



16:00–18:00 CEST

**Sang-yun Han** (Tohoku University)

*Between Religion and Superstition: The Conceptual Entanglement of Mikkyō and the Occult in Postwar Japan*

The introduction to Japan, in 1973, of Colin Wilson's 1971 *The Occult* was an important moment in the religious history of the archipelago, as it led to the establishment of the Japanese-language term "okaruto," still used today as an umbrella term to describe all things esoteric and supernatural. The translation of Wilson's work did not constitute, however, a mere acceptance of Western concepts: on the contrary, it represented a complicated negotiation process with a pre-existing religious context. As soon as it was introduced into Japan, the idea of "okaruto" was almost immediately associated with the idea of "Mikkyō," a term which, commonly translated as "Esoteric Buddhism," is used to describe the most "secretive" forms of (Japanese) Buddhist thought. In fact, even before the more active introduction of the term "okaruto" into Japan, other Western works were already being interpreted in this light. Note, for instance, J. C. Cooper's 1971 *Religion in the Age of Aquarius* which was translated into Japanese in 1972 as *The Revival of Mikkyō* (Mikkyō no Fukken). In this presentation, I will argue that, despite attempts by traditional sects to separate "orthodox Mikkyō" from the then popular category of "the Occult", the conceptual entanglement between these two aspects led to a popularization of esoteric Buddhism in Japanese society, ultimately redefining the country's religious landscape.

### Final discussion

How can we approach "esotericism" in Asia and facilitate cross-disciplinary research?

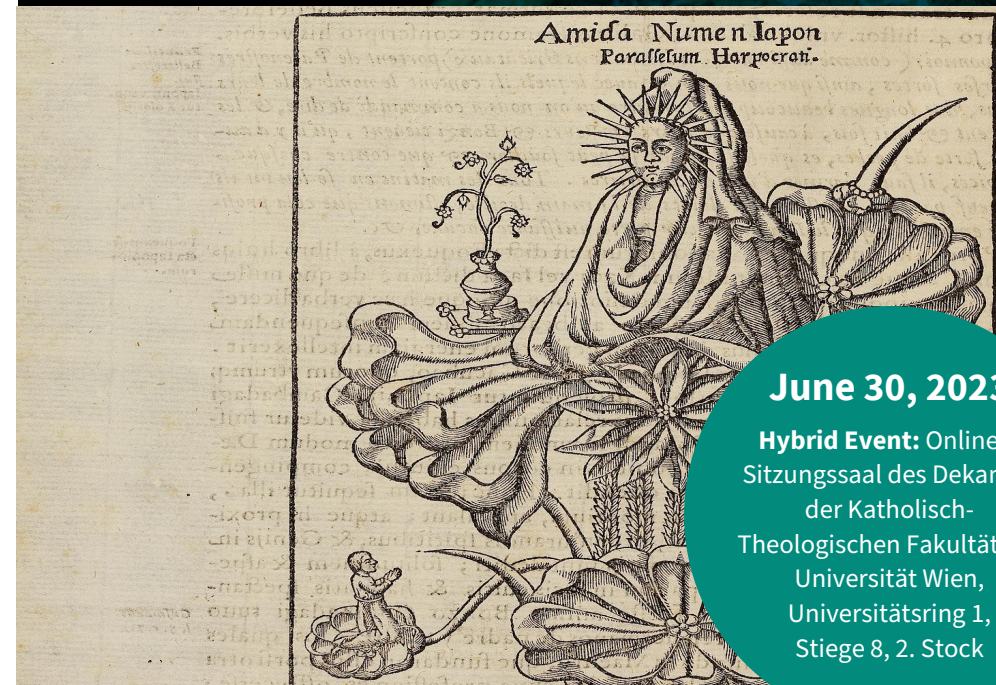
19:00 Dinner: Mayer am Pfarrplatz

<https://globale-religionsgeschichte.univie.ac.at/>

For questions, please contact  
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# What is "Esotericism" in South and East Asia?

Workshop of the Department of Religious Studies in Collaboration with the Research Centre Religion and Transformation and the East Asian Network for the Academic Study of Esotericism



**June 30, 2023**

**Hybrid Event:** Online &  
Sitzungssaal des Dekanats  
der Katholisch-  
Theologischen Fakultät der  
Universität Wien,  
Universitätsring 1,  
Stiege 8, 2. Stock

Free registration until June 29, 2023  
at [patricia.mayer@univie.ac.at](mailto:patricia.mayer@univie.ac.at)

# Friday, 30 June 2023

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**10:00–12:00 CEST**

**Julian Strube** (University of Vienna)

*What is “Esotericism” in Asia? Methodological Challenges and Historical Developments since the Sixteenth Century*

Several fields of study today are occupied with, or even delineated on the basis of, different understandings of “esotericism.” Although (actively) ignored by many scholars, there is a de facto compartmentalization of scholarship into “Western” and “Eastern” esotericism, as examples such as “esoteric Buddhism” illustrate. This observation is the starting point of my investigation, which will reconstruct historical understandings of “esoteric” subjects as outcomes of encounters between Europeans and Asians since at least the sixteenth century. Rather than suggesting the existence of a universal esotericism, I am interested in how distinctions between “esoteric” and “exoteric” became a fundamental logic within debates about the meaning of religion, which historically have not been divided along “Western” and “Eastern” lines. Against this background, I will show how the demarcation of a “Western esoteric corpus” within the same source material is the direct result of a narrow historiographical paradigm, the complication of which allows for a more comprehensive and historically grounded understanding of the global history of esotericism and religion. My focus will be on European encounters with Japanese and Chinese teachings and practices, and how such encounters shaped regional developments in Bengal since the eighteenth century.

**Orion Klautau** (Tohoku University)

*Mikkyō and Esoteric Buddhism: The Genealogy of an Entanglement*

A quick search for “Mikkyō” in most English-language present-day encyclopedias – online or otherwise – will provide, for this term, the translation “Esoteric Buddhism.” Although Mikkyō is associated in Japan with the schools founded by Saichō (762-822) and Kūkai (774-835), the roots of such practices go back to Tang-dynasty China (618-907) and, further, into late medieval India. While secrecy is indeed one of Mikkyō’s most basic features, its association with the term “Esoteric Buddhism” did not come until much later, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Although predating it, the term was popularized in the eponymous 1883 best-seller by Theosophist A. P. Sinnett (1840-1921), who in his work, however, makes no direct mention of these (Sino-)Japanese practices later described as “Esoteric Buddhism.” When was it, then, that Mikkyō became Esoteric Buddhism? This presentation attempts to provide some initial insights into the origins of this entanglement, thus contributing not only to the history of modern Japanese Buddhism, but also to studies on the globalization of the idea of “Esotericism.”

**12:00-13:30 Lunch Break: Café Diglas im Schottenstift**

**13:30–15:30 CEST**

**Ioannis Gaitanidis** (Chiba University)

*The Esotericism of 'Japanese Religions'*

In this paper, I argue that one of the reasons why subjects currently treated under the label of esotericism elsewhere did not attract the attention of scholars studying religion in Japan consists of a typical methodological fallacy in Area Studies: 'Japanese religion' has constantly been treated as a uniform (yet complex) entity that can only be understood as such. Esotericism has not been debated in Japan until recently, simply because the Japaneseness of 'Japanese religion' had superseded any account of internal variation, rejection and contradiction. Even today, scholarship on religion in Japan, produced in and outside the country, continues seeking to identify the 'uniqueness', 'alternativity', and 'peculiar characteristics' of a sui generis 'Japanese religion'. In fact, many of the post-WWII works I will discuss in this paper seek to explain 'Japanese religion' as if its workings remain 'esoteric' to the uninitiated audience. In this, one could even identify a subtle affinity with early religionist studies of esotericism, where esotericism was portrayed as a relatively uniform phenomenon coming out of a particular cultural area.

**Avery Morrow** (Brown University)

*Conceptualizing Esoteric Shinto*

The emic term Koshintō refers to small-scale divinatory, martial, meditative and healing practices which are purported to be survivals from an “ancient” substratum of Shinto and suppressed by modernizing currents. Paradoxically, the conceptualization of Shinto was itself a modernizing process in Japanese religion, meaning that Koshintō practices and texts were generally produced in the 19th and 20th centuries. The genuinely suppressed religious movement Shugendo, which contains both Shinto and Buddhist elements, is not considered Koshintō. I propose a translation of Koshintō which disentangles it from claims to historicity. I suggest calling this category “Esoteric Shinto” by analogy with modern Western occultism, which also has a small number of dedicated practitioners and an outsized cultural impact. This category could help us contextualize specific “suppressed history” stories, such as those used by the religious groups Aum Shinrikyo (“hihirogane”) and Happy Science (“Ame-no-Mioya-Gami”, “The Cherry Bushido”). It can also help us interpret the spiritual language used in martial arts such as aikido.