



CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and  
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

Summer Semester 2023

# CAS-E Lecture Series

18.04.2023

**"Prognostics for the Fate of the Nation in Traditional China--Some Calendrical Cases"**

Prof. Wang Fan-sen

In traditional China, there were many different ways to prognose the fate of the nation, such as drawing lots or astrological divination. In this speech, I plan to provide preliminary observations on some calendrical prophecies in traditional China, such as Bingding 丙丁, Xinyou 辛酉, and the Twelve Cycles 十二運 etc.

25.04.2023

**"Lessons from the Edge of the Village: Extending African Wisdom to a Turbulent World"**

Prof. Paul Stoller

In this talk, which is adapted from my forthcoming book, (2023 Cornell UP), I attempt to demonstrate what scholars might do to contribute to the social and cultural changes that can shape a future of wellbeing and viability. In the talk I intend to show how scholars can use sensuously described ethnographic narratives to powerfully communicate slowly developed insights to a wide range of audiences. These insights are filled with wisdom about how respect for nature--the bush--is central to the future of Homo sapiens. In the lecture, I suggest that the evocation of space/place, the scripting of dialogue and the crafting of character can bring to life the drama of social life. In this way more artful forms of scholarly writing expand the appeal of scholarly representation, which, in turn, extends the spread of knowledge that embodies indigenous wisdom. In the end I underscore the profound importance of recognizing and applying indigenous wisdom to the ever-present social and ecological problems that threaten the future.

02.05.2023

**"The Uses Of Magic: Walter Skeat's Study of Malay Magic and the Stereotype of the Superstitious Malay"**

Prof. Farish Noor

This presentation looks at the work of the British anthropologist Walter William Skeat (1866-1953), whose book 'Malay Magic' (1900) is widely regarded as being one of the classic works that were produced during the colonial era in British Malaya. Skeat's 'Malay Magic' was ambitious in both its scope and depth, as he sought to explain to his western readers the place of magic and the occult in the lives of the people of Malaya. In this presentation I will argue that notwithstanding the research that went into the writing of his work, Skeat had also contributed to the then-prevailing belief that Southeast Asians were an essentially unscientific people, whose life-worlds were deeply shaped by elements of esotericism and irrationality. The presentation calls for a re-reading of Skeat's work in the political-historical context of the time, when the rise of anti-colonial activism and resistance to colonial rule were hardly touched upon in Skeat's work; and argues that Skeat's writing had also contributed to what the scholar Syed Hussein Alatas has referred to as the 'myth of the lazy native'.

09.05.2022

**"Body – Presence - Phantasm: Reflections in and on phenomenological anthropology"**

Prof. Robert Desjarlais

How might we go about understanding the complicated and ever-shifting nuances of bodily experience, sensory perception, and memory, time, and healing in our lives and the lives of others? With this lecture, Robert Desjarlais reflects on several key dimensions of his anthropological research and writing efforts through the past thirty-five years, from the late 1980s to the present. In particular, he focuses on the ways in which his ethnographic research endeavors in Nepal, in the United States, and in Europe have tied into pressing conceptual concerns within the fields of sociocultural anthropology, medical anthropology, and the anthropology of religion, especially when it comes to questions of bodily experience, emotions and affect, sensory perception, and ritual transformations. Underpinning all of Desjarlais' research and writings efforts along these lines is a commitment to critical phenomenological approaches in anthropology. From his early research on illness, healing, and bodily sensibilities among Hyolmo people in the Nepal Himalayas, to critical reflections on experience and selfhood for residents in homeless shelter in Boston, Massachusetts, to recent inquiries into images, phantasms, and spectrality in Paris and Berlin, Desjarlais has been deeply invested in trying to understand, within the frames of a critical phenomenology, the gist of life, death, hardship and healing in various domains of existence in the contemporary world.

**Every Tuesday | 18:15-19:45**

**Location:** Room 000.235, Seminar room  
Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen

Link for virtual attendance: <https://fau.zoom.us/j/63672581746>

# Summer Semester 2023

## CAS-E Lecture Series

16.05.2023

**"From Numerical Cyphers to Symbolic Lines: Exploring the Process of Graphic Standardisation within the Shuzi Gua Corpus"**  
Flaminia Pischedda (IKGF)

This paper shall focus on the palaeographical sources currently understood by scholars as belonging to the *shuzi gua* 數字卦 ('numerical cypher' or simply 'numerical *gua*') corpus. The so-called *shuzi gua* corpus is a large set of earthed texts dating from the Longshan Culture (龍山文化 ca. 3000-1900 BCE) to the late Warring States period (戰國時期 475-221 BCE). The term *shuzi gua* refers to a sequence of specific integers—1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9— whose graphic representation is typically expressed in what can be defined as the 'divinatory form'. Different combinations of these integers are stacked one on top of the other in groups of three (*sanyao gua* 三爻卦), four (*siyao gua*), six (*liuyao gua* 六爻卦), or in pairs of six (*lianglie liuyao gua* 兩列六爻卦). Roughly one hundred instances of *shuzi gua* have been found on various types of unearthed artifacts, including ox scapula, turtle plastrons, bronzes, pottery handles, and bamboo slips. The integers are written (engraved or brushed) on the material support in many different directions, vertical, horizontal and diagonal resulting in a diverse structural and visual *mise-en-page*. Due to the presence of numbers and the *gua*-like shape, these symbols are usually regarded by scholars as ancestral to the *Zhouyi* 周易 ('Zhou Changes', or *Yijing* 易經, 'Book of Changes', or simply *Yi* 易), a divination manual which was canonised in 136 BCE. Its basic constituent are the 64 hexagrams, i.e. six-line diagrams which purportedly owe their symbolic origin to the ancient Chinese cosmic concept of the Two Primary Forces: *yin* 陰 (represented by even numbers and the 'broken line'), and *yang* 陽 (represented by odd numbers and the 'unbroken line').

In this paper, I first briefly introduce this highly heterogeneous corpus, which I organise according to the following criteria: *material*, *visual*, and *linguistic*. These are focused, respectively, on the following three aspects of the evidence: *object*, *layout*, and *language*. The material criterion describes the object, providing information about its completeness, dating, measurement, and provenance. The visual criterion details the text's configuration, i.e. how the text is laid out upon the object, and it is divided into macro- and micro-analysis. The linguistic criterion analyses the language on two levels—structural-syntactic and lexical—identifying the technical lexicon and the linguistic patterns, where present. Next, I explore the process of standardisation of this unique graphic system over a long period of time and across different regions and communities. Particular attention will be paid to the issue of the numbers 1 and 7, which according to some textual evidence appear to have had an interchangeable value. I reconstruct the patterns of numerological variations by site of origin and type of object, tracing the instances of 1s and 7s to evaluate their different distribution. This paper shall thus contribute to a deeper appreciation of the symbolisation of numbers unified and 'standardised' into what are today known as the *yin-yang* lines, within the divination practice related to one of the most important texts of Chinese literary production.

23.05.2023

**"Divination Dialogues: Voyance and Understanding in Senegalese Divination Praxis"**  
Dr. Knut Graw

The project envisages a synchronic study of divination and related practices in Senegal and the Gambia, based on participatory field research in rural Southern Senegal, the Gambia, and the urban agglomerations of Dakar and Serekunda, with a focus on the documentation and analysis of divinatory consultations, their epistemology, procedure, content, and the way they are experienced. Taking a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach to ritual praxis, the project will develop a subject-oriented understanding of divination and its sociocultural significance in the contemporary Senegalese and Gambian life-world. Drawing on the analysis of key dimensions such as intentionality, dialogue, and time, the project aims, furthermore, at comparative work regarding formally comparable practices in Africa and Asia, moving towards an integrative understanding of divination's diversity across different locales.

30.05.2023

**"South Asian Sources for Modern Occult Yoga (MOY)"**  
Dr. Keith Cantú

This lecture demonstrates the utility of creating a separate discursive category of yoga called "modern occult yoga" (MOY). Treating modern occultism as a contemporary subset of esotericism per the prevailing scholarly consensus, the persistent presence of yoga within modern occultism since the middle of the nineteenth-century warrants a new category that is properly integrated into scholarship on the fields of Indology, yoga studies, esotericism studies, and comparative literature. The first part of the lecture introduces the contours of this category as contrasted with "modern postural yoga" (MPY), and shows how there is a relatively consistent pattern as to how yoga was engaged in modern occultism. The second part the lecture demonstrates how a variety of voices contributed to the formulation of MOY, and diagrammatically outlines how specific authors on occultism both outside of and within South Asia participated in its discourse. The presentation concludes with showing how such tracing of sources leads to the discovery of new material that not only amplifies our understanding of both yoga and modern occultism but also assists with the contextualization of such sources in their regional and language-specific South Asian milieus.





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## CAS-E Lecture Series

06.06.2023

**"Becoming a Master: Materializing Esoteric Wisdom in Brazil's Valley of the Dawn"**

Prof. Kelly Hayes

One of the largest alternative religions in Brazil is the Valley of the Dawn (Vale do Amanhecer). It was founded in the early 1960s by a charismatic medium known as Aunt Neiva, and today claims affiliated temples throughout Brazil, the United States, and Europe. Its doctrine blends elements of diverse origins with an esoteric metaphysics that emphasizes the hidden connections behind the world of appearances, promising adherents a path to spiritual evolution. Aunt Neiva claimed to have been initiated into esoteric wisdom by a Tibetan Master of Wisdom, earning her *mestrado* or master's degree. She brought this knowledge to her followers by institutionalizing it in a multi-level system of initiation known as the hierarchy of the *mestrado*. At each level, the initiate is said to develop self-knowledge and spiritual powers. These transformations, otherwise invisible to ordinary senses, are manifested through an astonishing array of titles, insignia, symbols, and ritual vestments. My paper examines how ostensibly hidden capacities are made visible, materializing what is otherwise an interior process linked with the acquisition of esoteric knowledge and powers believed to transform the self.

13.06.2023

**"Mediums, Localised/Hybridised Practices, Resilience and 'Buddhification' of Bhutanese Communities"**

Dr. Dendup Chopel

In 2018, I encountered several elderly female mediums (rnal-'byor-ma, Yogini and/or bsnyen-jo-mo, 'Invocation-Lady') whose practices had just been ritually proscribed by the village Lama who took possession of their ritual paraphernalia consisting a headgear, and small handheld drum and bell. Due to this dispossession, they were unable to become possessed by the deities for which they were mediums able to intercede between humans and other inhabitants of the more-than-human lifeworld of rural Bhutan. Their incapacitation by the Buddhist Lama was done in tandem with influential village elders for whom single-minded adoption of Buddhism in their gentrifying village was being challenged by the continued presence of these mediums in the competitive circle of ritual specialists. This paper will unpack how these mediums perceive their world of spirit possession and ritual services for a village community where their services were historically deemed inalienable and efficacious in appeasing the constituent deities and numinous beings of the land. This will be done by studying the changing socio-political contexts which make their practices not only irrelevant, but also marginalised. Simultaneously, this paper will also study the affects, phenomenology, and performativity of these ritual practitioners, and how new hybridised practices and cosmologies are being produced when the deities of these mediums become incorporated into the local Buddhist pantheon. The Lama assumes the ritual roles of these mediums, and in the process, ensures that even as their practices may be marginalised, the ethos of their practices resiliently continue unabated.

20.06.2023

**"The Utopian Project of the Late-Soviet Waterbirth Movement and Its Interactions with the Global New Age"**

Dr. Anna Ozhiganova

Among the many utopian ideas for raising a "new man" that emerged in the late Soviet Union, there was one unique project – Aquaculture – that aimed to give birth to babies-dolphins" capable of living in the ocean, with phenomenal health, high intelligence, and paranormal abilities such as clairvoyance, healing, and telepathy. The Aquaculture author, the charismatic teacher and psychic Igor Charkovsky (1936–2021) was inspired by Russian esoteric teachings, in particular, the practices of the mystic healer Porfiry Ivanov but also by various esoteric concepts that have become global (human-dolphin communication research, extrasensory perception, and bioenergetics). Thus, the Aquaculture project belonged to the second half of the 20th-century global wave of parascientific teachings that shared faith in hidden human potential and the ability to master it through particular technologies. My research focuses on the interaction of Charkovsky and his followers with the global New Age, in particular, with the Esalen-Soviet Exchange Program that was implemented in the 1980s–early 1990s, as well as such successful New Age organizations as Findhorn Foundation and Integral Transpersonal Institute and some important figures of the international New Age movement: Jacques Mayol, John Lilly, Michael Murphy, John and Amma Kidd, Linda Tellington-Jones, Estelle Myers, Sondra Ray, and others.

# Summer Semester 2023

## CAS-E Lecture Series

27.06.2023

**"A Case Study of Xuantong Dashu 《玄通大书》 – The Great Book of Mystery: a Comprehensive Encyclopedia of the Yi Fate"**

Dr. Aleksandrs Simons (IKGF)

The aim of this lecture is to introduce with a case study of Xuantong Dashu 《玄通大书》 – The Great Book of Mystery. The Great Book of Mystery is one of the most comprehensive of divination encyclopedias used by the Bimo (毕摩) shamans/masters of psalmody of the Yi ethnic minority that include both traditional Yi prognostication techniques, such as: deductive reasoning, bringing sacrifices to one's tree of life, ancestor worship, etc. and Han techniques of five elements (五行), twelve palaces (十二宫), eight trigrams (八卦), taijitu (太极图), etc. The present research is of hermeneutic nature and will provide an interpretation of The Great Book of Mystery distinguishing between Han and Yi prognostication techniques and their relevance to the present day.

04.07.2023

**"Activation and Subjectivation: A Photographic Essay on Transformational Rituals that 'Do'"**

Dr. Raquel Romberg

Stones collected by Santería practitioners are only stones until they are activated in a ritual; the same is true of the wafer, which is only a thin cracker until it is consecrated during Catholic Mass, and of mass-produced plaster figures of the saints, which are only plaster figures until they are baptized by Puerto Rican brujos (Spiritist witch healers). In all these cases, a mystified transformation takes place during the ritual, causing mere matter to be "activated" or spiritualized as a manifestation of the spirits. Similarly, processes of subjectivation processes alter the moral and religious dispositions of devotees. Following the emic Spiritist notion of "manifestations," certain gestures form a bridge between material and spiritual realms and the various dimensions of the self. These gestures are thereby examined as affective and practical technologies of subjectivation that defy "belief" and "cognition." In both cases—activation and subjectivation—a process of transformation or "ritual labor" is sought to alter the ontological status of things and people. Drawing on visual documentation collected during my intensive work in the altar-home of a Puerto Rican espiritista-bruja, I examine everyday rituals and gestures that "do," that is, the transformational processes that contribute to sacralizing altar-homes, creating spatial proxies of distant sacred places, and embodying the ethos of Spiritist notions of cause and effect and reincarnation in the here and now.

11.07.2023

**"Hybrid Pathways to Orthodoxy: Esoteric Practices in 'Sharia-Compliant' Exorcism"**

Prof. Dominik Müller

My presentation will address attempts of systematically "purifying" Muslim Malay cultural practices related to invisible worlds in the Sultanate of Brunei, which are linked to a massive state-driven process of centralizing, bureaucratizing and controlling Islam-related practices by political and legal means. Newly established "Sharia-serving practices" which have been generated in this process over the past two decades, however, have become culturally re-embedded and are simultaneously drawing upon multifold transnational symbolic registers, in rather multi-directional ways that complicate their orthodox framing. In the main ethnographic example, water-crystal photography conducted by the globally famous Japanese esoteric celebrity person Masuru Emoto, digital media practices and the rationalizing quest for evidence and scientization have become integrated into the project of promoting a new form of state-controlled "proper" Islamic exorcism and fighting (or "re-educating") its traditional practitioners. I will contextualize these hybrid pathways to orthodoxy vis-a-vis their locally-specific their post-colonial historical trajectory, i.e. the discursive substrate of bureaucratizing Islam in the Bruneian "M.I.B. State", while simultaneously making reference to some transnational and trans-regional entanglements which are shaping the developments at play in the observed case study.

18.07.2023

**"The Status of Esoteric Practices in Present-Day Taiwan"**

Prof. Michael Lackner

Years ago, the first ideas about what is now the CAS-E saw the light of day when listening to a presentation on the Indian art of topomancy (*Vastu*). The comparison between the habits of an Indian specialist and a Chinese expert of the corresponding *Fengshui* led us to the more general question of the strongly differing status of esoteric practices in a global perspective: according to political, religious, and scientist ideologies, they are subject to different degrees of rejection or acceptance. Presenting Taiwan as a case study, I will inquire into the status of these arts and practices with regard to their place in education, politics, and daily life. The focus will lie on practices like the temple oracle, *Fengshui*, physiognomy, and spirit-writing. Since none of the practitioners would use the term "esoteric" as a self-designation, we will have to keep in mind that we are operating with a default term.