Magic, Myth, and the Supernatural

Lecture: Monday 11:30 am-13:15 pm (NAH 115)
Tutorial: Tuesday 15:30-16:15 pm (MMW 705), 16:30-17:15 pm (UCC 111);
Wednesday 10:30-11:15 am (NAH 401); there could be one or two more tutorial
options depending on the number of students
Instructor: Hsuan-Ying Huang 黃宣穎 (NAH 322, hsuan-ying.huang@cuhk.edu.hk)
Office hour: by appointment
TA: Simon Tu 杜紹康 (simontu@link.cuhk.edu.hk); Sam Siu Hei Lai 黎肇曦
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Brief Course Description:

This course will examine phenomena often viewed as irrational and superstitious to see how they can be understood in cultural terms. The first part of the course will examine traditional anthropological topics such as magic, myth, ghosts, witchcraft, and shamanism. The second part will cover more recent issues such as qigong, UFOs and alien abduction, and urban legends. Examples from contemporary industrial societies, including Hong Kong, will be used to challenge notions of “modern (or Western) rationality” as well as “traditional superstition.” The power of a cultural approach in explaining the supernatural and the limits of what science can explain will also be discussed.

Learning Outcomes:

Upon the completion of this course, student will:

1. learn to see the cultural nature of reality and of the supernatural;
2. understand how and why many seemingly irrational and bizarre beliefs make sense in their cultural contexts;
3. learn how to use critical thinking while being tolerant of other views;
4. develop a healthy skepticism, while at the same time remaining open to new ideas

Required Texts:

All the required readings will be posted on Blackboard. Readings marked with an asterisk (*) should be completed before the lecture, while the other reading(s) can be completed in time for the tutorial.
Quite a few articles could be found in these two popular readers:


Some extra materials will be posted on Blackboard during the semester. You’re not required to read them. But they may help you to understand the relevant issues more deeply.

**Evaluation:**

1. Tutorial participation (20%): Active participation and thoughtful discussion are highly appreciated.

2. Brief tutorial presentation (10%):

Each student is expected to give a brief presentation (around 3 minutes) at a chosen week’s tutorial (beginning from the third week—Sep 26). The presentation is intended to serve as the starting point of the ensuing discussion so it should include at least two leading questions. When there are two presenters for the same tutorial, they should meet in advance for coordination and collaboration.

3. In-class mid-term (30%): This will be held on Oct 31.

4. Take-home final exam (40%): This will be handed out on Nov 28 (the last lecture), and will be due on Dec 12.

**Course Policies:**

Tutorial attendance is mandatory. If a student has an unavoidable conflict or becomes too sick to attend the tutorial, he/she must contact the instructor before the tutorial begins. Students may miss one tutorial without penalty. If a student is sick for an extended period of time and thus must miss multiple sections, he/she must contact the instructor to help him/her devise a make-up plan.

Students need to know how to cite properly and how to avoid plagiarism. Read the University’s guidelines about academic honesty ([www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/index.htm](http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/index.htm)). Pay particular attention to Section 1 (What is plagiarism), Section 2 (Proper use of source material), and Appendix 1 (Details guidelines on proper use of source material).

The take-home final exam should be submitted via Veriguide—an all-too powerful plagiarism-detecting software (https://academic.veriguide.org/academic/login_CUHK.jspx). Students will also be required to submit a signed declaration that they are aware of the University’s policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

Reading List

Sep 12: Introduction (no tutorial this week)


Sep 19 : Magic


Sep 26 : Myth


Oct 3 : Ghosts and Spirits


Oct 10 : No Class (the day following the Chung Yeung Festival)

Oct 17 : Witchcraft and Divination


Oct 24 : Shamanism


Oct 31 : In-Class Mid-Term (No tutorial for this week)

Nov 7: Qigong


Nov 14 : UFOs and Aliens Abduction


Clay, Alexa “Growing up Alien” (https://aeon.co/essays/wasn-t-i-special-enough-to-be-abducted-by-aliens)

Nov 21: Urban Legends and Rumors

* Evans, Grant “Ghosts and the New Governor: The Anthropology of a Hong Kong Rumor,” in Grant Evans and Maria Tam Siu-mi, eds., *Hong Kong: The Anthropology of a Chinese Metropolis*, pp. 267-296


Nov 28 : Conclusion (no tutorial this week)
