

Healing Practices and Modern Esoteric Currents between Japan and the U.S.

25-305 | Tuesday, 3:30 p.m. | Helios

Panel Chair: Ioannis Gaitanidis

This panel details four cases of productive interchange between American “metaphysical religion” and Japanese “psycho-spiritual therapies” (*seishin ryōhō*) in the first half of the twentieth century. We consider how traditional physical practices were updated by new ideas, diffused across the Pacific Ocean, and adopted as new healing methods in each of the two areas. By thinking of healing practices as the agents of religious and spiritual innovation, we demonstrate that the history of transnational exchange of bodily practices within modern esoteric currents can be a productive unit of analysis for religious studies research. For this reason, we have secured the participation of two experienced researchers who will act as respondents: Professor Helen Hardacre, an American authority on Japanese religions, and Professor Yoshinaga Shin’ichi, an expert on esoteric currents worldwide.

Philip Deslippe

Yogi Ramacharaka and the Transnational Diffusion of Modern Yoga

This paper will discuss the writings of Yogi Ramacharaka, the penname of New Thought author William Walker Atkinson (1862-1932) who wrote thirteen books and numerous magazine articles as Yogi Ramacharaka in the first decades of the twentieth century. Combining New Thought, Theosophy, physical culture, mundane concerns, and medical science into accessible prose and numerous practical exercises, the Ramacharaka works were translated in numerous languages and became a powerful influence in the history of early modern yoga throughout the world. A full understanding of Yogi Ramacharaka not only offers clarity on one of the earliest and most important influences on *seishin ryōhō* in Japan, but also provides both a general framework and exemplar of similar types of transnational exchanges within metaphysical religion in the early twentieth century.

Naoko Hirano

American Metaphysical Religion in *Seishin Ryōhō* and Reiki Ryōhō in 1920s-1930s Japan

This presentation describes the characteristics of the seishin ryōhō 精神療法 (psycho-spiritual therapies) practiced in 1920s-30s Japan and analyzes the ways in which they were not only influenced by the bodily practices of Japanese religion and their contemporary medical science and physiology, but also by the words and thoughts of what Albanese calls “American metaphysical religion.” Furthermore, the presentation uses Usui Mikao’s Reiki Ryōhō 靈気療法 (Reiki Therapy) as an example of how esoteric discourses and practices were able to move from North America to Japan without the activity of any particular organization.

Hidehiko Kurita

Breathing Methods as a Crossroad between the Localization of Western Ideas and the Acculturation of Japanese Tradition

Various religious traditions use words that literally mean “breath” as synonymous with “life”, “spirit”, and “soul.” Some of these traditions use breathing methods to control the spirit. In early modern Japan, some Chinese ideas on breathing methods based on the concepts of *yin-yang* and *qi* contributed to people’s good health and peace of mind. After the Meiji Restoration (1868), Western ways of health seemed to replace previous Chinese medical ideas and breathing methods seemed to disappear. However, they returned at the turn of the twentieth century. In the background was the importation of a novel American trend called “New Thought”. In this paper, I will clarify how the tradition was inspired again by the movement coming from beyond the Pacific and how breathing methods gained popularity and new meanings in modern contexts in Japan.

Justin Stein

Trans-Pacific Transculturation: Usui Reiki Ryōhō and Reiki Healing, 1936-1986

In the summer of 1936, a young second-generation Japanese American named Hawayo Takata returned to Kauai, where she established a small business practicing and teaching healing methods that she had studied in Tokyo for the prior six months. Fifty years later, in 1986, Takata’s students in the Hawaiian Islands and the North American mainland numbered in the thousands, and they and their students brought Reiki around the world, including back to Japan. However, due to numerous adaptations that Takata made to Reiki over her teaching career, the practices that returned to Japan were quite different from those that had left a half-century prior. This paper uses printed materials, diary entries, and oral history to outline how Reiki was adapted for Hawaii Nikkeijin in the 1930s-1950s, North American Euro-Americans in the 1960s-1970s, and the Japanese in the 1980s, and how these changes illustrate historical dynamics, linkages, and discontinuities between these groups.

Helen Hardacre, Shin’ichi Yoshinaga

Responses

The respondents will address the issues raised in the papers of this panel.

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