

Online Workshop

“Esoteric Practices and the Master-disciple Relationship in the Digital Age”

Workshop date: June 28th, 2021

Place: Online

Convenor: Stéphanie Homola

Call for Abstracts

How is esoteric knowledge transmitted in contemporary societies where communication technologies allow all kinds of information to circulate and be disclosed to an ever-wider audience? For instance, the young generations in Taiwan can learn about the complex and obscure Chinese tradition of divination through various channels: get personally acquainted with a specialist who agrees to transmit his/her knowledge and skills, attend a six-months course on horoscopy along with other fellow classmates, or learn the techniques in didactic handbooks and apply them using do-it-yourself manuals or apps. Why and how to engage in a master-disciple relationship when even the most esoteric traditions are available on the Internet and can be shared and discussed in forums, blogs, and social media? Do information technologies dilute the potential of the dyadic relationship between a master and his/her student or do they make it even more relevant?

This workshop aims at exploring the contemporary developments of the master-disciple relationship – a mode of knowledge transmission which has traditionally been prevailing in the teaching of esoteric practices. It adopts a working definition of this teaching relation as an elective, personal, and moral relationship between a practitioner and his/her pupil. This relationship often involves teaching and learning processes based on observation, intensive study, and memorization, a hierarchical tie between the master and the disciple, and long-term commitment and dedication that can extend to sharing daily life tasks, providing assistance, and travelling together. In some cases, the teaching relationship can be loosely defined along these characteristics and produce various stages of knowledge transmission rather than a full and well-defined path to expertise. In the same way, it can, but not necessarily, imply initiatory or binding rituals which give the apprentice access to hidden and controlled knowledge and tie him/her to a master and, potentially, to a line of transmission or school of thought.

This workshop addresses esoteric practices in a global perspective, along the lines of the Research Program “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective” developed at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU). Convened by

Michael Lackner, Andreas Nehring, Dominik Müller, and Bernd-Christian Otto, this project is at the core of an on-going application to establish a Centre for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences (CAS) at FAU, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). It develops a theoretical and methodological framework for the transcultural study of esoteric practices in a perspective that extends beyond the Eurocentric category of Western Esotericism. As a heuristic category which primarily serves for the collection of material in various cultural settings, “esoteric practices” are defined through the combination of four main factors: practices which (1) have as their goal the ability to identify and to influence present and future life events; (2) assume special knowledge or abilities and require prolonged education that generally leads to a form of expertise, as well as to the strategic restriction and non-disclosure of the knowledge obtained; (3) are based on forms of ritual efficacy, which are generally concealed, and cannot – or only partially – be apprehended by the senses, and for that reason (4) are contested, to different degrees in different culturally and milieu-specific circumstances, since there is – especially in the 21st century – no generally accepted explanatory model for the effects ascribed to such practices.

In such perspective, the workshop welcomes contributions by anthropologists and social scientists studying the master-disciple relationship in esoteric practices in contemporary societies as well as its historical developments. It especially seeks submissions from a variety of cultural contexts that will allow cross-cultural comparisons and discussions. Contributors can – but are in no way restricted to – address the following interconnected questions:

- ♣ How is the master-disciple relationship – as specific mode of knowledge transmission – defined and assessed in contemporary discourses? By the actors who engage in it and by outsiders, including in supportive and critical discourses? How are they called, or do they call themselves in local idioms (master/disciple, teacher, professor/student, pupil)? What are the expectations on both sides in terms of commitment, knowledge transmission, mentoring, emotions? How do actors assess and perceive the evolution of this mode of knowledge transmission in the past decades, in comparison with past experiences or historically (re)constructed models and norms about what a master-disciple relationship should look like? How is this mode of knowledge transmission assessed in comparison with other modes of transmission experienced, for instance, in the education system? How do actors address gender issues, including when the transmission is/used to be restricted to same-sex actors or involves opposite-sex actors?
- ♣ How is the master-disciple relationship lived in contemporary societies? What are the rhythm and practical organization of knowledge transmission? What is the impact of communication technologies on the transmission of esoteric knowledge? How does the networking essence of social media influence the dyadic relationship between the master and the disciple? Do new technologies define new kinds of specialists and new kinds of students when the latter can be trained remotely? Do practitioners use social media as a resource to stay in touch, build, and/or expand a community of students? Do communication technologies incite apprentices to engage in multiple teaching relationships with different masters?
- ♣ Tensions between different modes of knowledge transmission. Which kind of practices and knowledge favor the master-disciple relationship in the contemporary landscape of academic and education institutions? What are the historical and current tensions with academic institutions which are based on an open, collective, and standardized mode of knowledge transmission? For instance, professional astrologers in India share their time between training “disciples” at home and “students” at universities. In China, Chinese

Traditional Medicine is an institutionalized field taught at university; however, since the 1990s, as they were confronted with the limits of this mode of knowledge transmission, specialists have tried to rehabilitate and revive the once disparaged and rejected master-disciple teaching. What can we learn when observing these two modes concurrently in contemporary societies? Which tools and artefacts of knowledge transmission are used in various contexts, from didactic manuals to secretly transmitted documents?

- ♣ Tensions in a vulgarization process of esoteric knowledge. Attempts to disclose (some aspects) of esoteric knowledge to a wider audience through various channels are not new in the history of esoteric practices. In particular, the development of printing technologies and publishing industries and markets at various times constituted both a challenge and an opportunity for the dissemination of esoteric knowledge and practices. As they increase the speed and outreach of knowledge circulation, do information and communication technologies constitute another disruptive innovation likely to redefine the dynamic of esoteric practices? To which extent do they threaten, challenge, or nourish the strategic disclosure or concealment of specific aspects that characterizes esoteric practices? To which extent is the social basis of both masters and disciples widening in contemporary societies? Does it question the exclusiveness of esoteric practices and foster, in turn, legitimizing discourses on hereditary transmission?

- ♣ How do scholars studying esoteric practices reflexively assess their own involvement in their object of study? The technical and specialized (if not secret) dimension of esoteric practices often results in scholars working with people who masters such knowledge, getting some understanding of the techniques, and, in some cases, engaging in a learning relation with a teacher. How do widespread anthropological debates on reflexivity in the past decades impact the study of esoteric practices? To which extent can the academic and spiritual quests for knowledge contradict or sustain each other? Do esoteric practices require to be experienced personally by the scholar to be fully understood?

Please send an abstract of your intended contribution with title, institutional information, and expected location (time-zone) to stephanie.homola@fau.de before April 15th, 2021.

Schedule

- Deadline for abstract submission: April 15th, 2021
- Feedback and Conference schedule: May 7th, 2021
- Workshop date: June 28th, 2021