

RETHINKING SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY IN ASIA

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• <https://hkbu.zoom.us/j/97202521413>

PANEL ON RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY



Moderator
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Can the Poor Believe? The Case of Homeless People in Taiwan

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It's tricky to talk about religiosity among the poor. In various religious traditions, being poor materially means the proximity to being rich spiritually. For scholars fond of Marxist deprivation theory and religious economy theory, the poor is supposedly to be attracted to or committed to religion more than the average. However, according to actual observations and previous research, the poor seem just pretentiously religious, if not irreligious. They do have no (real) faith. I would like to think of this question on the poor's ambiguous or elusive religiosity by discussing my ethnographic research on homeless people encountering religion in Taiwan. Furthermore, I would like to reflect on the definition of religion in sociology while bringing the contexts of East Asian societies into consideration.



Rethinking Western Canons: Notes from New Asia College

Andrew JUNKER, Chinese University of Hong Kong and Yale-China Association

How have institutional forms from the West influenced education and knowledge-creation within Asia, and in Hong Kong in particular? Can we recover and recuperate ways of asking and answering questions that have been colonized by analytical tools imported from the West? I will respond to these questions by thinking through a case with which I am currently affiliated, New Asia College ("New Asia") at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). New Asia was founded in 1949 by several Chinese intellectuals who had taken refuge in British-ruled Hong Kong after the communist revolution. There, they founded a modern-style school that aimed to maintain culturally Chinese, Confucian-inspired learning. Early New Asia faced hardship, then success, and then integration into CUHK. I consider two aspects of its history relevant to the questions posed at this conference. The first is the institutional story of what happened to the Confucian project of New Asia as a result of it joining CUHK. In that process, the Confucian aspirations of the school's curriculum and pedagogy were displaced by the secular rationality of a global, cosmopolitan university. The second aspect concerns part of that which was diminished in the transformation, namely the Confucian intellectual and moral content of the founders' original project. New Asia's leading intellectual, the historian Mr. Ch'ien Mu, believed in the classical Chinese notion of the "unity of heaven and humanity." Moreover, near the end of his life he declared that the theorization of this unity was "Chinese culture's contribution to the survival of humanity." But the institutional framework built to continue this vision had changed and his ambition remains unrealized. In an effort to partially recover and recuperate the New Asia intellectual categories of thought, I use Ch'ien Mu's formulation of "human culture" (人文) and "heaven" (天) to re-think a controversial claim in a canon of the sociology of religion, which is Emile Durkheim's ontology of culture in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.



Weird: Asian Religion as Method

David A. PALMER, The University of Hong Kong

In his *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010), Kuan-hsing Chen called for "multiply[ing] frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview" through perspectives rooted in Asian realities. Until now, postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric accounts of Asian culture and society generally remain deeply embedded in the secular frame that is the very foundation of colonial knowledge production. While the critique of secularism is now well established in academic discourse, a truly postcolonial work in social theory would advance beyond critique to seriously engage with and draw upon the non-secular ontologies that have historically constituted knowledge in Asia, and which continue to do so outside of the dominant institutions of knowledge production established in the colonial era. To break the secular firewall in social theory, however, raises difficult questions: beyond incorporating Asian ideas, perspectives, experiences or approaches, this involves unpacking the ontological and epistemological foundations of critical social theory itself and bringing a multiplicity of "weird" ontologies into the theoretical field. In this paper, I will propose some preliminary reflections on what such a project might entail. I will begin by outlining a few methodological and normative principles, and then, drawing on my anthropological research on Daoism and Chinese religion, consider the value of engaging with indigenous concepts to develop "weird" but more realistic social theories of personhood, vitality, and power.



Interrogating Concepts: Revisiting 'Folk/Popular Hinduism' and 'Sanskritization'

Vineeta SINHA, National University of Singapore

In this paper, my objective is to problematize a number of categories that constitute the intellectual heritage for students of Hinduism. Social science approaches to analysing Hinduism have generated an anthology of sense-making tools – a body of categories, concepts, schemas and dichotomies – which have been pivotal in sociological and anthropological accounts of Hinduism in India as well as in the diaspora. Specifically, I problematize, historicize and unpack the categories 'folk/popular Hinduism' and 'Sanskritization', which share a historical and analytical relationship and thus must be appraised jointly. It is important to recognize that the description 'folk/popular Hinduism' does not exist in isolation. This is only one half of a dichotomy that has identified, named and ranked two religious styles – the 'Sanskritic'/'Brahmanic' and 'non-Sanskritic'/'non-Brahmanic'. The core idea of 'Sanskritization' has been central in conceiving this binary and carries the associated notions of upward social mobility, privilege and prestige in adopting elements from Sanskritic/Brahmanic varieties of Hinduism. The elitist, exclusive bent carried in the concept of Sanskritization translate into a concomitant rendering of 'folk/popular Hinduism' as everyday Hinduism practiced by the masses, those without privilege and from low socio-economic backgrounds. Turning to ethnography from Hinduism in the diaspora, I propose to re-conceptualise the category 'folk/popular Hinduism' avoiding judgmental and pejorative connotations carried in more conventional interpretations of the same, which serve to sustain and reproduce a hierarchy and pecking order of religious styles in theorizing Hinduism.

