

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

Online Workshop, June 28-29, 2021
Convenor: Stéphanie Homola (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Schedule
Berlin time (UTC+2)

Monday, June 28

11.15-11.30 a.m. - Welcome address
STÉPHANIE HOMOLA & DOMINIK MÜLLER (FAU ERLANGEN-NÜRNBERG)

Panel I - The Master-disciple Relationship in the Transmission of Divinatory Knowledge

11.30-12.00 a.m. - KNUT GRAW (UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN)
“On the Transmission of Divination in Senegal”

12.00-12.30 a.m. - ALICE YU (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)
“Different Kinds of Master-disciple Relationships in Contemporary Hong Kong: the Transmission of Fundamental/Intermediate and ‘Ultimate’ Divination Knowledge”

12.30-13.30 p.m. - Break

13.30-14.00 p.m. - RADU BIKIR (CRCAO)
“The Transmission of Mantic Techniques, and the Master-disciple Relationship in Taiwan”

14.00-14.30 p.m. - STÉPHANIE HOMOLA (FAU ERLANGEN-NÜRNBERG)
“The Master-Disciple Relationship as a Regime of Knowledge Production: Complementary Modes in the Transmission of Chinese Divination”

14.30-15.00 p.m. - Break

Panel 2 - The Guru and the Disciples

- 15.00-15.30 p.m. - OLIVIER ARIFON (UNIVERSITE CATHOLIQUE DE LILLE)
“Buddhism and Digital Communication. Connecting the Guru, the Master and the Disciple through Digital Tools”
- 15.30-16.00 p.m. - ANA CRISTINA O. LOPES (STANFORD UNIVERSITY)
“Tara’s Triple Excellence Online Program and the Relationship Guru-disciple in Tibetan Buddhism”
- 16.00-16.30 p.m. - Break
- 16.30-17.00 p.m. - KEITH EDWARD CANTÚ (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA)
“Guru is God”: The teacher-student relationship among Tamil and Bengali sadhus”
- 17.00-17.30 p.m. - CECILIA BASTOS (NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO)
“Yoga, meditation and the new virtual master-disciple relationships”

Tuesday, June 29

Panel 3 - Religious and Technical Traditions in a Global Perspective

- 14.30-15.00 p.m. - SERGE DREYER (TUNGSHAI UNIVERSITY)
“When Esoterism Prevails on technique. Side Effects on the Relationship Teacher-Learner. The Case of *Taiji Quan*”
- 15.00-15.30 a.m. - MARC LEBRANCHU (GSRL-EPHE-PSL, CNRS)
“From global market to individual invisibility. Master-Disciple relation in the European Taoist milieu. An overview”
- 15.30-16.00 p.m. - Break
- 16.00-16.30 p.m. - MENG WANG & YANG SHEN (MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY)
“Truth-seeking through Qin Practice: A Sonic-Sensorial Discovery of Ethics and Nature in Contemporary China”
- 16.30-17.00 p.m. - HARRY DANON (EHESS)
“Patterns of knowledge transmission in contemporary French alchemy”
- 17.00-17.30 p.m. - Concluding remarks & Discussion

Abstracts

KNUT GRAW (UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN)

“On the Transmission of Divination in Senegal”

Drawing on extensive fieldwork with maraboutic diviners in Senegal and the Gambia, this paper deals with the question of how the knowledge for executing different forms of divination is acquired, transmitted, and learned. Complementing ethnographic observation and interviewing with first-hand experience of learning how to do cowrie divination and geomancy, the paper addresses both, the relation between the ritual specialist and the learner as well as the question of the epistemological nature of the divinatory knowledge to be acquired.

ALICE YU (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

“Different Kinds of Master-disciple Relationships in Contemporary Hong Kong: the Transmission of Fundamental/ Intermediate and ‘Ultimate’ Divination Knowledge”

Divination is popular and widely practised in contemporary Hong Kong. Chinese divination especially, such as The Eight Characters and Fengshui Divination, is not only offered by a large number of diviners, but these techniques are also learnt by many who are interested in them. As a result, many diviners offer divination courses to interested parties; the underlying master-disciple relationships are very much commercial based.

Based on my few fieldwork trips to Hong Kong since 2016, the transmission of divination knowledge from master to students, regardless the kinds of techniques, could be categorised into two types: fundamental/ intermediate and ‘ultimate’. While the former knowledge is sufficient to perform divination and obtain some insights about the inquired aspects, it is considered to be *insufficient* to produce an accurate or very detailed diagnosis or prediction: a desired outcome that ‘ultimate’ divination knowledge could provide. In the transmission of fundamental/ intermediate knowledge, initial personal/ face-to-face relationship is not a prerequisite, and it constitutes what I called the casual master-disciple relationship. While in the transmission of ‘ultimate’ knowledge, at least certain level of trust and personal understanding between the two parties is required before the transmission could take place, and it constitutes what I called the committed master-disciple relationship.

Both casual and committed master-disciple relationships are largely commercial based, with the former being very close to a pure commercial relationship. A disciple could easily maintain casual relationships with several different masters *at the same time*, since the cost of fundamental/ intermediate divination course is rather cheap. The master and disciple relationship in this case is analogous to that between service provider and service receiver. On the other hand, the committed master-disciple relationship is constituted not only of commercial element, but also trust between and personal understanding of each other.

Masters would need to get to know the persons beforehand, for example his or her career and financial ability, and to judge whether he or she has a kind heart and whether or not he or she is truly interested in divination. This is because ‘ultimate’ divination knowledge is capable of predicting the future accurately or even to change one’s destiny (in the case of Fengshui divination), masters need to be careful not to transmit the knowledge to the wrong hands. ‘Ultimate’ divination knowledge is extremely costly. It is likely that a disciple would engage in a committed master-disciple relationship only with *one* master. Some master would enter into a committed relationship with disciple only if he or she had not previously had such a relationship with any other master and promises he or she would not enter one with another master in the future. Moreover, the high cost of ‘ultimate’ knowledge also explains why, before switching from casual to committed master-disciple relationship, a disciple would choose very carefully which master he or she wants to develop such a committed relationship. Common concerns among disciple are that they fear their masters do not possess ‘ultimate’ divination knowledge and even if they have, they would not transmit ‘ultimate’ knowledge to them in full even upon paying high price.

In the contemporary digital era, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19, the world has settled into an unprecedented online regime. The local transmission of divination knowledge between masters and disciples too; many masters have switched from offering face-to-face to online divination classes (via platforms such as Zoom and Youtube) under the social distancing measure. Both parties seem to be happy with the arrangement of not needing to meet in person, as long as masters receive their 'tuition fee' on time and disciples receive the expected knowledge. With the lift of social distancing measure, some masters and disciples still prefer to have online rather than face-to-face divination class given its convenience. I argue that information technologies do not necessarily dilute the potential of the dyadic relationship between master and disciple, nor do they make it even more relevant. Rather information technologies help sustain the two forms of existing mater-disciple relationships in Hong Kong.

RADU BIKIR (CRCAO)

“The Transmission of Mantic Techniques, and the Master-disciple Relationship in Taiwan”

In this article, I will discuss my relationship with my divination teacher M. Liang in Taiwan from summer 2015 to summer 2016. One of the main goals of this work will be to see how my personal belief in the invisible world can interact with the academic part of my research: before starting my description of the events that structured my relationship with my master, I will make an introduction about my Perennialist (from the *Phiosophia perennis*) approach towards esotericism and how it influenced my analysis as a researcher. The introduction will therefore focus on the interactive aspect of those two parts of my method, and see how the esoteric and the academic dimensions of my research complete each other.

After describing my method of non-dual approach between esotericism and the academia, I will give a description of the events that structured my learning with M. Liang: how I met him, why I was interested to learn fortune-telling from a Chinese teacher and how our relationship was slowly built. I will also compare this interaction with a previous master I have encountered in Taichung in 2014, M. Hu and also Mrs. Xiao whom I met in spring 2016, and who practiced Qi Gong in Taipei as a way of making a sort of “medical divination,” thus sensing the patient’s disease, its karmic cause, and heal it with Qi. While describing those events, I will make links between some ideas the three of them had in common, thus comparing my learning with M. Liang to the content of the teaching of other specialists.

Secondly, I will discuss one important part of the master-disciple relationship, which is storytelling. Indeed, my main divination teacher M. Liang, as the other masters that I have met, are not naturally attracted to getting disciples, especially if they are foreigners. Thus, our relationship went from “fortune-telling” to “storytelling”, and the use of stories made our relation more comfortable to them: for instance, the “unpleasant” fact that, I, the disciple, was a foreigner, was solved by making a story around my past lives. I was thus very often transformed into a reincarnated Buddhist monk, or a Chinese literati keen on fortune-telling. With this kind of storytelling, the master was then able to transform his disciple into a real Chinese student, making more space for confidence and transmission. The making of stories was also a tool for the teacher to impress the disciple; examples of past consultations stories were often displayed thus showing the master’s power and efficacy, and at times demonstrating the unjust rejection of some skeptic clients who came back to him subsequently.

Lastly, I will discuss the content of the teaching and explain why the technique was not the most important part of the teaching of my master. Indeed, for M. Liang as well as for M. Hu the divination technique one was using was not an essential part of the diviner’s practice. Ethics, mental discipline, meditation and recitation of Buddhist mantras in Sanskrit were a large part of the transmission; the teacher allowed me to study the fate calculation technique only after I could demonstrate those moral capabilities.

Besides, I will also discuss oral concepts that all of them tried to convey to me while teaching me their divination skills. Thus, I will describe ideas such as “non-action” *wuwei* 無為, “nature” (natural way of being) *ziran* 自然, and “feeling” or “sensing” *ganying* 感應, and how those concepts apply in the context of divination.

The challenge of such a relationship was of great importance, I was indeed needed to play my

“Chinese” role of a “reincarnated monk” or “literati” who was not so foreign after all, and enter in the belief system of those diviners which allowed me to sense the living part of divination, and not only the technique. Even if a generalization of this experience would be impossible, the interest of such a presentation for me will be not only a description of what happened in those interactions, but also to analyze the symptomatic details of how those specialists of the mantic art perceived and interacted with their reality and what was the mental universe they lived in.

STÉPHANIE HOMOLA (FAU ERLANGEN-NÜRNBERG)

“The Master-Disciple Relationship as a Regime of Knowledge Production: Complementary Modes in the Transmission of Divination in Taiwan”

To which extent do methods and teaching materials differ when transmitting esoteric knowledge in a collective classroom or within a dyadic master-student relationship? Based on fieldwork conducted among practitioners of various divination techniques in Taipei (Taiwan) and Kaifeng (Henan Province), I examine the tools and circumstances of knowledge transmission among amateur and professional practitioners in both settings (classroom and personal relationship). I rely on the concept of “regime of knowledge production” coined in science studies to explore how various modes of knowledge representation and transmission (such as mnemonics, handbooks, computers) pertain to competing and complementary “economies” of knowledge transmission.

OLIVIER ARIFON (UNIVERSITÉ CATHOLIQUE DE LILLE)

“Buddhism and Digital Communication. Connecting the Guru, the Master and the Disciple through Digital Tools”

Guru Rinpoche (or Padmasambhava), a Tibetan figure from the 8th century, is important in Tibetan Buddhism. Today, its traces are still visible in the Himalaya with caves, dedicated spots and monasteries. Nowadays, a practitioner could be in contact with this Guru through his master, himself holding the knowledge and the “karmic” connection with this Guru. In Tibetan Buddhism, it’s the dominant and everlasting method.

Surprisingly – or logically -, the link between the Guru, the master and the disciple is also possible with social media and digital tools. The use of digital tools gives indication on how people understand and translate a religion into an everyday practice, maintaining the link. By examining the presence and the activities by the practitioners or friends of Buddhism around this figure on digital tools, this communication wants to examine the modalities of esoteric practices.

Creating posts and photos may be a contemporary manner to express its devotion to the guru, a constitutive dimension of the relation between a figure and practitioners. Moreover the 2020 lockdown, additional digital practice arises such as online session with the master and mantra counter as performative action.

Key word: Buddhism, communication, religion, social media, master disciple relationship

ANA CRISTINA O. LOPES (STANFORD UNIVERSITY)

“Tara’s Triple Excellence Online Program and the Relationship Guru-disciple in Tibetan Buddhism”

In the pandemic context, there has been a noticeable intensification of online activities in Buddhist spheres, which have accelerated transformations, already underway for years, in the ways practitioners relate to their traditions. In the process, new paradigms are being created whose full

impact will only be known after some time. Such transformations are clearer in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, a tradition that emphasizes in-person transmissions, empowerments, and blessings. Despite these traditional constraints, we have witnessed in the last year a proliferation of online retreats, empowerments, rituals and so forth, expanding significantly the presence of Tibetan Buddhist activities on the internet. In a word, the time of COVID-19 has changed the boundaries around what is transposable to an online environment within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and also the way disciples relate to their gurus.

I would like to explore these changes and innovations that the pandemic has fostered within the domain of Tibetan Buddhism by discussing the case of Tara's Triple Excellence, a daily guided online meditation program created in 2011 by disciples of the Tibetan lama Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche (b. 1951). Despite the late date of its creation, Tara's Triple Excellence, or TTE, was the first major Tibetan Buddhist online program to be launched. TTE, which is available through the internet in seven European languages, Chinese and Nepali, claims to present the entire Buddhist Path "as a step-by-step online program" that guides practitioners "through the three vehicles of Buddhism"—the "First Excellence" teaches the path of "Foundational Buddhism" (represented today only by Theravada traditions); the "Second Excellence," the path of Mahāyāna; and the "Third Excellence," the path of Vajrayāna. The participants follow the TTE meditation program on a daily basis from their own homes. At some point, in order to progress in the program, the participant has to receive the initiations that authorize one to do certain practices. It is the guru, in this case Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, who bestows the initiations, and at least for now these have to happen in person – although the possibility of bestowing initiations through the internet is already being discussed in the group.

Tara's Triple Excellence was also directly affected by the pandemic. Indeed, in the last year, we have witnessed the intensification and diversification of the program's team strategies to build a Sangha in connection to the program. Online retreats, facilitated groups and book clubs have been created during that period directly impacting on the relationship between participants and gurus – current and past – through, among other things, the circulation of images, videos and stories of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (1920-1996), the renowned father of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche. Also during that period, the status of genuine dharma teachers of Western students of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche has been reinforced through talks and other means. In this sense, it could be said that the program is adding another layer to the global activities of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche through the active creation of specific networks of connections that also extend to other gurus and instructors who are not necessarily connected with the lineage that engendered Tara's Triple Excellence. In this presentation, I will discuss the mobilization of different kinds of digital technologies in the creation of these networks in order to understand how the notions of guru and Sangha are being re-signified in the context of Tara's Triple Excellence.

KEITH EDWARD CANTÚ (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA)

"Guru is God": The teacher-student relationship among Tamil and Bengali sadhus

This paper will build upon the topic of my last contribution to the "Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective" conference and show how interconnected the principle of the guru is among sadhus and other esoteric practitioners (both Hindu, Sufi, and non-sectarian) in South Asia. The first part of the paper will focus on contemporary guru-student relationships that I encountered on field work conducted over a total of two years in Bangladesh and the states of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, India. The second part of the paper will utilize the textual and art historical record (primary sources and secondary Orientalist accounts) to show how these contemporary models have both built upon and transformed the model of the "Guru is God," which remains a popular saying in South Asia to this day. Finally, some consideration will be given to the intersection between the social and gendered implications of the social relationship between teacher and student and how these intersect with the more esoteric notion of the guru as divinized human being.

CECILIA BASTOS (NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO)
“Yoga, meditation and the new virtual master-disciple relationships”

Since 2009, I've been observing a group of Vedanta students and yoga practitioners in my ethnographic research in Rio de Janeiro. They study Vedic texts in a non-profit cultural association called Vidya Mandir, in which classes given by Professor Gloria Arieira take place. Gloria, seen as a master or guru, started learning Vedanta in the 1970s while in an ashram in India for four and a half years. Ever since her return to Brazil, she has dedicated her time to teaching the Indian philosophies of yoga and a kind of “meditative life-style” at Vidya Mandir. From the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the classes and puja rituals have all been performed online, and judging by the increase in cases and deaths in Brazil over the last months, it will probably be a long time before they would feel like engaging in a learning relationship in person. The main questions I have been trying to answer involve the way pupils are perceiving this new mode of knowledge transmission, and in which ways it's been affecting their master-disciple relationship. Interlocutors indicate that the classes per se are relevant but that the chatting before and after classes, which cannot happen at the moment, are when their ties with the teacher become stronger.

SERGE DREYER (TUNGSHAI UNIVERSITY)
“When Esoterism Prevails on technique. Side Effects on the Relationship Teacher-Learner. The Case of *Taiji Quan*”

As far as we know up to now, *taiji quan* was originally a Chinese martial art. As such there was nothing esoteric about it except the fact that it was basically transmitted within specific families. In 19th and 20th century, China went through major changes, in great part due to Western interference, which made *taiji quan* attractive to well educated people. Those people wrote about this martial art, especially in the first half of the 20th century, in such a way that it became a well-accepted practice among middle class and Chinese intelligentsia, far from the usual contempt of these social classes for this kind of activity. In a matter of decades, *taiji quan* incorporated Taoist thinking, western science, Chinese medicine, save the Chinese nation mission, etc. Soon it drifted away from traditional martial arts and became an intellectual topic in China as well as abroad. Many authors, highly educated or not, formatted it through philosophical notion such as the 8 trigrams (*ba gua*), the 5 agents (*wu xing*), non-action (*wuwei*), *yin* and *yang*, etc.

In this paper we'll explore how the simple relationship between a teacher and a learner became a master-disciple relationship which we consider already a distortion of the original practice. This phenomenon has been amplified by the spreading of *taiji quan* all over the world through oral narratives, manuals, scholar books, constant insistence on medical benefits as well as cultural propaganda from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, etc. There is now distinctively a market which guides the relationship between teachers and learners, very often in abusive fashion when esoteric knowledge becomes a pretext for controlling learners but sometimes profitable when this kind of knowledge stimulates the interest for sound features of Chinese culture

MARC LEBRANCHU (GSRL-EPHE-PSL, CNRS)
“From global market to individual invisibility. Master-Disciple relation in the European Taoist milieu. An overview”

In this paper I will discuss the characteristics and limitations of the relationship between Chinese masters and Western disciples as I have observed them in different European Taoist groups and in my long relationship with a Chinese master.

Twenty-eight years ago, during a qigong training course, I met a Chinese master who influenced my life, since this led me to devote a thesis to the reception of Taoism in the West years later. A small group having formed around him, I became one of his students. Between the teachings I received, the vision of

Taoism held by the Western practitioners and the general public, and Sinological works I read, the distance was sometimes great.

Having met Prof. Goossaert to tell him about my background and questions, he suggested that I devote a thesis to it. This is what I did between 2010 and 2017. The aim was to understand how Taoism is perceived, understood, and practised in the West today, by reconstructing the history of its reception and representations since the 16th century.

I was therefore led to identify Taoist teachings in Europe, their nature, Taoist groups, and recent Taoist national associations. I followed their various activities, such as seminars with Chinese masters in Europe or at the Baiyunguan in Beijing. These observations make it possible to draw up an initial panorama and to attempt a first categorisation of the master-student relationship and the use of notions such as master, tradition, initiation, secret, etc. in a globalised market.

Furthermore, the master I was a student of taught Taoist rituals and neidan practices. Some were presented as 'traditional' and under the seal of secrecy. However, these teachings took place in a post-modern Western framework, requiring an adaptation of the transmission that was sometimes a source of difficulties, which I will present.

Studying a field and esoteric transmissions while being part of them raises epistemological, ethical, and deontological problems which I mention in conclusion.

MENG WANG & YANG SHEN (MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY)

“Truth-seeking through Qin Practice: A Sonic-Sensorial Discovery of Ethics and Nature in Contemporary China”

Guqin (“ancient Qin”) is a Chinese musical instrument that is also seen as a mediating tool in a project of cosmological self-transformation. To find Qin practice in a spiritual tradition presumes an epistemic community whose members share a particular view of musical experiences. How this epistemic community forms is historically contingent and a result of the interactions between a tradition of knowledge, specific pedagogical relations, and personal engagements. Particularly in a time of social change, the acquisition as well as the transmission of the cosmological, self-cultivational framework of Qin music-making is subject to concrete social conditions. The article presents the journey of an Urumqi Qin practitioner since 1999 and her growth into a Qin revivalist. It shows how an ethical and cosmological understanding of the Qin art is rooted in the transformation of particular body orientations, and how a master-disciple relationship is instrumental in facilitating that adjustment. Through biographical notes of Meng Wang, the article also shows how the epistemic communities of Qin self-cultivation practitioners are formed along with broader transitions of cultural landscape in late socialist China.

HARRY DANON (EHESS)

“Patterns of knowledge transmission in contemporary French alchemy”

For this presentation, I propose to delve into some aspects of the master-disciple relationship that I have witnessed during my fieldwork among French contemporary alchemists. The first avenue of reflection I intend to explore is the practical modalities of knowledge transmission between master and disciple. Consisting in a learning process whereby the neophyte has to learn techniques of minerals and/or plants transformation and spiritual involvement, initiation is for the most part self-taught. The role of the master is less to teach than to guide the neophyte by responding to questions and showing laboratory techniques in a revealing/concealing fashion. Secondly, I intend to assess the repercussions of the digitalization of knowledge transmission. The latter seems to be fostering a fragmentation of learning sources and a greater individualization of apprenticeship. As tremendous amounts of information are available on the internet (online libraries, facebook groups, online conferences, forums etc.), neophytes are able to pick-and-choose contents that best fit their interests, which tends to make the position of the master less relevant. In the opposite, internet also permits masters to commercialize

their practice through the advertisement of conferences or online and/or week-end training courses. Thirdly, I will detail how digital media is correlated with a democratization of esoteric knowledge and a general decrease in habits to maintain secrecy. These two interrelated processes reinforce the commercialization of knowledge and generate tensions and debates among practitioners on such subjects as laboratory work ethics and the perpetuation of tradition. Finally, I will propose some reflexive thoughts on the relationship between academic and esoteric search for knowledge. While, on the one hand, alchemists can be brought closer to scholars in that their practice partly relies on what can be considered scholarly or scientific methods to produce knowledge, on the other one, I suggest that the ethnographer should try to emulate the neophyte's position (participating to laboratory work, engaging in individual practice, reading alchemical treatises etc.) in order to produce enriching data for his/her analysis. This will be illustrated by examples based on my experience on the field.

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?