (Kang 2013: 117). Thus, through the *kukhak* (National Studies) movement promoted by Yi, the “Tangun nationalism” advocated by Taejonggyo during the colonial era has been transmitted as a form of cultural nationalism in contemporary South Korea.

However, Yi’s cultural activities did not stop there. While developing the nationalist cultural movement domestically, he also promoted a global peace movement and proposed a new concept of “Earth Human” (지구인 [地球人]) (Yi 2002c). In 2008, he founded the World Earth Human Alliance (WEHA) as an international NGO. This organization aimed to put into practice “Love for the Earth” and “Love for Humanity” and sought to promote international activities for global peace and environment protection. What is noteworthy here is that the “Hongik thought,” which was advocated in Tangun nationalism, was adopted as the guiding principle of the globally expanded “Earth Human” movement. In his seminal book *A Message to the Koreans*, Yi regarded Tangun as a symbol of the blood and soul of the Korean people and argued that the philosophy of *hongik ingan, ihwa segye* propounded by Tangun constitutes the principle of “Peaceology” (평화학 [平和學]), which aims to unify global citizens. He further asserted that the global version of the Korean people’s “Hongik Human Spirit” (홍익인간정신 [弘益人間精神]) is precisely the “Earth Spirit” (지구정신 [地球精神])” (Yi 2001b: 50–1).

However, Yi faced a problem in promoting the Earth Human Movement. Since it was a global movement that appealed to people all over the world, it became impossible to put the symbol of Tangun, the founder of the Korean nation, at the forefront. Therefore, a new symbol was needed to represent all mankind and the

Earth. As a result, Yi adopted a new symbol called Mago (마고[麻姑]). Mago is the earth mother goddess of mankind mentioned in *Pudoji* (부도지[符都誌]), which is said to record the ancient history of the Earth before Tangun Era. In this book, Mago is depicted as the first woman of humanity, living in *Magosöng* (마고성[麻姑城], Mago's Castle), the highest utopia on Earth (Pak 2002: 17). Based on this fabricated historical chronicle he presented Mago as the goddess who created the Earth (Yi 2002b: 34). It is thought that he became interested in Mago after being inspired by the Gaia theory of the New Age movement. Furthermore, from the 2000s onward, as his cultural activities expanded on a global scale, Mago came to be used more frequently as a symbol in place of Tangun. For example, when the WEHA was founded in 2008, a meeting called "Meeting with Mago" was held in the United States. Also in 2009, the Mago Earth Garden was created in Sedona, and a 12-meter high statue of Mago was erected within it. In this way, Mago became a symbol of the Earth itself and played an important role in Yi's global peace activities. This shift from "Tangun" to "Mago" can be regarded as an influence of the New Age movement.

In this way, Yi promoted a peace movement on a global scale, while simultaneously pursuing a cultural nationalist movement domestically. At first glance this appears to be contradictory. However, this can be interpreted as an attempt to compensate for the erosion of national identity caused by globalization. Rapid globalization often results in the weakening of national identity, which in turn gives rise to radical patriotic movements seeking to protect cultural traditions. The more Dahn World expanded its activities on a global scale, the more its nationalistic tendencies deepened. This is due to the destruction and reconstruction of local traditional cultures caused by globalization. Many sociologists point out that globalization is a complex process that simultaneously contains contradictory effects of integration and anti-integration. R. Robertson, for example, introduced the concept of "glocalization" to argue that globalization and localization are not mutually exclusive (1995: 173–4). From this perspective, the duality of globalization and localization in Dahn World's activities can be understood from the very nature of globalization.

Dahn World's Educational Business and K-Pop Idol

Since the late 2000s, the *Hallyu* boom has spread globally, and Dahn World has strategically capitalized on this trend, thereby intensifying its efforts toward globalization. Recently, it has become fashionable in South Korea to add the letter "K" to various types of cultural content to capitalize on the global success of

K-pop. For example, the beauty industry uses the term “K-beauty” to strategically promote the export of Korean cosmetics and cosmetic surgery tourism. At Dahn World, meditation practices such as Brain Education (formerly known as Brain Respiration) have been considered “Korean special products” that could conquer the global market. From 2020 onward, Dahn World has exported them globally under the promotional label of “K-meditation”. This can be seen as part of a strategy to promote *tanhak* training methods as meditation techniques unique to Korea, in response to the growing global interest in meditation practices such as mindfulness.

Recently, the close ties between Dahn World and K-pop idols have drawn significant international attention. Yi expanded his education business and founded Global Cyber University (글로벌사이버대학교, GCU) in 2010. This is a four-year online distance learning university. It currently has four colleges, four departments and a total of fourteen majors. It upholds “Hongik Human” as its founding principle and aims to cultivate global “Hongik Talents” (홍익인재 [弘益人材]) who can spread Korean values to the world. This university is also known for having many K-pop idols among its students and alumni. As a distance learning university where students are not required to attend classes daily and they can take courses on their smartphones or PCs at their convenience, it has become popular among busy K-pop idols. It is estimated that more than two hundred K-pop artists are currently attending the university.

BTS (방탄소년단 [防彈少年團]), a world-renowned idol group, are also alumni of GCU. Six of the seven members of BTS enrolled at GCU and studied in the Department of Broadcasting and Performing Arts. (Only the eldest member, Jin, graduated from the Department of Film and Arts at Konkuk University.) After Suga first enrolled in March 2013, the other members of BTS enrolled one by one, with the youngest member, Jungkook, enrolling in 2017 and graduating in 2022. GCU has also actively promoted itself as “the alma mater of BTS.” The promotional video for the university’s school song (distributed on YouTube), also features BTS singing “GCU, a place where you can study without stress.” In addition, the university’s official website features a special page entitled “Global Members with BTS,” which emphasizes that “GCU, the alma mater of BTS, has always supported everyone’s dreams.” The website also includes the following comment from the head of the Broadcasting and Entertainment Department: “Their sincerity reflects GCU’s philosophy of Hongik Human. I believe this is the driving force behind BTS today. It can be said that BTS are global Hongik Talents who practice and spread the philosophy of Hongik Human.”⁶ These activities have been recognized by the Korean government, with

GCU receiving the Commendation of the Minister of Education in 2022 and the Commendation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy in 2023.

However, the relationship with BTS unexpectedly led to public criticism against Dahn World. Dahn World promotes itself as a health and meditation company, but its activities possess a distinct underlying religiosity. There have also been a number of consumer complaints regarding Dahn World. General members can receive training for the standard membership fee. However, there is also a special advanced training course that requires a large amount of money (Oh 2014). Above all, Dahn World has a strong tendency toward the personal worship of its founder Yi Sŭng-hŏn. Owing to a large number of related legal claims, there is even a group called “Dahn World Victims and Families Solidarity” in South Korea. There have also been reports of potentially unlawful activities overseas. In May 2009, twenty-seven former members and instructors in the United States filed a class action lawsuit against Dahn World. Their claims included unjust oppression, brainwashing, violation of labor laws, and sexual assault. Eight of the ten cases, however, were dismissed for a failure to state a claim. Nevertheless, the class action lawsuit caused a major stir in American society, where anti-cult movements have flourished in recent years. Dahn World has been classified as a typical cult and various media outlets have called for vigilance (Woo 2011: 52–5). The issues surrounding the class action lawsuit in the United States were also widely reported in South Korea, and public criticism against Dahn World grew rapidly.⁷

In this situation, a major national controversy erupted in South Korea, criticizing Dahn World as a pseudo-religion. This was triggered by an internal conflict between HYBE (the entertainment agency that BTS belongs to) and ADOR (a subsidiary) over the transfer of management rights in 2024. ADOR is headed by Min Hŭi-chin, who is known as a creative director for idol groups such as TVXQ, SHINee, and Girls’ Generation. ADOR is also known for managing the popular five-member girl group NewJeans, which debuted in 2022. Amid the turmoil surrounding the internal conflict between HYBE and ADOR, rumors spread on the internet and social media suggesting a close relationship between HYBE and Dahn World. Then, on April 25, 2024, ADOR representative Min Hŭi-chin held a two-hour press conference, during which she tearfully claimed that she had been coerced by HYBE. Many people in South Korea watched the press conference, and it was also broadcast live overseas.

Many young people, intrigued by the uproar, began to gather information about HYBE. As a result, fake news spread on social media alleging that HYBE

was related to the *saibi chonggyo* Dahn World, and that BTS was also receiving Brain Education from Dahn World. For example, it was claimed that the lyric “Put your strength into your solar plexus, Tan! Jŏn! Ho! Hŭp!” in the BTS song “Attack on Bangtan” (진격[進擊]의 방탄[防彈]) is derived from the *tanjŏn* Respiration (Respiration pronounced “hohŭp” in Korean) of Dahn World. In response to the spread of such fake news, Dahn World clarified that it is not a religious organization but a company, and that it has no connection with HYBE. Dahn World also warned that it would take legal action against those who spread malicious gossip and fake news on the internet and social media (Yi 2024). BTS also clarified that they are not followers of Dahn World and urged Dahn World not to use them for promotional purposes due to copyright infringement.

Since the outbreak of the uproar, Dahn World has faced a serious challenge. At the press conference held by Min Hŭi-chin, she stated that during the filming of NewJeans’ “OMG” music video, she had been subjected to extreme levels of oversight and direction by HYBE. This made K-pop fans very angry, and a prank known as the “Dahn World Challenge” became popular among young people. It involved illegally entering Dahn World’s training center, dancing to NewJeans’ song “OMG,” screaming, and then running away. The entire act was filmed, shared on social media, and spread throughout the country. In response, Dahn World expressed its willingness to take legal action for the obstruction of business, but was unable to do so due to the large number of incidents. Subsequently, Dahn World was no longer able to operate in its previous form. It removed the familiar fascia of “Dahn World” from its buildings and even changed its official company name to “Brain Training Centre.”

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the *tanhak* training methods practiced during the Chosŏn period have not been transmitted in their original form into contemporary Korean society. Originally, the term *tanhak* was newly discovered by Yi Nŭng-hwa in colonial Korea. Moreover, in Kuksŏndo established after liberation, the training methods that had previously been practiced secretly in the mountains were reorganized into a modernized form in response to the social demand for enhancing the physical strength of the nation under the military regime.

In the case of Dahn World, which emerged after Kuksŏndo, the *tanhak* training methods underwent a more radical transformation. This modification

of *tanhak* practice attempted by Dahn World was a response to the postmodern situation of Korean society, which has been transformed by globalization. It can also be seen to have been influenced by the Western New Age movement, which began to flow into South Korea in the late 1980s. As illustrated by the case of Chöngsin segye-sa, the New Age movement in South Korea also developed under the influence of the *seishinsekai* boom in Japan. The transformation of *tanhak* in Dahn World can be attributed to the “commodification of spirituality” that accompanies the global expansion of the New Age movement.

In the case of Dahn World, riding the wave of *Hallyu* boom, it promoted the modern commodification of the *tanhak* training methods and sought to export them worldwide. However, well-known training methods already existed in the global market, such as yoga from India, Qigong from China, and Zen from Japan. Particularly, Indian yoga, which dominates the global fitness market, was a major competitor to the worldwide expansion of *tanhak* practice. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Dahn World adopted the name “Dahn Yoga” when it entered the United States. At that time, *tanhak* practice was referred to as “Dahn Yoga” and described as a “special form of yoga” (Woo 2008: 118). Furthermore, Dahn World asserted that *tanhak* is the oldest training method in Asia, claiming a history of 5,000 years, in order to differentiate it from Indian yoga. In the discourse “Tangun nationalism”, Tangun is believed to have been born in 2333 BC. Dahn World’s claim is based on the idea that Tangun taught *tanhak* to the Korean people 5,000 years ago. In this way, Tangun nationalism embedded in modern discourse on *tanhak* plays an important role as a strategy to differentiate Korean training methods from other Asian practices within the competitive context of the global market.

In addition, Brain Education (formerly Brain Respiration) is also emphasized as a unique meditation technique of Dahn World to differentiate it from other Asian training methods. In this way, Dahn World refers to *tanhak* as “Dahn Yoga” and markets it as the oldest training method in Asia, integrated with modern neuroscience. In this regard, Giddens’s theory of modernization offers valuable insights into the transformation of *tanhak* in the global New Age market. In relation to globalization, Giddens proposed the concept of “reflexive modernization.” He described it as a process of “dis-embedding” followed by “re-embedding” (Giddens 1990: 21, 79). When Dahn World expanded to the United States, it boldly transformed the core training technique of *tanhak*, “*tanjŏn* Breathing,” into “Brain Respiration” and then reimported it to South Korea. It can be interpreted as the “dis-embedding” of existing *tanhak* tradition

and the “re-embedding” of a newly globalized tradition shaped by the New Age movement.

Moreover, Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s concept of a “global format of knowledge systems” is also useful for explaining the characteristics of the global New Age movement. She explained that a shared “global format” leads to the reorganization of differences in local contexts, and as a result, local communities around the world can access the global knowledge system (Morris-Suzuki 1999: 36). Moreover, she argues that the proliferation of the standardized global knowledge format provides a common basis that is essential for international communication and interaction (Morris-Suzuki 1999: 35). Following this argument, it could be said that the contemporary New Age movement provides a global format for esotericism in the postmodern religious context. In other words, it could be said that the New Age movement, which is developing globally, provides an “arena” for negotiation and exchange among different forms of esotericism in the world. It could also be understood that Dahn World’s attempt represents a new entry into this “arena.”

It is important to note, however, that the spread of the New Age movement as a global format does not imply a unidirectional spread of Western esotericism. In this regard, Strube has examined various forms of esotericism, arguing that “they are not the result of the unilateral diffusion of ‘Western’ knowledge but of globally entangled exchanges” (Strube 2024: 106), thus also proposing the concept of “global esotericism.” In fact, Dahn World’s integration into the New Age movement facilitates the worldwide visualization of *tanhak*, a form of Korean esotericism, and enables interaction with other forms of esotericism. The case of Dahn World can be said to demonstrate that a phenomenon such as “global esotericism” is being formed through the contemporary New Age movement.

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The Healing Spirit in Korea

James Flowers

In 2016, the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea impeached the sitting president, Pak Kŭn-hye (b. 1952) (Peterson 2025).¹ It accused her of improperly taking advice on national security matters from her aide, Ch'oe Sun-sil (b. 1956). As well as the charges of corruption and abuse of power, media reports of Ch'oe's rumored shamanic practices captured the Korean public imagination (Park 2018). Many lamented that a president's association with unorthodox religious practices brought everlasting shame on Korea as a nation and Koreans as a race. While the international media focused on the charges of corruption, many Koreans worried more about the damage to Korea's reputation if it were known that power elites allowed esoteric practices in not only their lives, but more worryingly, in issues of state power.

Although the Korean mainstream media leaned in on the inappropriateness of a president's relationship with people involved in shamanism or *musok* 巫俗, the details were more complex than that. Ch'oe's family practiced a nonmainstream religion, not necessarily involving shamanism, but the media chose to repeat the term *musok*. At the same time, Korean shamans took to the media to deny any involvement or association with the entire case. They argued that, unlike Ch'oe, they were genuine shamans, and not purveyors of a fringe religion. For the official media, at stake was the assumption that so-called proper and respectable Koreans are not tainted by superstition or the occult.

The open secret, however, is that, despite the stigma and tut-tutting from so-called official society, people from all walks of life in Korea, continue to consult shamans or imbibe its general ideas. Although its marginalized status vis-à-vis the state has fluctuated over time, it is important to note that shamanism or *musok* has been Korea's most popular religion for many centuries (Hyeon 1986; Oh 2016). As a Korean practice, it also absorbed many elements

from Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. It has never been one thing, varying as it does across regions and even within local communities, according to the choices that shamans (*mudang* 巫堂) made. Mostly women, shamans communicated with spirits in the process of helping people with problems in this world. Broadly speaking, there were two main methods. Although not a strict rule of thumb, shamans north of the Han River mostly practiced rituals in which spirits entered their bodies, while those in the south communicated with spirits without becoming possessed themselves.²

Scholars such as Kendall (1987), Kim (2003), Hwang (2007), and Sarfati (2021) show in meticulous detail, that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, shamanism continues as a significant religious and healing practice that defines much of Korean life. Common to the work of these scholars and many others, is that shamanism characterizes an intense religiosity that guides much of Korean everyday life, health, and healing. Clearly, many people in Korea also observe the major religions of Christianity and Buddhism, with approximately half of the population declaring themselves atheist. Observers will notice some commonalities shared between shamanic and evangelical Christian practice in Korea, but this chapter will not elaborate on this phenomenon. Drawing on Kim Chong-ho's work, and others, this chapter examines some common features shared across healing practices in Korea. While critics accuse shamans of being occultists, and the biomedical community claims that Korean Medicine physicians are purveyors of unscientific superstition, the popularity of these practices belies the disparagement.

Beyond the academic research, anyone living in Korea for any length of time will soon come to recognize the presence of *musok*. It has also become a tourist attraction, for example, with guided occult tours in Sindang-dong, Seoul. In the 2020s, shamanism has also become mainstream in popular culture, for example, in blockbuster movies and in the explosive growth of online shaman influencers.³ The public attention to shamanism has also recently attracted coverage in mainstream media. The paradox remains that despite its popularity, it continues to carry the stain of occultism unacceptable as a serious method of prevention of disease and misfortune, in supposedly scientific and well-educated circles.

Despite the stigma, millions of Koreans see shamans for assistance and treatment regarding questions of psychological and physical health, and to seek life advice. To better illustrate the importance of shamanism in Korea even in the twenty-first century, we may consider the numbers. According to published figures, there are approximately 300,000 practicing shamans listed

in the 2020s. It is difficult to verify the numbers, but this amount outnumbers the approximately 120,000 biomedicine doctors and 24,000 Korean Medicine doctors (Sarfati 2022).

The continuing opprobrium surrounding *musok*, as illustrated with the Pak Kūn-hye controversy, reflects the historical position of shamans. During the Chosŏn period, even though the majority of Koreans had an ongoing association with and participation in *musok*, the scholarly elites commanded both the state and crafted strictures on public morality through command of the Confucian textual canon and the ability to project power through the written word. The phenomenon of scholars in the Chosŏn period loftily proclaiming that *musok* deviated from the correct rituals as set out in the Neo-Confucian texts morphed in the twentieth century to technocratic bureaucrats in Japanese-ruled Korea from 1910–45 and subsequently in the Republic of Korea period after 1945 declaring that *musok* defied scientific knowledge as defined by university-trained PhDs. The controversy over *musok*'s ambiguous status continues especially since it cannot be reduced to a single category and never really fell in the realm of state-sponsored legitimacy.

Histories of medicine, grounded primarily in secularist and materialist frameworks have mostly overlooked the role of *musok*. Even if not regarded as institutionalized medicine, and as it has been continually reframed, rediscovered, and reinterpreted, its continuing widespread popularity shows that it still plays a significant role in Korean healing culture into the twenty-first century.

This chapter traces a small part of the complex history of *musok*, with a focus on the period before Liberation in 1945. As an example of the plurality of *musok*, in the late nineteenth-century adherents of Tonghak (Eastern Learning) incorporated *musok* into their ritual practice. In addition, the chapter focuses on a case of *musok* in the period of Japanese colonial rule in the early twentieth century, specifically, shamanic *kut* or prayer ritual. Even if branded as occult, such healing was ubiquitous and even continues today in the twenty-first century.

The Persistence of *musok*

The central theme of this chapter is the coexistence of Korea's modernization, as a current-day economic, technical, military, and cultural power on the one hand, and the less obvious shamanism and spiritual healing on the other hand. Even though they are often considered to be binary opposites-materialist science versus intangible ritual, the chapter argues that they are mutually constitutive.

Even if mainstream scholarship and the media valorize the former and often ignores the latter, they are both elements in the formation of twenty-first century Korea. Shamanism becomes an important case study that helps us to rethink the study of esotericism from a non-Western context, where categories of “religion,” “science,” and “occult” are historically fluid.

At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a large range of healers with different titles, according to gender, style of healing, according to type of religious practice, according to region, and according to seniority. Some were people who simply sold remedies, others were healers who combined acupuncture with face-reading or palm-reading, while there was a wide range of healers practicing chanting, singing, dancing, and reciting of sutras. It is also important to know that the great majority of these healers did not belong to formal institutions such as a temple or a group of ordained masters. Instead, most of these healers operated within local communities, and fit into two major groups, both predominantly women. The first group comprised those people whom, when ill, communicated with the spirits, and subsequently recovered, and then became healers in response to the healing experience. Hereditary healers are the second type. *Mudang* (무당 巫堂) was the most common term for women of both these types, while *p'ansu* (판수 判數, lit. prognosticator or fortuneteller) was the most common term for the men. There is yet a multitude more of terms used for various types of healers (Lee 1981).⁴ The shamanic ritual, the *kut*, featured a shaman, who usually acted as a medium with a particular spirit or a range of spirits to solve a problem in this world, that could range from an illness to seeking advice on life decisions, as well as prognostication.

The terminology remains a topic of controversy among scholars. Some argue that shaman is not an actors' category, but rather a modern term. The word shaman comes from the Tungus *saman*, which in turn originated from the Sanskrit *śramanā* through the Chinese *shamen* 沙門 (lit. monk) (Blacker 1975; Samuel 2015).⁵ Korean healers used a range of specialized terms, such as *munyŏ* 巫女 (lit. *mu* woman), *mansin* 萬神 (lit. 10,000 spirits), *tan'gol* 당골 (hereditary shamans), *paksu* 박수 (a type of male shaman), and many other titles (Walraven 1994: 1). In the early twentieth century, English speaking commentators began to use the term *mutang*, not shaman, in their writings (Allen 1896: 163–5; Underwood [1908] 2015: 93; Hulbert 1909: 403–31).⁶ However, other Western observers in Korea began to use the term shaman around 1900 (Bishop 1897: 399–408; Walraven 1998: 55–72). This term *mudang* has come to serve as a generic term in Korea. One problem in deciding the terminology in translation is that *musok* and *mudang* can be considered derogatory terms, depending on

context. For example, *mu* can be translated to English as witch. Or it might be understood as roughly meaning quack or charlatan.

As popular religion and healing method in premodern Korea, *musok* also operated as a foil for the educated elite in the Chosŏn period, the Neo-Confucian scholars, who proclaimed their rituals as the ideal standard of righteousness. In the nineteenth century, with the rise of increasing social unrest and the fracturing of the Neo-Confucian social accords, new religious groups reconfigured Confucianism by claiming it as a Way (*do* 道) of the common people. Most notably, the Tonghak believers incorporated elements from *musok* with their newly reformed ritual practices that augured the birth of a new world *kaebyok*. With the Tonghak adherents' claim of direct communication with Heaven (*chŏn* 天), the Chosŏn court declared them to be dangerous practitioners of the heterodox, since they dared to reform the Neo-Confucian rituals as prescribed by the established elites.

With the advent of Japanese colonial rule in 1910, the authorities tolerated *musok* but regarded it as the remnants of a backward, superstitious Korea that needed modernization. In August 1915, the Government-General issued the Regulations on Religious Propagation in Korea and defined traditional Korean religious rituals/shamanism as superstitious practices that needed to be regulated (see Government General of Korea 1915; "Chosŏn pogyo kyuch'ik haesŏl" 1915). Similar to the case of the medical physicians, both of Eastern and Western medicine, the police were assigned to supervise the religious healers' activities. Unlike the physicians, however, the shamanic healers were not formally registered as legitimate healers, and as in the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910) period, held ambiguous status. Thus, as individuals, they remain mostly invisible to present-day scholars. Some of the best evidence that exists comes through Japanese ethnographers, who sometimes relied on police records as their sources. Most paradoxical of all, in the light of their lack of status, was their great popularity among Korean people, in terms of religion and healthcare.

As during the Chosŏn Dynasty, however, educated elites often excoriated and ridiculed the religious healers or shamans, as uneducated heterodox practitioners. The Eastern Medicine doctors proved to be even more hostile to the shamans, publicly lambasting them as unqualified and illegitimate people who wildly dance around. Despite such vilification, many shamans responded by claiming they were the real representatives of an essential Korean culture that they were protecting from the threat of extinction with the challenge of materialist science. By doing so, they developed strategies to renegotiate and reclaim their position even under colonial rule. At the same time, prominent

nationalist Korean intellectuals, such as Ch'oe Nam-s'ŏn 崔南善 (1890–1957), seriously promoted *musok* as the essence of Korean culture that deserved protection and even celebration.

Hidden Knowledge

In the twenty-first century, Korea is globally known as an industrial powerhouse. Yet behind this manufacturing prowess there exists the phenomenon in which the seemingly invisible term *sin* 神 or spirit provides much of the ballast that supports the more visible economic and cultural achievements. Or to put it another way, common and popular practices such as shamanism, often considered “occult,” need to be recognized as essential elements of Korean indigenous healing practices, and of Korean life in general. It also means understanding concepts such as spirits and religious healing not in binary opposition to scientific industrialization but instead as mutually constitutive in the Korean context. It means recognizing the intangible and the ineffable, not only the materially visible, as essential elements in constituting the Korea we know today.

The academic turn in the history of medicine toward material objects, shears away more obscured meaning, and applies a presentist interpretation of the semiotics implicit in language and in the performance of healing. Overcoming the problem of scholarly emphasis on functionality requires further examination of terms such as *sinbi* 神祕, that can be translated as occult or mysterious. While scholars avoid using the term occult to describe shamanistic practices, this word unapologetically appears in English-language popular culture in Korea, as a general descriptor of shamanism.⁷

However, if we accept that the English word occult encompasses the idea of hidden or secret practices, it can be applied, in varying degree, to all medical practices. The issue at stake is who gets to decide the definition of exclusive knowledge. For example, most people only vaguely understand the language of academic medical science. The Korean state has bestowed authority on the pronouncements of medical scientists. At the same time, the state gives no authority to shamans and only limited authority to Korean Medicine doctors. Therefore, in the eyes of the state, by definition, medical science is open knowledge, while shamanism belongs in the realm of secret knowledge, the occult. While the above tension in the present day has become enveloped in the question of science as deemed universal knowledge in contrast to Korean

practices as local culture, a similar dynamic played out during the Chosŏn Dynasty vis-à-vis state-endorsed medicine and local healing practices.

The operative word in medical practice that can be translated as occult, *pi* 秘 simply means secret. However, using it in compound words particularizes meaning. For example, *pibang* 秘方 means secret prescription, *pibŏp* 秘法 secret method, and *pigyŏl* 秘訣 secret know-how. These commonly used concepts operated in common across the gamut of healers including herbalists, acupuncturists, and shamans. *Pangsul* 方術 is yet another term that present-day Korean scholars translate as occult.⁸ In her discussion of the famous scholar Chŏe Han-gi 崔漢綺 (1803–1877), Kim (2023: 105) relates how Chŏe disparaged traditional medicine physicians as practicing occultism, since herbal remedies were a type of insider knowledge. In this example, Chŏe's claims of newly reinterpreting *ki* 氣 and its relationship to the body, led him to belittle the already existing knowledge as occult. For Chŏe, new theorizing meant knowledge while old medical theories by stint of supposed mystery become occult (*pangsul*).

It is well-known that there existed a tension in Ming 明 (1368–1644) and Qing 清 (1644–1912) China and Chosŏn Korea between state endorsed medicine, as standardized in texts, on the one hand, and secret healing. At variance with the idea of medicine as mostly to be found in canonical authoritative texts, was the reality that families and lineages closely guarded their healing secrets—with the term *pi* very much in operation. One famous example was the Tongrentang 同仁堂 Drugstore, in Beijing, that served the Imperial Court during the Qing Dynasty in China, well-known for a large range of secret family recipes (Bian 2020: 149). In the twentieth century, the People's Republic of China, in 1949, assumed state control, and soon became the owner of the family secrets.

While the *pi* terms above are not usually translated as occult, terms such as *hyŏnbi* 玄秘 and *sinbi* 神秘 do speak to a deeper level of secret knowledge, thus are translated as occult.⁹ These are concepts that can also be translated as mysterious or profound. In the nineteenth century, the term *pi*, in the occult sense began to newly appear in texts, such as the *Golden Secret Register of the Six-Person Ŭm Talisman Scriptures* (*Kŭm pirok yuk inŭm pugyŏng* 金秘錄六人陰符經, n.d., nineteenth century). Yet another text, the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618–907) text, the *Multiple Ancestral Secret Methods* (*Pichŏn manbŏp kwichong* 秘傳萬法歸宗) grew in readership during the Chosŏn Dynasty. These tracts played a role in the growing popularity of employing methods of enhancing superhuman powers. While both Eastern Medicine physicians and shamans used the techniques outlined in these texts, it is ironic that, in the popular historical imagination, the term occult applies to shamans, rather than any physicians.

Since the concept of *sin* lay central in healing, in addition to the ubiquity of secret and hidden healing methods, it turns out that *sinbi* (occult) cleaves closer to everyday common practices than the modern understanding of occult implies. Furthermore, the etymology of the term *sinbi* means the presence of the hidden action or influence of spirits. We may flip it upside down by acknowledging that the idea of secular healing, in the absence of spirit involvement, is the anomalous novelty, historically speaking. In this context, the concept of occult takes on a more pedestrian meaning, rather than out of the ordinary. It was the norm to commune with spirits in the process of healing. The issue at stake is that the “hidden” knowledge was knowledge restricted to certain groups, a phenomenon also seen in global discussions of the “esoteric.”

Not only did physicians and shamans share the common language of *sin* and *bi*, but also a range of concepts such as *ki* (*qi*), *ŭm yang* 陰陽 (*yin yang*), and *o haeng* 五行 (five phases). However, in the second half of the nineteenth century, ideas from the West increasingly entered Korea. While some Koreans welcomed medical thinking from the West that purported to emphasize concrete and material knowledge, many others took a different view. In response to the challenge of emphasizing the physical body and tangible elements such as cells, Koreans began to bring into the open *sinbi* medical healing and rejuvenation practices that had for the most part operated as private knowledge. Even though practitioners published *pi* practices for popular use, they remain mostly unstudied in the scholarship. Koreans wrote on the emptiness of medical ideas that failed to recognize and value the ineluctable and intangible forces such as spirits, *ki*, and *ŭm yang*. Central to this conceptual framing lay the idea that *sin* corresponded to the *sim* 心 (heart/mind). The heart/mind and *sin* could not be quantitatively measured, since Koreans did not think of the heart/mind in the modern biological sense.

Studying the occult in Korea requires understanding that it historically encompassed a range of different types of healers who shared a conceptual framework based on *sin*, but who also maintained their own private or secret (*pi*) relationship with *sin*. While healers held secret knowledge, this fact was known, on the one hand, in a utilitarian sense, as a strategy to better compete in the medical marketplace. Secret knowledge, when effective, attracted patients. On the other hand, it meant understanding a range of concepts on their own terms, rather than attempting to fit them into a modern interpretation that assumes science as the gauge with which to judge.

As Strube (2023: 1–24) argues, we need to take care with context and meaning when using the term occult in the present. The term occult implies

special knowledge held by a select few. Strube also points out that English-language scholars readily use the term “esoteric Buddhism,” implying these were minority practices, when in fact they were mainstream in Japan and China. Similarly, practices such as shamanism that Korean popular media refer to as occult encompass a wide range of practices used by many Koreans. It is likely that Korean translators believe shamanic practices to be rare outside Korea, and especially in the English-speaking world. Thus, they assume that English-language speakers find shamanism exotic, whereas it is more like an everyday practice in a Korean context.

Religion and Healing

Shamanism in Korea is mostly studied as a religion or cultural practice. Thus, it rarely features in academic histories of medicine, regarded as a separate category. Yoo’s (2016) monograph, which I draw on, provides a very rare exception to conventional teleology. Yoo takes shamanism seriously, alongside biomedicine and psychology, as a therapy for psychiatric problems in the twentieth century. More typical of the scholarship are Suh’s (2017) study that covers the Chosŏn Dynasty to the twentieth century and DiMoia’s (2013) study of medicine in Korea in the twentieth century. Thus, the scholarship on medicine and healing in Korea mostly adopts the frame of secularism and materialism in its analysis. In this mainstream genre, physicians prior to the twentieth century gave therapy to patients in the form of herbal medicine and acupuncture to produce a physiological healing response. Alternatively, various governing regimes implement public health policies to govern populations (Kim 2019). Biomedical science is considered the norm, or the benchmark against which Korean healing practices are measured. Scholars are often concerned with identifying how medicine arrived at this inevitable point, assuming that knowledge is based on a search for a rational truth.

Historians interested in teleological change pay attention to the development of biomedicine and scientific technology in Korea in sync with the accompanying decline of traditional religious and healing practices. In this telling, favored by many pundits, Korea achieved prestige and prowess as a technological and engineering global powerhouse. The conceptual blind spot in such presentist history is the fact that Koreans also persisted in preserving and strengthening their precious cultural resources such as Eastern Medicine, shamanism, and a range of indigenous religions.

As a thread of continuity in Korea, shamanism has also varied in meaning over time. Originally an expression of people's communications with intangible spirits, in the nineteenth century shamanistic practices became synonymous with visions of building a new world in a political and religious sense. Then with the arrival of Japanese colonial rule in the twentieth century (1910–45) shamanism became an expression of the essence of the Korean civilizational spirit, in resistance to attempts to submerge Koreans into the ontology of Western science.

In the mid-1920s, prominent Korean intellectuals such as Yi Nŭng-hwa 李能和 (1869–1945), Ch'oe Nam-sŏn, and Son Chin-t'ae 孫晉泰 (1900–?) began to study and write about Korean shamans (Yoo 2016: 19; Yi 1927; Ch'oe 1927; Son [1927] 2002; Yin and Janelli 1995: 31–56). They aimed to differentiate Korean culture from Japanese culture. In the spirit of the resurgence of Korean cultural nationalism, this group of scholars claimed to have discovered the genuine Korean essence. They argued that Korea had developed its own culture and traditions, distinct from China and Japan, and Korean shamans represented the concentrated essence of the Korean spirit. Identifying shamanic healers as virtuous people who embodied deep cultural values of wisdom jarred with modernizing intellectuals. Nevertheless, for the first time, a section of elite intellectuals had glorified Korean shamans.

In Sivin's (2015) historical study of medicine in China, he emphasizes that most of medicine involved forms of religious practice. Essentially, religion and medicine have been intertwined for most of human history. Many historians of medicine have written about the religious aspect of medicine in the West, but historians have only recently begun to write on this nexus in East Asia, mostly concerning China and Japan (Stanley-Baker 2023). The continuing anxiety among historians to center a Korean path to science and technology has meant that the link between medicine and religion in the secondary literature remains somewhat obscured. Especially from the 1970s onward, the Korean state prioritized the scientization of the Korean population. Criticism and pillorying of shamanism accompanied this hard turn to valorizing natural science as the only legitimate form of knowledge. In this atmosphere, anyone working in the education sector, including universities, is expected, by default, to reflexively describe shamanism as superstition.

Furthermore, in twenty-first century Korea, there are accredited university colleges of Korean Medicine, where students undergo rigorous training comparable to that of schools of biomedicine, and where graduates receive medical licenses recognized by the state. Korean Medicine is acknowledged as a

legitimate form of healthcare, while also arguably sharing certain commonalities with traditional Korean shamanism.

Building on the scholars who have published fine studies of shamanism in Korea, the main argument of this chapter hinges on bringing religious healing, including shamanism, into the mainstream of the history of medicine and to the center of Korean civilizational discourse. It also argues that better understanding of the mutually constitutive relationship of medicine and religion requires acknowledgment of the *sim* heart/mind and *sin* spirit/s, in their various manifestations, as the area of commonality (Lee 2024).

On *Sin* Spirit

The various interpretations of the polysemic term *sin* 神 allow for the presentist idea that medicine and healing in Korea were historically mostly secular (Kalton 1987: 9–25). In a modern sense, the term *sin* can be interpreted in a secular sense by defining it as vitality, while some scholars translate *sin* as invisible and mysterious (Kim 2023: 105).¹⁰ For example, East Asian Medicine physicians often give patients an herbal prescription named *sa sin hwan* 四神丸 (Four Spirits Pill) to warm the kidneys and spleen. Many interpret the *sin* as a metaphor for some kind of healing force, rather than as a literal deity (Scheid et al. 2009: 429). To give another example, physicians use the well-known acupuncture point *sinmun* 神門 (Spirit Gate) to help to regulate and strengthen the *sin*. As with Four Spirits Pill, many understand this point to be related to the *sin* as a metaphor for vitality or the psychological aspect of a person.

However, the term *sin* also means gods, deities, or spirits, meaning supernatural forces or entities. Both interpretations, the non-spiritual vitality or spirits, nevertheless place the *sin* as directly connected to the heart/mind. This connection is best expressed in *o haeng* (five phase) theory that guided much of East Asian cosmological thinking since as early as the Chinese Han Dynasty (202 BCE to 220 CE). Corresponding to Fire in Five Phase Theory, the heart/mind rules the body as the monarch and corresponds directly to *Sin*/Spirit. Both physicians of orthodox herbal medicine and acupuncture, on the one hand, and shamans, on the other hand, framed their thinking with this approach. They placed central importance on the heart/mind, not as biological entity, but as associated with intangible and often ineffable forces.

Medicine and healing can be interpreted in various ways. In the literature on East Asia, and especially in the present day, commentators pay most attention to

ki as the element that animates life and health, and that connects humans with each other (Lei 2014). Since *ki* is often understood as energy or as life force, it more easily resonates with modernist understandings of the body as a network of physiological connections. However, at least in the Korean historical context, the less easily defined *sin* sat more centrally in understandings of configurations of life, of existence, and of thought. *Sin* acted as the conceptual thread that connected humans to each other, whether living or having already passed on to other worlds.

The question of *sin*/spirit provides an example that differentiates Korea from its East Asian neighbors in the early twentieth century. While Meiji Japan had taken the path of industrialization and China's intellectuals turning to scientism in the name of the May Fourth Movement, Korea saw a religious revival that included Confucianism in new forms, Buddhism, shamanism, and Christianity (Lee 2024; Kim 2020). With the Kabo 甲午 reforms of 1894–5, the Korean state ended the Confucian examination that had lasted for centuries. With this relaxation of the requirement of top-down conformity, space opened up for the flourishing of ideas from the bottom-up, including previously censored religious beliefs. Although the new Japanese colonial rulers attempted to marginalize these religions, they did not crush them. Furthermore, Koreans understood their practice of their own religions as a form of defiance of expectations of the Japanese colonial state. Alongside this phenomenon, Eastern Medicine physicians consolidated their position in a campaign characterized in terms of civilizational discourse (Flowers 2021).

The ambiguity of *sin* is related to its contextual nature. In the secular modern world, the assumption is that *sin* means something like vitality, consciousness, or spirit—as in the English expression “to be in good spirits.” Arguably, prior to twentieth-century secularism, people did not feel the need to deny the existence of supernatural spirits, meaning that there was no binary choice between the so-called natural and supernatural worlds that guide modern thinking.

Intangible Spirits

In 1613, Hō Chun 許浚 (1539–1615) published the most well-known Korean medical text, the *Treasured Mirror of Eastern Medicine* (*Tongŭi pogam* 東醫寶鑑). Emphasizing nourishing life (*yangsaeng*) and medicine together as a way of life, the text adopts a Daoist frame that conceptualizes the body as a home of multiple spirits. For example, the organs are primarily locations of various

Daoist deities. Essence (*chǒng* 精), *ki*, and *sin* feature at the front of the book. A notable feature is the section dedicated to a discussion of *sin*/spirit. While discussions on the *sin* are not unusual in texts of East Asian medicine in China and Korea in the past four hundred years, notable is the special emphasis placed on the topic and the depth in which it is discussed. The forty-one pages dedicated to *sin* comprise a similar length to the section on blood but still outnumber the section on *ki* at twenty-eight pages and the section on essence at nineteen pages. The editing team compiling the text made the choice to highlight the spirit as a key aspect of medical theory.

Although this popular text highlighted a Daoist conceptual framework, learned physicians in subsequent centuries increasingly framed medicine as Confucian practice. Cultivation practices included daily rituals of paying tribute to parents and to ancestors. Communicating with and looking after deceased ancestors was an undisputed precondition for cultivation of the heart/mind, which in turn was a necessity for good health. This ritual self-cultivation practice saw its most obvious expression in the *chesa* 祭祀 (ancestral rite) (Deuchler 2015).

Borrowing Power

We see evidence of an open and public turn to the occult in medicine in Korea in the mid-nineteenth century. This case study provides a cogent example of the coexistence, at the end of the nineteenth century, of the upsurge of spiritual healing with incipient industrial modernity as exemplified by the Japanese military force's mechanized warfare. A range of practices that the state considered occult for centuries emerged into greater public consciousness in the context of social unrest that had begun to challenge Confucian orthodoxy and the rule of the Chosŏn Dynasty (Choi 2024; Kim 1894). For example, the famous encyclopedia, *Extended Jottings of Unwanted Words of the Five Continents* 五洲衍文長箋散稿 by Yi Kyu-kyŏng 李圭景 (1788–1856) provides an account of the nexus between occult practices and medicine.¹¹

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of popular millenarian bottom-up movements that challenged the orthodoxy of the Confucian literati official class. Local scholars and people in rural areas aimed to interpret Confucianism and religion in new ways. For example, Chŏe Che-u 崔濟愚 (1824–1864) founded the new religion, Tonghak 東學 (Eastern Learning) in 1860, as a movement to restore the Way of Heaven (*chŏndo* 天道). The Tonghak adherents argued

that Heaven (*chŏn*) manifested in each individual, rather than as a dimension external to us. As a serious force with a large following, they mounted a serious challenge to the Confucian scholar class and the state, claiming to be reviving true Confucianism, from the bottom-up. For his efforts, the Chosŏn state executed Chŏe in 1864. The Chosŏn state's repression of these beliefs, declaring them heterodox, provoked eventual resistance from the Tonghak believers.

The state also objected to Tonghak practices that they regarded as *sinbi* (occult or mysterious) (Choi 2024). The Tonghak movement of the second half of the nineteenth century provides an example of religion-medicine convergence. As Choi Sung-woon has shown, a surge in the popularity of practices centered mostly around medicine and *charyŏk* 借力 (borrowing power). These practices involved calling on spirits to aid with supernatural powers and with treating disease (Choi 2024; Song 1900; Pak 1993). They included ritual prayer, studying and chanting Tonghak verse, and the use of talismans to communicate with Heaven. *Kaebyŏk* 開闢 was the ultimate aim, building a New World.

As part of these shifts toward interest in *sinbi* medicine, the late nineteenth century in Korea also saw a surge in the popularity of Qimen dun jia 奇門遁甲 (Marvellous Gates Hidden Technique) (Choi 2024; Yi 1983), a centuries-old divination method that originated in China. People used it to facilitate military, geomantic, political, and bodily powers. The main goal in Korea was to strengthen *yang ki* 陽氣 by both taking medicine and calling on spirits, with the idea of transforming from human form to supernatural form, thus harnessing the *do* 道 (spiritual cultivation). Herbs were combined with magico-ritual techniques to transform the body into a higher form of *yang ki*. (*Chūkan Nihon Kōshikan Kiroku* 1894). By doing so, changing the quality of the body and heart/mind would contribute to effecting positive change in the world (*T'ongyu Tonghakdo mun* 1893). *Charyŏk* had its origins in the Daoist medicinal prescriptions for spiritual cultivation to enhance wisdom and communication with the divine (*T'ongyu Tonghakdo mun* 1893). People created medicines by adding new drugs to certain existing prescriptions.

The Tonghak adherents also took the action of peasant rebellion in the name of Confucianism of the common people. Koreans know Chŏn Pong-jun well as a rebel leader who fought two wars in the 1890s to defend the people against the depredations of the Chosŏn state and Japanese colonial intrusion in Korea. As a scholar of Confucianism and Eastern Medicine, he became a military leader of the Tonghak movement that almost overthrew the Chosŏn Dynasty. His organization transformed into a mass movement of salvationist cosmology in which large numbers of people practiced meditation and ritual, based on a

combination of Confucianism, Daoism, local religions, and Eastern Medicine theory. Branding themselves as a healing, medical movement, the Tonghak followers believed that cultivating the heart/mind through ritual practice would transform society and the world.

On the one hand, the Tonghak adherents argued for their own version of Confucianism, which in essence emphasized the centering of the heart/mind. On the other hand, the heart/mind existed in a dynamic relationship with the world of spirits-or the divine world. During the Tonghak military battles with the Chosŏn forces in the 1890s, they employed *charyŏk* to boost their strength and to seek to influence the battle terrain. Ironically, the state forces who publicly excoriated *charyŏk* as heterodox also used it to enhance their military capabilities.

Alongside taking herbal medicine to build strength and power, they combined medicine with rituals such as prayer, chanting mantras, and the use of talismans. Chŏn and the Tonghak movement constituted one of the most significant forces at the center of shaping modern Korean history. Floundering in the face of the challenge from the Tonghak rebels, the Chosŏn state requested help from the Qing Empire. In response, the Japanese government, furious at Qing military intervention in Korea, engaged in the Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895, culminating in victory. Japanese military forces executed Chŏn, who had shown no fear and had loudly proclaimed that the Tonghak spirit would live on and create a better world. Even though Japanese military forces eventually defeated the religio-medical movement on the battlefield, the Tonghak believers constituted a major force in social and political change in Korea. Indeed, the wide-ranging Kabo Reforms from 1894 to 1895, that significantly changed Korea, were introduced following Tonghak demands. To give just one significant example, the Kabo Reforms ended the dominance of official Confucian ideology, as previously defined by the state, meaning that Korean people were able to newly and openly engage in a wide range of practices previously deemed esoteric. Ostensibly heralding a new modernity, the new reforms meant to bring Korea in line with the industrializing world powers paradoxically laid the conditions for the new flourishing of a range of religious healing, as well as a new prominence for the shamans. They represented the mutuality of modernity and spiritual healing.

Shamans in Korea

During the nineteenth century, apart from the Tonghak millenarian activists, shamans were also involved in the development of *charyŏk* medicine. Apart

from singing prayers and chanting mantras, and using talismans, they were familiar with many Daoist medical prescriptions, as well as medical texts such as the Chinese medical text, the *Compendium of Materia Medica* 本草綱目 (1596) by Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–1593).

More than only practicing prophecy, the primary evidence shows that the shamans were treating ill people with the aim of cure and relief. So many Korean people consulted them for healing that the shamans were also required to register at local police stations, thus bringing them under state supervision. Thus, as with physicians, their relationship with the state meant that their healing activities were observed and recorded.

A problem with the exclusion of the shamans from history of medicine studies arguably lies in the conceptualization of the disease process. Historians of medicine are familiar with Temkin's (1977) classic analysis of diseases as fitting in either the ontological disease category or the physiological disease category. For Temkin, ontological disease referred to a specific entity that had entered the body. For example, in this characterization, an invading entity such as a virus causes a disease. The physician then aims to treat the disease by eliminating the virus, with for example, antiviral drugs. Or it may be a case of a possessing spirit that needs to be exorcised.

On the other hand, a pathological process occurring at the level of the individual patient characterized the physiological disease category. In this approach, the healer sees beyond the disease to diagnose according to the overall condition of the patient, who by definition is a unique individual. Therapy is thus geared to treat the person, rather than the disease alone.

It is not clear, therefore, where shamanism fits in the Temkin model that has shaped historical scholarship. To say that an exorcism is merely an act of expelling an invading demon or spirit inadequately captures the healing process, which people in Korea, for example, understood as negotiating the fluctuating relationship between an individual and specific spirits. The ethnographic records show that people in Korea perceived a malleable border or porousness between the human world and the human body, and the spirit world and spiritual entities. However, most scholars have interpreted the Korean shamanic rites as religious and social ritual on the one hand or on the other hand a ritual that fulfilled psychological or social needs (Walraven 1994, 2002, 2011; Kleinman and Sung 1979).¹² Nevertheless, increasing numbers of scholars have taken the step of taking seriously the belief that the shamans were practicing healing and medicine in a process of communion with spirits who were of this visible world but also on a plane of existence that most people could not clearly conceive of (Samuel 2010; Yoo 2016).¹³

Historians of medicine in Korea understandably focus on written medical texts in their studies. Skewing historical accounts to literate medicine means omitting the healing practices of the majority of people, who had less access to scholarly medicine. Chosŏn literati-orthodoxy also meant that literate physicians marginalized and condemned shamanistic healing, devoid as it was of a written tradition. Contrary to the present-day historiography that characterizes literate, textual medicine as secular and naturalistic, their objections to shamanism did not primarily concern belief in spirits. After all, literati in Chosŏn Korea prioritized communion with ancestral spirits (Lee 1987). Their objection, rather, was that shamans did not follow orthodox rites and were therefore flirting with dark magical forces, since Confucian literati emphasized prescribed ritual and decorum, as prescribed in state-sanctioned texts (Deuchler 1987; Kalton 1987).

The history of medicine in East Asia typically features a long litany of men, usually characterized as geniuses of their field. Some historians of medicine in the West have, in recent years, overturned the supremacy of the pantheon of great man physicians, and demonstrated that most of medicine was performed by women and in the domestic environment. The majority of shamans in Korea have been women. Therefore, repositioning them into the mainstream of the history of medicine, rather than relegating them to the status of a quaint cultural oddity, also brings women to the forefront of Korean social life (Kendall 1987; Hwang 2007).

Furthermore, using anthropologist (Samuel's 2010) analysis of the two types of medicine, naturalistic and "personalistic" arguably helps to bring shamans to the center of the medical field. He argues that we need to take the language of spirits and ritual healing more seriously by going further than scholars who characterize religious healing as related to a patient's psychological processes. For Samuel, a naturalistic disease is one that occurs in humoral medicine and modern biomedicine, in which the etiology is due to an identifiable factor such as diet, a biochemical imbalance, excess heat or cold, a pathogenic factor such as miasma or pathogens, and so on. A personalistic disease, in contrast is explained as being caused by spirits from another plane of existence. Instead of explaining the spirits as a type of psychological state, Samuel takes seriously both the malignant spirits and healing spirits as actual entities that heal a patient's body in real terms. However, for Samuel, visitation by spirits was highly individualized because the spirits concerned were attached only to that specific person. People had highly individualized spirits, which were not separate from one's normal existence. The reasoning was that many spirits were healing spirits, since not all spirits were demons.

Arguably, religious shamanic healing, as a constellation of processes in which spirits and humans collaborated to rectify the heart/mind of a person, involved a deep concern with moral values. Religion was never value-free. In the Korean case, precepts that fused Buddhism and Confucianism, just to name two sources of teaching, created a moral force with which to cultivate the heart/mind. Furthermore, for (Walraven 1994), the *mudang* were evidence of Korea's literate and refined culture. It was in this context where the shamans were the object of debate that Japanese ethnographers and their students began extensive fieldwork in Korean villages in the 1930s. Thus, the resulting ethnographic surveys are the major sources for shamans in Korea of this time period.

I read Japanese official sources such as government reports against the grain, and not just as official rhetoric of disparagement of Eastern healing practices. Undoubtedly, there did exist a Japanese sense of superiority vis-à-vis Koreans and Manchurians, but there was also space for individual Japanese to go beyond official rhetoric, and to embrace genuine interest in aspects of Korean life and culture. To read Japanese official sources in the context of Japanese rule means to situate the motives for publication of propaganda in a desire to portray an image to a global audience. The audience for Japanese Government-General reports criticizing Eastern medicine was not the village populace, but more broadly, the international community, as well as the home population in Japan. Even if the reports were written in Japanese, the production of such official forms of knowledge fit in with the bureaucratic requirements of claiming the credentials of empire, rather than persuading Korean village folk that they should not be using acupuncture or ginseng for healing.

In the 1910s, numbers of North American missionaries living in Korea also wrote detailed accounts of rural healing practices. For example, the Reverend George (Jones 1902), a scholar and missionary, wrote a chapter titled "The Spirit Worship of the Koreans." Unlike the Japanese scholars, Jones thought the pantheistic beliefs of the Korean villagers were an abomination of God's work on earth. Although not trained as ethnographers, the North American missionaries also provide another angle from which to analyze religious healing. Despite the written rhetoric of ridicule of Korean religious healing, some missionaries recognized commonalities with their own healing practices, and sometimes even participated in village healing rituals (Harvey 1987).¹⁴ In this sense, the missionaries, unlike the Japanese ethnographers, actually participated as healers, giving them their own "insiders" participatory view.

In his oral history of shamanism in Japanese-ruled Korea, Kim Kwang-ok, however, goes further than Walraven or Yoo by arguing that the Korean shamans

made use of their own cultural resources to develop strategies to deal with the colonial power (Kim 2013; Walraven 1994; Yoo 2016). He was able to gather his research by the oral history method in one region, Andong, over a period of decades during which he gained his subjects' trust. In sum, Kim convincingly shows that the shamans responded to and counter-manipulated the process of colonial modernization. Through voice, ritual, and scriptural interpretation, from condemning the shamans in the 1910s, by the 1930s, the shamans had not only asserted their own place in colonial Korea but had also persuaded the colonial state to give approval to shamanism. Kim calls this process unintentional resistance to Japanese rule.

Three Japanese ethnographers based in Korea, Akamatsu Chijō 赤松智城 (1886–1969), Akiba Takashi 秋葉隆 (1888–1954), and Murayama Chijun 村山智順 (1891–1968) conducted scholarly fieldwork research examining rural health care practices in Korea. Whereas Akamatsu Chijo was a religious studies scholar, Akiba Takashi was a sociologist who studied functionalism with people such as Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) (Yoo 2016: 18). Both were professors at Keijo 京城 (Kyōngsŏng)¹⁵ Imperial University. In 1937, they coauthored their study on Korean religious healing, arguing that it was perhaps the most representative cultural aspect of Korea (Akiba et al. 1938). On the other hand, the sociologist Murayama Chijun, a graduate of Tokyo Imperial University, worked on the Government-General's Central Council for several decades. His sources were his own extensive field surveys, local surveys, and reports that Korean police and provincial administrators made available to him (Murayama 1932). He sought to analyze the indigenous meaning of folk beliefs and practices. His 1932 work *Chosen no fugeki* 朝鮮の巫覡 (*Korean Shamanistic Healing*) is a survey of religious healers in South Chōlla-do, the area with the largest number of shamans (Yoo 2016). His volumes also include *Korean Ghosts and Spirits* (1929), *Korean Geomancy* (1931), *Korean Divination* (1933), and *Korean Religions* (1935).

Although the general tone of these studies was to essentialize Korean people as backward and unscientific, that reading only works if we accept science and biomedicine as the only valid form of experience. As Atkins (2010) shows, on the other hand, many Japanese people in Korea viewed Korean practices through the nostalgic lens of a world that had regretfully disappeared in the Japanese homeland. Furthermore, reading against the grain, although tainted through the vision of an ethnographic lens, these studies give us a window into a rich world full of meaning that reminds us how Korea's refined culture

persisted in the face of soulless science. Reading in this way reveals a world where people, despite the state, produce their own practices combining medicine, Buddhism, Confucianism, in an art form that combines high and vernacular cultures.

In sum, these ethnographies describe a Korea that was rich in belief in spirits and lists the multiplicity of ways that people interacted with them in everyday life. For example, Murayama's book-length study shows how there were spirits in homes, in rural settings, and in streetscapes.

Murayama's research on shamans adds to accounts of the many spirits in Korea but focuses more on the shamans and their rituals—the *kut*. Readers learn of the panoply of religions that infuse the *kuts*. Murayama details the instruments that the shamans used in the *kut*, including swords, knives, fans, and bells. He also describes the visual elements of the *gut* such as costumes, artworks, and talismans. Also essential for the *kut*, the book describes the aural elements, including the music, and ensemble of religious lyrics that the shamans sang and chanted, accompanied with drums, zithers, lutes, and bells.

Murayama also relates a number of case studies of *kuts* where shamans were treating patients' illnesses. For example, he reported a case, in which a patient had brain disease (*noesubyōng* 腦髓病) caused by flying demons (*kwi* 鬼) (Murayama [1929] 1972: 183).

They appeared like fine white needles of white hairs, flying down into the patient's head. Subsequently the patient began to feel ill. She felt weak, was afflicted with chills and fever, feeling hot and cold at the same time. She then suffered from lung disease (*pyebyōng* 肺病) together with yellow eyes, green and painful hands. (Murayama [1929] 1972: 184)

Having outlined the patients' symptoms, Murayama then described the shaman's treatment ritual.

The *mudang* prescribed a white chicken and beef (21 pieces) stew. Cinnabar was added to the mix. The *mudang* then directed the patient to go out under the sun. They then began to dance with the left hand ringing a bell, and the right hand waving a feather. While dancing, the *mudang* hit the patient's head hair, and took the hair out. After four days, the *mudang* called on the 7-star spirit.¹⁶ She gave a ritual offering, followed three bows. Reciting sutras and singing songs also accompanied the dancing. The *mudang* also used meat slices and white chicken liver on the patient's head. She next used moxibustion on the patient's head, ears, and neck. She followed that with using cinnabar to expel *ūm ki* (*yin qi*). (Murayama [1929] 1972: 184)

Murayama ended his report by declaring the patient had recovered. He also stated that people regularly prayed to sun spirits and moon spirits in the course of their healing rites. Of the various spirits, the seven-star spirit was the most commonly worshipped, followed in popularity by the four-directions spirit. Among the seven stars the North Star (*pukt'u* 北斗) was considered the most important, also known as Merciful Buddha.

The *mudang* often sang during the ritual. However, before singing, the practitioners always prayed first, mostly by bowing to the spirits (Murayama [1929] 1972: 244). The *mudang* selected the songs to sing according to the individual patient's case (252). They selected the songs from a wide range of mostly Buddhist sutras and Daoist religious texts, and also Confucian texts (248). The *mudang* also used a manual that included many common songs (252). According to Murayama, the Eight Yang Sutra (*P'al yanggyŏng* 八陽經) was one of the sutras that the *mudang* most commonly sang. It was considered to be an astrology text or a text of destiny important for defeating ghosts in the shaman world (Stein 2010). While the *mudang* commonly used the Eight Yang sutra, the Jade Scripture (*Okkyŏngg* 玉經) was an example of a Daoist song that they also sang.

Shamans also sang texts attributed to the Chinese scholar Confucius (孔子, 551 BCE to 479 BCE) and the scholar and member of the Chinese royal family, the Duke of Zhou (周公, eleventh century BCE) (Murayama [1929] 1972: 257). Yet another example of a popular sutra that the *mudang* sang was the *Amitabul* 阿彌陀佛 sutra. The practitioners commonly sang it at funeral services, as well as other sutras, to help people ascend to the Pure Land (Paradise, *kŭngnak segye* 極樂世界).

Discussion of the Case

Many scholars have described and analyzed shamanic practices in general and the *kut* in particular. While acknowledging the importance of analyzing the social and cultural roles of shamans, it is also important to view shamanic healing through a medical lens. I choose one example to analyze its medical meanings.

Firstly, the case above does not comport with medicine in an official sense, whether it be biomedicine or state-sanctioned Korean Medicine as practiced in the twenty-first century. If a physician filed their insurance claim for a disease caused by flying demons, they may soon have their license revoked. Rather, a

disease caused by demons that pierced a patient's head fits ter Haar's (1996) argument that the fear of attack by demons concentrated the minds of Chinese people throughout history. While the cause of disease would be dismissed as nonsense by a modern-day physician, the listed symptoms are nevertheless recognizable to our university-trained doctors. In biomedical terms, at first glance, a doctor might suspect flu, or another infectious disease caused by a virus. Alternatively, a standard Korean Medicine diagnosis would be termed as an attack from external pathogenic *ki*, since these doctors view alternate chills and fever as a sign of an external wind attack. Indeed, an orthodox presentist reading would maintain that the description of demons is better read as a metaphor for pathogenic *ki*, since demons do not exist. In this case, we learn that the diagnosis is lung disease. In a general sense, most doctors would not find this assertion controversial, even if the description is imprecise. We cannot be sure, though, whether shamans understood the lungs in a material sense or in the Korean Medicine as a range of functions, including acting as protective *ki* for the body.

The healing methods in the *kut*, however, bear next to no relation to biomedicine. Although the panoply of experience in the *kut* also bears little resemblance to modern Korean medicine, we can nevertheless identify elements of commonality. The use of moxibustion, burning dried mugwort, on or above the skin continues to be a very common therapy in modern Korean Medicine, as well as Chinese Medicine and Japanese Traditional Medicine. Related to Fire, and therefore the Spirit, its therapeutic effect is understood as stimulating *yang ki* and promoting circulation of *ki* (Hö [1613] 2013). For shamans, moxibustion facilitated communication with ancestors and the spirit world. Common to both shamanism and Korean Medicine, though, it helped to clear unclean *ki*.

Another element of healing common to both shamanism and Korean medicine, cinnabar, also appears in the above case. Although not commonly used in Korean Medicine in the twenty-first century, historically, cinnabar has been widely valued for its range of healing effects, most notably calming the *sin*/heart/mind. In common with Korean Medicine, shamans also used cinnabar to calm patients' *sin*, but also the *sin* of spirits who were unsettled and anxious.

The third healing element common to shamanism and Korean Medicine is the chicken stew. Scholars have discussed the importance of animal sacrifice in shamanism in Korea, including pigs and cows (Hyeon 1986: appendix p. 4). An essential purpose here is to offer a sacrifice to a spirit (Yoo 2024a: 5–11). Also, soups combining meats and medicinal products remain a staple in Korean everyday life. Most well-known is the popular chicken and ginseng soup, food

as medicine, and believed to strengthen *ki* and to invigorate the *sin*/heart/mind. As seen in the case above, beef is also used to strengthen *yang ki* (Murayama [1929] 1972: 184; Sarfati 2009: 225–32). Meats such as chicken assume different contextual meanings in the *kut* as compared to Korean everyday life, yet the commonality rests in the idea that the meat provides sustenance. It provides nourishment in both the physical world and in the realm of spirits.

Accompanying the dancing, shamans recited sutras and sang songs as part of the process of communicating with certain spirits to deal with the problem at hand. Redolent of literati culture, shamans sang Confucian texts, as well as singing Daoist religious scriptures. As (Yoo 2024b) shows, Korean people have considered religious texts sacred, of Buddhism, Confucianism, shamanism, and Protestant Christianity (beginning in the twentieth century). The significance lies in all of these texts exerting powers of strengthening the Spirit, centering the heart/mind, and healing sickness.

Also, showing the continuing popularity of Buddhism in Korea, shamans commonly chanted the Pure Land sutra *Amitabul*. The significance is that Pure Land Buddhism, although historically popular in Korea, in the twenty-first century is heavily overshadowed by *Sŏn* (Zen) 禪 Buddhism. While *Sŏn* emphasizes meditation and personal enlightenment, Pure Land Buddhism focuses on the sutra and its power in healing, in communication with spirits, and in eventual ascent to the Pure Land.

On Visual, Oral, and Aural Culture

Scholars have often characterized medicine as the art of compassion (Sivin 2017). If scholars generally agree that medicine is an art, fewer analysts, though, have highlighted art as medicine. Sarfati (2021) has outlined the manifold artistic permutations involved in the rituals of the *kut*. Shamanic rituals certainly employ art in healing. In the way that literati physicians practiced Confucian comportment and embodied cultivation of the heart/mind, shamans implemented healing through the vehicle of popular arts and ritual. Whereas the literati physicians displayed facility with the brush, calligraphic writing of their prescriptions as powerful artistic symbols of authority, so did the shamans emphasize the power of the written word in their talismans. The very act of elegant brush writing involved mastery of *ki* and of the *sin*/heart/mind.

As Walraven (1994) shows, much of the language of Confucian literati and the shamans overlapped. For example, five-phase theory served as the foundation of

literati medicine, as in *The Treasured Mirror of Eastern Medicine*. These included the five senses, the five colors, five flavors, five smells, five sounds, five emotions, and more. Heavy in symbolism borrowed from Buddhism and Confucianism, the *kut* employs visual art, in the form of pictures, elaborate clothing, talismans, ribbons, flags, paintings, calligraphy, and symbols. Oral ritual occurs through eating foods, both for sacrifice, and for sharing victuals with the spirits. Aural ritual occurs through musical instruments, chanting, singing, and praying. Taken together, they represent artistic expressions of the thousands of local communities in Korea.

Five-phase theory diagnosis and therapy involved the idea of influencing and shaping the permutations of the five phases, wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. The literati physicians examined all the correspondences as they appeared in a patient. To give a very simple example, if a patient's complexion was slightly greenish tinged, the coloration indicates an issue with the liver and possibly anger. The physician might then prescribe sour herbs to treat the liver and thus soothe the anger that has caused disease.

Shamans take the five-phase theory to another level. Deploying the five phases in healing means displaying an array of colors, a cacophony of sounds, of smells, with a range of flavors of drinks and food, while putting on display a range of emotions. Each of these qualities fit in the five-phase matrix. Five colors manifest in elaborate costumes and flags that the shaman flourishes. For example, viewing the color white affects the lungs and is associated with the emotion of grief. Viewing color green affects the liver and is associated with the emotion of anger. Tasting sweet flavors affects the spleen and stomach. The *kut* becomes a way in which people in the communities deploy the five-phase theory, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, a range of local deities, as well as less tangible spirits in a multilevel experience in which people connect in a communal ritual, as well as communing with spirits from other worlds. To repeat, Confucian literati also communicated with spirits, in prescribed rituals to connect with deceased parents and ancestors.

To make sense of this phenomenon of a colorful array of sights and sounds rich in symbolism and the divine, I draw on Sivin's (2015) adaptation of the anthropologist (Moerman 2002). In this argument, the meaning response refers to the curative power of knowledge, symbol, and meaning, as well as the importance of the physician-patient encounter. In other words, people respond to the meaning of symbols in the written word, divine texts, talismans, colors, musical expression, dance, and the rituals in a religious sense. Combined with communication with spirits, the rich tapestry that provokes the senses in multiple dimensions, elicits a healing response.

To better explain the role of the senses, we may refer to the popular term, *nunchi* 눈치. Koreans commonly use this term to describe the sensitivity of Koreans in which nonverbal signals take on great significance. *Nun* means eyes, while the polysemic *chi* means propensity, circumstance, power. Jullien (1999) wrote a book on the historical importance of *chi* in Chinese thinking. In the Korean context, *nunchi* means that non-written and nonverbal communication marks a sense of civilization sensibility. Understanding *nunchi* helps us to better understand the significance of the *kut*, in which much of the communication and healing remains non-textually based and nonverbal.

Relevant to this discussion of *sin* is the clear overlap with medical practices in the Korean/East Asian tradition. The reference to the eyes points directly to the five-phase theory in which the *sin* is expressed in the eyes. In short, a physician/healer uses their senses to make a diagnosis-first of all by seeing a person's eyes. Even if medical science discounts such human judgments and chooses technology to diagnose patients, such human sensitivity on the part of skilled healers continues as an important element in medicine as it is practiced. Most importantly, five phase theory holds that fire is the emperor. Fire directly corresponds to the heart/mind and the *sin*/spirit. In other words, the heart/mind takes the prominent position among the other phases, that correspond to the other organs, such as the liver and the heart.

Centrally important is the concept in Confucianism and Buddhism that if the heart/mind is cultivated through virtuous practice, attention to ritual, and reverence for the appropriate texts, then the conditions for good health are created. This thread ran through the Chosŏn Dynasty in orthodox medicine yet continued into medical practices that the state considered esoteric and therefore heterodox. In the context of the challenge from colonialism and scientism beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, medical practices, including shamanism, became political due to their transgressive nature vis-à-vis scientific biomedicine. Koreans prioritizing the heart/mind and the *sin*, Eastern medicine, and shamanism, and a host of new religions at the beginning of the twentieth century formed a foil to the new advocates of secular biomedicine who aimed to define knowledge in material terms devoid of spirit.

Conclusion

Although the Japanese colonial rulers based their healthcare policies in Korea on biomedicine and hygiene in the name of science, Korean people continued to

insist on their own precious cultural resources. In the new context of scientization, *musok* also was ascribed new meaning, with intellectuals rediscovering it as a key element of essential Korean culture. Thus, this chapter shows that shamanic practices cannot simply be reduced to a marginalized anachronism. As an aspect of Korean health practices within modernity, *musok*'s role echoes similar phenomena in non-Western contexts as analyzed in this volume.

Korea's late industrialization and Korean elites' concomitant anxiety regarding the imperative to be seen as players in a modern, scientific nation in line with international norms has meant that the realities of the popularity of indigenous healing practices have been obscured. Not only a modern phenomenon, the modern-day taboo regarding shamanism also has historical origins in the Chosŏn Dynasty Confucian elites' efforts to cleave to the orthodoxy of prescribed rites. Standard narratives frame the demise of the Confucian order at the end of the nineteenth century as opening Korea's path to modernity based on Western knowledge systems. While that is true, twentieth-century social and political changes also opened space up for healing practices and esoteric practices that focused on *sin* to emerge more into the open. Despite the constant attacks from biomedical doctors, Korean medicine continues to thrive, with its practitioners' attention to the heart/mind in diagnosis and practice. Ironically, despite its stigma, shamanism has emerged even more into the open through the realm of popular culture. Continuing as a form of Korean vernacular culture, the dynamism of the broad field of spiritual healing practices demonstrates that biological science does not hold a monopoly on matters of body and mind in Korea. Although often regarded as vernacular culture, largely due to the predominance of women shamans, shamanism nevertheless remains an expression of Korea's literate and refined culture, embracing art, music, dance, and important elements of Buddhism and Daoism (Walraven 1994). Healing with spirits continues to develop as a range of practices and rituals that bring help to many people, fulfilling a certain need that science cannot fill.

The focus on the heart/mind and the *sin* illustrates the salience of the concept of ineffable connectedness among people in this world, as well as people's connectedness with the spirits in nether realms. The inherent paradox is the blurring of the distinction between life and death. Biological death does not mean spiritual death. Those who have passed away straddle this plane of existence and other intangible realms. Communication of spirits goes beyond mere functionality. The potency of the spirits rests in moral agency. Confucian and Buddhist compassion, therefore, goes beyond the confines of human beings, but also operates as supernatural force. The image of Korea as a disciplined

militaristic society has softened with the global attraction of Korean popular culture. It turns out though, that a better examination of Korea's modern history must include the powerful influence of healing of and with spirits, in their various manifestations. In the Korean context, these spiritual practices may not be so esoteric after all.

Seen through a Western lens, Korea's global success across a range of fields including economics, industry, and popular culture, is attributed to following Western models, most of all science. However, reading against the grain of this development narrative reveals an added important non-Western perspective in which Korea's refined culture that centers *sin* and heart/mind provides an anchor that guides civilizational practices that continue to enrich South Korea in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

Introduction

1. For a theoretical basis of this issue, see Liu (1995) and Sakai (2006).
2. “Okölt’ü yǒnghwa pum Han’guk-edo sangnyuk” (1975), *Kyŏnghyang Sinmun*, February: 17. Also in this volume, Mitsuaki Sassa and James Flowers discuss additional cases on this topic.
3. As a result of searching for vocabulary in newspaper articles using the NAVER News Library database, there were no articles that used the term *esoterisijŭm* 에소테리시즘 (esotericism), while *okölt’ü* 오컬트 (occult) began to appear in newspaper articles from the 1970s, with a total of thirty-seven occurrences. The term with the highest frequency and with articles dating back to the prewar period is *sinbijui* 신비주의 (mysticism).
4. The studies of Ichiyonagi and Komatsu are discussed in detail in Gaitanidis’s chapter in this volume.
5. Several scholars have raised doubts about using *shamanism* as a catchall term for *musok* (Iida 1988: 157). However, this translation has become widely accepted in contemporary South Korea, and instances of the term being transliterated as *샤머니즘* in Hangul are frequently encountered.
6. The issues surrounding the study of esotericism in the field of religious studies in Japan are discussed in detail in the chapter by Hidehiko Kurita in this volume.
7. As argued by Davide Marino in this volume, the approach to “translating esotericism” taken by Hanegraaff and Mukopadhyay (2023) remains firmly rooted in a Western-centric perspective.

1 Darkness, Strangeness, and Monstrosity: The Affectiveness of *Kaii* in Japanese Studies of the “Occult”

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all texts from Japanese to English are translated by the author.
2. For details on how these were made and on the variety of specimens that exist today, see Viscardi et al. (2014).
3. As of December 20, 2024.

4. Hirota's main argument concerns the equally important historiography of *yōkai* as supernatural beings, noting that this has been a modern construct and that even Yanagida never employed the concept to describe these phenomena.
5. I thank Sangyun Han for suggesting to add this piece of information here.
6. See <https://www.inagawa-kaidan.com/> (accessed January 5, 2025).

2 Western Esotericism with Chinese Characteristics: Translations and Translators in the People's Republic

1. Some exceptions to this general trend in recent literature include studies on the Theosophical Society in Shanghai (Chuang 2020, 2021), the “market of the occult” in early twentieth-century China (Junqueira 2021), and Chuang Chienhui's contribution in this volume.
2. This process of meaning-making through the work of translating international literature is a constant in Chinese history, and an extensive specialist literature has addressed the importance of translation work and the creation of a local vocabulary in the context of the discourse on “Chinese modernization” (Lackner and Vittinghoff 2004; Liu 1995; St. André and Peng 2012). Specific studies have been conducted on particular aspects of this phenomenon, such as religion (Meyer 2022), science (Wright 2000), economics (Faure 2016), and psychoanalysis (Plaenkers 2013).
3. This work was supported by the Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (CAS-E). I would like to express my gratitude to Gao Yang, Zhou Dangwei, and Professor Zhang Xinzhang for their generosity in agreeing to discuss their work in person and for their insightful comments on a draft of this chapter. A special thanks to Dominique Hertzner for her invaluable help during its troubled composition.
4. For the discussion of “Esoteric Buddhism” as a starting point for current debates on “esotericism,” see the Introduction to this volume.
5. The Chinese government funded two important research projects led by Wang Liuer at the CASS: “Research on Religious ‘Mysticism’” (*Zongjiao shenmi zhuyi yanjiu* 宗教神秘主义研究, 2001) and “Research on the Causes and Countermeasures of Foreign Cults” (*Guowai xiejiao de chengyin ji duice yanjiu* 国外邪教的成因及对策研究, 2002).
6. This choice is influenced by Euro-American discourses. On the one hand, He relies on the non-scholarly theories of Richard Smoley (2006) while, on the other hand, his insistence on Gnosticism is influenced by the work of Hanegraaff (2008, also Hanegraaff et al. 2005). A recent critical analysis of the relationship between

scholarship and the problematic categories of Gnosis, Gnostic, and Gnosticism can be found in Robertson (2021).

7. The “Needham Question” refers to the inquiry posed by the British scientist Joseph Needham (1900–1995) regarding why modern science developed in the West but not in China, despite the latter’s advanced scientific and technological achievements in the premodern era. For a recent reassessment of the “Needham Question,” see Wang (2024).
8. In this regard, Zhang identifies Chinese theories and practices akin to “Western esotericism” like divination (*zhanbu* 占卜), geomancy (*feng shui* 风水), calendrical sciences (*lifa* 历法) that, however, were incorporated in the holistic system of China (Zhang 2018b: 254).
9. Zhou and Gao presented their doctoral work at ESSWE 7, held in Amsterdam in 2019.
10. At the time of writing, Gao’s translation is currently being prepared for publication.
11. Gao Yang, conversation with the author, Xi’an, July 15, 2024.
12. His edition of *The Red Book* sold well over 200,000 copies.
13. Zhou Dangwei, conversation with the author, Guangzhou, August 24, 2024.
14. Leo Strauss is notably absent from all major reference works in the field of “Western esotericism,” including the 1,200-page *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*. A few brief mentions of his work only appear in the recent *Philosophical Perspectives on Esotericism* (Pitkänen 2024).
15. The series includes translations of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), classics of alchemy such as *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* as well as contemporary Rosicrucian authors (Rebisse 2005).
16. Zhang is particularly interested in the encounter between the mind-body culture of China and that of the West, and he often draws parallels between the native tradition of *taijiquan* 太极拳 and Gnosticism.
17. It was reported that the publication of *The Black Books* of Carl Jung is encountering some issues due to a Chinese legal requirement stipulating that all volumes in a set must be of equal size. Famously, Jung used a larger notebook for his seventh and final volume and all the current editions on the Western market preserve this size discrepancy.
18. Out of the well over one hundred sources listed as references in the “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective” project (Lackner et al. 2025), I was able to identify only *one* [!] written in a non-European language (Malay). Considering this corpus, one might think that the conversation around this so-called “global perspective” can only be articulated in European idioms. Given this context, it is hardly surprising that one of the editors of the *Correspondences* special issue, to which this article is intended as a response, saw “no significant weaknesses” in a comparative project grounded in the epistemologically and

methodologically flawed concept of “esoteric practice on a global perspective” (Hanegraaff 2025: 311). Examples of more reflective approaches to comparative analysis within the field of the study of religion and esotericism can be found in Maltese (2023) and Strube (2023b).

3 The Heresy of History: The Category of *Gishi* in Modern Japanese (Oc)culture

1. This chapter draws from material and conclusions previously published in Japanese in Klautau (2025). The author would like to thank colleagues Ozawa Minoru, Avery Morrow, and Ioannis Gaitanidis for the opportunities for dialogue, without which this research would not have been possible.
2. See, for instance, the chapters included in Fagan (2006).
3. The intersection between “religion” and “pseudoarchaeology” is examined in detail in a recent special issue of *Nova Religio*, one of the leading journals dedicated to the academic study of “alternative” or “emergent” religious movements. See especially Card (2019) and Laycock (2019).
4. From the early days of their popularity, these texts were also referred to as the *Ishihara Documents* (after the city where the headquarters of Takeuchi’s group was located) or the *Amatsukyō Documents* (after the name of the religious association). Notably, Morrow (2014), the only semi-academic work—as acknowledged by the author himself in Morrow (2019)—to introduce these sources to English-language readers, follows a postwar source in referring to them as the *Takenouchi Documents*. For the sake of consistency and convenience, I refer to them as *Takeuchi Documents* (or *Materials*) throughout my works.
5. Starting, perhaps, with Harada (1989), numerous works and articles have been published on the Amatsukyō and the *Takeuchi Documents*. In my discussion of these materials, I have primarily relied, in addition to the Harada reference, on Nagaoka (2017) and Fujiwara (2020).
6. See, for instance, Haneda (1976: 255–65) for information on an archaeological dig that took place in the summer of 1942, spearheaded by Kotera Kojirō and Yoshida Tomio, both of whom were members of the Research Center for the Culture of the Age of the Gods, which I reference again later in this chapter.
7. There is a first wave of interest in the *Utsufumi* during the early Meiji years, which, in a way, both culminates in and is further promoted by the 1877 publication of a partial translation into vernacular Japanese of a version of the manuscript held in Ōita Prefecture. For an overview of the topic, see Fujiwara (2019: 31–2) and his sources, Nakamura (1991, 1992a, and 1992b) and Fujino (2000c). As mentioned above, this attracted the attention of foreign scholars in the context of

- early Japanology, such as de Rosny, who initially appears to have believed in the authenticity of the *Uetsufumi* and the sources it mentioned, and Chamberlain, who was skeptical from the outset—not only of this document but of all things related to the “so-called divine characters” (see Rosny 1882; Chamberlain 1883).
8. Note that, after the Second World War, Miura continued to write about alternative perspectives on ancient Japanese history. Into the 1950s, he published, albeit under the pen name “Mimura Saburō,” 三村三郎, a somewhat influential work on the alleged common ancestry of the Jewish and the Japanese (*Nichiyū dōoron* 日猶同祖論). See Klautau (2024: 108–12).
 9. See, for instance, Person (2020), a comprehensive study of the Genri Nipponsha, an ultraconservative association that tested the boundaries of wartime Japan’s repressive forces, challenging how much nationalism was considered “too much.” A similar dynamic can be observed among the proponents of these so-called ultra-ancient sources for Japanese history—deeply influenced by Japan’s imperial vision, their assertions extended beyond the sovereignty of the Japanese Empire, sometimes portraying the Japanese ruler as the rightful sovereign of the *entire world*.
 10. For instance, Harada (1993: 19), Fujiwara (2006: 23), and Hasegawa (2017: 127–8) all discuss the historical significance of this roundtable, each with varying levels of detail.
 11. According to Hasegawa (2017: 129), figures like Shimada “dismissed the so-called *jindai moji* documents not just on the grounds that their content was false, but also because they contradicted what were considered ‘official histories,’ such as the *Nihon shoki*; they were thus ‘fake histories’ that ought to be discarded.” In this sense, although one could argue that Shimada’s use of *gishi*—in explicit opposition to the official position of *seishi* as represented in the narratives of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*—constitutes a continuation of more traditional usage, it is important to note that in this twentieth-century context, *gishi* is no longer merely one among many alternative categories of historical narrative that developed alongside *seishi*, but rather a direct negation of it. As such, Shimada’s usage represents, in my perspective, a distinctly modern development.
 12. Unless indicated otherwise, the biographical information about Agō in this chapter was obtained from Kashima (1980). This chapter was completed before the publication, in December 2025, of an important study of Agō by Fujino Naho 藤野七穂, one of the leading scholars of postwar *gishi* narratives, whose insights on the topic I was therefore unable to incorporate here. See Fujino (2025).
 13. As noted in previous studies (Fujino 2000b: 234–7), Agō used a type of Japanese punctuation called the *nakaguro* between the terms *koshi* and *koden*—a symbol used, among other purposes, to separate different nouns in a list. In other words, although Agō consistently treated these terms as distinct, later writers, such as Saji

- Yoshihiko 佐治芳彦 (1924–2014), omitted the *nakaguro*, turning *koshi-koden* into a single term used to describe these alternative sources more broadly.
14. See Han (2021). In a later article, Han (2024: 88) acknowledges that although “what defines a ‘boom,’ or whether such a phenomenon indeed took place” remains “up for debate,” she nonetheless emphasizes that the repeated use of the term in contemporary media warrants recognition of the phenomenon—at least in emic terms. Gaitanidis (2026), included in this volume, further complicates the issue by tracing how the term evolved through the 1980s and 1990s, amid ongoing tensions between emic and etic frameworks. Still, for all its contested meanings, it is clear that the rise of *okaruto* as a cultural keyword significantly shaped the publishing landscape of the time. It enabled previously niche narratives—particularly those concerning the ultra-ancient history of Japan—to enter the public sphere in an accessible format, both in terms of price and language.
 15. Naturally, amid the Yamatai boom described earlier in this paper, *Gishi Wajin den* was, at the time the *Chikyū roman* issue was published, a highly popular text. It is worth noting that this very title, absent from the original Chinese source, was itself a product of the early 1950s. During this period, two historians specializing in China published a widely popular pocketbook volume that translated ancient continental records about Japan into contemporary language, labeling the relevant section of the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* as *Gishi Wajin den*. See Wada and Ishihara (1951).
 16. In this regard, we should highlight the series of reprints issued by Hachiman Shoten, Takeda Sūgen’s publishing house. Particularly relevant to our topic are Sakai ([1934] 1982, [1930] 2001); Miura ([1941] 1986); Oyabe ([1929] 1999); Takeda (1999); and Yamane ([1940] 1988).
 17. For an overview of the persistence, into the twenty first century, of tropes about Judeo-Christian actors in ancient Japan, see Klautau (2024).

4 Who Talks About Esoteric Shinto, and Why?

1. For instance, Sokyo Ono’s *Shinto: The Kami Way* (Tuttle, 1962) is still in print and commonly read in the United States.
2. In 1908, the obscure Shinto group Miizukai (Isomae 2022: 608–12) sent one of their disciples to Boston to climb a ladder of swords and demonstrate the mental power of Shinto. Harry Houdini objected to the performance and debunked it for the press, but more notably, some of the Boston Brahmins in the audience had already seen the trick performed in Japan.
3. Communication with Kurokawa Yūsuki, October 2024. Takahama and Yoshimura are known to have met, but this transmission of *monoimi* tradition is Kurokawa’s

supposition based on his contextual knowledge of Shinto networks in this time period. Takahama is a controversial figure.

4. *Kagura* has been revived at Ise to a small extent, but according to Kurokawa, *monoimi* is now a completely lost tradition.
5. The finished product, *Occult Japan*, does not use “esoterism.”
6. This diagram was likely the work of Ōmiya Shirō.
7. For instance, the title of Saji Yoshihiko’s (1979) book promises a “romance” of “erased” history.
8. See the works of Ikeda Mitsuru, or more recently, Harada (2024).

5 For Now We See Through a Distorted Lens, Darkly: In Search of Buddhist Masters

1. The bibliographical information after his immigration to America is found in Tweed (2000: 58–60).
2. Sato (2008) is the pioneering and the most concise survey.
3. A popular online database of American newspaper included this article in the category of *The New York Herald*, but this is a mistake. Shawn Higgins personally pointed out this for me.
4. However, *Buddhist Affairs Overseas* occasionally publishes news about the activities of Russian Buddhists. For example, an article in No. 12 reports that the number of Buddhists in Russia has reached several millions, the majority of whom are Mahayana Buddhists who use the Scriptures translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan (*Buddhist Affairs Overseas* 1890b: 23).
5. Arthur Lillie’s hypothesis of the migration of early Buddhists to Scandinavia and then to North America might have influenced the publication of this essay. The early Buddhism reformers in Japan are thought to have been familiar with Lillie’s name and writings to some extent. Lillie’s idea is later elaborated upon in such work as Lillie (1900: 198–208).
6. This controversy arose when Blavatsky responded to Lillie and a review published by Stanton Moses in defense of the Spiritualist interpretation of Buddhism presented in this work in 1881 (see App 2021: 142–3.) It is doubtful whether Japanese Buddhist reformers clearly understood the difference between Lillie’s argument and the Theosophical interpretation of Buddhism, but Lillie’s name was known to some extent among them. Musen Fuji’s work *The Gospel of Two Sages*, which will be discussed later in this chapter, is an example.
7. Originally a letter written to the editor (*Light*, vol. 4, no. 197 [October 11, 1884]: 418). Michael Gomes discusses the probability that the network she

established among Kalmyks enabled her to access to the heartland of Tibet (Gomes 1987: 134–5).

6 Delineating the “Esoteric”: The Development of the “Identity of the Purport of Perfect and Esoteric Teachings” (*enmitsu itchi*) in Medieval Tendai Buddhism

1. This chapter is based on my presentation in the International Lotus Sutra Seminar 2016 held by the Rissho Kosei-kai International in June 2016. I am profoundly grateful to the Rissho Kosei-kai International and Dr. Dominick Scarangelo for giving me this precious opportunity.
2. The English translations of two doctrinal terms, *ynian sanqian* and *enmitsu itchi*, are based on the translations by Asai Endō and Ōkubo Ryōshun (Asai 2014: 47; Ōkubo 2014: 84).
3. Mizukami explains that it is the main purpose of the *Kōen hokke gi* to discuss the aspect of the identity of the purport of Perfect and Esoteric teachings in the *Lotus Sutra*, *Wuliangyi jing*, and *Guan puxian jing* (Mizukami 2008: 226).
4. We are able to learn Annen’s discussions on the Esoteric Buddhist visualization techniques in more detail through comprehensively examining the texts such as the *Taizō kongō bodaishin gi ryaku mondō shō* 胎藏金剛菩提心義略問答抄 (*Compendium of Abbreviated Questions and Answers on the Bodhi Mind in the Womb and Diamond Realms*, T. 2397: 75).
5. I draw on Dolce’s discussions of the “esoterization” and “esoteric ritualization” of the *Lotus Sutra* attempted in the Japanese Esoteric Buddhist traditions during the medieval period (Dolce [2006] 2011a: 142–57).
6. I will refer to his discussion in more detail in the next section.
7. In the following descriptions in the *Dari jing yishi*, Yixing might simply attempt to clarify the huge virtue of the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* by means of comparing it with the *Lotus Sutra*. On the other hand, according to the Tendai Buddhist texts such as the *Tendai shingon nishū dōi shō* 天台真言二宗同異章 (T. 2372: 74) written by Shōshin 証真, Yixing clearly expounded the integrity and complete equality between the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* and *Lotus Sutra* in these descriptions. In the Japanese Tendai, they have been frequently quoted and referred to in order to demonstrate the authenticity of the identity of the purport of the Perfect and Esoteric teachings.
8. A similar sentence is discovered in the *Dari jing shu* (T. 1796: 39, 733c).
9. A similar sentence is discovered in the *Dari jing shu* (T. 1796: 39, 658a).
10. The *Kōen hokke gi* consists of two fascicles.

11. The information on Enchin's activities during 867 CE is discovered in the *Chishō daishi nenpu* (DNBZ 28: 1390b).
12. Asai discusses the whole structure and point of each section in the *Kōen hokke gi* (Asai 1973: 494).
13. Asai carefully examines Ennin's discourses on the idea of attaining Buddhahood within the ignorant state and attaining Buddhahood within this very body (Asai 1973: 364–6).
14. Dolce discusses the interpretation of this section (Dolce [2006] 2011a: 150–1).
15. Mizukami discusses the descriptions in this paragraph (Mizukami 2008: 237–41).
16. It is also assumed that these discourses stemmed from the Esoteric Buddhist scriptures called *Guanzhi yigui* 觀智儀軌 (T. 1000: 19) and *Fahua mantuluo weiyi xingse fa jing* 法華曼荼羅威儀形色法經 (T. 1001: 19) translated by Amoghavajra (705–774) (Asai 1973: 456–527; Mizukami 2008: 390–411).
17. Todaro discusses the detail of the five stages of realization (Todaro 2006). Kitao and Yamazaki carefully discuss the visualization of the syllable a (Kitao 1996; Yamazaki 2003).
18. The passage quoted from the *Lotus Sutra* is translated by Kubo Tsugunari and Yuyama Akira (Kubo and Yuyama 1993: 278).
19. As for the translation of the passage quoted from the *Lotus Sutra*, I followed Kubo and Yuyama's translation (Kubo and Yuyama 1993: 64).

7 The Theosophical Movement and Asian Unity: Perspectives from Prewar China and Japan

1. 6 1919 [Taishō 8] nen 3 gatsu 5 nichi kara Taishō 8 nen 6 gatsu 6 nichi, JACAR (Ajia Rekishi Shiryō Sentā) Ref. B03050977000, Kaku nai seisai zassan / Eiryō Indo no bu / Kakumeitō kankei (bōmeisha o fukumu), vol. 3 (1.6.3.2-21-1_003) (Gaimushō Gaikō Shiryōkan).
2. FO 371/6069
3. FO 371/3069
4. According to the author's verification of the sources, while biographical accounts written by Shastri himself often contain discrepancies regarding his professional background and career history, the dates of events and the individuals he met appear to be generally accurate.
5. However, at present, no primary sources have been found to substantiate these activities apart from the article in the university's institutional journal. Nor has any documentary evidence been discovered indicating a formal connection between Shastri and the Bhārat Dharma Mahāmandala. After moving to Britain, Shastri claimed that he had been a disciple of a spiritual teacher known as Shri

- Dada of Aligarh, and that he had been sent to Japan on his master's instruction. Yet no records concerning the figure of Shri Dada exist outside of the writings of Shastri himself and those of his disciples. If one were to take the article in the *Waseda Gakuho* at face value, the claim that Shastri had been a missionary of the Bhārat Dharma Mahāmandala could be interpreted as a point of contact with the Theosophical Society. Nonetheless, to date, no conclusive evidence has been found to indicate that Shastri himself was a member of the organization.
6. For instance, in a report dated November 30, 1917, Richard's house was described as follows: "No Anti-British talk is heard in the house of this gentleman now" (FO/731/3422/324).
 7. FO 371/ 3069.
 8. FO 371/3065.
 9. In 1917, Shastri reported that there was support from the Japanese government behind this magazine (FO/371/3422).
 10. FO 371/3422.
 11. Cousins described his appointment as a lecturer at Keio University in Japan in his book *We Two Together* as follows: "This was made possible by a ten-day wait at Calcutta for a steamer to Japan in fulfilment of the piece of good karma that had come to me through the collusion of Sarojini Naidu and Yone Noguchi, two poets who had shuffled a third into a Guest Professorship of Modern English Poetry in the first modernised university in Japan, the Keiogijuku of Tokyo" (Cousins 1950: 342).
 12. The original version was published in 1916, and the British intelligence service also retained an English translation in its records. The citation in this chapter is taken from "The Present State and Origins of the Nationalist Movement in India," in *Ōkawa Shūmei Zenshū*, vol. 2 (1962): 556–67.
 13. An Indian further stated that Bakshi had told him that he had recently ascertained that Shastri was in the pay of the Indian Government, and was not to be trusted (FO 307/3069); translation of the Letter written in Urdu from Kesho Ram Sabarwal to V. D. Bakshi (FO 371/3423). FO 371/3423.
 14. FO 307/3065.
 15. Surendra Narayan Archives, China Folder.
 16. See H. P. Shastri (1952), "In China," in *Great Souls*, 168. This reference is corroborated by "Arrived" (1918: 11), where Shastri's name appears.
 17. See Chuang (2021) and Nellist (1933: 112, 118).
 18. Among the members who made significant contributions to the Theosophical publishing activities of the Theosophical Society in Shanghai, the efforts of a Jewish Theosophist named Alexander Horne should not be overlooked. His activities as a Theosophist in Shanghai have been introduced by Chuang (2014, 2021), and the

- participation of Jews in the Theosophical movement is discussed in detail by Boaz Huss (2025).
19. Surendra Narayan Archives.
 20. Surendra Narayan Archives.
 21. “40. Shanhai Dai Ajia Kyōkai” JACAR (Ajia Rekishi Shiryō Sentā) Ref. B03041003600, Zai Naigai Kyōkai Kankei Zakken / Zaigai no Bu Dai-san kan (1.3.3.1-1_003) (Gaimushō Gaikō Shiryōkan).
 22. Shastri’s practice of Cultural Asianism through *The Asiatic Review* has been discussed by Chuang (2021), while Smith (2024) further explores his relationships with intellectuals from Japan, China, and India, and reevaluates Shastri as a multicultural translator and a transnational activist.
 23. FO 371/3066.
 24. FO 371/3066.
 25. Surendra Narayan Archives.
 26. For example, in a conversation with Raj Rattnam reported on January 30, 1918, Shastri responded: “He asked me what I thought of the Indian revolution which was to come, and as usual, I replied that I had no faith in the so-called revolution” (FO 371/3423, 531).
 27. FO 307/3065. It is also noteworthy that Shastri’s line of thought bears similarities to those of contemporary Indians who engaged with Theosophy, as discussed by Strube (2023).
 28. For details on Jewish Theosophists in modern China, see Huss (2025).
 29. In addition, the November issue of the same year reported that Horne, who was giving lectures at the local branch of the Theosophical Society, “has accepted an invitation to speak before the local Jewish Literary Society. His theme will be ‘Our Conception of the Universe’” (“Social and Personal” 1922b: 27).
 30. For example, *Israel’s Messenger*, various issues from 1919–20.
 31. In addition, Wang, a collaborator with Japan, participated in a Buddhist organization called the “Sino-Japanese Esoteric Buddhism Study Association,” and the role of religion in his political views has already been examined in a study by Schicketanz (2016).

8 Japan’s Occult Monsters: Esotericism and the New Left in Post-1960s Japan

1. For the further descriptive accounts in this paragraph, see Kurita et al. (2019), Kurita (2022), and Yoshinaga (2021, 2024).
2. There are translations of materials and studies on “Western esotericism” by the French literature scholars such as Ikuta Kōsaku (1924–1994), Arita Tadao

- (1928–2012), and Tanaka Yoshihiro (1950–2012), as well as works by an English literature scholar, Yokoyama Shigeo (b. 1954), including *Seibetsu Sareta Nikutai: Okaruto Jinshuron to Nachizumu* (Suiseisha, 1990) and *Nanika ga Sora wo Tonde Iru* (Shin Jinbutsu Ōraisha, 1992). However, Yokoyama is an exception in this regard, as he incorporates numerous Japanese cases throughout.
3. Examples of this type of research include Tanabe et al. (1999) and Shimazono (2003).
 4. This perspective runs consistently through the works of leading Japanese scholars of religion, such as Shimazono (1992, 2020). A similar understanding of religious history can also be found in other works, such as Ōmura and Nishiyama (1988) and Inoue et al. (1990).
 5. Shimazono, during his university years, was a student member of a New Left sectarian party, Nihon Shakaisyugi Seinen Dōmei Kaihōha (the Japanese Socialist Youth League, Liberation Faction), and he played a leading role in the Tōdai Struggle (the student struggle in University of Tokyo) from 1968 to 1969 (Shimazono and Kondō 2009: 91–100). Inoue Nobutaka, who was also an undergraduate at the University of Tokyo at the time, likewise encountered the Tōdai struggles. Nishiyama Shigeru, after graduating from high school and working as a company employee, entered Tōyō University in 1966 and participated in the university protests there as a nonsectarian student in 1968 (Nishiyama Shigeru Sensei Koki Kinen Ronbunshū Henshū Iinkai 2012: 6–11). These individuals established the Shūkyō Shakaigaku Kenkyūkai (SSK, the Society for the Sociology of Religion) in 1975, which later became the predecessor to the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society, and they went on to lead the field of religious studies from the 1980s onward. According to Nishiyama, SSK's founding principle of “focusing on presentations by young researchers” reflected “a spirit of horizontal solidarity among independent young scholars, as opposed to the vertical authority structures that existed within universities at the time,” shaped by the atmosphere of the university struggles in 1968. For a detailed account of the SSK's development, see Shūkyō Shakaigaku Kenkyūkai (1992).
 6. The issue of negative memories surrounding Japan's Zenkyōtō movement is thoroughly discussed in Kosugi (2018). In contrast, more affirmative assessments and studies on its cultural and intellectual aftermath can be found in Suga (2018) and Toyama (2018). While little prior research exists on the relationship between religion and the Zenkyōtō movement, this topic has recently begun to be explored in Kurita (2025).
 7. The role of editors in spiritual movements before WWII is discussed in Kurita ed., “*Nihon Shinrei Gakkai*” *Kenkyū* (2022).
 8. See Bhabha (1994).

9. For further information on Lowell and his “esoteric Shinto,” see Avery Morrow’s chapter.
10. For further information on “ultra-ancient history,” see Orion Klautau’s chapter.
11. Fujisawa Chikao’s books on the topics include *Seiki no Yogen* (1942), *Nichi-Man-Ka Ittaikaron* (1943a), and *Shinkoku Nihon no Shimei* (1943b). Additionally, Fujisawa was involved in the publication of *Nanyō Shotō no Kodai Bunka* (Nakagi 1942: 5), a Japanese abridged translation of James Churchward’s *The Lost Continent of Mu* and *The Children of Mu*.
12. Although there is debate over the terminology used to describe this experience, the expression employed here follows the standard usage adopted by the Japanese American Citizens League and the Japanese American National Museum, in order to clarify Sekiguchi’s situation.
13. The most important materials on Seichō-no-Ie during the Occupation period are *Sekai Kōmyō Shisō Zenshū*, forty volumes (Sekai Seiten Fukyū Kyōkai, 1946–51). For the Japanese Shinto Theologian League, see its journal *Nihon Shingaku* (1949–2011; the title changed successively to *Hihan Shūgaku*, *Shūkyō Bunka*, *Shinrei Bunka*, and *Taiyō Shingaku*). This journal has been digitized and indexed (1949–80, unpublished) through a research project by Yoshinaga Shin’ichi (KAKEN Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) “Tracing the History of Media-Based Esoteric Movements in Postwar Japan: The Case of the Journal *Nihon Shingaku*,” project number: 17K02244). The reference to the “Aquarian Age” by Sekiguchi Nobara appears in *Genshi Kirisutokyō Shingaku* (1959: 232–3).
14. Nakazato Seikichi’s profile is detailed in *Tompa*, no. 5, a memorial issue dedicated to him. The description here is based on the following materials from that issue: Nakazato (1985: 8–28), “Nakazato Seikichi Shoshi Nenpu” (1985: 82–3), and Nakazato Seiki (1985: 118–20).
15. Regarding the influence of Shingon Buddhism and Agon Shū, see Han (2021). For changes from the 1960s, see Iikura (2009: 27–8).
16. For Kasai Yoshiharu’s profile, see Fukazawa (2014).
17. A representative example of Kōsakusha’s publications that fits this category is the magazine *Yū*. Other publications on occultism and esotericism released by the company during that period include Fritjof Capra’s *Tao Shizen-gaku* (*The Tao of Physics*; translated by Yoshifuku Shin’ichi, 1979), Takahashi Katsumi and Matsuoka Seigō’s *Shinpi to Jōdan* (1979), *Yūgaku Taizen* (1980), and Seki Hideo’s *Sai Kagaku no Zenbō* (1981). All of these works featured Kōsakusha’s characteristically beautiful bindings and eye-catching layouts.
18. For further information on Takeda, see Takeda and Yokoyama (2024).
19. According to Moriya, the chairman of the All-University Student Council at that time was Kurimoto Shinichirō (b. 1941), a later economic anthropologist and politician. After Kurimoto, the position of chairman was taken over by Terao

- Yasutaka, and a large-scale protest movement against the tuition hike unfolded in 1965 (Terao 1965).
20. Moriya investigated together with Yamada on the Mt. Minakami, which was regarded as an Artificial Pyramid (Yamada 1979: 121). See also Yamada (1981).
 21. I am grateful to Dr. Till Knaudt for drawing my attention to Oda's anti-Israel campaign.
 22. Later, he translated Arthur Koestler's *The Thirteenth Tribe* into Japanese, introducing to Japan the theory that distinguishes between the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim, which has since become widely known.
 23. For example, there are works such as Akama (1988, 1989), Fujii (1993), Asai (1993, 1995), and Umamo (1982, 1983, 1991, 1992). Akama Gō was also a New Leftist (Takeda and Yokoyama 2025: 401–2).
 24. In Hebrew, “Zayin,” also rendered as “Zain,” is the seventh letter of the alphabet and symbolizes a weapon or sword. Within the Ancient Imperial Army, “Zain” was additionally used to designate the God on earth and Kojima Rokan himself.
 25. However, according to Kojima (1992b: 3), they were possibly linked to the 1886 appearance of Halley's Comet.
 26. *Sotsutaku* is the new name of *Setudan*, adopted after Shiba severed ties with Zain. During this period, Shiba wrote under the pen name Yamato Kanjō.
 27. For details on the influence from Takeda, see the editor's commentary by Kurita at the end of Yoshinaga (2024), as well as Kurita (2024b).

9 The Transformation of Korean *Tanhak* Through Globalization: The New Age Movement and the Worldwide Expansion of Dahn World

1. Under the McCune–Reischauer system, the Romanized form of 단월드 is “Tan Wöltü,” but the company officially adopted “Dahn World” as its corporate name. In this chapter, the latter form will be used. For the history and overview of Dahn World, see Baker (2018). Baker also discusses the relationship between the New Age movement in Korea and Dahn World (Baker, “Globalization and Korea's New Religions” in Baker 2009).
2. For the process of establishment and characteristics of Taejonggyo, see Sassa (2021). In addition, for scholarly works on Taejonggyo available in English, see Baker (2010), John (2018).
3. See Sassa (2010: 213). In this article, the author argues that Yi Nŭng-hwa's concept of *Singyo* was influenced by Japanese *Shinto*, while simultaneously being proposed as a counter-discourse to oppose it.

4. For further information on Chŏngsan's background, see Kim (2019: 255–80) and Kang (2015: 107–38).
5. Yi Sŭng-hŏn uses the pen name “Ilchi” (일지[一指], One Finger, meaning “pointing to the truth”) and is known as “Ilchi Lee” internationally. Details of his career and activities are available on his official website (<https://ilchi.com/>).
6. Global Cyber University, “Global Members with BTS,” <https://honor.global.ac.kr/home/homeIndex.do> (accessed March 8, 2025).
7. The feature article titled “A Thorough Analysis of Dahn World” was published in the January 2010 issue of *Monthly Sintonga*. This article reported on the pseudo-religious (*saibi chonggyo*) characteristic of Dahn World in detail (Han 2010). Furthermore, in March of the same year, the SBS television program *I Want to Know That!* aired an episode titled “Dahn Yoga Scandal.” This program provided detailed coverage of the court case concerning Dahn World that was filed in the United States (“Dahn Yoga Scandal” 2010).

10 The Healing Spirit in Korea

1. Korea was divided in two in 1945, with the nicknames North Korea and South Korea. In this chapter, for events after 1945, I use the shortened term Korea, instead of South Korea or the official name, the Republic of Korea (ROK).
2. In 2024 and 2025, Korean mainstream media also accused impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol of seeking advice from his friend, a so-called shaman, Chŏn Sŏng-bae. On social media, Koreans corrected the characterization of Yoon's friend by pointing out that he is not a shaman but rather is a maverick Buddhist involved in occult practices, such as prognostication.
3. The Wailing (2016), Exhuma (2024), Dark Nuns (2025), and KPop Demon Hunters (2025) are examples of movies that feature aspects of shamanism. In the award-winning television series The Glory (2022), shamanism played a significant role in the plot. Lee Kyoung-hyun, known as Baby Goddess serves as just one example of a popular YouTuber shaman (<https://www.youtube.com/@babygoddess>).
4. Scholars generally agree that *mudang* is a compound Korean term, rather than a term of Chinese origin. However, some scholars speculate that the term may also have Ural-Altaic roots.
5. Tungus is the term for the indigenous people of eastern Siberia and Manchuria.
6. The Americans often spelt *mutang* with a “t.” Yet another American missionary Homer Hulbert explicated many of the terms such as *mudang*, *pansu*, but argued their practices were superstition.
7. See <https://www.chosun.com/english/kpop-culture-en/2024/07/18/RKHUAQB EVBGKTIPXS4BRHDANAI/>.

8. *Pangsul* is also often translated as supernatural arts, healing art, or divination.
9. In the McCune-Reischauer transliteration system, ㅍ (*pi*) becomes *bi* in these words.
10. Kim translates *singi* 神氣 as invisible and mysterious *qi*.
11. Beyond the confines of Confucian textual orthodoxy, Yi aimed to include a wide variety of topics, including secret knowledge.
12. On the social role, Walraven. On the psychological role, see Yoo (2016). Although Yoo did not cite him, he followed Arthur Kleinman's well-known formulation in which spirit healing and similar techniques are concerned with "subjective" aspects of illness (rather than disease). For Kleinman, the body is analyzed through concepts such as somatization (Kleinman and Sung 1979: 7–26). For discussion on the Kleinman conceptualization, see Samuel (2010: 7–20).
13. Exceptions include Safati.
14. For commonalities between shamanism and Christian evangelism in Korea, see Harvey (1987).
15. Modern-day Seoul.
16. The seven stars are known in English as the Big Dipper. They are seven bright stars of the constellation also known as Ursa Major.

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