DFG awards funding to Centre for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences at FAU

Whether it's feng shui from China, ritual magic in Germany, vodun in West Africa or kabbalah ma’asit in Israel: practices used to try and predict, control or manipulate future events can be found all over the world. A research unit led by Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) is to investigate and compare these esoteric practices in a large-scale interdisciplinary project that has received 3.7 million euros of funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG) over the course of the next four years.

What do various esoteric practices have in common? How can we gain access to the experience and knowledge of those who practice these rituals? How can we compare this knowledge without perpetuating Eurocentric stereotypes? By using these questions as a starting point, the FAU Centre for Advanced Studies called ‘Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective’ aims to systematically compare the strategies of interpretation, rationalisation and legitimisation of esoteric practices. ‘We want to find out why these practices are still successful today in different cultural and regional contexts,’ explains sinologist Prof. Dr. Michael Lackner, Director of the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, ‘Fate, Freedom and Prognostication. Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe’ and speaker of the Centre for Advanced Studies at FAU. In the medium term, the aim is to create a cultural theory of esoteric practices in order to explain their resilience even in these times where technology and scientific discourse are so widespread. In addition, it is hoped that the theory will shed light on typological similarities across a large number of case studies and explain why they are assessed differently depending on the cultural context.

The scale of the collaborative project is considerable, especially in view of the global relevance and high interdisciplinary and innovative potential of the topic and the fact that it has never been researched in this manner before. The DFG is therefore providing more than 3.7 million euros of funding over the course of the next four years. ‘I would like to congratulate FAU on this new DFG Centre for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences and wish Professor Dr. Michael Lackner and the entire team every success in achieving their research goals,’ says Bavarian science minister Bernd Sibler. By awarding this funding, the DFG has once again confirmed that FAU is conducting ambitious research at a high international standard. The establishment of a Centre for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences underlines that this explicitly also applies to the humanities and social sciences, as this DFG funding is specifically tailored to the forms of work carried out in these fields,’ Minister Sibler continues. ‘Researchers in these fields will also continue to find an excellent environment for their work in Bavaria. The Bavarian government will ensure that this is the case, for example with our planned University Innovation Act.’

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