CULTURAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION OF DANG-KIS IN SINGAPORE

Past research is rich in clients’ healing experiences with spirit mediums, shamans and other spiritual healers. However, healers themselves may also therapeutically benefit by taking part in the practice of mediumship and shamanism. This presentation focuses on dang-ki healing, a form of Chinese spirit mediumship practiced in Singapore and Southeast Asia. This practice is based on the belief that a deity can possess a human (called dang-ki; 乩童) to offer help to supplicants. I aim to explore whether participation in dang-ki healing has therapeutic value for the dang-kis; and if so, how their self-experiences are related to their life histories and possession experiences in a sociocultural context. From the perspective of cultural phenomenology, I will discuss how the dang-kis’ embodied selves are shaped and reshaped through the idiom of spirit mediumship given that self and culture are mutually constituted. Many dang-kis reported negative life issues before initiation. They recounted positive changes in their characters and life conditions after becoming a medium. This self-transformation is carried out through three interrelated pathways. First, there are changes in identity and social role in becoming a dang-ki—from a regular person to a practitioner. Although there are various initiation pathways, their roles as a medium must be approved by their communities. Second, during the possession rituals, there are changes in sense of self through embodied practices according to culturally recognizable scripts. These changes (e.g., awareness, physical actions, locus of control) are grounded in the bodily states, physical environment, and sociocultural environment. Finally, there are more enduring changes in sense of self as a result of the recurrent possession experiences, change in social role and identity, internalization of the possessing deities’ dispositions, and spiritual training embedded in an amalgam of Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist philosophies. In other words, recurrent bodily practices of possession shape subsequent embodiments, knowledge, learning, and interactions with others through a process of looping effects. In conclusion, the practice of dang-ki mediumship illustrates how the phenomenology of the self as agent and subjectivity may be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through ongoing interactions among body, personhood, physical environment, and sociocultural expectations.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER: LEE BOON OOI

Lee Boon Ooi, Ph.D., is senior lecturer and program leader of MA in Counseling and Guidance at the National Institute of Education where he has done research on relationship between culture and mental health, particularly, on indigenous healing systems, cultural psychopathology and health beliefs. His current projects on ritual healing aim to examine the relevance of traditional practices to psychotherapy; and how subjective healing experiences are embedded in the body, physical settings and sociocultural environments.

DETAILS

Date: 13 February 2019 (Wed)
Time: 2:00 - 3:30 pm
Refreshments provided
Venue: HSS Meeting Room 4 (HSS-04-71)
Contact: Randy LaPolla
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Register: https://tinyurl.com/2019-crici2

This event is organised by the Interdisciplinary Cluster for Research on Intercultural Contact and Interaction (CRICI) at the School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University.
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