

# The Allure of the Mystical: East Asian Religious Traditions in the Eyes of Alma M. Karlin

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## Abstract

Alma M. Karlin (1889–1950), a world traveller and German-language travel and fiction writer, cultivated a keen interest in religious beliefs and practices of the places she visited, believing in the Romantic notion of religion as the distilled soul of nations as well as in the Theosophical presumption that all religions are just particular iterations of an underlying universal truth. For this reason, the topic of religion was central to both her personal and professional identity as an explorer and writer. This article examines her attitudes to East Asian religio-philosophical traditions, by focusing on the two versions of her unpublished manuscript *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten*, which presents an attempt to turn her successful travel writing into an ethnographic text. The content and discourse analyses demonstrate the influence of both comparative religious studies of the late 19th century, and of the newer ethnological approaches from the turn of the century. On the one hand, Karlin adopts the binary opposition of religion (represented by Buddhism, Shintoism, Daoism and Confucianism) or the somewhat more broadly conceived belief, and superstition (e.g. wondering ghosts, fox fairies), and assumes the purity of textual traditions over the lived practices. At the same time, she is fascinated by what she perceives as more mystical beliefs and practices, which she finds creatively inspiring as well as marketable subjects of her writing.

**Keywords:** Alma M. Karlin, East Asia, religious beliefs and practices, comparative religion, travel writing

## Privlačnost mističnega: vzhodnoazijske religijske tradicije v očeh Alme M. Karlin

### Izvilleček

Svetovna popotnica in nemškojezična pisateljica Alma M. Karlin (1889–1950) je gojila posebno zanimanje za religijska verovanja in prakse dežel, ki jih je obiskala. Verjela je v romantični koncept religije kot okna v dušo naroda ter v teozofsko prepričanje, da so vse religije le partikularni izrazi temeljne univerzalne resnice. Zato je bila religijska tematika osrednjega pomena tako za njeno osebno kot profesionalno identiteto raziskovalke in

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pisateljice. Pričujoči članek obravnava odnos Alme Karlin do vzhodnoazijskih religijsko-filozofskih tradicij na primeru dveh verzij njenega neobjavljenega rokopisa *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten*, ki je poskus predelave njenih uspešnih potopisnih člankov in knjig v etnografsko besedilo. Vsebinska in diskurzivna analiza pokaže vplive tako primerjalne religiologije s konca 19. stoletja kot novejših etnoloških pristopov s preloma stoletja. Alma Karlin privzame binarno nasprotje religije (predstavljajo jo budizem, šintoizem, daoizem in konfucijanstvo) ali nekoliko širše koncipiranega verovanja na eni strani in praznoverja (npr. tavajoči duhovi, lisičje vile) na drugi ter predpostavlja čistost tekstualnih tradicij v primerjavi z živetimi praksami. Toda obenem jo fascinirajo – v njenih očeh – bolj mistična verovanja in prakse, ki so zanjo tako ustvarjalni navdih kot tržno privlačna pisateljska snov.

**Ključne besede:** Alma M. Karlin, Vzhodna Azija, religijska verovanja in prakse, primerjalna religiologija, potopisi

## Introduction

The turn from the 19th to the 20th centuries saw Europe brimming with enthusiasm for everything that was exotic. Colonial expansion and solidification, and the many concomitant advances in travel and communication, resulted in the unprecedentedly wide spread of ideas and practices that Westerners became familiar with through encounters with foreign lands, especially Asia. This process did not only echo in the broader scholarship, it reverberated throughout society at large. Eastern religious traditions, primarily of the Indian subcontinent, became a space of exploration and escape from the challenges brought on by the processes of modernization (Clarke 1997, 96–111).

In 1908, Alma M. Karlin (1889–1950), a native of the then Austro–Hungarian provincial town of Celje, found herself in the metropolitan capital of London, where the atmosphere of cultural and religious pluralism was particularly heavy. There she began to learn a number of foreign languages, including Japanese, Chinese and Sanskrit, and became acquainted with Indian, Chinese and Japanese religio–philosophical traditions as well as Theosophy. Over the years she spent there and later in Scandinavia, an ambition began to take shape of traveling the world, exploring the unknown, becoming an acclaimed writer in the German language. And indeed, in November of 1919 Karlin embarked on her world trip, with a goal to learn about foreign lands, their people and customs, and to write about them in order to both educate her compatriots and reach personal fame.<sup>1</sup> It was her intention to support her travels by publishing non-fiction and fiction in newspapers

1 See Trnovec (2020, 106–127) for a more detailed analysis of Karlin's motivations and interests.

and magazines, and also in book form, although eventually she took up a number of different jobs—often with meagre pay, and had to resort to borrowing money to be able to continue her journey. She wanted to sail to Japan first, but due to financial and visa constraints she headed West, only reaching the “land of [her] dreams” (Karlin n.d.d.) some two and a half years into what would turn out to be an 8-year long adventure that took her to South America, California and Hawaii, East Asia, Australia and New Zealand, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia and India.

Among the many interests she pursued during her globe-trotting, religion is among the phenomena that stand out most markedly. Not only do various religious practices, especially those that she and her contemporaries in Europe would deem particularly superstitious and magic-oriented, figure prominently in her travel writing and fiction, she also compiled and published her notes and observations on religious practices in two dedicated volumes, the 1931 *Mystik der Südsee: Liebeszauber, Todeszauber, Götterglaube, seltsame Bräuche bei Geburten* (*Mysticism of the South Sea: Love Spells, Death Spells, Beliefs in Gods, Unusual Customs at Child-birth*)<sup>2</sup> and the 1933 *Der Todesdorn und andere seltsame Erlebnisse aus Peru und Panama*, the latter to great success.<sup>3</sup> It is notable, however, that no such book was published on religious traditions of Asia, where she spent more than a third of her journey, but it seems this was not for lack of intention. This article examines Karlin’s unpublished manuscript—or two versions of such text, to be precise—with the title *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten* (*Religion and Superstition in the Far East*), now held at the National and University Library in Ljubljana.

Much like the above-mentioned volumes, these texts could be considered as popular scientific treatments of religious beliefs and practices encountered on her route, an ethnographic reworking of her travel experience, in this case through Asia. Here, I focus only on Karlin’s views of East Asian traditions, complementing the analysis of the said texts with her travelogues, especially the *Einsame Weltreise* (1930)<sup>4</sup> which covers the same stretch of her journey. My main goal is to assess how Karlin’s understanding of and attitudes to various teachings and practices she encountered in East Asia were formed, how they are related to the scientific and popular discourses on religion of her time and to what extent, if at all, she deviated from the established conceptual frameworks. Zmago Šmitek (1986,

2 Published in Berlin–Lichterfelde by Hugo Bemühler in the series “Weltreise” on geography and ethnology.

3 Published in Berlin by Prismen-Verlag. The English translations were published as *The Death-Thorn and other Strange Experiences in Peru and Panama* in London by G. Allen and Unwin Ltd. in 1934 and as *The Death-Thorn: Magic, Superstitions and Beliefs of Urban Indians in Panama and Peru* in Detroit by Blaine Ethridge Books in 1934 and in 1971.

4 Published as *The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman* in London by V. Gollancz, Ltd. in 1933.

176) in his seminal work on Slovene encounters with non-European societies and cultures, judges that “in terms of scientific independence and length, Karlin’s manuscript exceeds almost everything written on East Asian religions in Slovene territory.”<sup>5</sup> Although the reception and impact of her writing is beyond the scope of this article, Karlin’s great popularity in the late 1920s and 1930s as a travel and (less so) fiction writer, must have exerted some influence on the popular imagination among her readership. Writing in German, her books became bestsellers in the German language book market, but they were likely read also among some of those whose mother tongue was Slovene, especially if they had theosophical inclinations.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the years 1931–1933 Karlin toured several European cities (Jezernik 2009, 138–39), lecturing in women’s clubs, like many other contemporary women travellers (Leutner 1997).

I begin with a short exploration of the evolution of Karlin’s personal interest in religion—a topic that is only touched upon here, but would in itself warrant a much deeper investigation, sketching in broad strokes the cultural atmosphere in which Karlin’s intellectual curiosity and writing sensibilities were developed. What follows is a detailed analysis of one of the versions of aforementioned *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten* manuscript. I first compare the two manuscripts, which differ in the geographical scope they cover and the level of detail, before directing my attention to the one presenting the more elaborate examination of East Asian religious beliefs and practices. I first appraise Karlin’s sources. While her sparse comments make it clear she prepared for her journey by reading extensively (see also Senica 2021, 231), and that during her trip she was a regular visitor to local libraries as well as appreciated immensely, even sought, contact with people who could share their expertise or offer insights (academics, educated elites, missionaries), she, with rare exceptions, never reveals what texts or whom she consulted.<sup>7</sup> I continue with an overview of the topics that caught her eye, summarizing them not in the geographical manner in which she organizes her material, but rather by the categorizations she implicitly applies to it, thereby elucidating her conceptual scheme. In the final section I scrutinize her conceptions and approaches by recontextualizing Karlin’s portrayal and interpretation of East Asian religious traditions in the intellectual trends of her time.

5 All translations from Slovene and German are mine.

6 Sadly, very little analysis has been done since Šmitek’s (1986) book on the representations of East Asian religions and philosophies in Slovenia in the decades spanning Karlin’s life. One notable exception are the recent articles by Motoh (2019a; 2020).

7 Numerous implicit intertextual reference can also be found in her fictional writing (Bräsel 2019, 52–55).



Figure 1. A miniature of *mikoshi* 神輿, a Shinto portable shrine. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

## Karlin's Interest in Comparative Religion

The period of Karlin's life roughly corresponds to the time when religion emerged and established itself as a special field of scientific inquiry, becoming institutionalized as a research subject in several disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, ethnology, folkloristics and the more narrowly defined religious studies. At the same time, this era witnessed a growing popular interest in Eastern, particularly Indian, philosophical and religious teachings and, to a lesser extent, practices. Both scholarly and general trends were highly influenced by the wider intellectual currents related to rationalism, atheism, mysticism and the like.

Alma Karlin was born a Roman Catholic and was buried as one, but her life, especially her travels and travel-inspired writing—both nonfictional and fictional—was lived in very pluralistic religious landscapes. Judging from her autobiography, her enthusiasm for the spiritual and mystical began at an early age. She reports about the imaginary fox kingdom where she resided in her childhood imagination (Karlin 2010, 21–22)—possibly later endearing her to the fox spirits and fairies of East Asia, the effect her father and later his death had on her early understanding of afterlife (*ibid.*, 17, 33), and the deep impression her first communion left on her (*ibid.*, 36). Pilgrimages and prayer are mentioned throughout the chapters on her youth, with a particularly detailed account of her religious experience on the

final pilgrimage she undertook with her confidante, the family's maid Mimi, to Svete Višarje/Monte Santo di Lussari before she left for London. There she asks Holy Mary, who reportedly denies her happiness in love, for "the laurel wreath" as a consolation (Karlin 2010, 100–1). She later reads this as determining her fate as an unmarried woman, yet a successful author. A belief in destiny surfaces elsewhere too, for example, while reflecting on how well things turned out for her in Beijing because she decided to stay in a German instead of an English or a Russian guesthouse:

Such an insignificant step—hesitation between two guesthouses, an incidental inquiry—so often determine the future, the human life. When I later remembered these tiny episodes, I often felt gloomy. It cannot be a pure coincidence that determines one's life. Yet, on the other hand: is our every action already a seed in the bosom of future, which only needs to germinate? (Karlin 1930a, 226; 1996, 283)



Figure 2. A wooden board painted with a motif of the Japanese Inari cult. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

In her travelogues, especially in those from the second part of her journey, Karlin often reflects on her identity as a Christian and the very different practices of Catholic and Protestant missionaries she encounters—in the Pacific, in South-East Asia and India she often stays at missionary stations or dormitories. But the dislike of Christianity that gradually builds in her—in India, at the end of her

journey, she claims in exhaustion to have become “a staunch pagan” (1930b, 344; 2006, 345)—seems to dissipate after her return home. During the years spent with her companion Thea Schreiber Gammelin in Celje, they attend mass daily (Trnovec 2020, 139), but this likely stops when they move to the countryside. Finally, on her deathbed, Karlin calls for a Catholic priest, and is given a church funeral, reportedly to the surprise of her friend (*ibid.*, 156).<sup>8</sup>

Karlin’s enthusiasm for comparative religion developed during her multi-year stay in London. As a teenager she read extensively in French and English literature. First the works of Voltaire, and later Kipling, Stevenson and Haggard took her to different worlds, provoking her thirst for adventure. Then, in multicultural London, she met many European and Asian men and women<sup>9</sup> and began cultivating a keen interest in various Asian languages and traditions. Her encounter with a young Japanese man, Gotō Nobuji,<sup>10</sup> to whom she was giving English lessons, proved particularly impactful. As a conversation exercise she would usually ask him to tell her about Japanese culture and customs. His explanations not only taught her a great deal about Japan, “but awoke [her] interest for the entire Asia” (Karlin 2010, 151). After having met other Japanese and also Indian students—from the latter she learnt some Sanskrit—and after having been introduced to the basic structures of Chinese and its phonetics during her studies at the Oriental Institute in Paris,<sup>11</sup> she sought out a Chinese student for mutual language and culture exchange classes. Mr. Tao turned out to be another great influence. He taught her about “the many unforgettable men”, “the teachings of philosophers and world sages”—Confucius and Laozi in China, Buddha in India, encouraging her to “engage in a serious study of the most diverse religious teachings” (*ibid.*, 164–65). She became engrossed with Chinese philosophy and received from Mr. Tao upon his departure from London “*Wu Wei*, a wonderful study of Lao Ce [Laozi]” (*ibid.*, 166) by the Dutch sinologist and translator Henri Borel (1869–1933). She complemented and deepened the knowledge gained from interactions with students

8 According to one oral history, there were two priests present at Karlin’s funeral, a Roman Catholic one and an Old Catholic one (Roženbergar Šega 2009, 21).

9 Contrary to (some of) the men, who were both her teachers and sometimes love interests, the women remain unnamed with the sole exception of Karro, a Norwegian Theosophist (more below).

10 In her autobiography, Karlin writes of Nobuji G. Her postcard collection includes 6 postcards from N. G. depicting natural disasters in Japan. From another postcard sent from Berlin and signed as N. Goto, my colleague Chikako Shigemori Bučar identified his surname as Gotō 後藤. While in Japan, Karlin (1923a) mentions meeting her former student in her *Reiseskizze* “Asakusa”.

11 The pages of her autobiography on the several months she spent in the French capital are believed lost. Some documents indicate she left London in April or May 1911 in order to study and possibly due to poor health. The more precise length or nature of her stay in Paris remains unclear (Trnovec 2020, 102–3).

through books she was given, bought or borrowed in the library. She was “utterly bewitched by Asia”:

I was in a new world; currents of knowledge from all parts of Asia rushing towards me, the ominous Indian mystics, ghost–interlaced Chinese mystics, the calm, bright Japanese mystics. (Karlin 2010, 168)

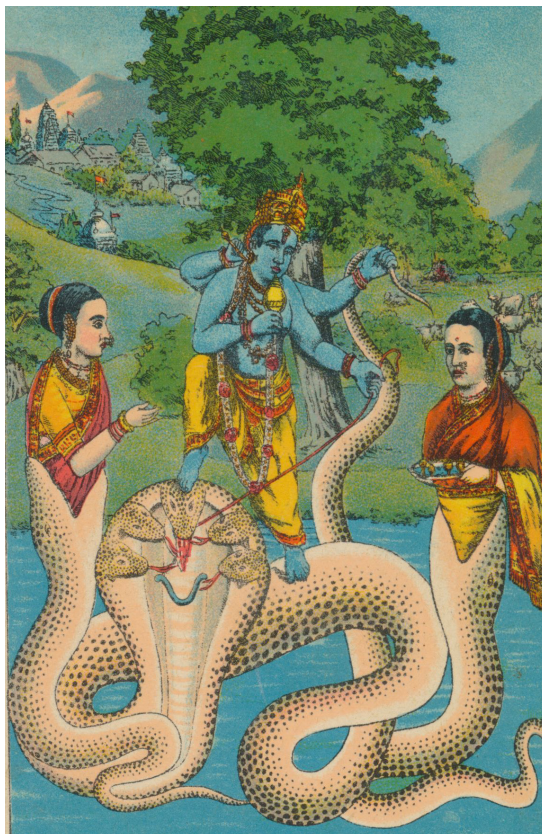


Figure 3. A postcard Karlin bought in Karachi, with an image related to serpent worship. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

In the Indian dormitory she frequented to learn Sanskrit with various residents, she became acquainted with a Norwegian Theosophist Karro, who introduced her to the movements’ teachings.<sup>12</sup> This was significant as the movement was one of the more important driving forces behind the popular interest in Asian philosophical

12 On the other hand, Zmago Šmitek (2009, 62) considers it possible Karlin had heard of theosophy in her hometown, already before leaving for London.



and religious traditions in the late 19th century. Theosophy posited that there was an ancient universal truth underlying all religions, an eternal, united spiritual essence manifested most conspicuously in individual enlightened souls, an esoteric one true wisdom. It was one instance of pluralism and eclecticism so characteristic of the *fin de siècle*. The movement also introduced Buddhist terminology into the European vernacular, with concepts of karma, reincarnation, and meditation. While dismissed by some of its scholarly contemporaries for misrepresenting Buddhism or disseminating superstitious occultism, it held a wide popular appeal.<sup>13</sup>

Karlin met Karro again in Oslo (then Kristiania) where she found refuge after leaving London due to the movement restrictions imposed on her as an Austrian citizen at the onset of World War I. The time she spent there was formative as well: she studied a lot, sat in on various lectures, and began to write. In a conversation with a well-travelled captain's daughter over a Christmas dinner, she realized:

I was not interested in the exterior thing, in what a tourist can see. For the first time that Christmas I said to myself—as if taking a decision, ‘When I venture into the great wide world, I want to know *the interior of things*.’ With this I meant *the soul of the nations*, flowers and animals from the interior of the land, but *first and foremost, the superstitions of foreign parts of the world*, which I have become very interested in ever since I began my studies in comparative religion. (Karlin 2010, 251–52, emphasis mine)

She forged a plan that “once the war bloodshed was over I wanted to go to the land of the rising sun and travel through China and India and to return home with so much material for novels, that I could draw on it my entire life” (Karlin 2010, 282). And indeed, in addition to travelogues, after her return she published numerous short stories and several novels inspired by the cultural beliefs and social practices of the places she visited.

Although Karlin reports that in her initial meetings with Karro in London she “very much resisted believing in the reincarnation (one attempt more than sufficed!)” (ibid., 169), she eventually became a Theosophist. When exactly Karlin became a member of the Theosophical Society and for how long she was one is so far unknown, however there is the American Theosophical Society membership card among her documents showing she paid her dues, very likely just before she left Tokyo, for the period between 1 July 1923 and 30 June 1924.

13 Established in 1885, Theosophical Society gathered by 1920 more than 45,000 members across the world (Clarke 1997, 90), including a significant following in the Indian subcontinent.

Furthermore, throughout her travelogue she reports making friends with Theosophists, such as the societies in Adelaide and in Auckland (Karlin 1930a, 308, 330; 2006, 390, 418), or contacting the local members in Java in the hope they could provide her with accommodation. There she is very disappointed, for they quickly lose interest in aiding her despite her visibly poor health (Karlin 1930b, 2020; 1996, 222–23). The arrows usually pointed at Christian, especially Protestant and Anglican missionaries are now directed at Theosophists: “They were too busy preaching about love and help to transform these characteristics into action” (Karlin 1930b, 220; 1996, 223). By the time she reaches India she is utterly frustrated by her lack of publishing success and financial difficulties, so she decides not to go to the Himalayas where one could still find “the real sages, yogis,” nor to Adyar, the world headquarters of the Theosophical Society: “I was so bitter about my life, I didn’t want to know anything about lives of others and about other worlds” (Karlin 1930b, 303; 1996, 305). Back in Europe her attitude changed and she began writing Theosophically inspired fiction, especially from the mid-1930s when she turned completely to spiritual fiction.<sup>14</sup> After 1945 she became more involved with Slovene speaking Theosophists in Celje and remained a Theosophist until the end of her life (Trnovec 2020, 158).<sup>15</sup>

Karlin’s comparative interest in religion as a window upon the soul of a people, her didactic ambition and thirst for the exotic, her Theosophical outlook and the quest for the innermost truth all come together in her semi-scientific, ethnological writings on religion. In the following sections I thus turn to an examination of her unpublished book-length overview of religion and superstition in the Far East.

14 Among the most significant of these publications on reincarnation, connections between civilizations in time and space, lost worlds, spiritual quest and cultivation are the novels *Der Götze: Ein Mystischer Roman (The Idol: A Mystical Novel)* (1932), *Isolanthis: Roman vom Sinken eines Erdteils (Isolanthis: A Novel about Sinking of a Continent)* (1936), *Erdgebunden (Earthbound)* (1936) and *Der blaue Mond: eine Erzählung für Jung und Alt (The Blue Moon: A Tale for Young and Old)* (1938).

15 For more on Theosophical societies in the Slovene parts in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia see Šmitek (2009).



Figure 4. While Karlin did not travel to Egypt she wrote about its ancient culture in her theosophical fiction. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

### *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten: The Two Manuscripts Compared*

The manuscript *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten* exists in two versions, both incomplete, differing significantly in the geographical scope they cover. The first version (Karlin n.d.a, hereon referred to simply as A) consists of the title page and further 91 paginated pages.<sup>16</sup> It has no general introduction—it begins with the description of beliefs and practices in “Japan” (A, 1–29), followed by “the Ainu on Hokkaido” (A, 29–34), “Korea, the ‘Land of morning calm’” (A, 34–44), “China” (A, 45–80) and “Formosa”, i.e. Taiwan (A, 80–91). At the bottom of the last

16 Due to the error in numbering, there is a page 32a in addition to page 32. Furthermore, there is no page 43. As the story told on page 42 seems complete and page 44 starts with a new paragraph, it is quite likely this is just another mistake, despite the fact that the thematic focus of the text changes, as shifts in topic in other parts of the manuscript are sometimes also quite abrupt.

existing page it ends in the middle of a sentence, describing one of the indigenous groups in Taiwan. Except for these regional divisions, there are no other subtitles in the text.

The second text (Karlin n.d.b, henceforth referred to as B) is a longer manuscript, which covers not only East Asia but also other parts of her travel from India to Australia. It misses many pages, including the cover page. That this text bears the same title can only be assumed from the handwritten note on the slip binding the otherwise loose pages. The note written in ball-point pen was probably added at the time when this part of Karlin's estate (i.e. her writing, personal correspondence and some photographs) were bequeathed to the National and University Library in Ljubljana by Karlin's friend and companion Thea Schreiber Gammelín. While large parts of the text are missing, we may conclude from the remaining parts that the full manuscript comprised 337 pages. The surviving pages include a description of an unclear region (B, 26–30), followed by a complete section on East Asia—bearing the following titles: “Japan” (B, 41–54), “In Hokkaido” (B, 55–62), “In Korea” (B, 59–62), “China” (B, 63–81) and “Formosa” (B, 81–87). On page 87 begins the chapter on the Philippines, yet the rest of the pages are missing. There remain pages 92–94, which discuss Australian aborigines, but more than a hundred of the subsequent pages are again missing. The final third of the manuscript is preserved in its entirety. Beginning in the middle of the sentence the pages from 215–271 describe “Malaya”, “Siam” and “Burma”, followed by “India” (B, 272–326). The manuscript concludes with a comparative chapter titled “Intersections (*Übergänge*)”, where Karlin examines similarities between different traditions through the comparison of the European, Chinese and Mexican zodiac signs. This is in accord with her interest in comparative religion and general Theosophical orientation, which considers different religions as manifestations of one unitary, original wisdom.

Since the regional succession in the manuscript clearly follows the itinerary of her travels and Karlin had in fact already published books on religious practices in Central and South America, as well as on Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, we may surmise that the missing parts of the text discuss Hawaii, New Zealand/the Maori and Indonesia. The two manuscripts are the longest texts in the folder of her unpublished ethnographic writings, the rest no longer than a couple of pages each. We may presume that they were intended as the last part of “trilogy” on “beliefs” and “superstitions” of the lands she visited, the first two being the already mentioned 1931 *Mystik der Südsee: Liebeszauber, Todeszauber, Götterglaube, seltsame Bräuche bei Geburten* and the 1933 *Der Todesdorn und andere seltsame Ergebnisse aus Peru und Panama*.

Neither of the manuscripts is dated. The second, longer version B appears to have initially been dated to 1943 on the accompanying paper slip, but the year was later crossed out in pencil. It is very likely that they were written before the mid-1930s, when Karlin's publications moved on from travelogues and ethnographic texts to Theosophy-inspired fiction.<sup>17</sup> It is also not clear which version Karlin created first. There is a high overlap in the content on East Asia; with few exceptions, version A is more extensive, presenting a greater variety of beliefs and practices in more detail. Although the style of writing in both texts is sober and distanced, version A includes several emotional remarks and exclamations, direct addresses to the reader, subjective commentaries—the tools and strategies richly adopted in the conversational, entertaining and engaging style of her travelogues.<sup>18</sup> The East Asia part of version B is more concise, even truncated at times. With a rare exception the paragraphs are written in a completely impersonal tone; the text often gravitates towards enumeration rather than description or explanation. It is thus very likely the version A was a first attempt to rework the experience-focused and emotion-laden writing of her feuilletons, magazine articles and book-length travelogues into what could be considered an objective ethnographic text for a more scientifically minded audience.

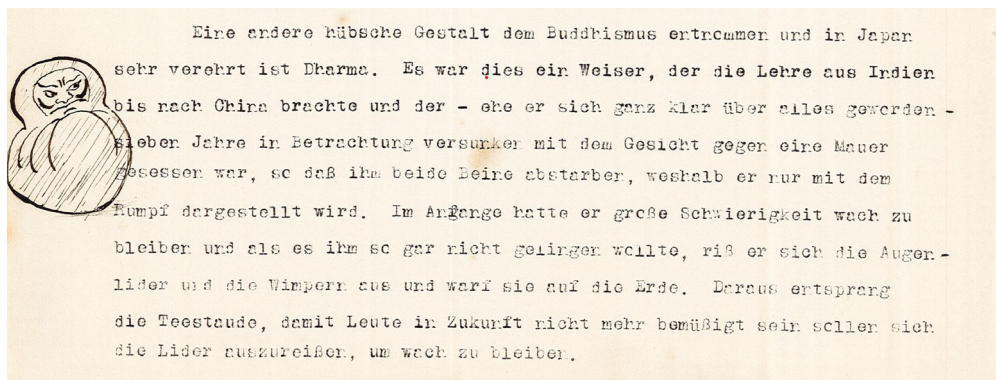


Figure 5. An excerpt from version B of *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten*, with Karlin's hand-drawn Japanese *daruma* doll. (Source: Alma Karlin Estate, Ms 1872, Folder 33, National and University Library of Slovenia, Ljubljana)

17 It is possible that references to these two texts are somewhere in her extensive surviving correspondence, which would help ascertain when they were written and why they were not published. With regard to the latter, it is worth noting that while her travelogue through the Pacific was an unexpectedly huge success, the parallel ethnographic book did not sell particularly well (Bergerová 2019, 177).

18 For a very informative contrastive analysis of emotivity in Karlin's travel and ethnographic writing on the Pacific, see Bergerová (2019).

Finally, version A includes few handwritten corrections, while version B contains more revisions as well as hand-drawn sketches in the margins: the Japanese Buddhist *daruma* 達磨 doll (B, 47), Shinto *torii* 鳥居 gate (B, 50), the profile of the Japanese supernatural being *tengu* 天狗 (B, 51), the *mizubiki* 水引 knot<sup>19</sup> (B, 51), ginseng root (?) (B, 61), *yin-yang* 陰陽 symbol (B, 76) and a simple sketch of a human being and a circle (B, 81). Based on the above, we may surmise that Karlin initially wrote the more extensive study on East Asia (version A), which she then shortened when it became a part of a longer text with a much broader geographical scope (version B). Be this as it may, this was a typical process of turning primary travel accounts into ethnographic texts—collating the information interspersed throughout the impressionistic chronological narrative into an organized, topic-centered document (Rubiés 2002, 253). In the following two sections I take a closer look at two aspects of this process: I first appraise the sources used by Karlin and then examine the thematic structure of the *Glaube und Aberglaube* manuscript.

### Karlin's Sources on East Asian Traditions

Throughout her travel and ethnographic writing, Karlin is rarely explicit about her sources of information. In the travelogues we can, based on her style of writing, to some extent discern her personal observations from what she gleaned from second-hand accounts, be they written or oral. This is much less obvious in the two versions of *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten*, as she intentionally adopts a less emotive style of narration. Since significant parts of the text are related to the (sometimes more detailed, at others more limited) accounts in her travelogues, we can nevertheless make a partial reconstruction of how she obtained her information.

In her writing Karlin occasionally shares which things she learned from conversations with named interlocutors. For example, we know from her autobiography that her London student Gotō Nobuji, among other things, introduced her to Japanese customs and habits, folktales (e.g. on the 47 *rōnin* 浪人), and art of Japan, while Mr. Tao and other Chinese students introduced her to Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Later, in Japan she adopts the same teaching method of asking students to tell her about everything Japanese: “During our socializing I learned very many things and became as close to the Japanese soul as an inhabitant of the West can; the boundary cannot be crossed by anyone” (1930a, 196; 2006, 243–44). It is easy to imagine the students (with one of whom she ends up

19 *Mizubiki* is also one of the “trivial objects” found in Karlin’s collection in the Celje Regional Museum, examined by Shigemori Bučar (2021, 33–36).

lodging) would explain to her the seasonal festivals and year-cycle rituals, or that friends and acquaintances would furnish her with the information on the historical and cultural, including religious significance of places they visited together on outings from Tokyo. Karlin also meets a variety of people through her position as the German ambassador's secretary, naming "the artist" Okada Tadaichi,<sup>20</sup> as the person who recounted to her the numerous stories about *tanuki* 狸, a Japanese supernatural trickster.

In China, her source of information as well as inspiration was likely an officer turned journalist Erich von Salzman (1876–1941), a correspondent of several German newspapers, an author of fiction and non-fiction set in China, and likely a German spy (The National Archive n.d.). By the time Karlin met him, he had resided in China for about 20 years. Probably still more important was Karlin's friendship with Salzman's wife—I believe it is her she refers to as Mrs. S.—and with whom she, among other sites, visited "the yellow temple Huang Ssu" a Tibetan Buddhist temple just outside the Beijing city walls (Karlin 1930a, 237–38; 2006, 292–99).<sup>21</sup> In Beijing, there were also two young women, a Chinese student Charlotte of German-educated Chinese parents to whom Karlin taught English, and, even more significantly, Mary, the eldest daughter of her landlady, a German woman Mrs. L., who was married to a Chinese man. Spending time with both young women, she learned a lot about gender roles, marriage rituals and family expectations, but probably also other things that were of interest to her, including religious beliefs and practices.

Karlin is the most explicit about her sources on the Taiwanese indigenous peoples. While in Taipei she had a long conversation with the famous Japanese ethnologist Mori Ushinosuke 森丑之助, who gave her the tour around the Taipei Museum, where he was a director and collector of indigenous objects, thus "saving [her] many months of search and investigation" (1924a, 1; 1997, 112). It is very likely that it was he who furnished her with the vast majority of the information provided in the Taiwanese sections of both manuscripts. In Taipei, she further spent evenings hearing about the "superstitions, tales and sagas of the Tayal" as related by her mysterious Japanese host and love interest Mr. I, who reportedly lived with Atayal for many years (Karlin 1930a, 267; 2006, 323).

20 This might in fact have been the sociologist, diplomat, and translator Okada Tadaichi, who was interested in architecture, art and theatre and "who developed a very enthusiastic interest in Central Europe and its nationals residing in Japan" (Čapková 2016, 87).

21 It is unclear whether this refers to the Western Yellow Temple (Xihuang si 西黃寺) or the no longer existing Eastern Yellow Temple (Donghuang si 東黃寺).



Figure 6. A Japanese colonial-era anthropological postcard portraying a group of Atayal during a meal. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

Karlin is even more reluctant or indifferent when it comes to reporting her readings. It is clear she reads extensively—as mentioned earlier, she states in her autobiography that she already acquired some books on Japan in London and that she received Henri Borel’s interpretation of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (Karlin 2010, 166) as a gift from her student.<sup>22</sup> She speaks of preparations she undertook at home before her journey (ibid., 287), and mentions that her studies in Japan prepared her for the entire East Asian leg of her trip (Karlin n.d.d). In version A of the *Glaube und Abergalube*, Karlin makes a rare explicit reference to a written source, when she mentions the sinologist’s Richard Wilhelm’s writings on the “I Ging” (*Yijing* 已經), noting that the professor discusses the “Buch der Wandlungen”, *Book of Changes*, in great detail, “explaining in passing particular signs” (A, 41).<sup>23</sup> It might be that she read his book later, after her return to Europe: while only noted in

22 This text is not a translation of Laozi’s 老子 *Daodejing* 道德經, but rather Borel’s own interpretation and elaboration of “the essence of his wisdom in all its purity” (Borel 1903, VII). It was intended for the general public as Borel believed it was his job to interpret China to the educated Dutch readership (Blussé 2014, 66). It was originally published in Dutch in 1895 in the collection *Wijsheid en schoonheid in China*, and it was soon translated into German, French and English.

23 Wilhelm (1873–1930) was among those Western researchers who adopted fieldwork-based approach to Chinese religious practices (see the final section below). What is more, he was not just an observer, he also participated in Daoist meditation and learned the inner alchemy practices (*neidan* 内丹) from his informants (Broy 2016, 92).



passing in her travelogue (likewise in the Korea section) the description of *Yijing* divination is relatively detailed in *Glaube und Aberglaube* and also includes examples of divinations.

In reports from several stops during her world trip, Karlin praises the excellent local libraries and speaks of the long hours she spent there, although again we are left without any details on the books and articles she consulted. I believe in the case of the Ainu people, her original two-part report, published in August 1923 in the feuilleton *Reiseskizzen* (*Travel Sketches*) (Karlin 1923b; 1923c) in her hometown's newspaper *Cillier Zeitung*, and *Glaube und Aberglaube* are based exclusively on the by then quite numerous ethnographic texts. Despite the efforts to write in a presumably objective, dispassionate style, throughout the manuscripts there is a sharp distinction in style and structure of the parts on Japan and China, and the Ainu and the Taiwanese indigenous peoples. The dry style and complete absence of what might be construed as personal observation or commentary that can be found in the Ainu chapter, in my opinion speak against the widely held belief that Alma Karlin visited Hokkaido while in Japan (e.g. Trnovec 2011, 2020). The doubt about Karlin's visit to Hokkaido was first expressed in passing by Jerneja Jezernik (2006, 84), and she, too, cites the uncharacteristic style of Ainu-related passages. In fact, the encyclopaedic way Karlin writes about the Ainu is very much reminiscent of the information on the practices of Taiwanese indigenous peoples—again found in the two *Reiseskizzen* (Karlin 1924d; 1924e) and the *Glaube und Aberglaube* manuscripts, which, as already mentioned, Karlin explicitly states was obtained through conversations with Mori Ushinosuke.

There are other details that give further credence to this suspicion. Perhaps the most obvious is that Karlin actually never claimed she visited the Ainu in Hokkaido—although the (too free) Slovene translation of the two *Reiseskizzen* can mislead the reader to make this assumption. In her travelogue the Ainu are only mentioned in passing (in a sentence that could admittedly be read as confirmation of her visit, but that could equally be read otherwise). Given the prominence she awards to her adventures among the—in her eyes—more exotic and unfamiliar people on her world trip, she would surely not pass up an opportunity to present her encounter with the Ainu, who were considered fascinating among the Japanese as well as Westerners. Furthermore, the map included in the German publications of her travelogue (Karlin 1930a; 1930b), which delineates her itinerary, stays well clear of the island and northern Japan in general. In fact, neither Karlin's travelogue nor her rich collection of postcards from Japan show her anywhere farther north than the famous religious complex and tourist hotspot of Nikko, not far from Tokyo (cf. Shigemori Bučar 2019). While her postcard collection does include two postcards depicting the Ainu, both are from the Japan–British exhibition of 1910, when Karlin was in London. Senica (2021, 238) further notes

how there is no mention of missionary activities, which were well underway at that time, although Karlin regularly makes such observations in other parts of her travelogues. All in all, it is reasonable to assume Karlin compiled the information she read in the by then quite rich scholarship on the Ainu or perhaps in Isabela Bird, whose writings she must have been familiar with (Senica 2021).



Figure 7. A postcard from the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910, depicting the Ainu bear sacrifice. Karlin sent it to her mother in February 1911. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

One notable literary reference in her travelogue may give some clues as to why she avoids or is not interested in naming her written sources. On the cusp of her departure from Genova, having finally boarded the steamer that would take her to South America, Karlin stands on the deck and bids farewell with a famous poem *Quiet Night's Thoughts* by Li Taipo (Li Taibai 李太白) she had learned in the local public library. In her travelogue she cites it in entirety in Italian (1930, 24; 2006, 24). Interestingly, her version has a very different second verse from the original, likely

adjusted then or later to accentuate the dramatic moment of her own project. While in the original the poet mistakes the moonlight on the floor of his room for frost, Karlin's version states: "And in that moonlight I saw in my mind the peoples and lands that I must see."<sup>24</sup> Karlin saw herself foremost as an explorer of distant, unfamiliar lands, so in her eyes her own authenticity and authority as a writer is grounded in the personal experience, rather than in the familiarity with the existing scholarship or other travel accounts. This said, her documentary writing is no less marked by the typical Orientalist intertextuality, as Klemen Senica (2021) has shown.

### Karlin's Examination of East Asian Religious Beliefs and Practices

In this section, I outline the content of *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten*, predominantly based on version A. As mentioned earlier, the material is organized geographically in five chapters, following her itinerary chronologically. There are obvious differences between them in terms of length, the longest two chapters being on Japan and China where she stayed more than a year and around 5 months, respectively. These are not only more exhaustive but also include richer commentary. The chapters on the Ainu and Taiwan stand out not only due to the style of writing (see above), but also because they include information on social life that would not be considered (either by Karlin or her readers then and now) religious or ritual, but would rather fall under the broader category of ethnographic subjects. She thus describes the physical appearance and child care of the Ainu, and details the physical appearance, dress and headdress, economic life and social structures of respective "*Wildstämme*" (wild tribes) of Taiwan,<sup>25</sup> following ethnic categorizations of Japanese colonial government. She further includes descriptions of landscape and vegetation.<sup>26</sup> The reason for this must be that in these sections she is not the original compiler of the information herself. The Taiwan part is likely an abbreviated copy of her notes of Ushinosuke's museum tour, while for the Ainu she equally follows a text that is in itself already ethnographic.<sup>27</sup>

24 "Levai la faccia al chiaro astro lucente/E a quel lume di luna volsi in mente,/Popoli e terre che veder dovrò. Indi al sulo chinati i stanchi rai,/Al mio paese tacito pensai/Ed agli amici cho piu non rivedrò." (Karlin 1930a, 24)

25 The version B contains the entire "Formosa" section, which actually concludes with a few paragraphs on the Taiwanese ("Formosanern"), i. e. the settlers from Southern China.

26 Taiwan and its inhabitants, especially the indigenous population in the highlands and on the Eastern coast, proved mesmerizing for Karlin. In particular the Atayal to whose territory she made an overnight excursion, figure prominently in her travel and fictional writing despite her short stay on the island (Veselič, forthcoming).

27 See Rubiés (2002, 252–53) for a discussion of how "spontaneous ethnographies" gradually became "methodised" since the late 16th century and how this "inscribed the travel narrative within a scientific project".

The manuscript has no special introduction, although the first sentence of the chapter on Japan may serve as a sort of preface to the entire volume: “In the Far East, Buddhism rules and colours all views, either directly or indirectly” (A, 1). While echoes of this statement are found in various parts of the text, Karlin discusses a breadth of beliefs and practices, only some of them Buddhist. She sometimes intentionally groups them, implying a sort of classification, while at other times listing them haphazardly—this is especially the case in the shorter Korean chapter. Contrary to the geographical key she uses as the main organizing principle, I will summarize the content according to the implicit categorization, thereby elucidating Karlin’s conceptual scheme of various religious practices.



Figure 8. A Buddhist temple with a pagoda in Mukden (Shenyang). On the back side, Karlin notes it is quite different from the Japanese temples. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

Apart from the chapter on Taiwan, creation/origin myths are among the first things Karlin mentions in each chapter. She recounts the myths on the origin of Japan and the Sun goddess Amaterasu 天照大神, i.e. the mythical ancestor of the Japanese imperial lineage, the Ainu myths of settlement of the world and the creation of first human beings as well as the Sun and Moon deities, Korean myths of Hwanung 환웅/桓雄 and the first woman, and of the sage Kija 箕子, as well as the Chinese myth of Pangu 盤古. In her description of the Atayal in Taiwan she relates two origin legends—the tale of two Suns, which is in fact the Moon creation story, and a legend on origin of facial tattooing, both of which can also be

found in a more extended form as separate items in the folder of her unpublished ethnographic texts held at the National and University Library. In the case of the Pangu myth she notes that there are numerous versions of the story (A, 45), while the rest of them are treated as authoritative, canonized texts.

Karlin does not intend to dwell long on such myths, however, as the book “primarily deals with superstitions that are alive and well today” (A, 45). She thus begins each regional section with a brief comment on the state of religion in the particular country. She explains that in Japan there are two main religions (“*Hauptreligionen*”) in addition to the original belief in spirits (“*Geisterglauben*”), i.e. Shintoism as a state religion based on the ancestor cult and Sun worship, and the imported Buddhism (A, 1). Later in the text she warns that people are neither strong followers of Shinto nor exclusively Buddhist (A, 12). Due to the simplicity and lack of imaginative space in Shintoism, however, it is Buddhism that has “a true influence on the dispositions and the life of the people” (A, 1). For Korea she remarks that while Buddhism is the main religion, it has taken a more phantastic form than in Japan (A, 37). She introduces the China chapter by stating that although there are three main religions—Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism—“in ordinary life, one religion unnoticeably extends into the others and it is less possible than anywhere else to draw clear boundaries among them” (A, 45). She further characterizes Chinese religiosity as pragmatic, functional, “firmly and clearly rooted in the tangible” (A, 46), even in its considerations of the hereafter. For the Ainu, on the other hand, she notes that their “*Götterlehre*” (doctrine of gods) is quite simple (A, 29).

In the longer sections on Japan and China such introductions are followed by the descriptions, of various length, of beliefs and practices related to the identified main religions. From the succession of topics presented, Karlin seems to associate Japanese ancestor veneration primarily with Shintoism, although her explanation of related rituals includes daily offerings at home and the Obon お盆 festival when the souls of the deceased return home, which is in fact of Buddhist origin.<sup>28</sup> She makes two comparative observations about ancestor veneration: that unlike “us”, the Japanese don’t perceive the ancestors to be removed from people’s daily lives—on the contrary, they are here, living parallel lives (A, 3). She further notes that in older times the Obon dances were supposedly highly “immoral, that is, according to modern attitudes.” She sees this, however, as a typical characteristic of the “primitive peoples”, who tend to have “a liking for accentuated erotic goings-on” (A, 4). She also describes Shinto funerals. Interestingly, the shorter version B includes the fact that all the highest dignitaries and imperial family members

28 She also seems to confuse the *tokonoma* 床の間, alcove for the display of artistic items, and the *kamidana* 神棚—the miniature household altar that enshrines Shinto *kami* 神 (A, 3–4, 23).

may only be buried in the Shinto way, while others prefer a Buddhist funeral (B, 44). Karlin mentions the deified historical personages of Tenjin 天神, whom she calls “the God of school children” (in fact of knowledge, learning and the learned), and Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師, the founder of the esoteric Shingon 真言宗 school of Buddhism, whom she classifies as more Shinto than Buddhist (A, 9). She then turns to the numerous deities and protective spirits that must be evoked during house construction, depicting the related rituals in great detail. She ends her description of Shinto-related practices with dietary aspects of Shinto ceremonies.

Karlin then addresses Buddhism, crediting it with “making the Japanese what they are”:

serious in the perception of their duty, always conscientious about avoiding what leads to bad karma, obedient, diligent, controlled; most of all controlled. They don’t burden their fellow humans with their suffering and their worries; they don’t grumble against fate, they don’t romp and curse if they break something, if something of theirs is ruined by the blunder of others; they are not impatient when something doesn’t want to go [as expected], and they don’t get besides themselves when a great misfortune is completely unexpectedly brought upon them. (A, 12–13)

She ascribes such a calm attitude, for which she holds the Japanese in high esteem, to the awareness of “circularity of things”, “the swinging wheel of birth and rebirth”, recognition that how we act is what matters: “In the East people consider much more the impersonal and the immortal (*unvergängliche*) than we do, living in the eternal as well as in the momentary (*vorübergehende*) and with this world-view they get over the everyday much more easily” (A, 13). She then explains at considerable length the elementary Buddhist teachings on reincarnation, karma and the impermanence of things. She emphasizes the complete absence of the idea of grace so fundamental to Christian belief: “one can neither free himself by prayer nor buy himself out from old guilt,” although even in the Buddhist lands “the lower folk” are inclined to avoid the consequences of misdeeds by donations, magic or penance. “Nevertheless, there is the sense, that there in the universe it is all law and not blind power and that anyone who disrupts this eternal harmony, must suffer through this disorder”. (A, 14)



Figure 9. A postcard with the famous Great Buddha of Kamakura (Kamakura Daibutsu 鎌倉大仏), which Karlin (1930a, 187; 2006, 232) calls “the best expression of Buddhism I have seen anywhere”. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

According to Karlin, while Buddhist teaching was “wonderfully pure” when it came to Japan in the 6th century CE, people soon realized that it had many manifestations and artists began to represent these in the form of deities, such as Kannon 觀音, the goddess of mercy. She then explains some of the most prominent bodhisattvas and deities of Japanese Buddhism: Jizō 地藏, Daruma 達磨—representing Bodhidharma, the founder of, the fierce protector deity Fudō 不動, the seven lucky gods, of whom goddess Benten (or Benzaiten 弁才天), receives most of Karlin’s attention. In this section, Karlin also describes a Buddhist funeral.

Among the “main religions” in China, she first briefly discusses Confucianism, which she prefers to describe as “the philosophy of everyday life” (A, 45) rather than a religion. She clarifies that Confucius is not a deity, but is honoured for his great wisdom. She describes the basic postulates of Confucianism as the basis of entire social life and considers civility or courtesy as the central precept of Confucius’s teaching. She calls him the “Apostle of civility”, where civility is not meant to be “a meaningless demeanour, but rather a pure outflow of true goodwill”. “The beautiful thing in the East is”, she says commendably, is “the honouring of the selfless” (A, 47).

She is less favourably inclined towards Buddhism in China. In stark contrast to her approving words on Buddhism in Japan and the closeness she feels towards

Buddhist teachings in general, she finds that Buddhism in China, while retaining the fundamentals, has for the most part strayed into the superstitious and fantastical. She blames this on “the Lamaism of Tibetan Monks” (A, 48), yet does not explicate this position any further.<sup>29</sup> She therefore discusses neither the Chinese nor Tibetan Buddhist practice in any detail, but simply mentions a few Buddhist deities—Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音, the “laughing Buddha” (笑佛; Budai) and the demon king Mo Wang 魔王, likening the latter to Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction. In addition to a sentence or two of introduction for each of the said deities, she also gives the corresponding Japanese names.



Figure 10. A postcard depicting the costumes and masks used in Tibetan Buddhism for performance of the ceremony for pacifying the souls of those who suffered a bad death. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

Karlin then turns to Daoism but emphasizes once again that many of the deities can be ascribed to both Buddhism and Daoism. She also states that contrary to the irrelevance of the body in Buddhism (due to reincarnation), Daoism glorifies the body, its strength and health. She finds this contrary to the original teaching “which possessed something sublime” (A, 48). She calls Dao “the all-permeating elementary power” and the underlines “*Wu Wei*” (*wuwei* 無爲) as the way to merge

<sup>29</sup> Judging from the denigrating comments in her travelogue *Einsame Weltreise*, Karlin holds Tibetan Buddhism, and especially Tibetan monks, in extremely low regard (Karlin 1930a, 236–38; 2006, 295, 297–98).



with this force. She quotes several “sayings of the sage”, she must have found particularly appealing as she characterizes them as “the most beautiful” (A, 49–50).<sup>30</sup> At the same time, she observes that the true philosophy of Daoism now only exists in books, for it had been overrun by supernatural beings and fantasies (A, 50). A few passages later, Karlin also mentions the eight Daoist immortals (*ba xian* 八仙), with special emphasis on Li Tieguai 李鐵拐, whose statue she was given as a present in Peru and carried with her through much of her journey.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 11. Karlin with her beloved “Idol”, the figure of Daoist immortal Li Tieguai. (Source: Alma Karlin Estate, Ms 1872, National ...)

30 Not all can readily be identified as quotes from *Daodejing*. The tenuous nature of the “master said ...” type of narrative that Motoh (2019b) demonstrates for quotes ascribed to Confucius, very likely holds true in this case as well.

31 She was not aware it was a Daoist immortal until she came to China. She carried the statue for a large part of her journey, then lost it, was reunited with it, and in the mid-1930s dedicated her novel *Der Götze (Idol)* to it. Her special connection to the statue is described in Karlin (1927; 1997, 179–84).

Stressing how difficult it is to separate or classify many deities, spirits, and supernatural beings (A, 19), in both the Japan and China chapters the sections on the “main religions” are followed by what today is most often termed as folk or popular religion, but what Karlin covers under the broad category of “superstitions”. Among these, there is a conspicuous fascination with foxes. She dedicates nearly two pages (A 19–20) to the worship of Inari (Inari Ōkami 稻荷大神), the Japanese goddess of rice, good harvest, and wealth, often represented by fox servants, and more than three pages to the shape-shifting fox-fairies (*bulijing* 狐狸精) in China (A 50–53), recounting several legends about them. She mentions the numerous other deities and supernatural beings, such as Tengu 天狗, Shōjō 猩猩 and Tanuki (Bake-danuki 化け狸) in Japan, or the “god of the hearth” (Zao Jun 灶君) and wandering ghosts in China. In the Korea chapter she mentions “Tokgabi” (Dokkaebi 도깨비), the prankster goblin and “high carved idols with creepy grimaces”, in fact the village guardians Jangseung 장승/長承, standing along paths, representing various natural forces, whom “the simple folk” consider to be able to turn away ghosts or treat as ghost lightning rods (A, 42). Methods of warding off evil spirits are also described in the Ainu chapter, as is the famous bear sacrifice. In addition to these more elaborate forms of superstition Karlin also identifies “conventional superstitions” (A, 23) or the customs and views that belong to “the superstitions in the narrow sense” (B, 51). Here she includes the potency of various plants and foodstuffs (e. g. ginseng), food taboos, magical spells (such as love and death spells of the Ainu), auspicious signs, lucky and harmful actions (e.g. dropping chopsticks in Japan), etc.



Figure 12. A postcard portraying Korean village guardians—Jangseung. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

A topic of great interest to Karlin, that is peppered throughout the text and cuts across the distinction she makes between religion and superstition, is symbolism. She discusses it more extensively in the chapter on Japan, but also gives many instances in the Korea and China parts of the manuscript. She sees symbolism, which she relates to Shintoism and “not yet completely erased belief in the spirits of nature”, as permeating the life of the Japanese (A, 4). She seems particularly taken by the enormous admiration Japanese cultivate for various trees and flowers: “Only in Japan does one make outings to admire the trees while they blossom, and only there is one as excited about the change of flowers as over personal happiness” (A, 6). Similarly, one of the wonderful things for her in China is “the symbolism that ties everything together, that can be noticed at every step, and that gives the commonest of things a deeper appeal and a finer meaning” (A, 71). She observes, that “we used to have this too, we have just forgotten the meaning of most objects around us” (A, 71). Throughout her manuscript Karlin notes the symbolism of animals, symbolism in the architecture and decoration of shrines, temples and homes, in New Year decorations and food. In the China section she further notes the symbolism of body parts, numbers, stars and in theatre. She seems to find animal symbolism particularly worthy of attention—not only does she highlight the examples throughout *Glaube und Aberglaube*, there is also a three-page comparative article “Tiere in Volksmund der Völker” among her papers in the National and University Library. Moreover, related to signs and symbolism are divination practices, another crosscutting topic. She describes the “Orakel” in Shinto shrines, gives examples of meanings of dreams, and of signs in the already mentioned *Yi-jing* divination. Interestingly the latter is included in the Korea part of the text, although she acknowledges this is an “ancient wisdom”, known already to Laozi and widely popular in China (A, 41).

Finally, in the sections on Japan and China, where Karlin stayed longer, a focus on two different ritual-cycles can be discerned. In Japan, where she stayed for more than a year, she was able to observe the entire year-cycle: the New Year celebrations, the Inari festival at the time of rice-planting, the “Boy’s Day” (now Children’s Day こどもの日), the summer Obon and Tanabata たなばた<sup>32</sup> festivals. In China, however, she describes New Year celebrations in one short paragraph (she left the country before the Spring Festival of 1924) and mentions the Qingming and Mid-Autumn festivals only in passing. On the other hand, in China there is a clear focus on life-cycle rituals. There she had the opportunity and, with no fixed job, the time to cultivate more intimate local friendships, especially with her host’s German-Chinese family, granting her wider access

32 She mistakenly calls it the festival of “Weaving Princess and the Ox King” (A, 8), the Ox King being a different legendary character than Cowherd of the Tanabata.

to life-cycle rituals. Her meticulous description and interpretation of mortuary rituals (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2019) in her travel writing (Karlin 1924a; 1924b; 1997, 99–102) is based on the funeral she attended of her Chinese host's father. In version A of *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten* it extends over five pages.<sup>33</sup> Another two pages are dedicated to weddings, followed by a few paragraphs on pregnancy, infertility and children. As mentioned earlier, funerals are also described in the chapter on Japan—the Shinto one from the perspective of the officiating priest and the Buddhist one from the perspective of the bereaved family members, while Bunun burials are mentioned in the section on Taiwan. This section also includes a lengthy treatment of the rites-of-passage to adulthood among the Atayal, centred around men's headhunting and men's and women's facial tattooing.



Figure 13. A postcard depicting the famous wood carving of the sleeping cat (Nemuri-neko 眠り猫) at the Tōshō-gū Shrine in Nikkō 日光東照宮. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

To sum up, while not exhaustive, this overview has shown Karlin had a very indiscriminate interest in broadly defined, primarily contemporary religious beliefs and practices. Karlin chose the geographical key to present these in her manuscript,

33 She makes an observation that despite the Buddhist views, the average Chinese person understands the afterlife in very materialistic terms, and this is the reason the funeral itself as well as later mortuary rituals are of utmost importance, as is demonstrated by the huge costs attached to these rites (A, 62–63).

yet there is also an inkling of a system in the way she organized her first-hand observations and second-hand information. The brief introductions are followed by origin myths, then come “religions”, “superstitions”—first the more complex beliefs and then more mundane magical acts. Interspersed throughout the text are references to symbolism and the year ritual cycle, while rituals of the life cycle come last. The final paragraphs of each chapter seem reserved for the left-over information—brief references or simple enumerations of unrelated customs or, in the case of China, descriptions of some of the temples she visited in Beijing, the longer versions of which can be found in her travelogue (1930a, 235–38; Karlin 2006, 294–99). In the final section of my analysis, I attempt to unpack Karlin’s conceptual scheme and method, by situating them in the broader intellectual trends of her time.



Figure 14. Chinese sacrificial paper money, also known as spirit money, burned in ancestor worship or as an offering to various deities. (Source: Alma Karlin Collection, Celje Regional Museum)

### Karlin’s Conceptual Scheme and Method in *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten*

As the very title of the manuscript suggests Alma Karlin distinguishes between belief and superstition, yet the above references to her text demonstrate, the binary opposition between religion and superstition to be even more salient for her conceptual framework. Although both religion and superstition have long been

used to describe various beliefs and practices, the specific meanings of these terms have varied widely through place and time. Still, labelling something as a superstition has invariably served to hierarchize different traditions and practices, hailing some as proper and orthodox, while denigrating others as diminished forms of the true thing or even complete aberrations (O'Neil 2005, 8864).

In her text, Karlin does not provide a definition of what constitutes the one or the other, but we can gain insights from how she uses these terms, especially in the two longer sections on Japan and China. In Japan, she identifies two (main) religions (“(*Haupt*)*religionen*”)—Buddhism and Shintoism, while in China three merit such a distinction—Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. This corresponds to the prevailing scholarly attitudes of the time, engulfed in the comparative concept of “world religion”, illustrated by, for example, Max Müller’s *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910) translation project or the First World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893.<sup>34</sup> It is impossible to pinpoint the precise starting point, but throughout the 19th century there had been a steady development towards the formation of the study field of comparative religion, with academic institutionalization in its final decades.<sup>35</sup> The initially philological interest in the translation and interpretation of ancient philosophical and religious texts turned into a process of selecting, editing and canonizing, whereby those texts that became designated as sacred writings were compiled and reconstructed as canons of specific religious systems.

The need for generation of such orderly traditions was not only significant for academia, but was of equal importance for the colonial governance and modernizing efforts of independent Asian states. The process of secularization, i.e. creation of a separate religious sphere (distinct from other social spheres such as politics, economy, law etc.), that transpired in post-Reformation Europe (Asad 1993, 28), came to be viewed as imperative for successful modernization and modernity. As in many other places, in East Asia the adoption of the concept of religion Ch. *zongjiao*/Jp. *shūkyō* 宗教 and its discursive counterpart of superstition, Ch. *mixin*, Jp. *meishin* 迷信, both neologisms, led to the establishment of various officially recognized religious associations, integration and systematization of clergy training, and hierarchization if not homogenization of particular teachings and practices in an attempt to emulate the church–state structure of Western countries (e.g. Goossaert and Palmer 2011, esp. chs. 2 and 3; Josephson 2012, chs. 6 and 7). In other words, during Karlin’s sojourn in Japan and China, the vocabulary of religion and superstition was not only a familiar form of reference to different East

34 See Masuzawa (2005) for a detailed treatment of emergence of the concept of world religion.

35 A historical and conceptual overview of the establishment of “religion” as a subject of comparative inquiry in humanities and social sciences can be found in Stausberg (2007).

Asian teachings and practices among her Western counterparts, but was probably familiar to at least some of her educated local interlocutors.

Contrary to the narrowly and, as I will further show below, textually defined religion, for Karlin belief (“*Glaube*”) is more inclusive. It seems to indicate a level of fairly complex, coherent ideas about and engagement with the transcendent, the spiritual. For example, she calls the Japanese ritual of *nagare kanjo* 流れ灌頂 or “flowing anointment”, the sprinkling of the head performed for the salvation of a woman who died in childbirth, “a very beautiful custom on the boundary between belief and superstition” (A, 26). The ritual formed as a part of the Buddhist tradition in medieval Japan after the introduction of the apocryphal Mahayana Blood Bowl Sutra Ketsubon Kyō 血盆經 from China (Glassman 2009, esp. 185–86). There is no indication that Karlin is aware of the “uncanonical” origin, therefore not grouping it with other Buddhist practices. The more likely reason for placing it on the boundary with superstition is the fear of wandering ghosts at the centre of this practice.

Belief for her is also about the truthfulness and depth of feeling, the interior of things, in contrast both to the superficiality of superstition as well as ceremony. This is explicit in her comments on contemporary practice of Christianity in South America, where “the Christian belief was a soulless circus of ceremonies. It manifested itself neither in life, nor in art, only in superstitious customs and sensual gestures” (Karlin 1930a, 90; 2006, 108). The emphasis on the non-material also seems to be an element in her understanding of belief, as shown in her reflection on the religiosity of Chinese and the blurred boundaries of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism:<sup>36</sup>

To me it seemed anyway as if there was no belief in our sense of the word, although everything is permeated by a very deep wisdom on the one hand, and the binding symbolism and astonishing superstition on the other; and a Chinese never undertakes anything of which the supernatural is not a part of [...] His belief concerns itself a lot, too much, perhaps, with things of the next world, but in this he is thinking of the practical, not idealistic side of the beyond. (A, 45)

The most important of all, however is that belief is historically rooted within a particular society. When pondering about missionary activities Karlin at one point writes:

36 Interestingly, she does not use the term three teachings, *sanjiao* 三教, although it has been commonly used in China to refer to the combination of the three.

Why should a belief not be as good as another one, especially in the lands where the original belief was pure and deep and seemed adapted to people? (Karlin 1930a, 319; 2006, 404)

A certain overlap exists, then, with the term religion, but belief seems more inclusive. While Karlin adopts religion only for the traditions stated above, belief appears to encompass all the religious teachings that she values positively.

When it comes to superstition (*“Aberglaube”*), Karlin is more ambiguous. In her non-fiction writing the term sometimes carries a clear negative connotation of something shallow, simplistic, empty. In the East Asian case this is evident in her treatment of Buddhism. She is very drawn to its teachings, perhaps even considers herself a Buddhist (Karlin 1930a, 327), but while she sings nothing but praises of Buddhism in Japan, she is much more critical of the Chinese practice. Although “true to its origin in the basic features” she finds it to be full of “demon worship”, “superstition” and “thought aberrations in every sense”. (A, 48) She is more reluctant to use superstition in order to refer to lived Buddhist practices in Japan—many of them syncretic, than to those in China, which she only painstakingly calls Buddhist. The fact that the year in Japan was “the happiest part of her journey” (Karlin n.d.d) certainly colours her views. She similarly observes that the “pure and high” philosophy of Daoism now only exists in books, as it had been overrun by all sorts of “spirit beings, magical feats and fanciful stories” (A, 50). These judgements are firmly grounded in the prevailing scholarly views during her London years and the period she spent in East Asia, although they were losing their stronghold at the time the manuscript was probably written.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned above, in the era of Romanticism an interest in religion—especially from the comparative point of view—became one of the central concerns of humanities. The 19th century thus saw fervent engagement in philological translations of many religious and philosophical texts. With regard to Buddhism, the translation and interpretation activities were very much focussed on what were deemed the pristine Pali and too a much lesser extent Sanskrit texts of Theravada, while Mahayana Buddhism was generally derided as the corruption of the original teachings (Clarke 1997, 98) and hence remained outside these endeavours. The nascent

37 The rich history of Western interest in the East Asian religio-philosophical traditions is beyond the scope of this article. East Asian, more specifically Chinese religious traditions and practices were first more forcefully brought to European attention with the missionary activities following the establishment of maritime trade contacts in the 16th century, while the interest in Japan was constrained by the two and a half centuries of Japan’s closure, until the country was forced to open in the mid-19th century. A short overview of the scholarly study of religions in China can be found in Girardot and Kleeman (2005), while the late 19th and early 20th centuries’ scholarly and popular engagement with the religious traditions of China and Japan is treated by Oldmeadow (2004, esp. ch. 7).



sinological scholarship<sup>38</sup> mostly directed its attention to the traditions of Confucianist and Daoist texts, as well as the Chinese translations of some Buddhist texts, although the latter were not necessarily fundamental to the Chinese Buddhist tradition (Girardot and Kleeman 2005, 1632). One of the first Western authorities on Japanese Buddhism, Ernest Fennollosa (1853–1908), who came a little later, was very vocal in his criticism of prominent philologists and scholars of Theravada Buddhism such as Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843–1922), which held Rhys Davids, which held Mahayana schools to be a degenerate form of Buddhism, and was no more sympathetic to Theosophical interpretations of Buddhism or the popular notions which, in his opinion, selfishly only cared for individual liberation (Oldmeadow 2004, 166). Moreover, the gradual process of canonization of East Asian religious traditions, mentioned above, resulted not only in the construction of seemingly coherent, unified religious traditions, but also in judging contemporary religious practices against the “genuine”, “pure” textual religion of ancient times (Nongbri 2013, 112). This counterposing of lived vs. textual that Karlin’s comments make so clear remains central to the scholarly treatment of East Asian religious traditions, such as in the separation of Daoism as philosophy and as religion.

This said, in the second half of the 19th century, the writings of some Protestant and Jesuit missionaries as well as (mostly) amateur scholars who were based in China (“in the field” so to speak), began to stress contemporary Chinese religious practice, in particular the folk religion (Girardot and Kleeman 2005, 1632–33). Such was the case of J. J. M. de Groot (1854–1921), a Dutch–German sinologist who taught in Leiden and later in Berlin. Like most of the Leiden-trained sinologists of that time, De Groot was originally meant to work as an interpreter in China and the Dutch Indies, but then shifted to a research career—although still in the employ of the Ministry of the Colonial Affairs—as an ethnologist and ethnographer with a focus on Chinese religion and its impact on domestic and social life (Blussé 2014, 59–61). In his monumental, unfinished work *The Religious System in China* (1892–1910) he nevertheless takes a turn towards classical, i.e. elite sources, and concludes that what he has observed in practice<sup>39</sup> are just different manifestations of the single essence—he calls it

38 The first European chairs were established in 1814 at the Collège de France and in 1876 at Oxford University.

39 Already during his year of practical study, which he spent in Fujian, de Groot was observing and noting in his diaries numerous details about family structures and institutions, the position of women, festivals and rituals of different social strata. He destroyed his diaries “after extracting from [them] whatever may be of scientific value”, for they also included “intimate matters of life, also concerning friends and relatives” (de Groot’s unpublished autobiography, cited in Zwi Werblowsky 1986, 118). De Groot’s initially very favourable, respectful attitude to China became its opposite around the time he began publishing his life work in which he finds China to be backward, undeveloped, and superstitious (ibid., 119; Girardot and Kleeman 2005, 1634).

*universismus*—of Chinese religion. According to de Groot, even Chinese Buddhism is but one branch of this unitary system (Zwi Werblowsky 1986, 117).



Figure 15. Karlin with the figure of Bodhisattva Kannon/Guanyin 觀音 she brought from Japan or China. The photo was taken in her hometown of Celje. (Source: Alma Karlin Estate, Ms 1872, National ...)

Within this tradition of the ethnographic approach to Chinese religious practices, another person of interest is Wilhelm Grube, a German who spent two years in China as a collector for the Berlin Museum of Anthropology (Broy 2016, 90). He published his observations of the popular religious practice in several texts (e.g. Grube 1901; 1910). Both de Groot (1892, Part I.) and Grube (1898) wrote extensively on Chinese mortuary rituals—a topic that stands out prominently in Karlin's travel writing from China as well. Whether Karlin was familiar with the writings of de Groot and Grube is difficult to determine, although it seems completely possible

that she had access to some of these publications through contacts in China, such as the von Salzmans, if not already in Tokyo.<sup>40</sup>

Karlin, too, was clearly attracted to the ethnographic–folkloristic approaches to religion that were slowly coming to the fore, and was a keen observer of the way people lived there and then, “superstitions” being part and parcel of everyday life. Despite her critical tone, it is precisely the rich and “contagious mysticism” that she finds most attractive when it comes to Chinese beliefs:

As the symbolism is tightly woven into the everyday of a Japanese, so reaches here the superstition into each, ever so minor act. Yet it is exactly this state of affairs that makes this country a wandering secret for us; one lives and moves in a somewhat eerie air circle of wonders, and this magic atmosphere is so strong, that no one who has lived in China long can escape it. (A, 48)

She was absolutely fascinated by popular religious practices and enticed by various folktales and legends. She also found them inspiring in her literary pursuits. Thus, in her travelogue she muses:

Should I tell you about the Forbidden City, where once a year, with a special permit, you are allowed into a certain part, where I saw a beautiful Buddha pagoda? Maybe I should speak about a chrysanthemum exhibition, which was not nearly as beautiful as in Dai Nippon,<sup>41</sup> my beloved Japan, or about the miracles in the Kung fu Tse [Kongfuzi] Hall, where the great philosopher is venerated? I would much rather speak about superstition, the steps of fox–fairy, about [Gu], who takes the lives of unborn children, about the ghost wall ... but the most wonderful of these things are anyway recounted in my Beijing short stories. (1930a, 248; 2006, 312)

With no full-time job and a quiet room overlooking the picturesque Beijing courtyards, Karlin immersed herself in writing during her months there. The collection of the (very) short stories she refers to was published in 1930 as *Drachen und Geister (Dragons and Ghosts)* by Frundsberg Verlag in Berlin. Again, the title is indicative of the aspects of Chinese tradition that enthralled her the most – symbolism and supernatural creatures, especially ghosts. Excerpts of book reviews

40 Grube’s (1898) discussion of mortuary customs in Beijing was, for example, published in the *Journal of the Peking Oriental Society*.

41 The fact that she uses this name for the Japanese empire is but one indication of her uncritical and unreflected identification with the Japanese imperial project.

reproduced in Jezernik (2009, 83) indicate readers found Karlin's fiction both entertaining and informative.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed Alma Karlin's unpublished manuscript *Glaube und Aberglaube im Fernen Osten*, which exists in two incomplete versions. The first version A, which was scrutinized more closely, equates the Far East with East Asia, while the second version B takes a broader geographical perspective, encompassing everything west and south of India. The East Asian section of the later is, with a rare exception, just a distillation of the former. The manuscripts were probably intended as ethnographic, semi-scholarly counterparts to Karlin's travelogue *Einsame Weltreise*.

As the title suggests, the two texts focus on religious beliefs and practices, matters of life-long interest for Karlin. Raised as a Roman Catholic, Karlin became enticed by non-European, particularly Asian religious and philosophical traditions during the years she spent in London where she moved as a young woman thirsty for knowledge and adventure. Working as a language teacher, she met students from Japan, India and China who offered her first glimpses of the classical textual traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism as well as the social life and cultural practices of their home countries. In the self-imposed exile in Scandinavia at the onset of the World War I, on a diet of library readings, lectures, and conversations with Theosophists and well-travelled people, Karlin forged a plan to travel around the globe, working towards fulfilling her ambition for fame as an explorer and author. Religious beliefs and practices were central in this endeavour, for she firmly believed in the Romantic notion of religion as a distilled soul of nations, the Theosophical presumption that all religions are just particular iterations of an underlying universal truth, as well as in religion's stimulus for creative writing. She then had to put her aspirations on hold for eight years of what became a physically exhausting and mentally draining journey, but eventually attained glory with the publication of her travelogues after her return in 1928. Not only did East Asian religious traditions figure prominently in her documentary writing, they were often present in her fictional stories set in contemporary China and Japan.

Until the mid-1930s, when Karlin turned to Theosophical fiction, her writing on religion was more reminiscent of the late 19th century scholarly approaches than the spiritual quests that became typical in the popular writing of the early 20th century. In her treatment of various East Asian beliefs and practices she adopted the categories of religion and (more broadly conceived) belief, and of superstition.

She employed “religion” only in reference to what by then became understood as bounded, coherent systems of canonized textual traditions exemplified in the concept of “world religions”. In her evaluations of contemporary Buddhist and Daoist practices in China she further underlined the primacy of ancient texts, deeming the lived practices she observed as superstitions at best and aberrations at worst. This was very much in line with the (comparative) philological and philosophical endeavours of the 19th century.

At the same time, Karlin was eager to observe, even experience, the ways people lived in the places she visited. From this perspective, it was the bustle of local religious festivities, the colourful deities and supernatural beings, and the purportedly all-permeating symbolism she encountered in East Asia that consumed her attention. These she approached in a manner of an amateur fieldwork ethnologist. Not able to speak any of the East Asian languages beyond the basic phrases, she must have relied heavily on the willingness and the ability of her interlocutors as well as the already published accounts—scholarly and popular—for explanation of the practices she so keenly observed. She mostly approached people and their lives with a genuine interest and appreciation, but neither this nor her unconventional position of a single woman traveling the world on her own hard-earned money enabled her—as Leutner (1997) also demonstrates for other German-speaking women travellers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—to radically break away from the established conceptual frameworks of her time.

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