



Scuola Italiana di Studi
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2011 KYOTO LECTURES

Thursday, March 24th, 18:00h

Benjamin Penny SPEAKER

Gods and Monsters Celebrity, Quackery and Religion in Contemporary China

In two celebrated recent cases, a Daoist priest by the name of Li Yi, and a *qigong* master called Hu Wanlin, both of whom had acquired great reputations as miracle healers, fell from grace, the latter at the hands of the law, the former in the media. Over a few short years Li had become one of China's most famous Daoists with a following that included some of that country's most notable celebrities. He became well-known for his seemingly superhuman feats and his mountain retreat outside Chongqing became a centre for spiritual seekers. Hu, on the other hand, was perhaps China's best known *qigong* doctor of the 1990s. Crowds flocked to his clinic hoping for a cure, but it is estimated that he was directly responsible for the deaths of over 200 of his patients. This lecture examines how Li and Hu gained, and then lost their reputations; how powerful the force of traditional ideas about healing remains in contemporary China; and how celebrity operates and is constructed. It addresses the world of *qigong*, the nature of Chinese religiosity, and the influence of the popular Chinese media since the middle 1990s.

Benjamin Penny is Deputy Director of the Australian Centre on China in the World, in the College of Asia and the Pacific, at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia and is currently a Visiting Professor at the Institute for Research in the Humanities, University of Kyoto. His research interests include medieval Daoism, the writings of Protestant missionaries on China in the nineteenth century, the religion of Chinese people in Australia, and contemporary religious and spiritual movements in China. He is the editor of *Religion and Biography in China and Tibet* and *Daoism in History: Essays in Honour of Liu Ts'un-yan*, and of the journal *East Asian History*. His book *The Religion of Falun Gong* will be published by the University of Chicago Press in 2012.

This lecture will be held at the Institute for Research in Humanities (IRH), Kyoto University (seminar room, 1st floor).

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