



GEORG-AUGUST-UNIVERSITÄT
GÖTTINGEN

Göttingen Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology (GISCA)
Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS)
Centre for Modern East Asian Studies (CeMEAS)

!! Deadline extended to March 29 !!

Summer School Göttingen SPIRIT 2016

Beyond the City Limits: Rethinking New Religiosities in Asia



Photo by Paul Christensen

18-22 July, 2016

University of Göttingen, Germany

Theme

With the rapid urbanization across Asia, with new cityscapes, glittering skyscrapers, shopping malls, globalized forms of consumption it is easy to assume that cities are the primary sites for the production of the new. Indeed, urbanity is often used as a synonym for modernity and Asian futures would appear to be increasingly urban. The study of religion is no exception, and emergent trends, practices and movements are often implicitly or explicitly connected with the city. For example, new religious movements are commonly treated as distinctly urban phenomena that reflect middle class sensibilities and subjectivities, concerns and consumption patterns. Moreover, the rise of new religious forms is often understood as coming at the expense of the rural, as when village mediumship practices are seen to give way to urban spirit cults, or when so-called “forest monasteries” in Thailand increasingly find themselves in urban or peri-urban zones.

But if cities are the future, is the country then the past? Does the focus on cities as sites of “the new” ignore the complex ways rural contexts, settings and imaginaries are implicated and contribute to contemporary religious practice? And to what extent does the notion of “urban religion” implicitly depend on its “others”? Does it reproduce the urban/rural distinction as one of the “great divides” (Latour 1993) that have been central to the experience of modernity?

In truth, it is increasingly difficult to sustain sharp distinctions between rural and urban. Across Asia, increased mobility especially patterns of rural/urban migration and the spread of communications and transport technologies connect urban and rural settings like never before improved education rates have seen the rise of an increasingly sophisticated, cosmopolitan and politically engaged rural population. Yet nationalist constructions of identity and modernizing discourses across Asia have at once denigrated the rural, “the peasantry”, as backwards and in need of “development” while at the same time valorizing them as embodying traditional values and the essence of national identities. Religion is similarly implicated in such discourses, at times standing for the “other” of modernity, at others functioning as the locus of ethnic or national identities.

Yet so-called urban and rural religious practices do not constitute two opposed spheres of activity but are interconnected in various ways. Indeed, it is frequently the very notion of an opposition between city and country that facilitates interactions and networks that traverse urban and rural contexts. For example, urban religious institutions may recruit ritual specialists from the countryside because they are seen to have retained “correct” knowledge and techniques that urban practitioners have lost (Davis 2016), or city dwellers may see rural settings as sites of spiritual potential and seek out sites of pilgrimage, of refuge or retreat.

This Summer School takes up these issues and asks how the study of contemporary religious life in Asia can benefit from “thinking beyond the city”, whether “the city” is understood as a spatial entity, a site of enquiry, or as an analytical category. It will call into question many of the assumptions that go along with the study of urban religiosity and will attempt to bring “the urban” explicitly into relationship with its various “others” — such as the “rural”, “hinterland”, “periphery”, or “village”. Central questions include: How do patterns of pilgrimage, travel and tourism, or the circulation of religious symbols or objects connect “urban” and “rural”? How do religious networks and practices help particular actors — such as rural/urban migrants — to negotiate tensions between their rural and urban lives? How do notions of nostalgia and pastness figure in projects of urban religio-spiritual renewal? How do dialectics of religion, secularity and rationality play out in rural/urban spaces? And to what extent does the notion of an urban/rural divide *itself* inform religious practices and imaginaries?

A final avenue of questioning focuses on the hierarchization of city and country and the relative superiority and agency attributed to the former. Just as postcolonial and critical theory have challenged discourses that contrast a dynamic and active occident with a relatively static, passive orient, the Summer School will critically examine the manner in which similar distinctions between city and country have inflected the study of religion in Asia. It will ask how “provincializing” the city can lead to new insights and approaches that can reveal blindspots and draw attention to power differentials in Asian societies. The purpose would be to challenge the processes of othering that assign a relatively passive or reactive role for the countryside and to instead draw attention to the agency of rural actors, to alternative imaginaries of the future, and to ask what role religion plays in specifically rural modernities.

The summer school thus invites participants to engage with, and develop, their own work through an exploration of the way religion and spirituality intersect with three key themes: (1) **traversing and transcending the rural/urban divide**; (2) **the city and its ‘others’**; (3) **provincializing the city**.

A range of international speakers has been invited whose collective expertise connects questions of rural/urban religiosities and critical engagements with the category of “the city” in contemporary Asia. An innovative approach of this Summer School is to include both scholars who work on religion and those do not but whose research aims to critically engage with the category of “the city”. This combination of perspectives is expected to produce stimulating exchange and novel insights.

Speakers will include:

- Prof. Michael Herzfeld, Harvard University
- Prof. Ursula Rao, Leipzig University
- Prof. Christina Schwenkel, UC Riverside
- Prof. Tim Winter, Deakin University
- Prof. Julia Huang, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan (tentative)
- Dr. Radhika Gupta, Göttingen University

Prof. Herzfeld will provide a public keynote as well as a general workshop on successful thesis writing. Podium discussions and morning lectures will provide theoretical frames and ethnographic snapshots from diverse Asian contexts. In addition, students will participate in small working and reading groups moderated and mentored by each of the invited speakers over the course of the School. Mandatory readings for these sessions will be shared in advance. Participants will have the opportunity to introduce their own work in working groups, to connect their research to each of the three theme blocs, in order to develop new ideas and learn new approaches for their own work.

Highlights of the cultural program include:

- A visit to the historic Bodenwerder synagogue from 1825, which was translocated to Göttingen in 2006 to find out about the transformation of religious sites in a local context.
- A city tour, including guided tours of historically significant cemeteries.

About the organizers

GISCA, CEMIS and CeMEAS are key institutions building research, network and outreach capacities in the study of religions at Göttingen Research campus (GRC). Bringing together scholars in the social sciences and humanities for inter-disciplinary dialogue, they in particular foster an appreciation of regional diversity and intra- and cross-regional entanglements in Asia. With GISCA’s expertise in the anthropology of Southeast Asia and CEMIS and CeMEAS core competence in South and East Asia

respectively, these centers complement each other, join creative forces and pool their excellent academic networks to organize this Summer School.

Applications

We invite applications from interested doctoral and research-based masters' students of all cultural-studies disciplines, whose work relates to East, South and/or Southeast Asia. We offer expertise especially in social and cultural anthropology, history, sociology, media and visual studies, religious studies, and area studies. The number of participants is limited to 20.

Applicants should submit an abstract of their thesis or dissertation (max. 500 words), a statement of motivation (max 1 page), a brief statement by the applicant's supervisor, as well as proof of current university enrollment. Scholars of GISCA, CEMIS and CeMEAS will select the participants. Free accommodation will be provided and there are no tuition fees. Travel stipends may be available to fund participants otherwise unable to attend due to the financial burden of travel costs. Please e-mail your application to Karin Klenke at karin.klenke@cemis.uni-goettingen.de. Application deadline: March 29, 2016. Successful applicants will be informed by mid-April.