Magic, Myth, and the Supernatural

Lecture: Monday 3:30 am-5:15 pm (NAH 12)
Tutorial: Tuesday 2:30-3:15 am (Lady Shaw Bldg G35); 3:30-4:15 pm (Science Centre 139), 4:30-5:15 pm (Science Centre 139); and TBA (The exact time and/or location of these tutorial sessions may change before we have a clearer picture of enrolment. Please stay tuned to our latest announcements!)
Instructor: Hsuan-Ying Huang (NAH 322, hsuan-ying.huang@cuhk.edu.hk)
Office hour: Thursday 4:00-5:30 pm, or by appointment
TA: Wang Kai (kai.wang@link.cuhk.edu.hk)

Brief Course Description:

Have you ever believe in magic? How do you read and understand myths? Do you have certain experiences that can be described as “supernatural”? What are these experiences, and how have they affected you? Are you “superstitious” or merely curious about things beyond the normal? Or perhaps you are thoroughly “scientific,” believing that all kinds of the so-called “supernatural phenomena” will one day be explained by science? Do you think superstitious beliefs are irrational and should be corrected, subject to the enlightenment of scientific reason?

In this course, we will examine magic, myth, the supernatural, and other related phenomena and issues from an anthropological—that is, a cross-cultural and social—perspective. The materials are drawn from both ethnographic and popular writings, that is, works written for a professional readership (in this case, anthropologists and other kinds of social scientists) and the general population. The course can serve as an introduction to the anthropology of religion. For UGE students, it can also serve as an introduction to anthropology (though merely through one of its branch, a very important one indeed, and hopefully an interesting one to you).

The course begins with traditional topics such as myth, magic, witchcraft, ritual, and shamanism; many of the examples are situated in traditional or underdeveloped societies that used to the focus of early-day anthropologists. Toward the end of the course we will arrive at emerging phenomena such as modern witchcraft, UFOs and alien abduction, and Qigong. Examples from contemporary industrial societies, including Hong Kong, will be used to challenge notions of “modern (or Western) rationality” as well as “traditional superstition.”

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 (as shown in the “reading list” on this syllabus) will be posted on the Blackboard course site.

The course does not have a textbook. But quite a few articles are selected from this popular reader:


The instructor may occasionally post relevant readings to the Blackboard course site. These items will be marked as “supplementary” and are not required.

Evaluation:

1. Course and Tutorial Participation (30%)

The grade will be based on your preparation and contribution to discussion.

2. Quizes (10%):

Two quizzes will be administered randomly during the semester. This is merely to check your comprehension of the course content and assigned readings.

3. Précis (10%):

For two chosen weeks during the semester, you need to write a memo (around 250 words) that evaluates the reading(s)—The TA will ask you to sign up for two specific weeks later. The memo can cover one or more than one of the readings in that week. In this short piece you need to raise a question suitable for discussion and develop your thoughts around it. This exercise will begin from the third week (Jan 22). These memos have to be posted on Blackboard—and therefore can be read by your classmates—by 11 am on the day of the lecture.

4. Final exam or paper (50%):

You have two options:

(1) Take-home final exam: This will be conducted in the format of essays in response to the questions that will be handed out on April 16 (the last lecture).

(2) Final paper: You need to choose a topic of your interest (and of course, it has to be related to the course) and conduct research in which there is a significant fieldwork component (for example, interview or participant observation). The length of the paper should be around 2500 words (excluding references). Please
talk to the instructor as early as possible (ideally in the middle of the semester, but definitely not later than the Reading Period) if you want to pursue this possibility.

Both are due on 2 May (5 PM).

Course Policies:

Reading:

Reading is an important part of the learning experience. Please try your best to finish the readings before the lecture, or at least before the tutorial. Take notes while you read, and bring your questions and thoughts to the tutorial to discuss with fellow students.

Course attendance and participation:

You should attend lectures regularly. Tutorial attendance is mandatory. If you have an unavoidable conflict or become too sick to attend the tutorial, you must contact the TA before the tutorial begins. Active participation in tutorials is necessary and your contribution to discussion will not only be highly appreciated but also become the basis of evaluation.

The Use of Electronic Devices in class:

You are strongly discouraged from using mobile phones during the lectures and tutorials. Please keep in mind that this is not only a passive withdrawal from the class, it may also have a negative impact on fellow students and the lecturer.

Academic Integrity:

Students need to know how to cite properly and how to avoid plagiarism—using someone else’s ideas or words without attribution. Please read the University’s guidelines about academic honesty (www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/index.htm). It’s worth refreshing your memory even if you have read it before. 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).

Late Policy:

For memos, extension is not permitted. You have to contact the TA before the deadline in order to sign up for another week. For final exam, extension is only granted to documented medical or family/personal emergencies. You must contact the instructor and the TA as soon as possible if such unfortunate events occur. Each day late without an approved extension will result in a reduction of 1/3 of a letter grade (i.e. A becomes A-; B+ becomes B).
Calendar

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<td>22/1</td>
<td>Myth and Symbolism</td>
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Reading List

Jan 8: Introduction to the Course (no tutorial)


Jan 15: Defining Religion

Geertz, Clifford. 1972 “Religion,” in Moro and James eds., Magic Witchcraft and Religion 8th edition, pp. 6-15. (This piece might be a bit challenging. Please re-visit it again in a few weeks and hopefully you will find it a lot easier to understand.)
Jan 22: Myth and Symbolism


Jan 29: Magic and Divination


Feb 5: Witchcraft and the Problem of Rationality


Feb 12: Ritual


Feb 19: Lunar New Year (No Class)

Feb 26: Shaman and Other Specialists


Mar 5: Altered States of Consciousness and Other Experiences


Mar 12: Souls, Spirits, and Death

film: Rouge 胭脂扣 (1987)

**Mar 19: Gods and Spirits**


**Mar 26: Religious Change and New Religions**


**Apr 2: Reading Week (No Class)**

**Apr 9: Qigong and Falun Gong**


**Apr 16: Conclusion (no tutorial)**
