



## Transpacific Networks and Religious Circulations Spanning East Asia and the United States: An Introduction

Justin B. Stein

### Abstract

This special issue introduction examines the transpacific circulation of religious practices between East Asia (China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) and the United States, arguing that attention to the development of religious practice in transnational networks challenges scholarship that treats national units like “American religion” or “Chinese religion” as self-contained and self-evident. It proposes “circulatory development” to describe how the circulation of religious practices reshapes the practices themselves and the networks through which they move, making it difficult to identify the practice with any single place of origin. It then presents a historical overview of religion’s deep entanglement in modern East Asia and the US, from Benjamin Franklin’s fascination with Confucianism, to the gods worshipped by Asian laborers in the nineteenth-century American West, to Cold War-era transpacific Protestant networks and the therapeuticization of “Eastern spirituality.” Finally, it introduces the five case studies that make up this special issue, each illuminating the complex networks and agents that dialectically shape the multidirectional flows and ongoing development of transpacific religious practice: a Chinese American spiritual healer and his New York City-based students and patients; a Taiwanese Buddhist nun ministering an international and multiethnic congregation in Austin, Texas; the transnational network engaged in Protestant evangelism in prisoner-of-war camps during the Korean War; the mediascape and spectacle of an ultra-conservative South Korean pastor; and the digital and material networks of Shinto practitioners in the US and Canada.

### Keywords

Transnational Religion, Transpacific Religion, USA-Asia Relations, Asian American Religion, Modern Chinese Religion, Modern Korean Religion, Modern Japanese Religion, Cold War Religion

Historically, scholars often described the religious practices of the United States, China, (South) Korea, and Japan as existing in national units—such as American religion, Chinese religion, Korean religion, and Japanese religion—leading to these becoming subfields, with attendant specialized publications and journals. However, as the existence of this very journal attests, the transnational turn around the turn of the twenty-first century helped deconstruct some artificial boundaries and essentialisms that long characterized area studies. There is a growing recognition that such units are not natural, but rather what we might call “national cultural imaginaries”: constructions of national cultures as particular, unique, bounded formations that extend throughout a state’s territory and have a stable existence over time, such that contemporary phenomena anywhere within a state’s borders are considered in continuity with national characteristics from centuries past. To avoid reinforcing monolithic national cultures and narratives of national exceptionalism, scholars of religion have increasingly interrogated and denaturalized these national cultural imaginaries through varied means, including the use of frames and methods from transnational studies.

This special issue emerges from the “Transnational Religious Expressions: Between Asia and North America” seminar held at the American Academy of Religion’s annual meeting between 2017 and 2022. Like the many contributions to that seminar, the articles published here bring together multiple disciplines and methods to examine the translation, transmission, and transformation of varied religious activities that bridge Asia and North America. The authors consider “religion” in an expansive way that assumes its entanglement in other aspects of human life, including politics, economics, and medicine, and as much in the daily (sometimes unorthodox) practices of individual people as in the institutionalized forms of religious professionals. The papers in this special issue examine how the circulation of religious practices in transnational networks spanning East Asia and the US lead to the development of practices that reflect religious contexts of both sides.<sup>1</sup> The individuals and organizations that form these network hubs often transform the practices that they circulate through cultural translation or adaptation, while also being transformed themselves through their engagement with the practice. This special issue contributes to the growing scholarly literature on transnational Asia and transnational religion, while also providing insights into the particular qualities that characterize the religious interactions and intersections between East Asia and the US.

---

<sup>1</sup> We primarily examine religious entanglements between individuals and institutions located in the United States and in the East Asian nations of China, Taiwan, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan. Of course, there are no strict cultural boundaries of “East Asia” that align with these political borders. Despite Vietnam’s geographical location on the Indochinese peninsula, Vietnam’s religious cultures are arguably closer to those of East Asia than they are to their neighbors in Southeast Asia, and US actors have been major forces shaping Vietnam since the 1950s, including the religious impact of the Vietnamese diaspora in the US (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2011). Conversely, western and southwestern China’s ethnic minorities often have more in common with ethnic groups across their respective political borders in Central and Southeast Asia than with their Han Chinese compatriots. As such, we recognize the heuristic nature of the cultural intersystem between East Asia and the United States engaged with in this special issue.

The transnational turns among scholars of American studies (Fishkin 2006, Fluck et al. 2011, Shu and Pease 2015, Wald 1998) and East Asian studies (Cawley and Schneider 2023, Okano and Sugimoto 2017, Ryang 2016)—as well as the important historic interconnections between modern East Asia and the US—have given rise to a new subfield of transpacific Asian/American studies. This has, at least in part, emerged from the growing recognition that scholars of Asian studies and Asian American studies have much to offer one another, especially with regard to the transnational actors, networks, and interests binding East Asia and the US (Azuma 2005, Fujitani 2013, Takezawa and Okihiro 2016, Wang and Cho 2017, Wong 2009). In recent years, several scholars of religion have taken up this transnational approach to examine how religious phenomena have been produced through the interaction of people and institutions in the US and in East Asia (e.g., Clart and Jones 2020, H. J. Kim 2022, Kwon and Park 2022, Mohr 2014, Thomas 2019). But the framework of using religious currents in transnational networks to rethink frameworks that, explicitly or implicitly, are based in national identity has been of interest to scholars of “American religion” for some time. Nearly thirty years ago, Laurie Maffly-Kipp (1997) encouraged scholars to consider American religious history “from the perspective of the Pacific Rim” as a corrective to narratives focusing on White Protestant settlers’ westward expansion, and Catherine Albanese discussed (with reference to Allan Grapard’s work on “combinative” religion in Japan) how “the shape and operation of American religious life—all of it—is best described under the rubric of religious combination” and “addition” through intercultural contact and exchange (1997: 224).

The analytical framework of transnationalism developed alongside others like globalization, global studies, and global history, but its bounded scope of social phenomena that cross specific national borders can help avoid the potentially flattening or homogenizing tendencies of the “global.” In this sense, transnational studies is part of what Benjamin Kirby identifies as “second-phase” globalization studies literature, which attempts to provide “grounded” analysis “from below” at the level of individual actors’ material and social realities that help to flesh out more general or theoretical work on globalization (2025: 376–380). At the same time that the transnational scope can help to clarify cross-border connections, such analysis should also take care not to reify nation-states as internally homogeneous “units of comparison” (Rots 2025: 267–269). The articles of this special issue resonate with Kirby’s call for “thinking infrastructurally,” that is, “how global entanglements materialize as asymmetrical, friction-laden, and path dependent relations” (2025: 384–386; see also Duong 2015).

Throughout this special issue, the authors examine how religious practices circulate in networks that bridge countries in East Asia and the US, while resisting common models of “East–West” interaction that are the legacy of Orientalist, racial, and colonial thinking. Like Borup and Fibiger (2017) and Gaitanidis et al. (2025), we aspire to a “post-Orientalist” approach that considers “East” and “West” as political, contested constructions rather than ontological categories and focuses on the mutual and recursive influence

between religious practice in Asia and (in our case) the US. Although some actors analyzed in these articles use East-West binaries or nationalist rhetorics in their own discourse, we believe that the multidirectional transnational influences in their lives and work reveal the constructed nature of these “purified” identities and rather reveal the region to be a “North Pacific intersystem” (Stein 2023: 13).

### Networked Flows and Circulatory Development

In addition to the common theme of considering the circulation of religious practice between East Asia and the US, these papers consider this movement in terms of *networked flows*—that is, how people, materials, information, ideas, and practices do not move randomly about the earth, but tend to follow pathways structured by social and institutional connections—and *circulatory development*—that is, how the very act of circulation can transform both the network itself and that which the network transports.<sup>2</sup> For example, the course of migrants’ movements and resettlement across national borders can be affected by their social, familial, and institutional (including religious) connections, as well as state policies and economic forces. Their movement along a particular route connecting different nodes can help to reinforce that route and facilitate future flows along the same pathway. Moreover, religious expressions brought or produced along that route are often transformed by the journey and adapted for new settings, demonstrating that circulation is not simply a process of cultural transmission but can also be a process of cultural production.

This resembles phenomena in the natural world, like the underground mycorrhizal networks formed by fungi and plant roots. The presence of mycorrhizal fungi enables seedlings to “acquire sufficient soil nutrients for root and shoot growth and hence survival” (Gorzalak et al. 2015: 3). Mycorrhizal fungi can affect host plants’ behaviors, as well as connect plants to one another, fostering communication and coordinated interplant behaviors, such as resource transfers and mutualistic defense responses; and these interactions create “complex adaptive systems” in which interactions between network components allow the interspecific community to exploit local resources and behave in ways that would not be possible without these symbiotic relationships (Gorzalak et al. 2015: 2, 9). Similarly, social interactions mediated by translocal networks make possible forms of cultural practice and production that would not be possible otherwise.

As religious practices transform through the process of circulation, it becomes more difficult to identify them with a particular place. This raises the question: at some point should we stop identifying practices with their place of origin, and instead associate them

---

<sup>2</sup> This subsection is adapted from Stein (2017: 32–35).

with the site where they have been adapted to local conditions? For example, to what extent is the Holiness Church in Japan or Zen Buddhism in the US Japanese or American? In this special issue we try to identify practices with the transnational network in which they circulate, which the anthropologist James Clifford called a focus on *routes* rather than *roots*: such an approach can frame “practices of displacement [. . .] as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension” (1997: 3; emphasis in original). Foregrounding movement helps avoid the problem of identity that can arise from the assumption of stasis.

Toward that end, I offer a “circulatory development” model. This phrase has two meanings, each highlighting a distinct side of a dialectical process. First, it calls attention to cultural products and practices not being simply “portable practices” that “travel well” (Csordas 2009: 5); their successful transit can depend on dynamic development (i.e., adaptation or translation) during networked circulation. The process of circulation can depend on the development of the circulating product or practice through its adaptation by networked agents. Equally importantly, circulatory development also references the process by which the movement of ideas, practices, and values across boundaries of race, ethnicity, and geography can strengthen the “local bridges” that connect otherwise distant subnetworks, producing structural changes in networks (Granovetter 1983). In this sense, the circulation process affects the development of the network through which the product or practice moves, creating structures that can ensure its own continuation. This shows bidirectional influence between the product or practice being circulated and the agents involved in its circulation.

Circulatory development provides an alternative way to think about what Fernando Ortiz (1995 [1947]) called transculturation: the processes by which cultural products are generated, abandoned, and transformed through intercultural interaction. Transcultural models often describe “intercultural contact zones” (Pratt 2008) between two distinct cultures. The processes of cultural translation tend to place in gradual series of iterative, interrelated events as practices circulate in social networks that span a range of cultural identities and values. Many of the examples I provide in the next section—and those provided by the other authors in this special issue in their respective articles—support untethering culture from nationality, although many actors involved invoke nations in various ways. We might think of these practices as emerging from a North Pacific intersystem where “Chinese,” “Korean,” “Japanese,” and “American” are imposed signifiers whose meanings are continually being renegotiated. By treating nations and cultures as always-already “intersystems,” the circulatory development model helps overcome the assumptions of distinct, pure, and uniform cultures tacitly embedded in the language of cultural contact. As neither East Asia nor America is a homogeneous, bounded, or static entity, the articles avoid reifying cultural practices and values as essentially “East Asian” or “American.” Instead, the authors present interactional histories and ethnographies that focus on how local and translocal communities of practice identify particular values as

essential to their group identity in imaginative acts that can “purify” messy grays into clearer blacks and whites.

Circulatory development transforms not only practices but also the networks in which they circulate, forming new connections between previously unconnected nodes and introducing cultural values (sometimes coded as “Asian” or “American”) to new audiences in the North Pacific cultural continuum. Examining how circulatory developments span constructed boundaries (and when they are denied such crossings) can help draw attention to how such movements reinforce, destabilize, or redraw those boundaries and the meanings they are assigned. Foregrounding transnational connections rather than nationalist distinctions brings into focus how such distinctions are mobilized in emic discourses, as modes of building or strengthening connections and as modes of exclusion.

### **The Intertwined Nature of Religion in the US and East Asia**

East Asia has been part of religious imaginations in the US since the days of the nation’s founding. In the tradition of earlier generations of English Deists (Aldridge 1993: 19), several US founders, including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin, “looked to Chinese Confucianism for models of ‘natural religion’” (Tweed 2025: 7). Franklin, “the first and foremost American Sinophile” (Aldridge 1993: 25), argued in a 1737 essay that Confucian writings are “the Gate through which it is necessary to pass to arrive at the sublimest Wisdom, and most perfect” (cited in Hornung 2019: 155). Dave Xueliang Wang (2021: 33-36) argues that the moral philosophy that Franklin influentially expressed in publications like *Poor Richard’s Almanack* (published annually from 1732 to 1758) was more influenced by Confucian philosophy than by Puritan values. Alfred Hornung argues that the worldly, pragmatic approach of Confucianism (and Chinese religion, more broadly) helped Franklin “make that transition” from “America’s [Protestant] religious tradition . . . to scientific concepts and the construction of the rational design of Deism,” as evidenced in Franklin’s posthumously published autobiography (in Hornung 2019: 154). As Max Weber partly based the ideal type of ascetic Protestant values that he famously called “the spirit of capitalism” on some short passages where Franklin promoted the virtues of industry and frugality, allegedly tied to America’s Puritan character (in Hamilton 2000: 155, 158-159), proposing a Confucian rather than Protestant basis for Franklin’s ethics not only demonstrates American religion’s long-standing entwinement with East Asia, but also calls into question prior scholarly conceptions of the character and origin of “Western” modernity.

A century later, networked flows between East Asia and the US would transform religious practice on both sides of the North Pacific. The labor of East Asian migrants enabled the expansion of American settler-colonial agriculture and extractive industries along the Pacific coast and in the newly annexed Territory of Hawaii, and religious practices

circulated in their networks. In the mid-nineteenth century, roughly a hundred thousand migrants from the Qing Empire (largely Guangdong province, where there had been a series of natural disasters and armed conflicts and the locals were familiar with maritime travel and foreigners) traveled to work in the Western US, especially California (Hu-Dehart 2019). There, in the 1860s and 1870s, these migrants set up “joss houses” to worship ancestors, gods, Buddhas, and immortals, with the martial deity Guān Dì 關帝, the sea goddess/Empress of Heaven Māzǔ 媽祖/Tiānhòu 天后, and the bodhisattva of compassion Guānyīn 觀音 as especially popular for their protective properties (Gin Lum 2019). Japanese Buddhists who came to the US understood their transportation of dharma teachings to the US as part of the “eastward transmission of Buddhism” (*Bukkyō tōzen* 佛教東漸), reimagining a traditional narrative of Buddhism’s spread “from its roots in India, across the Asian continent, and finally to Japan [. . .] the last stage in the progression of Buddhism” (Williams and Moriya 2010: ix). In this new vision, the development of Japanese Buddhism was an intermediary step before its spread to the US, from where it could spread around the world, fulfilling its world-historical development and bringing about an era of world peace (Stein 2024: 1469–1470). And at least one Shinto shrine in early twentieth-century Los Angeles enshrined and made offerings to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln alongside more traditional Japanese deities (E. Anderson 2025). Thus, the US was not a neutral space for the practice of East Asian religion, but a place where local actors further developed the religious currents that flowed through them, using symbols and narratives of national cultural imaginaries to adapt practices beyond any national bounds.

Yet, Asian Americans practicing non-Christian religions were seen as less “American,” even un-American. US officials in 1920s Hawaii considered Buddhism an impediment to the full Americanization of second-generation Japanese Americans and sought (unsuccessfully) to close the Japanese language schools held at Buddhist temples (Thomas 2019: 75–101). After the outbreak of the Pacific War with the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, “the first Japanese people who were targeted for arrest [in the United States] were Buddhist priests” (Thomas 2019: 102), and incarcerated Japanese Americans on the US mainland who identified as Buddhist or Shinto were considered more “disloyal” and had more difficulty getting released from the concentration camps (Williams 2019: 196–198).

Conversely, religious currents from the US began exerting powerful influences on religious practice in East Asia long before the US became the global hegemon, and those influences have only deepened since the dawn of the so-called American century in the wake of World War II. Just as Protestant missionaries were making inroads into the Qing Empire in the early nineteenth century, the Second Great Awakening in the US led to the concept that America was a world-historical “benevolent empire” meant to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth through the work of societies like the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) (Conroy-Krutz 2015). Starting in 1830, the ABCFM established missions in treaty ports like Shanghai, Canton, Fuzhou, and Amoy, and

“worked closely with the U.S. government in its pursuit of its interests” there, helping negotiate the 1858 Treaty of Tianjin, including a section “specifying freedom of both foreigners and Chinese converts to practice and teach Christianity anywhere in the interior” (Bays 2012: 59). American gunboat diplomacy in 1850s Japan, working in part to protect Christian activities including missionization, also helped shape the definition of “religion” there (Josephson 2012), eventually becoming codified as *shūkyō* 宗教, which like many other Meiji-period neologisms, spawned loan-words in Chinese (*zōngjiào* 宗教) and Korean (*jonggyo* 宗教/종교).

The Christianity of American Protestant missionaries and East Asian/Asian American converts was embedded in complex politics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially as US imperialism spread to the Pacific with the US-backed overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom (1893), annexation of Hawaii (1898), and military occupation of the Philippines (starting in 1898). East Asians alternately saw the US as a potential model, rival, counterweight, and a threat to sovereignty or local imperial ambitions. Along with promoting US interests abroad, American missionaries often brought “Western” medicine for both humanitarian and recruitment ends, as in the medical missions of Peter Parker, an 1834 ABCFM appointee to Canton who established “China’s first modern hospital” in 1835 (Bays 2012: 46), and Horace Allen, “the first resident Protestant missionary” in Seoul, whose healing of Queen Min’s nephew (after the Japan-backed Kapsin coup attempt in 1884) won him royal support to establish Korea’s first biomedical hospital and support for Protestant missionization in Korea (Oak 2013: 16, 21, 104). Subsequently, American Presbyterian and Methodist missionary societies helped establish what became Korea’s largest Christian denominations (S.-G. Kim 1997: 505), and Protestant Christianity served as leverage for Korean resistance to Japanese imperialism, while also functioning as another apparatus of Western power (Oak 2013).

However, East Asian converts did not simply accept American Protestantism as is. They created new, localized forms of Christianity throughout the region, many of which established their identities in opposition to, despite being also partly shaped by, foreign missionaries (A. Anderson 2014, Bays 2012, Dunch 2001, Kane and Park 2009, Mullins 2003, Oak 2013, Tang 2014). Transnational networks of Chinese Protestants between late Qing/early Republican China and the US saw America and Christianity as aiding the Chinese nationalist and republican causes; Protestant Chinese Americans fought side-by-side with their White coreligionists “to battle racial discrimination and immigration exclusion” in the US (Tseng 1999: 22). After the 1919 May Fourth Movement, though, Chinese nationalism became more strongly anti-American, driving a disavowal of mainline denominations by Chinese Protestants on both sides of the Pacific (Tseng 1999: 36). The ambivalence of American power at this time is evident in a 1927 report by an American journalist in China, who reported that Americans still made up the majority of Christian missionaries on the ground and they “claimed the protection of their consuls and gunboats” for Chinese Christian converts, who were exempt from certain taxes under the

Sino-American Treaty of 1903; yet, he considered White foreigners' privileges (like extraterritoriality, which American citizens in China enjoyed until 1943) to be an obstacle to further missionization (Gannett 1927: 416–418).

Since World War II, American influences on religion in East Asia and East Asian influences on religion in the US have only grown in importance. The US occupation of Japan and American bureaucrats' writing of Japan's postwar constitution helped to develop the idea of religious freedom as a universal human right and continues to affect church-state relations in Japan today (Thomas 2019). As in other parts of the world, forms of evangelical and charismatic/Pentecostal Christianity that developed in the US have grown dramatically in South Korea and China, in part through adaptations to local social and cultural conditions (A. Anderson 2014). In South Korea, American power manifests not only in the Protestant legacy of the US-backed anticommunist, pro-Christian authoritarian governments that led the country from 1948 to 1988, but also in the adoption of General Douglas MacArthur and American flags into the Korean shamanic pantheon (Kwon and Park 2022).

Conversely, practices of East Asian heritage have become important parts of the religious landscape of the US. By the late twentieth century, practices like Zen meditation (and mindfulness, more broadly), *tàijíquán* 太極拳 (a.k.a. tai chi), and Reiki became part of mainstream American culture, with growing interest in “Eastern” religion and spirituality and as mass media, popular culture, and therapeuticization transformed negative perceptions of East Asian religion to positive associations in many contexts. However, continuities with earlier Orientalist discourses, as well as issues of power in questions of authority, authenticity, and appropriation, persist (Arjana 2020, Iwamura 2010, Stein 2023, Wilson 2014). Despite new levels of widespread interest in Asian religion and spirituality, Asian Americans have historically been, and continue to be, subject to injustice and violence because of perceptions of their racio-religious Otherness (Anningson 2021, Borja 2022, Joshi 2020, D. K. Kim 2015, Williams 2019).

American embeddedness in East Asia has also helped shape trends in US religious politics, from the focus on “religious freedom” in framing America's political interventions abroad (Thomas 2019) to the anticommunism of US evangelicalism (H. J. Kim 2022). Illustrating the recursive nature of religious circulations in transpacific networks, forms of Christianity that developed in China and Korea, partly out of interactions with (and in opposition to) American missionaries, have now established themselves in the US (Baker 2011, Tseng 2020), whereas the Protestant “Local Church movement” (*Dìfāng jiàohuì yùndòng* 地方教会運動 or *Dìfāng zhàohuì yùndòng* 地方召会運動, better known by the pejorative “Shouters” *Hūhǎn pài* 呼喊派) started in Republican China in the 1930s, further developed in Taiwan and the US in the postwar decades, and “returned” to a country transformed—the People's Republic of China in 1978—where it has since faced persecution (Dunn 2015: 28–32). And American Daoist practitioners' twenty-first-century encounters with Chinese Daoist monks at the sacred mountain of Huashan have left both transformed (Palmer and Siegler

2017). The articles in this issue further expand on these recursive religious circulations in transpacific networks.

### Article Summaries

In the first article, Kin Cheung examines the network of a particular New York City area Chinese American healer (who happens to be his father), considering how practices including *qìgōng* 氣功, Buddhist rituals, and *fēngshuǐ* 風水 engage in multidirectional circulations between teachers and students, healers and patients. Cheung shows how this healer has creatively drawn on varied practices and materials brought from China to the US via migration, imported materials, and Chinese-language broadcast and digital media, as well as other practices like Reiki, which he learned from one of his students. The continued development and synthesis of these techniques in the Chinese American diaspora blurs national distinctions as well as the boundaries between religion and medicine.

Next, Natasha L. Mikles examines how Fo Guang Shan (FGS) Xiang Yun Temple in Austin, Texas, serves as a local node in a transnational network of the larger Taiwan-based FGS Buddhist organization, and how the temple's role in that network changed during the COVID-19 global pandemic. One interesting development is that, as pandemic restrictions on gatherings and travel made it difficult or impossible for immigrant congregants of Chinese ethnicity (from different countries, including Taiwan, China, and Singapore) to travel home to arrange Buddhist funerary practices for loved ones who passed away, the nuns of the Austin FGS temple performed the forty-nine day chants “virtually” for the deceased, half a world away. Mikles also considers FGS's role in promoting a de-territorialized transnational Chinese cultural identity, alongside practices such as vegetarianism and cremation.

The next article shifts to a Cold War network that linked North Korean prisoners of war to Protestant missionary and church organizations from the US and South Korea, which worked toward their “conversion” from communism to anticommunism, concomitant with their conversion to Christianity. Sandra H. Park traces the legacy of the local category of “ideological conversion” (Krn. *chǒnhyang*; Jpn. *tenkō* 轉向) from the Japanese colonial period to the Republic of Korea; the transpacific partnerships between missionaries, the military, and media; and the circulation of religious actors, practices, and materials between the US and the Korean peninsula. In one particularly powerful example, Park argues that metal plaques produced by North Koreans who converted to Christianity (and defected to South Korea) to express gratitude to American Christians for materials they donated to the prisoner-of-war camps helped concretize Christianity as a powerful force in the US-led war against Communism.

The penultimate article continues to trace the development of political theology in religiopolitical US-Korean networks by examining how the affective narratives of contemporary South Korean evangelicalism are shaped by an interplay between a local history, embedded in twentieth-century South Korean history (in which the US was a major player). Minjung Noh frames her analysis around the ministry of Rev. Jun Kwang-hun, a South Korean minister whose frequent public rallies in central Seoul, livestreamed and archived via YouTube, juxtapose the imagery of American and South Korean flags with the content, optics, and discursive style of right-wing media and forceful anticommunism. By embedding Korean evangelical theology in US-Korean history and politics, Noh argues, Rev. Jun is able to draw on a conservative “affective infrastructure” that is compelling enough to draw on a significant audience, including non-Christians.

In the final paper of this special issue, Kaitlyn Ugoretz looks at another contemporary transnational network that spans Japan and the US: the community of global Shinto practitioners, for whom Japan is the spiritual homeland of their practice, and for whom lay practitioners and US-based Shinto priests serve as crucial hubs in the overseas circulation of talismans (*ofuda* お札) and amulets (*omamori* お守り). Building off multisited ethnography in Japan, the US, and digital Shinto communities, Ugoretz describes the conditions limiting the circulation of Shinto materials outside of Japan and how shrines in the US serve as countercurrent “eddies” in places where flows are obstructed. Here we see how Shinto, often described as a uniquely Japanese tradition, is also bound up in transpacific networks formed through the demand for the circulation of religious materials.

Each of these articles highlights particular aspects of the circulatory development of religious practice emerging from networked flows spanning East Asia and the US, while also connecting to aspects of other papers. Cheung’s and Mikles’ microhistories from the Chinese diaspora in the contemporary US examine figures who serve as hubs in spiritual communities seeking healing from physical ailments or in times of mourning distant loved ones. Their articles illustrate how local actors creatively adapt practices to new environments and situations, while constructing de- and re-territorialized Chinese identities. Park’s and Noh’s papers together contribute to the scholarly literature illustrating the deep interconnections between American empire, evangelical Protestantism, and anticommunist politics in the Korean peninsula since 1950. They each demonstrate how transpacific Christian networks have formed an infrastructure for the circulation of materials and media promoting particular ideologies and experiences of citizenship and salvation. Ugoretz’s analysis of the circulation of religious materials in transnational Shinto networks shows the resourcefulness and creativity of spiritual practitioners, resonating with the subjects highlighted by Cheung, Mikles, and Noh. Throughout, these authors’ analyses of interactions between structure and agency in complex relationships between state actors, religious institutions, and clerics and lay practitioners adapting their practices to shifting conditions help deepen our understanding of the multi-scalar processes of negotiation that shape transnational religion in this region.

## Acknowledgments

I thank all the contributors to this volume; *Transnational Asia*'s editor Sonia Ryang and editorial staff for their support; the anonymous reviewers and copyeditor for their helpful feedback; and our colleagues from the American Academy of Religion seminar "Transnational Religious Expressions: Between Asia and North America," with whom we have had many wonderful conversations about these issues over the years. I especially thank my fellow seminar co-chairs and steering committee members, Lucas Carmichael, Holly Gayley, Amanda Lucia, Scott Mitchell, and Shobhana Xavier. Work on this special issue was supported by the KPU 0.6% Faculty Professional Development Fund.

*Justin B. Stein* is chair of the Asian Studies Program at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. He is author of *Alternate Currents: Reiki's Circulation in the Twentieth-Century North Pacific* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2023) and co-editor of the Routledge Handbook of Religion, Medicine, and Health (Routledge, 2022). His research on Japanese religion in the transnational context has previously been published in journals including *Asian Medicine*, *Japanese Religions*, *Journal of Global Buddhism*, and *Modern Asian Studies*.

## References

- Albanese, Catherine. 1997. "Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination, and American Religious History." In *Retelling U.S. Religious History*. Edited by Thomas A. Tweed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 200-226.
- Aldridge, A. Owen. 1993. *The Dragon and the Eagle: The Presence of China in the American Enlightenment*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- Anderson, Allan. 2014. "Pentecostalism and Charismatic Movements in Asia." In *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*. Edited by Felix Wilfred. New York: Oxford University Press, 158-170.
- Anderson, Emily. 2025. "Japanese Diasporic Religions." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.1042>.
- Anningson, Ryan. 2021. *Theories of Self, Race, and Essentialization in Buddhism: The United States and the Asian "Other", 1899-1957*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Arjana, Sophia Rose. 2020. *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace*. London: OneWorld Academic.
- Azuma, Eiichiro. 2005. *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baker, Don. 2011. "Korean Religiosity in Comparative Perspective." In *Asian Religions in British Columbia*. Edited by Larry DeVries, Don Baker, and Dan Overmeyer. Vancouver: UBC Press, 163-183.
- Bays, Daniel H. 2012. *A New History of Christianity in China*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Borja, Melissa May. 2022. "Religion, 'the Chinese Virus,' and Perceptions of Asian Americans as a Moral and Medical Menace." In *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Medicine, and Health*. Edited by Dorothea Lüddeckens, Philipp Hetmanczyk, Pamela E. Klassen, and Justin B. Stein. London: Routledge, 495-501.
- Borup, Jørn, and Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger, eds. 2017. *Eastspirit: Transnational Spirituality and Religious Circulation in East and West*. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill.
- Cawley, Kevin N., and Julia C. Schneider, eds. 2023. *Transnational East Asian Studies*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press.
- Clart, Philip, and Adam Jones, eds. 2020. *Transnational Religious Spaces: Religious Organizations and Interactions in Africa, East Asia, and Beyond*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Conroy-Krutz, Emily. 2015. *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Csordas, Thomas. 2009. "Introduction: Modalities of Transnational Transcendence." In *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*. Edited by Thomas J. Csordas. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1-29.
- Dunch, Ryan. 2001. *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857-1927*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dunn, Emily. 2015. *Lightning from the East: Heterodoxy and Christianity in Contemporary China*. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill.
- Duong, Lan P. 2015. "Transnationalism." In *Keywords for Asian-American Studies*. Edited by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong. New York: NYU Press, 232-234.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. 2006. "Asian Crossroads/Transnational American Studies." *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 17, 5-52.
- Fjelstad, Karen, and Thi Hien Nguyen. 2011. *Spirits Without Borders: Vietnamese Spirit Mediums in a Transnational Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fluck, Winfried, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe, eds. 2011. *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press.
- Fujitani, T. 2013. *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gaitanidis, Ioannis, Luis Fernando Bernardi Junqueira, Avery Morrow, and Sangyun Han. 2025. *Therapy, Spirituality, and East Asian Imaginaries*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Gannett, Lewis S. 1927. "The Distrust of Missionaries." *Current History* 26 (3): 416-420.
- Gorzela, Monika A., Amanda K. Asay, Brian J. Pickles, and Suzanne W. Simard. 2015. "Inter-Plant Communication Through Mycorrhizal Networks Mediates Complex Adaptive Behaviour in Plant Communities." *AoB Plants* 7: plv050, 1-13.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/aobpla/plv050>.
- Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6): 1360-1380.

- Hamilton, Alastair. 2000. "Max Weber's Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Weber*. Edited by Stephen Turner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 149-171.
- Hornung, Alfred. 2019. "Confucius and America: The Moral Constitution of Statecraft." In *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*. Edited by Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi. London: Routledge, 148-163.
- Hu-Dehart, Evelyn. 2019. "Chinese Labor Migrants to the Americas in the Nineteenth Century: An Inquiry into Who They Were and the World They Left Behind." In *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*. Edited by Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, with Hilton Obenzinger and Roland Hsu. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 42-52.
- Gin Lum, Kathryn. 2019. "Religion on the Road: How Chinese Migrants Adapted Popular Religion to an American Context." In *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*. Edited by Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, with Hilton Obenzinger and Roland Hsu. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 159-178.
- Iwamura, Jane Naomi. 2010. *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Josephson, Jason Ānanda. 2012. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Joshi, Khyati Y. 2020. *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*. New York: NYU Press.
- Kane, Danielle, and Jung Mee Park. 2009. "The Puzzle of Korean Christianity: Geopolitical Networks and Religious Conversion in Early Twentieth-Century East Asia." *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (2): 365-404.
- Kim, David Kyuman. 2015. "Religion." In *Keywords for Asian-American Studies*. Edited by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong. New York: NYU Press, 211-216.
- Kim, Helen Jin. 2022. *Race for Revival: How Cold War South Korea Shaped the American Evangelical Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kim, Sung-Gun. 1997. "The Shinto Shrine Issue in Korean Christianity Under Japanese Colonialism." *A Journal of Church and State*, 39 (3): 503-521.

- Kirby, Benjamin. 2025. "Religion after Globalization? Infrastructure, Planetaryity, and the Fate of the Global." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 93 (3): 372-394. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaf068>.
- Kwon, Heonik, and Jun Hwan Park. 2022. *Spirit Power: Politics and Religion in Korea's American Century*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Maffly-Kipp, Laurie. 1997. "Eastward Ho! American Religion from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim." In *Retelling U.S. Religious History*. Edited by Thomas A. Tweed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 127-148.
- Mohr, Michel. 2014. *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mullins, Mark R. 2003. "Indigenous Christian Movements." In *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*. Edited by Mark R. Mullins. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 143-162.
- Oak, Sung-Deuk. 2013. *The Making of Korean Christianity: Protestant Encounters with Korean Religions, 1876-1915*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Okano, Kaori, and Yoshio Sugimoto. 2017. *Rethinking Japanese Studies: Eurocentrism and the Asia-Pacific Region*. London: Routledge.
- Ortiz, Fernando. 1995 [1947]. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Palmer, David A., and Elijah Siegler. 2017. *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 2008. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.
- Rots, Aike. 2025. "Crossing Boundaries: Rethinking 'Japanese Religion' in the Anthropocene." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 51 (2): 253-283.
- Ryang, Sonia. 2016. "The Transnational (Re)Turn of Korean Studies." *Transnational Asia* 1 (1): 1-24.
- Sakai, Naoki. 2010. "From Area Studies toward Transnational Studies." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* vol. 11, no. 2.
- Shu, Yuan, and Donald E. Pease. 2015. *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning toward the Transpacific*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth University Press.

- Snodgrass, Judith. 2003. *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Stein, Justin B. 2017. *Hawayo Takata and the Circulatory Development of Reiki in the Twentieth Century North Pacific*. PhD dissertation. University of Toronto.
- Stein, Justin B. 2023. *Alternate Currents: Reiki's Circulation in the Twentieth-Century North Pacific*. Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Stein, Justin B. 2024. "Japanese Imperialism and the Chinese Delegation to the Second General Conference of Pan-Pacific Young Buddhists' Associations (1934)." *Modern Asian Studies* 58 (6): 1465-1489.
- Takezawa, Yasuko, and Gary Y. Okihiro, eds. 2016. *Trans-Pacific Japanese American Studies: Conversations on Race and Racializations*. Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Tang, Edmond. 2014. "Identity and Marginality—Christianity in East Asia." In *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*. Edited by Felix Wilfred. New York: Oxford University Press, 80-99.
- Thomas, Jolyon Baraka. 2019. *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American-Occupied Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tseng, Timothy. 1999. "Chinese Protestant Nationalism in the United States, 1880-1927." In *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*. Edited by David K. Yoo. Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 19-51.
- Tseng, Timothy. 2020. "Transpacific Transposition: 1965 to Present." *ChinaSource Quarterly* 22 (3): 9-13.
- Tweed, Thomas A. 2025. *Religion in the Lands that Became America: A New History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wald, Patricia. 1998. "Minefields and Meeting Grounds: Transnational Analysis and American Studies." *American Literary History* 10 (1): 199-218.
- Wang, Dave Xueliang. 2021. *China and the Founding of the United States: The Influence of Traditional Chinese Civilization*. Lanhan, MD: Lexington Books.
- Wang, Chih-ming, and Yu-Fang Cho, eds. 2017. "Special Issue—The Chinese Factor: Reorienting Global Imaginaries in American Studies." *American Quarterly* 69 (3) (September).

Williams, Duncan Ryūken. 2019. *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, Duncan Ryūken, and Tomoe Moriya. 2010. "Introduction: Dislocations and Relocations of Issei Buddhists in the Americas." In *Issei Buddhism in the Americas*. Edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Tomoe Moriya. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, ix-xxi.

Wilson, Jeff. 2014. *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wong, K. Scott, ed. 2009. "Theme Section: Race in American-East Asian Relations." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16 (3).