

Workshop **PARAPSYCHOLOGY UNDER SOCIALISM II:**
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN CHINA AND THE USSR

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Centre for Advanced Studies “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective” (CAS-E), Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), together with the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health in Freiburg

Organizers: Birgit Menzel, Michael Lackner

Abstracts

Dr. He Hong (Beijing/VP China)

The failed official testimony on whether Psi is a genuine existence

A three-year effort from 1996 to 1999 trying to find an authentic answer

I will take this opportunity to summarize the last official gathering and coordinated effort to find hard-core, waterproof evidence of Psi in Chinese society. To address the debates between convinced researchers (Group A) and the more skeptical (Group B), the coordinators emphasized the importance of remaining neutral and conducting the experiments without prejudice. Participants were asked not to bring any preconceptions about whether Psi is real or an illusion. Although a few key individuals have passed away, there is still an opportunity to record the most important proceedings, which reveals much of the truths about psi research in China.

Yanlin Lu (Princeton University/USA)

Somatic Science and the Post-Mao Quest for Scientific Legitimacy

How did somatic science, a Chinese science of the paranormal, survive and flourish in post-Mao China despite the official materialist stance and the opposition from critics? My presentation examines the various strategies that somatic scientists deployed in their quest for scientific legitimacy. To begin with, they conducted live Psi performances for senior officials, and framed themselves as brave explorers of the unknown in return for political endorsement and financial support. Meanwhile, they organized joint experiments to prove the authenticity of the paranormal to their skeptical colleagues. Moreover, they maintained presence in the general public to recruit new psychics and attract public sympathy. This multi-pronged approach illuminates how scientific authority in post-Mao China depended on navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting, sources of legitimacy.

LEPING ZHA (Wuhan/PR China)

Are the Chinese Psi Claims Real? Why the Arguments Never End

As in other regions under socialist leadership, governmental and political influence upon the exploratory and applicational Psi has been readily visible in China since 1979. However, it is inaccurate to attribute the lack of acceptance of Psi claims, referred to as EFHB (Exceptional Functions of Human Body) under the “Somatic Science” banner in PRC, solely to administrative constraints. On the contrary, the inability of the EFHB researchers and practitioners to produce verifiable evidence of Psi, even under minimal controls, actually generated divergent interpretations and standings within policy-making bodies, resulting in administrative responses often inconsistent and indecisive.

These failures may be interpreted as the consequence of insufficient scientific rigor and methodological sophistication among the principal contributors, particularly given that the overall quality of recent-day Chinese research efforts diminished compared to those of four decades ago. Setting aside the instances of deliberate fraud that went unreported by investigators, both trained children and purportedly gifted adults have consistently exhibited strong Psi capacities in informal or private contexts, then repeatedly and predictably failed major authenticity tests. The persistent discrepancies invite extensions of experimental paradigms transcend the classical 'sheep-goat,' 'decline,' and 'experimenter' effect frameworks. This is also be interpreted by some as revealing a deeper epistemological principle, that the rational structure of the empirical world exhibits a strong resistance to disruption, thereby safeguarding society from a regression into mysticism and disorder.

Dr. Sveta Tambovtseva (Independent Researcher/Cyprus)

When Alphabets Generate Energy: From Soviet Parapsychology to Post-Soviet Linguistic Nationalism

Parapsychology in the USSR was a paradoxical phenomenon: while the immaterial nature of psychotronic effects proved difficult to justify within materialist frameworks, the field flourished in the Soviet Union as both popular culture and a series of classified institutional projects. To reconcile parapsychological methods with official scientific discourse, a range of bioenergetic theories was developed. During the Cold War this created a distinctively nationalist parascientific tradition, that survived the USSR's collapse.

I examine how parapsychology and bioenergetics provided theoretical foundations for post-Soviet New Age movements, focusing on Vseyasvetnaya Gramota (Pancosmic Script), a doctrine centered on an extensive unconventional Slavic alphabet of 147 letters. Positioned as the world's first and most authentic writing system accessible only to Slavs, VG letters function simultaneously as linguistic signs and bioenergetic devices conferring extrasensory powers.

The VG's founder, Shubin-Abramov, claimed affiliation with military unit 10003, allegedly conducting extrasensory research. VG practices—letter recitation and embodiment, bioenergetic gymnastics based on spiral movements—use the alphabetic forms as media for achieving parapsychological effects, transforming letters into bioenergetic devices. The movement illustrates parapsychology's transformation from institutional science into grassroots nationalism, where bioenergetic vocabulary legitimizes the replenished alphabet as both national tradition and powerful technology.

Luis Fernando Bernardi Junqueira (University of Cambridge/UK)

Travelling in Spirit: Science and Trance States in Republican China

How did a new, fringe, foreign science initially promoted by only a select few eventually become a widespread cultural phenomenon in Republican China? This paper interrogates how psychical research, a field devoted to the scientific investigation of unusual phenomena such as hypnotism, mediumship, and extrasensory perception, was appropriated by early 20th-century Chinese reformers in their modernising efforts. Originating among cutting-edge scientists and intellectuals in late 19th-century Britain, psychical research captivated the imagination of scientists and intellectuals worldwide, including from East Asia, who saw in the study of paranormal phenomena the potential to expand the boundaries of human knowledge beyond the material world. The field promised to showcase the supremacy of mind over matter, casting exceptional human abilities within a scientific realm.

I argue that the Chinese engagement with psychical research must be seen as the interplay between local Chinese interests and a global wave of late 19th- to mid-20th-century movements that denounced Western modernity as materialistic, violent, and dehumanising. As China was being ravaged by foreign imperialism and civil war, Republican reformers lauded psychical research as a scientific

means to enhance the Chinese mind by unlocking hidden psychic powers. It was believed that this would save China from the grip of Western materialism, paving the way for a superior form of 'spiritual modernity' rooted in science, tradition, and mental reality. In this paper, I will trace the beginnings of psychic studies in China around the turn of the 20th century, and how it evolved in what eventually became known as 'Spiritual Science' (*xinling kexue* 心靈科學), the Chinese expression of transnational psychical research.

Dr. Lennert Gesterkamp

Crazy Zhou, the Most Famous Unknown Psychic of Chinese Official History

In Chinese history, a new dynastic rule was often presaged by psychics or supernatural portends announcing the rule of a new emperor. Such psychics and portends often had a dubious role in official history writing, which was generally compiled by Confucian scholars of the next dynasty, ensuring that a Confucian, i.e., moral, narrative explained the rise and fall of a dynasty. In this narrative, psychics, portends, healers, mediums, as well as Daoists and Buddhists were generally frowned upon and their descriptions and biographies accompanied with disparaging remarks. One exception to the rule may be the biography of "Crazy Zhou" 周顛, which was written by the first Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368-1398) and included in the official *Ming History*. It tells the incredible stories not only of Crazy Zhou announcing Zhu Yuanzhang's establishment of the Ming dynasty, but also of being cooked alive in large jar and locked up without food and drink for a month yet survive these ordeals without a scratch. Eventually in 1393, after being healed by Crazy Zhou, Zhu Yuanzhang wrote him a long stele inscription – the aforementioned biography – for which he built a stele pavilion on top of Mt. Lu as well as a road leading to it. The stele is an enormous 4 meters tall and 1.3 meters wide and can still be viewed on its original site. This kind of imperial praise would make Crazy Zhou the most famous yet hardly known psychic in Chinese official history.

What are we to make of these stories of Crazy Zhou? If the Emperor himself has written it, are the stories then true? But why would he write them anyway, and why were they incorporated in the official history? This presentation will take a historical approach, by first introducing Crazy Zhou and his stories and their sources, secondly by highlighting parallels with other famous psychics found in official history and their contested role, and finally by discussing the status of psychics in Chinese history and the contrasting views they solicited in different sources, not only corroborating the validity of traditional ideologies such as Confucianism and Daoism, but also underscoring established divisions of power in Chinese society. Whether Crazy Zhou actually performed these tasks, or even ever existed, becomes less important than the role he plays in these opposing narratives.

Dr. Anna Ozhiganova (Independent Researcher/Bielefeldt/CAS-E)

Soviet Extraordinary Science: The Alliance of Parapsychology and Cybernetics

The history of Soviet cybernetics provides a remarkable example of the dependence of science on unpredictable and unstable decisions of the authorities. Having been banned as "reactionary pseudoscience" in the early 1950s, cybernetics was fully legitimized and almost canonized just a decade later. As declassified materials from the U.S. Stargate Project revealed, already in 1963-1964, the CIA released reports investigating the Soviet Union's attempts to develop "cybernetic telepathy." The fascination with cybernetics in the USSR significantly influenced not only telepathy but all Soviet research into paranormal phenomena, which remains virtually unstudied to this day. Igor Poletaev, a renowned Soviet propagandist of cybernetics and the author of the first Soviet monograph on the subject, played a key role in establishing a telepathy research laboratory under Leonid Vasilyev's leadership at Leningrad University. The *cybernetization*, which came across all fields of natural, hu-

man, and exact sciences, also influenced the language used to describe paranormal phenomena as a form of *bioenergy informational exchange*. This approach emerged in the mid-1960s and developed into an ambitious project in the 1980s to create a complex of *bioenergy-informational sciences* led by a full member of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences Vlail Kaznacheev.

Bionotes of Participants:

Dr. Hong He (Helmholtz Association/Beijing Office)

Hong He, PhD in Physics, was during May 1995-August 2000 the psi group-leader in the famous Chinese 507 Institute in Beijing, the Chinese psi-research flagship during 1982-2000 for studying “extraordinary somatic phenomena,” mainly ESP and PK. The psi-research in 507 was directly supported by three important military generals, Prof. Xuesen Qian, Mr. Zhenhuan Zhang and Shaozu Wu,

Dr. He had received visitors and carried many psi-tests on the gifted kids and adult-claimers; he had checked through the 507 psi-archives. Despite a few mysterious cases, even the most famous psychic Mr. Baosheng Zhang in his group was exposed during his tests as a non-reliable target, caught “red-handed” via marked samples as well as in the former video-camera in the original 507 archive. So he was accused as a “traitor”.

Dr. He acted as an expert in a team of 20+ group, entrusted for implementing officially coordinated national validation-test on psi starting since Sept. 1996. Despite very few interesting tests, the whole project had to be cancelled due to the outbreak of Falung-Gong in April 1999. This 507psi-lab got closed as well,

Looking backward 25 years, the psi-research in China is coping the same pattern as other countries: a few triggering cases reports, but as a whole no sufficient repeatable hardcore-evidence for the outsiders, a plausible explanation is still missing.

Leping Zha (Wuhan)

Dr. Leping Zha's involvement in the study of "Somatic Science" in China dates back to 1979, focusing on macro-ESP and macro-PK phenomena. His commitment to this field continued throughout his academic and professional career. Formerly a Research Fellow at the now-defunct Institution of Chinese Somatic Science (ICSS) and the Founding Chairman of the Chinese UFO Research Organization (CURO), Dr. Zha remains deeply engaged in the investigation, experimentation, and philosophical inquiry of parapsychology and UAP/NHI developments in China. His comprehensive historical accounts of the massive parapsychological research movement in China are widely cited within Western research circles. More recently, Dr. Zha has been instrumental in organized national efforts to establish rigorous authenticity tests for children's psi claims under the initiative "Unidentified Human Phenomenon" (UHP), where he serves as an advisor to the Commission of Experimental Control. Dr. Zha earned his Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Pittsburgh, USA, in 1995.

Yanlin Lu (Princeton University/USA)

Yanlin LU (ch. 陸衍霖) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of East Asian Studies of Princeton University, specializing in modern Chinese history. Among others, his research explores the dynamic interplay between the production of scientific and medical knowledge and the socio-political and ideological conditions of the time. He received his B.A. in B.A. in History at South China Normal University and his M.A. in History from the University of California, Irvine.

His dissertation, titled “The Abortive Scientific Revolution,” investigates the rise and fall of the controversial “somatic science (人體科學)” - a Chinese science of human superpowers. Emerging from the alleged discovery of ear-reading children in 1979, early experimental efforts were shaped by growing interests in Qigong, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Western parapsychological research, leading to a novel body of scientific knowledge about the human body and its hidden potentials.

Despite proponents' hopes that somatic science would reveal unknown mechanisms of the body and ignite a “new scientific revolution,” it was ultimately dismissed as pseudoscience by its tireless critics by the early 2000s. The dissertation thus discusses how the proper boundaries of scientific knowledge were negotiated historically, and with what implications to our understanding of China's Reform Era and the production of scientific knowledge.

Supported by the Donald and Mary Hyde Research Fellowship for the 2024-2025 academic year, Lu is conducting fieldwork in China and other locations to gather primary sources for his research. Outside of his academic endeavors, he is a musician and analog photographer with a deep appreciation for Dmitri Shostakovich and Gustav Mahler.

Yuan Jin (Ryazan/University of Northampton/UK/ Sofia-University (US/VPChina; Beijing/VP China)

Yuan Jin is a psychology researcher and lecturer. He is currently serving as an instructor for the Master's program and a teaching assistant for the Doctoral program for the Transpersonal psychology programs at SOFIA University in the USA. He is also a PhD candidate in Psychology at the University of Northampton, UK, where his research focuses on personality and meditation, under the supervision of Prof. Chris Roe and Dr. Alasdair Gordon-Finlayson. His academic interests span meditation, parapsychology, transpersonal psychology, and contemplative practices across different cultural traditions.

Yuan Jin holds a BSc in Psychology with Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience and an MSc in Clinical, Social and Cognitive Neuroscience from City, University of London. He is a member of the Exceptional Experiences and Consciousness Studies (EECS) research group at the University of Northampton. Alongside his academic roles, he has extensive experience in one-to-one meditation instruction. He has also been actively involved in international academic organizations, including serving as the former Student Representative Chair for the Parapsychological Association.

Luis Fernando Bernardi Junqueira (University of Cambridge/UK)

Luis Fernando Bernardi Junqueira is a Leverhulme Trust & Isaac Newton Trust Research Fellow at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science and a Research Fellow of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. He specialises in the global history of health, science, and religion in 19th- and 20th-century China, with extended interests in the histories of mental health and alternative medicines in modern East Asia and South America. His first book, *The Science of the Spirit: Mind, Medicine, and the Impossible in Chinese Modernity*, explores the Chinese enthusiasm for psychic powers in the first half of the 20th century through their engagement with psychical research, and examines how this field gave rise to new understandings of health and religious experiences.

<https://luisfbj.com/>

<https://www.hps.cam.ac.uk/directory/junqueira>

<https://www.clarehall.cam.ac.uk/directory/luis-fernando-bernardi-junqueira/>

Dr. Lennert Gesterkamp (Leiden University/NL/Shandong Normal University/VP China)

Lennert Gesterkamp is a Chinese art historian and sinologist, specializing in Chinese painting history, Daoist art, ritual, and text, and East-West cultural exchanges. He obtained MA's in sinology and Chinese art history from Leiden University and SOAS, and a PhD in Chinese art history from Leiden University. He conducted postdoc research at the Academia Sinica in Taipei, at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, and Utrecht University. He was a senior fellow at the IKGF and CAS-E of Erlangen University and is currently a research supervisor at Macau City University. His monograph study, *The Heavenly Court: Daoist Temple Painting in China, 1200-1400* was published with Brill in 2011 and a Chinese translation appears next year with Liaoning Art Press. He has published more than three dozen articles in both English and Chinese. From 2026 on, he will be Changjiang Professor of Chinese Art at Shandong Normal University/PR China.

Dr. Anna Ozhiganova (Moscow/Bielefeld (CAS-E))

Anna Ozhiganova is an anthropologist whose research interests lie at the intersection of the anthropology of religion and medical anthropology, with a focus on late and post-Soviet Russian esoteric and alternative health practices. She holds a PhD at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of

the Russian Academy of Sciences for her research into Russian New Age and new religious movements, which was based on extensive fieldwork conducted in the 1990s. The results of her research were published in a monograph *New Religiosity in Contemporary Russia: Doctrines, Organizations, and Practices* (2006, in Russian), and over fifty articles and book chapters. Anna is currently studying the controversy surrounding Cold War parapsychology. Her most recent position was as a Research Fellow on the project 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (CAS-E FAU).

Dr. Sveta Tambovtseva (St. Petersburg/Cyprus)

Svetlana Tambovtseva, Ph. D. in Philology, M. A. in Anthropology. Since 2016 she has conducted fieldwork of the Doukhobor communities in Russia and Georgia as well as the New Age movement of VseyaSvetnaya Gramota. Her research focuses on the textual cultures of religious dissenters, drawing on the fields of anthropology of religion and folkloristics. She received her Ph. D. degree from the Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House) of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2022 with her dissertation on the history of the Doukhobor religious folklore. She taught Social Anthropology as a teaching assistant and Anthropology of Religion as a primary tutor at the Higher School of Economics at St.-Petersburg in 2021-2023.

Dr. Gerhard Mayer (IGPP Freiburg)

Gerhard Mayer is a psychologist with a particular interest in cultural studies and interdisciplinary approaches relating to parapsychology and anomalistics. He is the director of the Gesellschaft für Anomalistik and chief editor of the *Journal of Anomalistics /Zeitschrift für Anomalistik*. Since 2025, he is President of the Parapsychological Association. He studied psychology, sociology, philosophy, and history of art at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau in Germany. Since 1996, he has been working as a research fellow at the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health in Freiburg/Germany (IGPP).

Prof. Michael Lackner (CAS-E)

Michael Lackner is Senior Professor of Sinology at the Friedrich-Alexander-University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. From 2009 to 2023, he was the director of the International Consortium of Research in the Humanities "Fate, Freedom, and Prognostication". Since 2022, Lackner is the speaker of the Center for Advanced Studies "Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices in a Global Perspective". Lackner's research revolves around Chinese intellectual history, the Jesuit mission in China, scholarly practices of literati in the Song and Yuan dynasties, and traditional ways of prediction in China. His recent publications include *Handbook of Divination and Prognostication in China* (ed. with Lu Zhao), Leiden: Brill

Prof. Birgit Menzel (CAS-E)

Birgit Menzel is a professor for Russian Literature and Culture at the University of Mainz in Germersheim, where she has taught at the Faculty for Translation and Interpretation. She has published 10 books on Soviet/Russian literature, culture and translation, and since 2012 on Occultism, Altered States of Consciousness, Parapsychology and Transhumanism in Russia. Her current research projects are *New Religious Movements in Late and Post-Soviet Russia* and the *citizen diplomacy* movement, esp. the *Esalen Soviet-American exchange program*. At CAS-E she co-organizes open seminars, epistemological partnership with IGPP Freiburg and the project "A global map of esoteric films" <https://cas-e.de/mapping-esoteric-films/>.

