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Croatia

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Abstract

East Asian religious communities in Croatia are very few in number. Although there is a substantial body of literature dealing with Asian religions from theoretical, descriptive, and comparative perspectives, there is a lack of interest in East Asian religions specifically, some research on Buddhist communities aside. This chapter provides insights into existing data on several communities present in Croatia for a longer period of time. These groups influence various aspects of social and individual life (sport, “well-being culture”, unconventional medicine and official societies that promote cultural, scientific and economic cooperation with Croatia). Recently, a great number of migrants to Croatia from East Asia have led scholars to explore their religious life. Thus far we have found that these migrants are not organised into religious communities and that their religious life takes place in the private sphere.

Keywords

Buddhism; East Asian religions; migration; religion in Croatia

1. Introduction

East Asian diasporic communities in Croatia are not large, while Eastern Asian religious elements and some other influences (for instance in sports, medicine, “well-being culture” and so forth) are sporadic but present. To provide better insight into the presence of East Asian diasporic communities, religiosities, institutions, and practices in the Croatian context, we will start our chapter with a short introduction to the country’s historical, political, and social background.

Located at the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe, Croatia is a country with a turbulent history. Since embracing Christianity in the period from the seventh to the eleventh century, Croats built their identity primarily through a strong connection with the Catholic Church. During the war with the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Roman popes referred to Croatian territory as *Antemurale Christianitatis*, towers and

walls that protect Christianity. The existence on the borders of different cultures and religions (Catholic, Orthodox, and Islamic), shaped specific Croatian experiences in which Catholicism often served as a guardian and protector of national values (and cultural identity). Throughout its history Croatia has been part of other empires and state formations (Hungarian, Hungarian-Austrian, Ottoman, and Yugoslavian), except in the period from 1941 to 1945 during which a short-lived quisling Independent State of Croatia (NDH) was established. After World War II Croatia became part of a new socialist Yugoslavia which lasted until 1991.

During the socialist period, in a multi-religious and multi-national Yugoslavia, the government tried to suppress religion in public life. Although an “ideological struggle” was fought against religion and religious influences, especially through the media and education systems (with varying intensities at different times), traditional family patterns of behaviour and socialisation, celebrations of patron saints, holiday gatherings, implementation of local religious traditions, etc. (Jukić 1994: 366) remained among the population. Thus, religion was publicly invisible but still served as a marker of collective identities.

After the collapse of socialism and the introduction of democratic changes, Croatia experienced military aggression brought on by the rebellion of local Serbs supported by Slobodan Milošević's (1941–2006) regime in Serbia. The modern Croatian state was thus created during the war while its democratisation and social consolidation were based on homogenisation in both the national and religious senses. The newly established political elites based their legitimacy, as well as the legitimacy of the new social system, partly on Catholicism as a historical guardian of traditional and national values and as the only social factor that represented opposition during socialism.

All these historical processes shaped Croatia as a country with a strong (mono)religious Catholic affiliation and a specific position of the dominant religion in the public sphere (media, education, politics). The strong identification with religion and the church places Croatia among the countries with the highest level of religiosity in Europe (Davie 2000; Zrinščak et al. 2000). Along with the close connections between religion and nation, the entanglement between religion and politics, and the revitalisation of religion in general, Croatia shares another common process with other post-communist Central and Eastern European countries – an increase in the number of new religious movements (Borowik and Babinski 1997; Tomka 1995). This process is not very pronounced or large scale, but it is indicative and points to the fact that besides its overall collectivistic character, religiosity in Croatia is in some aspects both institutionalised and privatised or individualised. For instance,

along with high levels of confessional and religious identification, religious socialisation in the family, belief in God, and regular church attendance, there is simultaneously a variety in how far Catholic moral norms are accepted as well as an acceptance of alternative beliefs as a part of a personal search for meaning, inner development, and spiritual fulfilment (Marinović Jerolimov and Ančić 2014; Nikodem and Zrinščak 2012; 2019).

The strong expression of religiosity in Croatia is a complex phenomenon that also has an impact on the attitude of Croatian citizens toward immigrants, especially when contextual factors are taken into account (Scheepers et al. 2002; Scheepers and Eisinga 2015). The historical forms of multi-ethnicity and multi-confessionalism in Croatia are mainly related to autochthonous minorities (from countries of which Croatia was a part) which are culturally and linguistically close to the dominant population. In this situation religious affiliation plays the role of a symbolic difference from others. Immigrants are primarily perceived as a cultural threat and there is high social distancing from them (Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2012; 2014; Čehulić and Zrinščak 2023). Kumpes (2018) determined the connection of all three investigated dimensions of religiosity with social distance from immigrants, in that those who express confessional affiliation, who self-identify religiously, and who practise religion (by going to church or place of worship) show higher social distance from immigrants. Additionally, Čehulić and Zrinščak find that in Austria, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, as in Croatia, right-wing political orientations affect feelings towards immigrants as a symbolic threat.

2. The East Asian Diasporic and Religious Context

2.1 *East Asian Communities*

The East Asian diaspora in Croatia is small in number. The largest group is Chinese immigrants, numbering 797 people according the last Population Census from 2021, ranking eighth among the groups of foreign citizens in Croatia. Chinese immigrants in Croatia mostly deal in commerce and catering (restaurants). Kuti and Božić (2016) analysed theoretical concepts of transnational social spaces and tried to describe their development across Croatian borders based on empirical research on three migrant and minority groups: Albanians, Bosniaks, and Chinese people, for whom it was possible to assume that they engage in transnational activities. The authors describe Chinese immigrant group as representatives of trade and/or entrepreneurial diasporas and point out that the economic domain of transnational activities is the most represented among their Chinese interviewees. While other immigrant

groups maintain connections in Croatia and to their country of origin, but also to other countries in Europe and the world, Chinese participants' contacts were almost exclusively bilocal: Croatia and China. Kuti and Božić noted the transnational separation of the immediate family (spouses, parents and small children) among the Chinese group. Apart from fostering social ties, providing financial assistance to families in China or elsewhere is less relevant for various reasons (subjective and objective). At the macro level, there are also different unfavourable conditions for the development of transnational activities for Chinese immigrants in Croatia such as entry, residence, and work regulations. Another unfavourable element is geographical distance, which influences the development and maintenance of the transnational ties for Chinese migrants more than Albanians and Bosniaks. However, the development of new technologies (like WhatsApp and others) "reduced" that distance and enabled communication with geographically very distant family members, friends, etc.

There is no official statistical data on the exact number of Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese immigrants. The South Korean community in Croatia is small, only about 150 people. They mostly work in restaurants and live in several major Croatian cities – Zagreb, Split, and Dubrovnik. Due to the large number of tourists coming from South Korea to Croatia, Korean language and culture are taught at some universities. Although a Croatian-Korean Society exists, it is the South Korean Embassy which mostly hosts people on holidays such as the Korean New Year. They are religiously diverse (Buddhists, Catholics, and Protestants), so their religiosity is linked exclusively to the private sphere, to the family.

Japanese immigrants are even fewer. Munetoshi Sugiura, second secretary of the Embassy of Japan in Zagreb, states that Japanese people come to Croatia either because their spouse is from Croatia or they want to build or continue their professional careers here. With the intensification of economic cooperation between Croatia and Japan, Japanese people are engaged in a greater range of professions in Croatia.¹ Based on the examples given by Munetoshi Sugiura, the Japanese in Croatia are mostly professionals who came for specific personal reasons.

Unlike the afore-mentioned immigrants and immigrant groups from East Asia, which are few but visible in Croatian society, there is no data on Vietnamese immigrants and it can be assumed that there are extremely few.

Croatia is a small country, geographically distant and unknown to the home countries of East Asian migrants. It is the last country to become a member

1 See <https://www.nacional.hr/dossier-japanci-u-hrvatskoj-novi-zivot-nove-karijere/> (accessed: July 20, 2023).

of the European Union (in 2013), and it opened up to labour migration only recently. With this in mind, it can be assumed that the number of immigrants from East Asian countries will grow in the future. However, considering the current situation and the data at our disposal, this chapter can only serve as an introduction and a stimulus for future research that will look at East Asian diasporic communities (and their religiosity specifically) in Croatia.

2.2 *Local Interest in and Practice of East Asian Religiosities*

The first documented information in Croatia about Buddhist doctrine, customs, and practices consisted of the legend of the Buddha's life in the works of old Croatian writers Marko Marulić (1450–1524), Juraj Habdelić (1606–1678), and in letters written by Nikola Ratkaj (1601–1662), a Croatian Jesuit missionary appointed to work in Tibet (Špiranec 2019). Interest in Buddhist ideas emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in two areas: in popular culture and in the academic community. Scholars in Croatia looked at Buddhist traditions explicitly as well as implicitly. Scholarly interest in Buddhism was initiated by Croatian students in Vienna and Leipzig. In 1918, D. Pukler published a comparative study on Buddhism and Christianity, while the study of Sanskrit was an integral part of the study of Slavic studies and the Croatian language. Špiranec (2019) claims that this indirect influence through Slavic studies sparked interest in Asian culture among educated young people, which in the long term contributed to the interest in Asian religions. In the period between the two world wars, interest in Buddhist traditions continued to grow, not only in the academic community, but also in small esoteric circles in the bigger cities. Several books on Buddhism were published at the time and the Yugoslav Theosophical Society, founded in 1924 in Zagreb, disseminated its own understanding of Asian spirituality through publications, public lectures, educational courses, and ritual practices. Jesuit missionary activity was one of the sources of popularisation of Asian culture, religion, and concepts among Croats.

According to Špiranec (2019), during the period of socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1991), Buddhism was introduced to Croatian society and culture through several channels: the academic community, new groups of martial arts experts who nurtured Buddhist practices, ordinary people under the continuing influence of Jesuit missionary activity, and the gradual development of alternative religiosity within Catholic popular religiosity. After the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, Buddhism also became a subject of exploration in Catholic theological circles. Buddhist religion and philosophy are subjects of study and research at the Jesuit Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Sciences of the University of Zagreb. In addition to regular lectures, the faculty has hosted many

guests, such as the Dalai Lama in 2002 and Dorzin K. C. Dhondup Rinpoche in 2014 (Špiranec 2019). During the early phases of Croatian engagement with Buddhism, the East Asian dimension is included along with South Asian.

In recent times, Buddhist and Asian thought was first promoted in Croatia by the philosopher and orientalist Čedomil Veljačić (1915–1997), professor at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb. Veljačić was the first man in the former Yugoslavia to be ordained as a Buddhist monk (Bhikkhu Njanadivako). He wrote a numerous books about oriental philosophy and religion, using often a comparative approach. Today, cultural contacts with East Asian societies and most migrant communities present in Croatia mostly take place through societies/associations.

In 2018, Croatian and Chinese businesspeople, scientists, and cultural workers founded the Croatian-Chinese Friendship Society for Cultural, Scientific and Economic Cooperation. There is also the Confucius Institute at the University of Zagreb, established in 2012 as a university educational centre with the aim of promoting Chinese language and culture and strengthening economic ties between the Republic of Croatia and the People's Republic of China. The MAKOTO Croatian Japanese Society, established officially in 2013, is a voluntary association of citizens registered with the City Office for General Administration of the City of Zagreb, and is a non-profit legal entity whose work is public. This society actively works on building friendships through parties, lectures, workshops, projects and various events. The activities of these associations are focused on cultural and economic encounters and not on religion and religiosity in particular, apart from the celebration of some religious holidays as an aspect of Japanese culture.

East Asian religiosity has a more or less marginal presence in areas such as martial arts, medicine, “well-being culture” etc. Nevertheless, there are many different such practices present in Croatian society. Most of these are included in HUPED, the Croatian Association for Natural, Energetic and Spiritual Medicine. HUPED is a professional association of therapists and healers with the task of raising the quality of therapeutic and healing services and protecting the rights of users of these services. It was registered in 2000 at the Ministry of Justice and acts as an umbrella organisation for the field of alternative medicine in Croatia. Since 2012 HUPED has been a subsidiary of the European Association for Natural, Energy and Spiritual Medicine (EUPED), and is also an integral part of the international organisation IPED.

Over sixty different therapeutic approaches to improving health and quality of life are registered within HUPED (in special sections) and more than 1,000 professional healing therapists. In addition, several thousand people are still in

the process of training and tens of thousands of people have completed various education programmes, but use the knowledge acquired for their personal needs only.

Part of HUPED is also the Academy for Natural, Energy and Spiritual Medicine. APED is a set of informal educational programmes that train therapists and healers in the field of natural, energetic, and spiritual medicine, i.e. alternative medicine. Upon completion of their training, they receive a certificate or diploma as a confirmation of successful completion and as a licence for therapeutic healing work. In order to tackle the relationship between religion and unconventional medicine (which is much freer and even less defined than the relationship – at least in the formal legal sense) between unconventional medicine and official medicine and psychiatry, the Academy introduced professional training through the module “The Basics of Philosophical-Religious Systems and their Practices” for healers and therapists, but also for others who are interested in these topics, independent of their work.

There is also a Centre for Chinese Medicine in Croatia which offers a wide variety of traditional Chinese healing techniques as well as seminars and webinars about it. Different elements of “well-being culture” include for instance *fengshui* 風水 and *taijiquan* 太极拳 clubs that unite physical and spiritual aspects. Another interesting “well-being” aspect which is present to some extent in the popular culture is *dao* 道 (female) sexuality with some elements of spirituality and meditation. There are a few online workshops that teach the principles of the *dao* of sexuality, especially from the female perspective. They include various exercises for the mastering of the energy from the reproductive and sexual organs through breathing and control.

East Asian sports (martial arts) began to arrive in Croatia in the 1970s through individuals who visited, or for some time lived in and made connections with teachers from Far Eastern countries. Buddhist practice was transmitted through small groups of martial arts practitioners. As an integral part of martial arts training, members of the Mushindokai Martial Arts Society practised yoga and Buddhist meditation. This group was one of many meditation groups found across Croatia. Some members formally accepted the official Buddhist precepts in 1977. From that founding group, three Buddhist communities developed in the 1980s. Members of other martial arts groups also experimented with Buddhist practices (Špiranec 2019).

A number of different martial arts/sports of East Asian origin are present in Croatia: *aikidō* 合気道, *aiki-jūjutsu* 合気柔術, *jūdō* 柔道, *jūjutsu* 柔術, *karate* 空手, *kendō* 剣道, *kenjutsu* 剣術, *kyūdō* 弓道, *nanbudō* 南武道, *ninjutsu* 忍術, and *shōrinji kenpō* 少林寺拳法 originated in Japan; Jeet Kune Do, *gongfu* 功夫,

sanda 散打, *taijiquan*, and *wushu* 武術 originated in China; *kōmdo* 김도/劍道, *hapkido* 합기도/合氣道, *t'aegwōndo* 태권도/跆拳道, and *tangsudo* 당수도/唐手道 originated in South Korea; and Việt Võ Đạo originated in Vietnam.

There are many Asian sport clubs throughout Croatia. In some sports, individuals, both men and women have been achieving success in major world and Olympic competitions for many years (*karate*, *t'aegwōndo*, *jūdō*). Through familiarisation with certain sports and martial arts, members learn more about the cultural origins of these practices, together with the philosophical foundations in the background, and less about religious elements per se.

2.3 *East Asian Religious Institutions and Practices*

In Croatia, Buddhism is present to a lesser extent than in some other countries of the former Eastern bloc, such as Hungary and Poland. The Mushindokai association had a pioneering role: in addition to practising yoga and martial arts, it also introduced Buddhist practices to Croatia, establishing meditation and study groups. The association no longer exists today.

Linked to this heritage is the Dharmaloka Buddhist community. It arose out of a meditation and study group founded in 1985, which began to attract more people in the 1990s. The community follows the Sino-Japanese Buddhist tradition, primarily Chinese Chan 禪. In 1992, the community founded the first Buddhist centre in Croatia. The founder of this community is Željko Andričević, a Zen teacher who encountered Buddhism in 1975. In 1996, he met the famous Chan master Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009) in the USA and became his student. Shengyan was the spiritual advisor of the community until he passed away in 2009. The community is located in a spacious apartment in the capital Zagreb. For multi-day meditation sessions, they use the space outside the city. The community's main activities include monthly public lectures, study groups for those experienced in meditation, meditation practice courses, Zen yoga, the martial art of *kenpō* 拳法, Chan residential events, an international summer seminar in Chan Buddhism, yoga, and *kenpō*. They also mark significant events from the Buddhist tradition, especially Vesakh (celebrating the Buddha's awakening) and Bodhidharma Day.

The Mandala Society of Croatia was established in 1999 as a vehicle for esoteric Shingon 真言 practices and teachings as transmitted by master Tanaka Jōmyō 田中成明 (b. 1947), a Shingon priest, master of calligraphy, author, and world traveller. The Society facilitates workshops, courses, and training, covering the broad range of Buddhist teachings and practices. They are based in Rijeka.

In addition, small groups of Korean Sōn 선/禪, Japanese Zen 禪, and Japanese Shingon traditions exist in Rijeka, Zagreb, and Split. Each community

is very active and has networks of small groups of practitioners in all major cities, which organise lectures and workshops, lead spiritual exercises, and publish literature. They also organise visits from overseas teachers. Some of them are present on modern media (websites, YouTube channels) and offer online meditations and courses. They all belong to different schools of the Mahayana tradition,² although their primary source of inspiration, Čedomil Veljačić, belonged to the Theravada branch (Špiranec 2019). Their membership is, however, mostly composed of Croatian converts, especially those interested in New Age spirituality.

As previously mentioned, Croatian Catholic missionaries expressed interest in Buddhism ever since their first contacts in the fifteenth century. Convergence between some Buddhist practices and Christian traditions in contemporary Croatian society can be seen in the Christian prayer forms of some prayer communities:³ for example, the Catholic tradition of contemplation, which, despite the fact that it is described in Christian language, is in practice actually shaped according to Sanbō Kyodan 三宝教団 Zen teachings. This is evident from the structure of spiritual exercises, the way they are taught, the position of the body, breathing, internal processes and other elements separated from their original religious context and transferred into secular forms (Špiranec 2019: 508–509). This specific form of syncretism came from priests taught by the German Benedictine, Willigis Jäger (1925–2020), who studied Zen in Japan with the Jesuit Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle (1898–1990) and with various other Sanbō Kyodan teachers. After completing his training in Japan, Jäger presented the same content as Zen for non-Christians and as contemplation for Christians. The Jesuits contributed to this effort by translating the books of Anthony de Mello and participating in the translation of Kadowaki Kakichi's 門脇佳吉 (1926–2017) book *Zen and the Bible* (Kadowaki 2012). The Catholic hierarchy's concern about syncretic religious forms amongst ordinary people is evident in their public admonitions (Špiranec 2019: 508). However it is tacitly accepted because although eclectic, it remains within the framework of Catholic beliefs and sacramental practice.

² Špiranec (2019: 507–508) hypothesises that the “preference for the Mahāyāna schools seems to exist because of the external and internal similarities between Catholic and Mahāyāna rites, the decoration of sacred spaces and the structure of their doctrine, as well as their involvement in everyday life.”

³ For example, the Franciscan prayer community *Jeka tišine* (Echo of Silence) in Zagreb.

3. Key Literature and Lacunae in the Scholarship

Interest in Asian religious traditions, including specifically East Asian traditions, already existed in Croatian academic circles in the fifteenth century. In his paper, Špiranec (2019) focuses on contacts between Jesuits and Buddhists in Croatia but also gives a short overview of awareness of Buddhist doctrines throughout Croatian history. Until the nineteenth century, general Buddhist ideas were known among the educated classes in the major cities. In the twentieth century, they became more popular through the writings of important intellectuals of the time, philosopher Vuk Pavlović, poet Tin Ujević, literary critic and historian Antun Barac, etc. and with the help of official Buddhist centres. After the First World War, leading Croatian artists, among whom the poet Tin Ujević was most significant, sought a philosophical and metaphysical deepening of their art in Asia, specifically in China and Japan (Kim 2016). In one of his essays Ujević gave an encyclopedic summary of Chinese history, drawing parallels and connections with the history of the Western world along the way, and states that the theological-ethical foundations of contemporary China are based on the “Three Teachings” founded by Confucius, Laozi 老子 and the Buddha, which are not mutually exclusive: “They are characterised by tolerance and a kind of theological carelessness. The ‘gods of the East’ are not mutually exclusive, and they tend to compromise with magic, witches, sacrifices to the ruler, and some personal freedoms. On this basis, the moral unity of the Chinese world has withstood the times far better than the Roman West” (Ujević 1963–1967: 134–135). Ujević also emphasised elsewhere what he saw as the Far East’s cultural syncretism and spiritual unity as a model of internal civilisational tolerance, that is, “endurance.” In his essays, Ujević dealt with the legacies of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism in China not only in an encyclopedic way, but also attempted to understand their essence to find a support for and answers to the questions he dealt with in his search for a positive constituent of his poetry (Kim 2016: 105).

Although there is a substantial body of literature in Croatian dealing with Asian religions from theoretical, descriptive, and comparative perspectives, there are visible gaps related to the lack of interest in East Asian religions specifically, especially a lack of empirical studies among the populations who practise them. In other words, East Asian religious communities have not been the focus of scientific interest in analysing substantive and affirmative forms of this type of religiosity as a lived reality performed in everyday life, in communities of practice, in forming individual identities and shaping interactions with

others, while taking into account their influence on the material environment, physical appearance, structuring of social and political relations, and so forth.

4. Research and Methodological Challenges

Research on religiosity in Croatia began in 1964 at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb. Until the end of the 1980s, the most extensive research was on traditional Christian religiosity, mostly Catholicism. Quantitative (mostly) and qualitative methodology were used. Longitudinal surveys enabled insight into changes in two different sociocultural contexts –socialist and post-socialist. In 1988, research began into the minority religions of Christian provenance. The first survey to include all registered religious communities in Croatia was carried out in cooperation between the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb and the Association for Religious Freedom during the period 2001–2003. This study included three communities of oriental origin. These were the first sociological scientific insights into the distribution and practice of East Asian religions. However, the religiosity of migrant groups is a completely under-researched phenomenon. The Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies has conducted (some are still in progress) several surveys of migrant groups (Chinese and Nepalese), more related to the attitudes of Croatian citizens towards migrants from the Far East.

Migrant groups will no doubt be the subject of future research. This will present a real research challenge for several reasons. The data from the census varies, and there are often more migrants than is shown in the official data. Migrants are not organised into groups, and often change jobs and places of residence. Qualitative methodology is the only choice, and snowball sampling is the most appropriate approach. The issue of language can also be a problem, although many migrants speak English, so language barriers can be overcome. However, these are fluctuating groups, and they receive work permits for only five years. Because of all the above, religious practice is particularly tied to the private sphere, without religious institutions.

In short, these are hard-to-reach communities, with whom we have not had much contact even historically, because of geographical and cultural distance. Nevertheless, the number of migrants in Croatia is likely to grow. But given the variety of issues which they face, from the inability to find a secure employment to the social isolation that comes with being alone in an unfamiliar country, statutory support that is often inadequate, the xenophobic views which

they encounter, it is questionable whether they are going to start to organise into religious groups or if their religious practices will remain hidden in the private sphere.

In the era of globalisation and the massive migrant wave to Europe, the specifics of Croatia as a small country with relatively small migrant groups should be emphasised. Unlike large European countries with permanent large migrant groups, East Asian migrant groups in Croatia are small and unstable. Permanent and large migrant groups have different identity patterns in which religion certainly plays an important role, they have forms of organising into communities, they have religious institutions, etc. Minority, fluctuating groups, as in Croatia, probably retain their identity differently. The question is how much of a role religious identity plays in this context. At the same time, it is important for these groups that new digital technologies change the patterns of connection and communication, enabling them to maintain their connection with the parent community from which they came.

The study of “old” and new migrant groups from the Far East, of their religiosity and identity, of integration into the society they migrated to, of degrees of social distance towards them, etc., remains a real research interest and a challenge.

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