

Spirituality in a non-religious world --- New Age Movement in Hong Kong

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Subject and Aim

The topic of my research is based on the New Age movement in Hong Kong, that is concerning the stressful life routines and problems citizens face in everyday life, including relationship, health issues, financial crisis etc. People usually seek doctors and professional psychiatrist for useful advice or medicines to help. However, nowadays, people don't seem to be satisfied with doctors' advice, and some would rather choose to go to New Age stores, shops and centers to buy "things" that claimed to have magic power. For example, crystals, herbs, animal feathers and organs. Why do people buy these things? Some believe the object can attract a different energy and frequency to their life and alleviate whatever difficult conditions they encountered. In addition, some people may go to tarot card readers or use dowsing rods as tools to search for life answers beyond the physical world and the present. Are there any other reasons behind their choice? Are these ways useful? How much they can offer to "buy" their health or love through the materials that claim to have effects on their life? In Shamanism, one of the topics I encountered from the Hong Kong Tarot Center, I ask how do they make relevant the idea of sacred power coming from ancient tribes into the modern world? To what extent does this concept help them see the world and their life in a different perspective? How eager are they to spend on taking these "spiritual enhancing" courses to improve their lives and are they helpful? What does this kind of life seeking purpose in non-religious ways possibly imply towards contemporary Hong Kong? Why are there differences in search for spirituality compared with the past? In this project, I am going to probe the questions I have above.

Methodology

In this project, I practiced participant observations and structured interviews respectively. Part of the participant observation was done in the Hong Kong Tarot Centre where I joined their shamanic healing circles and watched through the process of some of the shamanic ceremonies. Another part of participant observation was done within the tarot card class and the dowsing rod class that was organized cooperatively by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions and the HK Tarot Centre. During the classes, I have been able to look at how the tools were utilized and what were the reactions of the participants and later analyzed the meanings and functions of each act in class. From the structured interviews with my informants, I tried to understand participants' views towards New Age beliefs in Hong Kong and the reasons why they are attracted to New Age, as well as to what extent they get helped in their life with similar disciplines and activities. Another location for my fieldwork is the Purple Moon New Age Shop in Causeway Bay, I did an interview with the shop owner, while I met customers inside the stores and get to know how people think about the work of magic tools or other materials within New Age. The purpose of the interviews is to understand the ideology of the modern way of achieving spirituality, which is in a non-religious and rather materialistic way in some aspects. I expect to find out the factors concerning the change in modes of searching life meanings in comparison with traditional religions.

Evaluation on level of impact in New Age

Bruce pinpointed a crucial point in studying the impact of New Age in a society, as New Age is organized around client and audience cults, it means that its popularity cannot be

measured by estimating the membership of particular organizations. We should look at to what extent people are affected by the thinking and values of New Age in their life, instead of calculating the number of New Agers in Hong Kong to examine its general impact. As a result, qualitative assessment is more suitable than quantitative approach in my study.

Origin and History of New Age Movement

The New Age Movement includes a range of spiritual, religious beliefs and practices originated from the U.S. that were developed in Western nations and become popular during the 1970s. Streiker (1990) described it as following that “New Age is not new, it is more than a fad.” He suggested that in the midst of the quackery and foolishness of New Age are elements that are crucial and permanent--- that will remain after the label of New Age is replaced by something else.

With commercialization comes along with capitalism, wide ranges of exotic products flooded in. Stores that came to be known as "New Age shops" sprung up, selling relevant spiritual healing and self-helping books, magazines, jewelries and crystals (Sutcliffe 2003:126). Even in music, New Age music is created to accompany the holistic growth of humanity and consciousness within humans, this is the picture many New Agers themselves see. There are also various kinds of tests in astrology, numerology, chakra massage, channeling services, inner child workshops opened for all walks of life. One of which commonly seen is channeling. Bruce (1996) suggested that huge range of New Age interests are more briefly observed in the output of “broadband” producers who provided

general guidance rather than specific therapies, many of whom received daily messages from an inner voice. In the 1970s and 1980s, these groups of people who “heard” the divine messages conceptualized their source in highly abstract terms as an “energy vortex”, or other similar forms, label the source with a personal name and even imbue it with quasi-personal features (Bruce 1996:203).

Through its path to popularity, many held opposing views on the weirdness of the New Age beliefs. They see its reasons of popularity as only gimmicks and fun out of the mystery. The word "New Age" is a relatively flexible term used to illustrate a wide range of practices and beliefs that turned popular during the late 1980s. Many of them came from esoteric culture of the late 19th centuries, others were extensions of new religions and the human potential movement (Bruce, 1996:196).

In Hong Kong, it is believed that New Age became known by people at the time around 2000, and the Hong Kong New Age Centre was set up in 2002 with the Hong Kong Tarot Centre opened in 2008. These two organizations are most popular among New Agers as many courses and gatherings were held by organizers of these two centers. The activities included courses in spiritual healing and tests, workshops on astrology, hypnosis and intuition training. There are also shops selling New Age books and products, some are online stores which trade through social media platforms. For example, Instagram and Facebook.

New Age belief

A lot of New Age magazines and advertisement literature suggested that the primary concern of New Agers is to improve the self (Bruce 1996:204). New Age believes in the all-embracing nature of the universe, in the end everything is cosmic consciousness, all is one (Bruce 1996:209).

They opposed the Newtonian view of matter (conventional scientific thinking). The New Age category suggested that the world is not made up of “tangible bits and pieces following the laws of interaction” but is all matter and energy connected and constructed in invisible ways that human is just starting to understand it (Bruce 1996:204). It upholds a holistic living style and emphasize on ecology, health and healing.

Streiker (1990) suggested that the New Age is transformative rather than reformative. It aims at transforming people's way of thinking towards life encounters. It doesn't measure spiritual success by quantitative method. For example, calculating how many schools or hospitals have been built by the believers. New Age is more concerned with the transformation of consciousness (Streiker 1990:52). During the Shamanic healing circle, at the end of each section participants shared their food and chat. They will talk about some gossips or problems they encountered during the week, while the shamanic practitioner will always talk about how by practice he or others could see through or understand why certain good things or problems come to their life. He demonstrated his own way on the transformation of consciousness, that if people believe it will happen, it happens. For example, if one feels inferior and think himself as vulnerable, he will attract people who will bully him, and he may even accept what the fact that he is bullied. He constantly reminded students in the class that "Thoughts create reality." There are many books in

bookstores teaching people the law of attraction and that is part of the New Age theory. In fact, New Age embraces a huge combination of thoughts and values.

New Age is panentheistic, it worships the creation rather than the creator, replaces obedience to moral law with preoccupation with self-realization (Streiker 1990:51). It is spiritually ecological. It emphasizes the inseparability and mutual dependence of human kind and nature. The view has put it in opposition to the capitalist' view of making full exploitation of the environment for the sake of short term profits (Streiker 1990:51). Meanwhile, New Age is reflective, emphasizes the need for self-understanding through meditation. As they believe the divine is present within the self. It is also ecstatic that it values the out-of-the-ordinary, the sensational, the unusual. They are open to the exploration of the limits of human consciousness, and celebrates the transpersonal and psychic dimensions of human existence, for example, the out of body experience and spiritual response therapy etc.

General View

New Age is not sectarian, it is cultic (Bruce 1996:196). Elements of New Age were seen as cultic while people put them into two categories, client cults and audience cults. On one hand, the client cult involved an individual relationship in which one acts as consumer and the other acts as the purveyor. During the time, this client cult usually exists within the form of a relationship between a therapist and a patient. (In HK, this mode of relationship is also common, the role could be therapist versus patient, the hypnotist and the hypnotized, the tarot master and the one who asked question, the tutor in a SRT test versus the

participants in the test.) One advertised his or her services on magazines or bulletin board offering consultations for fixed fees. People then book the service and choose between a huge category of services relating to tarot reading, crystal healing, past life regression etc. In HK, there are shops selling all kinds of objects related to New Age spirituality, for example crystals, animal's feathers, oil, and there are also centers that provided expensive courses for participants to learn specific skills to enhance their intuition and calm their body and mind. There are real places for people to buy these kinds of materials whereas most of the others have online shops and social platforms such as Facebook page and Instagram. Among all, tarot reading is the most common and popular service, especially among teenagers. It is explained as they faced self-growth problems, study pressure, peer pressure and constantly searching for life direction, they are likely to seek help with non-legitimate means while hoping to foresee the changes ahead. The popularity of tarot card reading could be proved by the tarot reading section in the university college fairs every year.

On the other hand, the audience cult involved in mass distribution of words, spoken and printed (Bruce, 1996:197). The circulation of the New Age body is through books, magazines, audio cassettes and public lectures. In Hong Kong, a series of videos and radio record could be found on YouTube. The topic of the talk ranges from the use of crystals in healing to the negative ego and self etc. In terms of books, New Age series including the "Conversation with God" written by Neale Donald Walsch is commonly found in many Hong Kong bookstores. Many people may have saw it but not many would know it is actually New Age teaching. Streiker (1990) wrote a book studying how cultural and

religious phenomenon of the New Age had developed into a section of the mainstream America society. The same form seems to be happening in Hong Kong. In his book, he distinguished two types of New Age participants: New Agers who trust in gurus, channelers, psychics, and crystal healers; and New Agers who embrace ecology, social conscience, feminism, and compassion for all living things (Streiker 1990). The former participates in all kinds of tests, while the latter tends to read a lot and embrace nature.

Critics on New Age

The concepts within New Age are usually interlocking, what is evidence for one set is evidence for the others (Bruce 1996:204). "Why is the world all in one? It's because everything is made up of energies." New Age not only adopts the precepts of new thinking, but it also calls upon the doctrines of scores of organized, not-so-organized, and even disorganized sects (Streiker 1990:38). The interlocking concepts within New Age may easily blind the eyes of the readers and convince themselves by the repetition of the same theory. When a person's thought turns into a belief and followed by people, people usually take it for granted as it was articulated by a "well-known" writer or speaker. However, they may just find out something very different after digging up the background of that person (often the past spiritual leader of New Age). For example, who is Seth? Who is Osho? Who are these fabulous spiritual teachers under the wide scope of New Age? What have they done before? After all, many times the writer 's name is just a spirit's name created by a person who received "inspiration", or a person who has a complicated social background but not recorded in his books. However, for most of the time the books would just mention

the good side of the person, for example, saying which school he taught in or the great spiritual enlightenment he accomplished, and omit the important background information of him. At the same time, the description is abstract and subjective. In addition, almost all best-sellers writers of those popular new age books received enlightenment in divorce and unhappy relationship in the past. He writes: "The appeal of New Age has always been to the marginal-- to those who do not or cannot fit in, who sometimes struggle for decades to discover a sense of vocation and mission, whose lives are always on the threshold of fulfillment, but who never fully enter in" (Streiker 1990:49)

The text-based research of New Age cannot prove its validity, many of their claims from the spiritual tests cannot be tested by experiment. That every one of us may have different reactions towards the experience so the testing result cannot be regarded as knowledge, it avoids arguments. "It does not work for you is no evidence for it not working. (Bruce, 1996:209)."

There is no longer any idea that there is one truth, one correct body of knowledge, instead there is individual preference. If one thing works for you, then it is true (Bruce 1996:5). In New Age, everybody does what is right in their eyes, there is little or no guidance on what should be done. Lina, a classmate I met from the dowsing rod class, told me how she felt about new age and religion. *"It is almost like a buffet, you pick what serves you, you pick the idea that is helpful for you. It provides you with absolute freedom. In fact, people can have different interpretations over the same text of teaching."*

Nevertheless, there are people questioned about the effects from New Age healing and tools, whereas pendulum, tarot cards and astrology in New Age works through the self-

fulfilling prophecy and pendulum healing serves only placebo effect. It is suggested that, a false definition of the situation in the beginning will evoke a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true (Merton, 1948:195). Therefore, a positive or negative prophecy, strongly held belief, or delusion declared as truth when it is actually false may sufficiently influence people so that their reactions will ultimately fulfill the once-false prophecy. It acts on behavioral confirmation effect, in which behavior influenced by expectations, causes those expectations to come true (Darley, 1983:21). There is indeed no power in tools and objects itself, nor the spirits or energies could tell the future. People who go to tarot readers usually care a lot about what the reader says during a reading, how do they react to the cards, and what messages they convey, which facilitates the power of prophecy as they put too much trust and expectation in it. In addition, many outsiders think that books about spiritual memoirs, inner journeys in meditation, past life regression, crystals-cure-cancer are pseudoscientific gimmick, they couldn't be proved as science. As for all kinds of healing in New Age, it's only patient's belief that works in the treatment.

Analysis I

As for New Age, there are enormously differing sorts and levels of involvement. Some people treat it no more than reading a story or interesting ideas; some may see a great change of world view and life directions opposite to traditional religions (Bruce 1996:200). Nowadays, there is a changing mode of belief, different from traditional religion and fixed practices, this belief is non-religious, but rather realistic. Believers spend a lot money on

material things, buying crystal, learning spells and ceremonies through courses, exploring a different idea of self by doing various tests and therapies.

From my observation and interviews with my informants, there are mainly **three** kinds of reasons for people to engage in the operation of New Age movement in Hong Kong. It includes tackling problems ranging from family issues to workplace conflicts, experiencing new self through various spiritual tests or supernatural contact and enhancing well-being with the attraction on health and money. Some of these aims seem to have a dependent relationship, for example, tackling problems and enhancing well-being, but they are clearly different. Many informants who go to the pendulum classes or shamanic healing circles are facing relationship problems, working pressure or health issues, they aimed at getting cured or tackling their crisis after all. Others see the course as leisure activities and something for amateurs, to escape from loneliness in life as almost all people go to classes alone. While some younger informants reflected that they go to classes for fun and simply want to try out different tests in New Age, socially speaking, some want to explore life meanings and find friends in the process. The class offered a place for people to find companions with similar interests and socialize with people coming from all ages.

As for the common features of participants, the people I interviewed always possess a sensitive, sentimental or empathetic character. While I discovered people who ask about life meanings frequently, had experienced emotional breakdowns or been through special life challenges are more drawn to New Age belief. Others who have romantic pursuits, self-exploration habits and previous psychic experience in their life are also often attracted to New Age.

Part I

From my interview with different customers buying various magic goods or joining the healing circles, they shared different attitudes and wishes in making some changes in themselves.

The first time I visited the tarot shop in Hong Kong, it gave me an impression that people tackled their problems in a very indirect way — buy a magical object and wait for the magic to work itself. Why didn't they choose to do something to make changes in their lives by themselves? Plus, this method is highly commercialized, they are spending much money on an object by which for the same amount of money could be exchanged for a better experience, for example a trip or a short adventure. The way the new age ideologies are couched like a religion but it is not religious, while being greatly commercialized. People create meanings onto the objects and make use of the wishes of people to persuade them to buy those expensive goods. The products don't necessarily just refer to material goods, but also courses and various types of spiritual experience.

Structured Interview

Interview with the shop owner -----Purple Moon New Age Shop

On 4th September, I went to the Purple Moon New Age Shop in Causeway Bay which sold all kinds of magic object and new age books. The shop is an up-level store which located in a half residential and commercial building. The shop owner is a male and claimed himself to be a new age magician, he knows how to play magic and tarot card reading, not in a way of performance art but in a way in which a wizard will do. He sells all kinds books and objects together with teaching courses about tarot reading and operating magic ceremonies for people who want to achieve certain goals. It was told that all the magic tools and objects he sells were imported from foreign countries, including the animal dried organs which were believed to have special functions.

The shop is located on the second floor of a private building. It is a compacted and small store with its total area of around 300 square meters. The shop is a flat used for commercial purpose, this type of mixed land use is commonly seen in Hong Kong as the land rent on the upper floor is cheaper, and can survive better for such kind of small scale business. Although the flat is small, the products were all packed on the book shelves in a tidy manner, including books, tarot cards, magic oil, accessories and other magic tools.

Surprisingly, the shop owner himself is a magician, he claimed that he knows tarot card reading and also doing particular ceremonies. The first time I met him I told my purpose of visit, he was a little guarded and defensive at first but later became more open to answer my questions. The following is what he told me:

My name is Gabriel, I am a magician within the new age movement. Apart from selling magic materials and goods, sometimes people find me to perform ceremonies, this is what I do and earned my living from. (Is there a market in doing magic in Hong Kong? Do you

worry that no one needs it?) I didn't worry about that, or I should say, there will be other ways of earning money even if no one needs ceremonies. It would be useful in some ways as long as the person has that field of knowledge and ability. No one can take it away from you. In fact, there are quite a number of consumer needs, it still has its market.

(When and how did you get involved with tarots and magic?) I have been playing tarot card since 2003, I helped people and started my business with it. The first time I tried to be a tarot interpreter, I succeed. There is a talent within me and that ability is natural, some people are born to do particular things, just like painters and chefs. (Do you have friends who are also New Agers?) Sure, I do but not a lot of them, it is lucky to have people shared the same interest or views with you, then you can often share insights with them and they would understand without you explaining. (How do you face the opposing opinions on magic practice?) **Magic is only useful for those who believe**, it is all about believing and having faith in particular things. But usually **I don't like to debate about the effectiveness of magic, it is hard to put those abstract concepts and spiritual/supernatural experience into words, and when it is conveyed in words, it lost or distorted the original meaning**. It then becomes another matter. **It's like translating a piece of music into words, when you do that you must miss out something**.

(How do you see people with mental problems seek magic or spiritual healing rather than going to the doctor? Do you think it helps?) Personally, I think some people don't want to admit that they have "problems" or "disease", people usually have the perception that going to the doctors means the situation is severe. They think it makes things serious to meet doctors. That's why they might feel more at ease when trying alternative ways.

Whether it helps or not, I think it varies for different people. But I believe they have their own independent principles and theories in healing.

Magic

According to Malinowski (1925), magic acts are the “expressions of emotion” or “emotion bound up with the possession or the lack of power (1925:46). With magic, his organism reproduces the acts suggested by the anticipation of hope. The seeking of magic are natural responses to frustrating circumstances and are actually based on a universal psycho-physiological mechanism (*Malinowski 1925:242*). They encouraged the expressions of emotion in act or word, so that the participant and foresee the images of success of the wished-for results. By doing this, harmony and equilibrium is regained in life (Faber, 1996:47).

What's more, the subjective flow of picture, words, and actions leaves a very deep conviction of its' reality. The wish and thoughts of the wisher will be strengthened and reinforced each time. After practicing the magic, the fabulous spell or beliefs with its power are regarded as mental obsession shows a strict message from an external and impersonal force (Faber, 1996:47).

Malinowski claimed that the fountain of magical belief does not come from the air but from actual experiences that people actually lived through. A magic's persistence is to survive failures and disappointments. While it also comes to the most crucial fact that the positive

cases of magics always overshadow the negative ones. For one, the social networks that feature magic can promote a sense of community and shared values, some participants suggested that the sense of "bond in belief" is something they couldn't get from an organized religion (Bloch, 1988:117).

In the interview with Gabriel, I then further asked about his opinion about New Age movement as a whole. This is how he replied:

*(Do you think New Age Movement for you belongs to an academy or religion?) Personally, I think both are not. To myself and my observation on my friends, I would say **it just represents how modern people wish they could take back the control of their own life and destiny.** Perhaps here I imply that most of us lived under different circumstances that make us unhappy. **We want to change, but not rely on the conventional practice, following rituals in a religion, we want to do it sincerely in a different way.** It is like a teenager who starts to rebel against his/her parents and seek for a brighter future or get some "fresh" air. **The idea of New Age has provided them a "new" different way to interact with life itself.** New Age movement is just the unconventional and uncommon act that people do to escape the normative form of traditional religion.*

*(In what ways do you think New Age is better than other religions?) In my opinion, **the individual can feel the change and differences brought by the teachings/effects of New Age more easily and within a shorter time.** If you are good at digesting spiritual teachings from a book, the words may change your views towards life immediately. In terms of studying, although New Agers will discuss their difficulties and enlightenment in*

meditation with their friends too, the pool is small. Therefore, most of the time they could only rely on their own.

New Age emphasized on exploring within ourselves, study what our mind thinks and feel. It assumes that there must be a "self" living inside us and people have to listen to the needs of self, in which I will analyze the concept of self at the latter part of this paper. Ultimately, the path of growth in New Age is individual-oriented and self-dominant, the writer and reader relationship, the client and customer relationship, the speaker and the audience relationship showed that there is forever only one target is being served each time in New Age practices, which is the self. In many processes of learning and knowing, the communication and interaction is less and it is most often one sided. In another word, one can just stay at home for hundred days reading and contemplating, testing out himself or herself. It doesn't require the actual interaction with people, this bring us on analysis of celebration on individualism at last.

Interview with the New Age Shop's Customer ----- Kate

In the second visit to the Purple Moon New Age Store, I met Kate who is a 27 years old woman who looks very young and cheerful. I chatted with her for a while and know that she was choosing new tarot cards, later I did an interview with her and the following is what she told me:

"I am Kate, I am a professional tarot and numerology reader. I had been practicing it since secondary school. This talent and ability have once made me popular in school, that's also

*why I chose this is as part of my career as well. I didn't know what is so called New Age from the beginning, **I just found the tarot cards beautiful and the person who can predict it and tell the fact very cool.** Later when I bought books about tarot cards to study, I knew it's part of something else, a larger discipline, but it didn't change anything. Usually **I don't claim myself as New Ager, the labeling is useless, and always cause troubles.** I just focus on what I like and what I could do. (Have you ever tried any spiritual test or had some special encounters with spirits?) No, the idea of SRT is interesting but I never try that, I might try it in the future. Do encounters include communications? I think I did communicate with the voice from outside when I did the reading."*

Kate represents a group of people within the New Age movement who don't know everything about New Age but usually encounter claims or labeling of people suggesting that they are New Ager. Many of them don't like the labeling. Throughout my conversation with Kate, I sensed that it comes from the rejection of mind towards others' stereotype and oversimplification of what they know and do.

Interview with the New Age Shop's Customer ----- Jacky

Another customer I met through the New Age shop owner is Jacky, she claimed herself half of a New Ager as she believes and is interested in some of its theories. She was looking for some magic tools and I heard her when she was discussing which goods have the best effect. She finally bought an amulet.

*I am Jacky, this is the second time I visited the store. The first time I came here because I got troubles with my work. I am a design assistant in an art studio. My boss was being extra demanding these months, I couldn't reach his expectation and fulfilled what he wanted no matter what I do. He complained a lot about what I kept correcting based on his requirement, he always had opposite needs before and after. For example, he said the color of the poster is too dark, I made it light. After I corrected it, he said darker is better. The same situation happened again and again. **After I bought an amulet recommended by the shop owner, the situation did change a lot!** My boss returned to the normal state and didn't complain about the minor stuff. That's why I am coming back now, my relationship with somebody I loved had deteriorated rapidly these days and there seemed no turning back. I saw many comments on the website that the love amulet might help, I just think it is worth trying. (What if it's just a normal accessory that doesn't work at all?) What I am thinking in my mind is that what if it could work but I didn't buy it. **Compared with the price of the amulet, the hope I bought valued much more than the amulet.** (Do you believe in destiny? Do you think an object could change your destiny?) I like reading fairy tales when I was small, **I believed there is a world that human can't see, or maybe more than one. I am not sure about destiny, but I think it is not very difficult to make things or people changed in reality, if some kinds of power intervene.** (Like magic?) Yes. (So, you believe in magic?) Yes.*

Participant Observation ----- Hong Kong Tarot Center

Shamanic healing circle

The Hong Kong Tarot Center organized a Shamanic healing circle in this season, followed by a total of 6 sessions that were held irregularly. I attended three of them and each time listening to some new background knowledge about the shaman practice. The people attending the gathering changed time by time, it is because not all the sections are mandatory. People just go there and listen when the topic is interesting to them.

The process of the healing circle is divided into four parts. Each time, we sited on a meditation cushion and formed a circle. The first part is greeting, started with the sharing of the week with everybody and introduce everyone to new comers. The second part is the theory teaching, the tutor's name is Kelvin. He is a very experienced New Ager as he is a shamanic practitioner, meditation facilitator, Zen counselor and psychspiritual healer. The third part is the activity/ test/ ceremony time. Lastly is the food sharing session. The time is flexible to change, sometimes the participants will do a “frequency/ energy resonance” together before food sharing, we used our palms to touch the palm of the person sitting next to us and project an “Om” sound.

In my opinion, the healing circle shares the same function of fellowship in Christianity --- to calm the mind and body. The only difference is that the healing circle was not doing any kinds of worship of god, but people try to place the concentration on the feelings and body, on ourselves. Another difference varies on the background knowledge of Shamanism on different themes varies each time while participants have to pay the lesson fee.

Participant Observation ----- (Healing Circle) Power Animal

This session is about the shamanic animal representations and advice people could get by choosing out their type of power animal. The tutor explained that human has got different personality while it correlates to the characteristics of certain animals. Therefore, when we study deep about our power animal, we would get insight from it. The same is useful in knowing our enemy's power animal so that we can figure out their weakness. He added that although now we don't have shamans who need to kill anymore, but the power animal could be useful in thinking what action we should take in various situations.

During the 2-3 hours, there were seven people sitting there forming a circle. The first round, a wooden stick is passed from Kelvin to every one of us. The one who holds the stick will first introduce his/ her name, then tell everybody one thing they are grateful for with one thing pray for and wish for. According to Kelvin's teaching, the theory is that by being grateful for what we have and be satisfied with it, people tuned their energy to high frequency. Then, when they wish for other things, it will be easier to come true. Another reason is that by affirming our wants, we will be more determent and strengthened our pursuit in that thing in the process. The inside wish will then project out to the reality. People talked about health, family, relationships and money in the part of gratitude. For example, a boy who's also the same age as me studying psychology said he is happy for his good health and the harmonious relationship his family has. And he wished that he could be braver to approach someone he liked.

In the theory part, Kelvin (the teacher) brought about 12 power animal cards and explained to us each of those characteristics of the animal, including deer, elk, buffalo, hawk, eagle, owl, bear, cougar etc. Different animals have their orientation, identification of femininity

and masculinity. He explained that shaman in the past had to went through lots of courage test to prove himself capable to conquer the dark power. They had to hunt and kill large wild animals. However, the ancient mode of shaman practice is no longer needed in the modern world. Therefore, in order to be get close to nature, people nowadays just picked the body parts of animals. For example, black cat eyes and bat eyes are believed to have special power. People believed that animals' special power is stored inside their body. The power animals can be divided into short term and long term, people get inspiration by studying the particular kind of animal and find out the relation and connection with the real world person. The example of the Shaman practice demonstrated that customs and practice falls within the norms of the society. For example, killing wild animals is forbidden, then we won't follow the old habits. Religion and belief still follow human's interpretation and judgment of present at last.

An interesting thing that Kelvin mentioned during the session is that you can understand and study one's personality and thoughts by knowing his/ her long-term power animal identification. The idea is that the person would possess the same characteristics as the animal. For example, bear represents a strong, protective, confident and leader typed charisma. By letting people know about your own long-term power animal, it might be a threat to yourself. As one can find ways to attack the soft spot of yours, he also mentioned one can study the characteristics of animal by watching the national geographic channel, while students might know themselves better by studying their power animal. In my opinion, one can surely find connections when you study one thing deeply, everything and anything.

In the case of the power animal, we are seeing how people try to invent and put symbols into people in real lives. They used animals to represent the personality and characteristics of one and objectify the being into an animal entity. In this way, participants who learned the idea might feel more easy and comfortable to confront the images of their original fear and look into what could be done to understand his/her fear more. For example, when you discover difficulties confronting your boss in the workplace, you might study the power animal of you and your boss, so that you understand why certain arguments happened consistently and how it might have gone wrong, perhaps you and your boss' power animal simply doesn't match.

In this way, they projected the problem into another world, to understand and solve the problems in a distinctive dimension, for example in the animal kingdom. By keeping a distance from the events they encountered in real life, perhaps it made them feel more comfortable and easier to reconsider problems in an objective way with a broader sense. In many cases of new age belief and teachings, people are finding meanings and reasons beyond reality that could be accused for the "something wrong" rather than just facing the fact in real life. Some see it as finding "excuse", while many believe in the mystical power in unseen universal laws. Practice like past life regression is also an example, people suspect there is an effect left from the previous life that would affect the "now".

Participant Observation----- (Healing Circle) Cut Away Ceremony

Another session of the healing circle is the Cut Away shamanic ceremony. According to Kelvin, the purpose of it is to cut away the negativity pattern or free ourselves from

addiction on something in order to bring upon positive change. Normally, the ceremony can be used for healing, letting go of the past, spiritual & personal growth, attracting a new relationship, gaining inspiration from the divine and much more. The focus of the ceremony is to set people free.

Cathy is whom I met from the shamanic healing circle. She volunteered to be the ceremony's main character because she got some questions on her mind about her career choice. She was working at a company in which it doesn't provide basic salary and she was terrified by the way her boss treated her. That reminded her of her own mother. All of us listening are very clear about what kind of choices she should make, but she said she doesn't want to leave and doesn't know about the reason.

First, Kelvin has asked her to stand up while all of us remained seated. Then, he asked her to pick up a person in the group whose energy looks to most similar to her. She picked, and a boy stood up. Kelvin had asked them to look into each other's eyes and pictured the person is the boss while the boy has to imagine himself as the boss. They exchanged a weird and long silence of eyesight. Next, Kelvin asked them to speak whatever they want. And the boy asked: "Are you afraid of me?" She replied: "Yes.". "What if I stand closer? (with a step moving towards her) And she immediately stepped back. (And before she spoke again, there's another long emptiness of silence, but the atmosphere was intense.) Later she cried, while saying out her true feelings towards her (her boss is female) and all the fear she felt for her. Then, Kelvin asked whether she wanted to find support, and she picked a woman (acted as someone she liked) but their interaction was weird. The woman stepped farther away when Cathy stood closer to her, while when she asked the lady to accompany

her to face with the boss, she refused and remained a far distance from her. Later we knew from her, she likes the person, but they were only friends. And it seems that the boss was just a distraction of her lack of support from who she truly cared. While she didn't get the support she need, she turned her head to something as disappointing as her romantic relationship.

That was the first time I watched a “ceremony” like this, the form is like a therapy drama for healing everyone sitting there as we focused on their interaction and imagined how she felt at that moment. From the observation, the people who joined the healing circle or interested in mind-body-spiritual stuff faced ordinary life struggles and they are sensitive to their feelings. At last, Kelvin asked every one of us to share what we have observed and how it was related to our own life. As he kept repeating “*What you see from others or the outside world (problems and challenges) are actually your own life lessons to pass through. You can only understand through what you have and what you know.*”.

The cutting off ceremony serves the function of empowering liberation, as described by Bruce (1996), it involved role-playing designed to force people to give up their inhibitions, while being able to discuss their problem openly and mixing freely with the participants. The setting of the healing circle is opened purposefully for people who want to share and discuss the topics of life or difficulties in group, similar to encounter group or the counseling group but it is implicit as there are specific topics of teaching in each session. It is more casual than a counselling group while more in depth than a normal teaching class. The healing circle has provided a platform for participants to gather with people who have

similar interest and chitchat from time to time, it is also how the participants maintain their social life and build up their social identity.

In conclusion, there are two types of ideas and focus could be identified through my participant observation on various parties of New Age movement in Hong Kong. One is nature-oriented (consciousness) and focus on green living; the other is experience-oriented (tests and tools) and focuses on the experiment of self. At some points we might feel weird seeing people spend a lot of money buying materials that we don't understand and claimed themselves to be a whole-person who is conscious about their life with the environment. As they can be contradicting, depending on the level of investment on the latter. In my opinion, the "strangeness" I sensed from this phenomenon originates from the capitalist society. When a rather primitive culture (E.g. Shamanism) emerges to the modern society, something has to change in order to survive. We seek for a fast and perfect way to deal with our problem, to get cure. Then, commercialization invades. Take the shamanic teaching as an example, shamans value the resources from the mother earth, they believed the nature and animals have magic powers which can help humans to become a better self, a warrior would like to be strong as a lion while tribe leaders wish to be as wise as an owl. However, in modern society we hardly have the chance to get close to the wild animals thus it is difficult to catch and collect their furs or eyes. Therefore, citizens from developed countries would purchase these "exotic" goods at an expensive price from stores. A business man who also knows about magic will then make use of people's wants and further generate more needs. In this case, it seems to me that the pursuit of human spirituality is eternal, it cannot be related to religion, therefore also not mutual to religious *methods*. *It is*

sometimes material, affected by the consumerism culture and commercialization of modern world; but it is also spiritual in which all those beliefs behind the material objects still carries the divinity human pursue.

Interview with participant of the Shamanic Healing Circle ----- Edmund

Edmund is a 47 years old man I met from the Shamanic healing circle, in fact I was amazed by the fact that there are people from the older generation in the circle as lots of students in Hong Kong don't know about the New Age movement. It made me curious on how these people get involved into this.

*I worked as a security guard at a bank, I lived a normal life and I have a daughter. **Last year my father died, I sensed the need from within to search for a faith and religion. At first, I looked up a lot on different kinds of religion, later I moved onto information about physical and mental growth. Then I found New Age, it feels that its' theory united all kinds of religious thoughts.** My work during daytime is dull, I used to watch a lot of movies after a long day's work. Two years ago, this habit has changed to watching videos on YouTube, there are so much to explore on this platform and even better than movies. One day, I found some interesting videos about special talents, it's about some children trained in their early age to see through words and patterns with something covered on top and their eyes closed. I was stunned by the fact that this kind of magical talents really exists. I don't know how could this work so I continued to search for similar topics like that. Then there are different kinds of talk and shows discussing the out of body experience, soul*

connection, life path numbers etc. From these studies, I discovered a new world that is different from what I saw from the past, that is a world full of unknown and divine power. The mystery of it encouraged me to get closer to this topic. One day, I was browsing on the internet, and before my realization, the Hong Kong Tarot Centre's website pops up. I looked into it and found some courses and study group on the New Age books. Yes, then I joined it and met a great spiritual teacher from Taiwan. She talks about "Life Blueprint Healing". She taught people to look deep into our emotions and find out the origin of our negativity. I am always excited to learn something new about myself and the others. Sometimes I feel touched when the teacher said something and I echoed in my heart, it reminded my own personal experience. Different people chase different things in life, I guess for me it's the unknown and mysteries in life that attracts me.

In Edmund's case, the experience of his father's death might have reminded him about something beyond the physical world, the spiritual and mental field. The reason to be attracted to New Age originates from his heart of searching for more to replace the sorrow or emptiness from within. In that ideology he could find most of the explanations in life and death, simplicity to complexity, inward and outward. From my conclusion of three main reasons for people to be interested in New Age, Edmund belongs to two groups, tackling problems and experiencing the new self. He has got an intention and a target to be fulfilled when he was searching for a religion. He needed an answer to digest the pain and lost after the death of his father. After the visit to the Tarot Center and participated in the course, he had found out something more, both himself and the others. He believes that

what he had learned in the course is useful, that helps him understand people's life and his own.

Interview with participant of the Shamanic Healing Circle -----Angel

Angel (24 years old), a girl who looked very gentle and kind with her smiles is a florist. She arrived early to class and she shared her experience in New Age with me, "***I was brought up in Christian schools, I believed in God but I didn't join the fellowship anymore after I graduated. Three years ago, I broke up with someone I really loved, that's when I started to lose hope and trust in relationships and people. I suffered from a long period of depressing states and felt like losing everything I cherished in life. After that I prayed, but I still constantly feel the emptiness in my heart from time to time. After some time, I read an interesting book and later known that it was New Age teaching. New Age has given me a new angle of looking into life. It lightens my world again. To put down the physical, my identity and experience to enter a wider metaphysical world. I felt peace in that spectrum. My friends know I believe in New Age teachings, it doesn't affect our relationship though. Sometimes they are curious about what did I learn from the books and classes. I find power animal similar to Chinese zodiac animals. After studying the features of the power animal, I felt easier to accept my weaknesses as natural.***"

People who became devoted in religion are often those who experienced downfalls in life, and it doesn't only limit to those who believe in New Age. However, what sort of materials they encountered when they are depressed may contribute more on what do they believe.

Angel is a common example in which she experienced emotional breakdowns and thus later reached New Age teachings. New Age beliefs claimed the world is good, the great evil is that many people are not able to enjoy the good things in life as their abilities are blocked and hidden, they offered ways to free one's potential and inner self (Bruce, 1996:179). However, the implausibility in it has always shifted our attention away from reflecting on the truth or falsity. After all, being right and being believed are different while the first does not always lead to the second.

Part II

Participant Observation-----Book reading workshop by a Taiwanese spiritual teacher

In the evening of 19th January, I went to the Hong Kong Tarot Centre to join the book reading workshop of a Taiwanese spiritual teacher Jian Xiang Ting, she seems to be quite famous among the New Age believers while she holds regular courses on her "Blueprints of Life" series teaching people how to practice the message inside "The nature of personal reality", a new age book written by Jane Roberts through channeling the spirit. The "Blueprints of Life" programme described by her, has magical impacts to people's life, that people with severe health problems and financial issues are soon settled once they can fully practice the theory of it. Yet, it is a long duration courses in which some participants had joined for years and there is no end. The book reading workshop is also based on the book "The nature of personal reality". Jian travels to four major locations to teach her classes, including China, Hong Kong, Malaysia. As she mentioned, many of her clients from

Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong suffered from serious diseases, mentally or physically, and they couldn't get cured from professional doctors while some did after they joined the course. According to Jian's speech, she received serious patients often was abandoned by doctors saying their diseases have already reached the final stage and they have to prepare for their death. Through listening to her, it gave those people hopes and possibilities. There are followers of the teacher from the mainland who came to join the session, she seems to be very enthusiastic about Jian's teaching as she gave an emotional and passionate speech at the beginning of the class when Jian's asking about everyone's recent situation and doubts. There were both Putonghua and Cantonese speaker in the workshop. Here is how the lesson goes.

As the lesson starts, the center owner sited next to Jian as her translator and Jian greeted everyone. Then, she invited people to say something about their recent troubles, questions or expectation on the session as she mentioned her instinct gave her this thought. Then some volunteered, the process in which the volunteers share their thoughts about their life was like casual chitchats with friends, however, the stories/problems for some sharing was private and personal, that was a very new experience to me. There were around 30 people sitting in the room. The first speaker was a man who came from Taiwan, as he spoke, he shared a story about a bird and recalled his first experience after joining Jian's class. He said he felt a deep level of sorrow which he had never experienced before, since then he felt like as if he was addicted to this form of realization, he expressed that he loves Jian's class even he felt his pain every time he received the teaching. To me, it sounds like he enjoyed the process of gaining more self-understanding through the lesson and practice

how to observe and digest his own emotions bit by bit which truly attracted him to join the lesson. Another woman asked about the personality problem of being too masculine. One reflected that she was diagnosed with stroke problem half year ago, the doctor couldn't explain the cause after a series of tests and experiments. But then the doctor required her to take medicine by then every day throughout her whole life. She said she felt so frustrated and she gave up taking medicines. Since then, she has not got any big issue. Meanwhile, a boy aged 23 reflected that he was suffering from mental illness and he had a bad relationship with his father when he was small, even to the present. He claimed he read lots of books about mental illness while he never feel afraid to face it. All the people who volunteered to speak is showing the rationale in seeking the cause of their unknown sickness, physical or mental problems. Meanwhile, they also want to find the way to leading to happy relationships, fruitful life and satisfying career.

Jian didn't answer their questions of life problems one by one, however, she tried to use the problems they gave as the example to explain how our emotion was formed and how human's negative emotion cycled repeatedly and poses harm to our life. For example, she explained the negativity rooted inside us would react with another person's negativity at the energy level which in turn causes both parties to act in aggressive ways and causes quarrels, that negativity was accumulated based on the insecurity and rejected experience we encountered since childhood. In such case, these unsettled and not yet released feelings and emotions was gathered and stored in our memory and will be reactivated from time to time. She described, *"Our belief system and thoughts will change our realities and even cause illness. When two negative units of energies interact, it would be magnified and*

projected to other levels in life. For example, attracting negativity at work, study and relationships. The negativity would then loop over and over again in a vicious cycle." She suggested that the belief system in our brain is like a bowl packed of stones, complex, heavy and in layers. The bottomed stone couldn't be taken out unless the stones on top were removed. To observe can help us understand the connections between our thoughts and feelings, negativity dissolves with self-acknowledgement.

The teacher also used concepts of lineage and messages stored in DNA in her teaching in explaining energy interactions. Throughout the workshop, she didn't open the book and participants were not reading any words. Instead, she focused on explaining the mechanism behind how we think and behave. She claimed any kinds of physical pain or mental disorder could be attributed to maternal cause. Insecurity, blockage and failure in connecting and being recognized by the family. According to her, DNA lineage, is also part of the cause. In some cases, the whole lineage inherited similar genes that "lack" the same crucial elements in life, that could be understanding and recognition. The last advice she gave before the lesson ended was to frequently ask ourselves how does the outside world causes impact to us in order the find the connection that matters to our feelings and vibrations.

The form of this workshop is a combination of lecture and a social gathering, though the content of this is not as rich as the common lecture, in part because of the delay in translation from Putonghua to Cantonese. It could as well be a fan meeting as the teacher has attracted some followers based on her charisma. From my observation, some students did not have life problems but they simply enjoy listening to her. It also looked like a public counselling session in which people asked the teacher questions and there are people who

faced similar problems or difficulties that they could talk to there. It is a place in which their social connection could be reestablished while that is differ from workplace, schools or other communities.

Interview with participant from Book Reading Workshop--- Jane, Zac, Panny, Jenny

Jane, a clerk who is 28 years old shared with me how she thought about the workshop and Jian's teaching. *"When you feel lost and you attend this workshop, she kindly explains why and how do you feel that way, that's really comforting. **I felt so at ease when there's finally somebody who could tell me life isn't the way we get used to, there is another way in viewing everything especially emotions and relationships.** When I start to understand the mechanism of events and my emotions, **I feel like I am the observer of all these and I can choose another way of acting, I could choose not to react to people's anger when I understand its' origin. I realized I could step out from my feelings and events that happened on me for some time and see others' difficulties and lessons.** I feel like I am not controlled by the happenings anymore, all the self-tagging or labelling on myself has been loosened. That's why I enjoyed staying in the session, even though Jian's teaching will be posted on YouTube."*

Zac, 22 years old, a student shared a similar attitude with Jane. He told me his first time joining Jian's workshop was the time when his cat just died because of illness, he was thinking deeper about life meanings and death. Here are his views with Jian and New Age. *"When she talks, I could forget some of the troubles and problems that have been bothering*

me and just focus on her teaching. Through her sharing, I was given hope, confidence and faith in dealing with my own issues, because I saw and heard that is how others succeed in dealing with their problems. I had once questioned myself about her teaching, but somehow I feel good to think the way she taught, knowing my reality could change once I change my habit of thinking. I see this as an experiment at first, trying to understand the inner world of myself, the mechanism of human feeling. And one day I realized the biggest change of reality really comes from changes on my view towards everything."

Panny, who was working as a clothing shop owner shared her personal experience on New Age teachings. *"I myself know it clearly, the power of faith, belief or thought, whatever you call it. I was diagnosed with stroke problem a year ago, the doctor asked me to take medicine since then, every day. One day, I really got tired about this idea, thinking why would my life got tired up with these little pills on my hand? After that, I decided to throw away all the pills and regained my power over life. I "believe" I could live well without the pills, I "believe" my body has the natural recovering system, therefore I have lived healthily until now. Faith works through experiences. Experiences make you understand your own power more and better. After all, I think life is a discovery process, every one's steps are different, I don't compare life. Cherish what we have is important, I think everyone is learning different things in spirituality, sometimes the words taught is the same, but people get a different message from it. Which teaching is "right" or "useful" differ for everyone, each have to find the right way which works for them."*

Jenny, 29 years old, who works in a bank told me how she thought about spirituality, *"Spirituality to me is going beyond the physical world and reality, to arrive at a place in*

which peace and a completely different standards/ values applied in that realm. For example, money doesn't mean success. Knowledge doesn't mean wisdoms. In that realm, everybody starts all over again. They learn all over again, we all become equal and there will be no status, all care for each other's well-being and happiness. Most religion and spiritual teachings work like that. In meditations, we review and look at our life and things from a distant place, not using the normal standards of society but the perspective of a separate realm, a realm with love and care. By detachment, we abandon our social self, the self with complicated thoughts and values, and arrive to the state of no self (social-self), we abandon the qualities attached to our social identity, similar to Buddhism."

Concept of detachment in healing

Detachment is a common concept in New Age healing, while the identity of self could be obscured in the process. Human usually identify features from dualisms and generate them into a self-identity. The repository of our familial heritage and our experience as individuals animated our thoughts, attitudes belief and values that constituted our deepest and powerful reality (Rose, 1995:4). People used to separate ourselves into different kinds of persons we are that we consume commodities, act our taste, fashion our bodies and display our distinctiveness (Rose, 1995:1).

Self is invented by people, as taught in New Age, therefore people have the power to abandon it if they don't serve good purposes. The social self could be alienated and detached. It is usually seen that people who experienced huge life changes and suffered from emotional breakdown are more keen to find support in spiritual growth and healings.

People target to find ways for emotional release and wisdoms that helped them to confront the reality. When they feel themselves not powerful enough to handle that alone, they find gods, magics, guardian angels, any living or non-living subjects to divert their emotional burden. By doing that, the physical self is less focused and people find peace by diverting the attention from their experiences or detaching themselves.

Participant Observation--- Tarot Card Lesson (Feb to March 2018)

The tarot card class is organized by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, while the teacher of our class came from Hong Kong New Age Centre. The classes were held on four consecutive Wednesdays in the evening, a time which favors normal office workers. Our teacher is called Jolie, the collaboration of the Centre with the Trade Union has started since 2003. According to Jolie, they have accumulated lots of students throughout these years while she taught the courses for long and was very experienced in different cards readings, for example the intuition cards, Zen cards, angel cards etc. The location of our classroom is inside a business building situated in the residential area. The classroom is rather small placed with around twelve tables and thirty people. The participants were aged around 20-55, with different occupations, both males and females.

Jolie divided the course into two parts, two lessons for theory and two lessons for practice. The first and second class she talked about the basic concepts and history on tarot cards, the importance of intuition (sixth sense), and mechanism of reading and interpreting cards. As she mentioned, the origin of tarot cards can be traced back to ancient Egypt and

occultism, it could also be understood in part of psychology. Then, she introduced the concept of subconscious to students, that the human right brain receives and processes messages in graphics, feelings, intuitions and imaginations. Jolie said, "*Intuition is an inborn ability, we all possess that but we rarely practice it, we are taught to use our brain to receive knowledge and messages. **Graphic is the language of the subconscious, they carried energies and messages.** There is no coincidence, when one picks the card, there must be certain associations with the person. **The card is only medium, what is alive (vibrating) is our thoughts, they carried energies that could resonate with the cards.** Same kind of energy is attracted to each other. A good tarot reader has to be intuitive and sensitive, so he/she could understand the messages based on the impression and mind of that person. **Tarot is only a tool, it may give you hints about the future, but that future is not unchangeable,** it will change when you choose another way round or when you change your attitudes and thoughts. **What we interpret from the card only reflects the present you,** it works as a place of signs in which you are the person who see through every possibility ahead and make choices. **Many people see the reading as an ultimate judgment about their future, actually it is not. It's only a mirror which leads people to confront their weakness, fear, worries in contrary to their expectations, true feelings, needs and wishes.** It could be a great tool for self-discovery and understanding your inner world. **It never determines your future, it's just a reflection on your choice, people are always in control of their life.**"*

Freud's discovery of the unconscious, and of the rules of its operation, revealed the self's radical ex-centricity to itself (Rose, 1995:7). A radical heteronomy gapes within human

beings, a very condition of our being able to relate to ourselves as if we were objects (Rose, 1995:7). With our deep assent to our identity, we are wagged, agitated, activated by an "other": an order that goes beyond us and is the condition of any consciousness whatever (Lacan, 1977). During the lesson, Jolie asked us to describe our feelings towards the graphic on the card using adjectives. She emphasized, *"There is no wrong answer, just tell us what you feel from the card. A card could have infinite possibilities and interpretations, all are correct."* She asked, *"You predicted your future, what's after that?"* She mentioned the importance behind "knowing" is that people are in control and conscious about their goals and choices, they can "change" their "predicted" destiny if it doesn't look good for them. The power of change, as she described, is still on the hand of people, it will never be deprived. For the latter part of the class, we only did open-ended discussion on "feeling" the cards, there is no actual practice or demonstration for the time being. Whereas throughout the whole course, students have no time to discuss with each other and has less interaction compared with other courses I joined in New Age. Apart from that, this group of people is more into experience rather than theory, compared to the participants of the book workshops. They see tarot cards as a hobby, a tool to make money or a cool skill to help people. Some of them have studied the Chinese numerology, ziwei numerology, palm reading or runes before. Instead of seeking help or healings, this group of participants aimed at trying out new experiences, nor they are familiar with deep-level new age beliefs.

Interview with participants in Tarot Card Class---- Mick, Sue

Mick, who is 25, working as an engineer, explained to me his motivation in learning tarot cards. *"I thought tarot card is mysterious since I was young, as it is partly ancient, historical and mysterious; and partly scientific, metaphysical and beyond our world. Tarot cards has the ancient western belief, many concepts were developed around nature, for example the four main elements in life, wind, fire, earth and water, they are fascinating. I joined the class because I want to learn something new, while many thinks tarot could predict our future, I wanna know the theories behind it. I guess I am only curious, while my girlfriend is a big fan of tarot cards as well. I had a tarot card reading experience in the past, that time I was struggling between two choices of job, the tarot reader said I should choose job B, as job A will limit my abilities, I didn't listen to her though. After six months, I found what she told me so accurately occurred, my boss was limiting me in every aspect. I don't know about New Age, but I heard about the law of attraction."*

Sue, who is 27 years old, worked as a nurse at a private hospital told me, *"My sister get to know stuff about palm reading and astrology since we were young. We used to play different kinds of psychological tests and compared our results together in the past. When we grew up, we have been in relationships with different people, we used to look at their zodiac signs and see whether we are matched. Interestingly, I found the people I couldn't get along with belonged to the zodiac signs that has an opposite element against mine. I used to do a lot tarot reading tests online, I even studied my own birth chart on the web and it stated out many specific personalities of mine which honestly had surprised me. After that, I developed an urge to study these stuffs deeper. Knowing these stuff, for example, predicting events or examining a person's inner world sounds very cool to me, it*

makes me feel powerful and special. I see patients almost every day, and I always think healing physical illness cannot compare to soul & spiritual healing, the latter heals someone's heart. I have heard about New Age, but I didn't study it, not the title."

From the interviews with informants, it reflected that past-experience, peer interest and pursuit of self-discovery have been the major causes for my informants to study tarot cards. Many people who enrolled in spiritual test or courses had similar experience in New Age, many of them had tried in person, or at least heard their close one who shared their experience in fortune telling, tarot card reading, studying ziwei numerology, astrology or birth charts. The "predictable" and "readable" future is an intriguing concept for most participants.

According to my study, the involvement and understanding in New Age on spirituality has two stages. The basic level is handling and resolving conflicts associated with the social identity, the most common problem seen in relationships, family, financial status, health etc. People in this stage still struggle within the social world and has close connection with their physical reality. The idea of "self" and social happening troubles them while they are only beginners on their spiritual path. Therefore, these people are more likely to find means that claimed to solve immediate problems, for example, by playing tarot cards, consulting astrologers, buying crystals and magic products, doing hypnosis. They may claim their act as closer to superstition and as they seek for immediate response to tackle their problems, regardless of their effectiveness. People in this stage are less attached to the belief and invest less time in that. Most participate through consumption, involving the client culture, buying products as if they are buying medicines or buying hopes and possibilities.

An advanced level is that one knows clearly about the rules, laws, structures, systems and the mechanism of the belief system. They have a strong identity towards the belief and usually be able to defend the opposite view and explain concepts towards suspicions. They practice constant meditations and are closely connected to their belief and spiritual realm. They possess a strong spiritual self with an autonomous substantive role in their spiritual growth. They might be spiritual teachers, shaman or guru in real life.

Participant Observation--- Dowsing Rod Class (March 2018)

The dowsing rod class is organized by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, while the teacher of our class is the owner of the Hong Kong Tarot Centre, her name was Chu. I had met her in the previous book reading session and the shamanic healing circles before. The classes were held on four consecutive Sundays in the afternoon, a typical time for common amateur courses. The location of the class is at the Trade Union Centre in Tin Hau, and the classroom was bigger with around 18 participants, coming from all ages.

On 4th March, it's our first pendulum lesson, Chu came in and she was wearing a dress with a stone necklace on her neck, with her strong smoky eyes makeup as usual. She was holding a tool box which stored many different kinds of pendulum inside. She greeted us, and showed us her collection and some personal stories about using pendulum, for example, succeed in helping her friend to find passport at the last minute. In the beginning, she introduced the background concept of dowsing rod with New Age's teaching penetrated in it. Here is how she told us, "*Everything around us are energies and magnetic fields. Your*

thoughts have their energies, they attract people and things around you. Your thoughts create your realities every day. There are good thoughts and unhealthy thoughts, for example believing it is hard to earn money creates a hindering force you hold for yourself to become rich; while believing that money comes automatically in its way is good for attracting it." She described that the dowsing rod/ pendulum is used to answer simple questions (mostly yes/no) and finding lost objects. It reacted to the aura of oneself and the outside world, crystal is the common material of a pendulum, other materials could be gold, silver or metal. As for the pendulum, it is a simple tool consisting of a weight with a crystal end, attached to a chain or thread. The pendulum reads energy patterns while it claimed to extract information from deep inside our subconscious minds. The common believed mechanism of pendulum is that the unconscious, involuntary movements of the hand holding the pendulum cause the pendulum to move. The subconscious mind of the person holding the pendulum causes the muscles to react unconsciously while these responses are too small to be recognized sometimes. Consequently, the answers are coming from inside oneself. ***"The pendulum will move better when you empty your mind, and trust it. The quieter your mind is, the bigger and clearer will the swinging be. Don't make effort to control, just focus on your question. At first, you have to build up a connection with it, ask questions that you are sure about the answer to test its accuracy, for example, your gender, birthday, favourite colour etc."*** During the class, Chu taught us to use the pendulum to do energy cleansing, removing negativity in relationships or health problems; and inserting positive energy back to it. The process is simply by holding the pendulum, focus on the order in our mind, while we watched the pendulum moved in a clockwise (bringing in

positive energy) or anti-clockwise direction (removing negativity). As for finding missing objects, we have graphs which help identify directions/ angles/ numbers/ alphabets, according to Chu, a map could be placed under the pendulum in order to find a place. Participants learned to read a page of instructions and read aloud it in heart to activate the "programming" of the pendulum, as Chu described, the pendulum has its energies that could react with the bigger energy field of the outside world. Upon the rules and correct values in using the pendulum, she also reminded the students, ***"Don't put your life decision over a simple tool. It is only a tool that helps you to find out your true feelings towards something, but only your decision and actions will change your reality. It is designed to help, but not determine. The pendulum only responds to auras, whereas for many beginners there are lots of factors that could affect the accuracy of the aura reaction. After all, a person should be responsible for his/ her rational decision making, life changes and realities are still on a person's hand. Nothing is predestined, everything is in motion. Your reality changes when your thoughts change."***

Chu shared her personal story of being diagnosed with diabetes five years ago. When she met the doctor, her diabetes index had exceeded the normal standard by nearly three times. The doctor suggested her to enter the hospital immediately. However, she refused and requested for a month and said if the index remains the same after a month, then she would live in the hospital. During that month, she ate whatever she likes but rested at a regular time, she did everything that could make herself happy and held a strong belief of the self-recovering nature of her body. At last, her diabetes index has dropped more than a half. ***"You are what you believe"***, she said with an affirmative voice and twinkling eyes.

During our last session on chakras healing session, Chu asked for a volunteer who has a problem with their illness and demonstrated the energy healing (matrix energetics healing) in front of us. The lady said she constantly felt ankle pain, Chu put her hand on the shoulder and back of lady, as if she was exploring some "points" over her body. Later, Chu asked the lady to relax and lie on Chu. She said, *"Now recall the memory of the incident that caused your ankle pain, imagine you didn't encounter the incidence, erase it and imagine you are running happily as if you are eleven."* When the process ended, the auntie reflected that her ankle felt lighter than before.

Interviews with participants in the Dowsing Rod Class----- Yue, Au Yeung and Choi

Yue, who is already 59 years old, told me the reason why she came to the class.

*"Money is never an issue for me, but health is. I care about my health, but when one gets older, you have less control over your physical body. My ankle pain was not new, I have that 10 years with me. It became severe recently, doctors for sure cannot help with it. Therefore, I finally reached matrix healing, I tried all kinds of healings. **You may say it's a bet, cost and value thing, give and take. When you have tried everything, when you feel like there's no hope you can see in front, you are more courageous to try and make another bet, as long as you could still afford the cost of the bet.** What if the aching pain that had been living with me that had tortured me for my whole life get cured? I had already spent a hundred thousand dollars going to therapies, doctors and buying medicines, they didn't help much. But I experienced a direct effect in "body-mind-soul" healing, as you can*

call it." The mentalities of risking to believe that the New Age practice could help herself is identical to Pascal's wager theory. This theory suggests that one should believe in God, even if God's existence cannot be proved or disproved through reasoning. The theory is rooted in game theory and that the best option of action is to believe in God in spite of any lack of evidence, as that choice provides the largest potential gains. The point is that the prospective prize in the wage is "an infinity of an infinitely happy life". In short, if God exists, then wagering for God results in infinite utility. While in her case, if the healing could work, the cost of joining the course is limited compared to her recovery in the long run. Similar ways of thinking can be observed in other people who joined spiritual healing as well.

Au Yeung, who himself joined several courses of Chu, including the extra sensory perception (ESP) courses told me, *"I think you can say it is an outside, atypical way to get healing from a string with crystals or even the belief system itself is absurd. I think I am open-minded than others, I try it than to judge it. I don't lose anything getting to know it more. Strange things happened in life, I have encountered different unexplainable things in the past. Some attributed miracles to religion, I attributed them to self-beliefs."*

Choi, 33 years old, a lady who looked younger than her age shared with me, *"I believe in auras and energies, just people couldn't see it easily doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It happens frequently in my life. I am a very sensitive person, I know whether I can be friends with a person the first time I saw him/her. Also, you will know one is actually angry or sad deep down even they are wearing a happy face. It is hard to describe, but you just know something is wrong, I think it is how we feel the aura. People have the tendency*

*to stay with people who have a bright and positive aura naturally. Recently there was aura testing machine created that is called biofeedback devices, I saw it from a HK night talk show, it shows the chakra levels of a person. I think it is not just pseudo-science. I came to this class because I want to improve my work and relationship. **I felt refreshed and relaxed every time I did the energy cleansing, perhaps it's because I put forth my faith and had generated good thoughts on the matters I care. The experience it is similar to praying or Zen meditation.**"*

When people already have the tendency to believe or like an idea, it is normal for people to find more ways to support and prove the idea. They will gather information and experience in order to support the thought. That is another form of self-fulfilling prophecy. From the points of view of the informants, the speech of Yue who suffered from serious ankle pain had reflected her mentalities of willing to spend a certain amount of money in tackling her health problems or other issues, she is eager to risk and try different ways. Other has responded a "nothing to lose" attitude in participating in spiritual test and courses. Many shows a psychological change after the class from feeling it is mysterious to interesting. As I talked to the participants, around a half of them wanted to explore the function of pendulum because they heard about it from friends and from televisions. The popularization of spiritual tools or courses has gained strong effect over peer influence and media affection.

Interviews with participants in the Dowsing Rod Class-----Lina

A classmate in the dowsing rod class, Lina, who is a university student stated how she thinks about New Age. This is her opinion: "***It is almost like a buffet, you pick what serves***

you, you pick the idea that is helpful for you. It provides you with absolute freedom. Some think it is problematic because wait a second, a faith with no rules? Not everyone wants to believe in total self-control, not all people have that confidence to claim the responsibility of everything happened in their life, they need something to blame for when bad things happen. In fact, that's what many traditional religions offers --- a god to protect and offer you challenges. For them, no matter what happened, that's really not their choice, so that they carry less burden. You are not the active agent and planner of your life, God has his plans for you. However, New Age teaches people to change your reality by thoughts, after all I am the person in control."

In New Age, there is no "one and only one" truth. Everybody could have a different experience, there is no "right and wrong" nor there are rules to follow. It gives people a high level of freedom, which could become both pros and cons. According to Bruce (1996), New Age affirmed the nature and mechanism of the world, it is a world-affirming movement rather than a world rejecting movement (in the case of Christianity). The world-affirming movements don't possess the criterion of a religion, such as church, collective ritual of worship, fully developed theology and ethical system in guiding us what to pursue and right things to do (Bruce 1996:173). They were optimistic towards the secular world while holding a positive view on humankind and to the "self". This affirming group promoted that people are not so much evil as restricted, in fact all people possess huge potential power which need to be learned and practice (Bruce 1996:173). We are taught to free ourselves from internal constraints. In comparison, traditional Christianity taught the self is sinful while the perfection is achieved by taming it and subordinating it to the higher

authority. The nature of relationship with God is hierarchical, with the founder or the priest being closer to God.

Analysis II

Factors concerning the rise of New Age and new form of spiritual pursuit in HK

After the study of the New Age with my participant observation and interviews with my informants, I have come up with new thoughts on new forms of pursuit in spirituality and reasons why New Age emerged and became popular in the 21st century, where non-religious community practiced their faith and belief in individualistic, commercial and experimental ways in Hong Kong.

The ideology and practice of spirituality changes with urbanization, altering as the economic structure of our societies change through neo-liberalism. There are free competition in markets which bring forth a general upgrade in living standards. More people have free time to develop other interests and explore the spiritual realms as they have fulfilled their physical needs. These people are usually in the middle-class range, they have extra time and spending for new activities and hobbies in order to gain a sense of pleasure from work. They constantly seek ways to upgrade life and search for new meanings of life.

Another reason for people in search of spirituality is the freedom brought by the capitalistic and materialistic culture from neo-liberalism, gradually leading to the ambiguity and

overlooking of moral standards. As a result, people feel the urge to retain and preserve the ideal self through spiritual enhancement and faith.

Meanwhile, **neo-liberalism** also gives rise to the concept of **individualism**. It stresses on freedom, self-choice and self-responsibility in carrying opportunities and risks. New Age penetrates from here in saying it is people's choice to believe in anything they want, everything is a choice, that if they regain the power of their thoughts, they can create a better reality. In New Age, we see changes in styles of worship and religious music. Local languages replaced ancient difficult Latin, power shifted from religious professionals to the laity (Bruce 1996:3)

In a modern world that celebrates individualism and self-achievement, New Age belief proposed people have a "center" which is all knowing, we can be liberated from fear, guilt and anxiety, from the shadows of the past which dominate our present responses and produce inappropriate reactions, from self-limiting images that make us feel inferior; from the sense of ourselves as victims (Bruce 1996:174). The purpose of the teaching is to let people bear the responsibility of their life. To do that one has to give up his/her rationality and cerebral culture and embrace the heart as a powerful center of energy as the mind (Bruce 1996:174).

Traditional religion emphasizes on authorities and organization, structured based with hierarchies only increases the distance towards god. Only few priests acquire the closest connection to God as well as the ability of talking to him directly. In comparison, New Age did not create a distance for the "higher being" to the "self", it embraces the concept that everyone could manifest so as to reach the blissful point of spiritual realization and linked

with God, as everyone is God. The idea of the closeness to self and higher-being offers the illusion of self-empowerment that could satisfy one's desire to control their life, instead of surrender to one God suggested in Christianity. In addition, practices of New Age are often in individual unit, yoga is an example.

“Modernization” fundamentally altered the place and nature of religious beliefs, practices and organizations so as to reduce their relevance to the lives of nation-states, social groups, and individuals (Bruce, 1996:1). With modernization, people trust science and their own power to create a life they want, while people developed a general distrust on theories, they questioned the traditional religion and held rebellious attitude against traditional rules. Science has made people to question about everything, soon revealing the tendency to create their own philosophies on life, so some became atheist. The New Age movement, as a result, provided many fancy concepts on spiritual tests, extraordinary techniques and talents to attract the public, especially the teenagers. Many young informants of mine told me they have experienced psychic game (for example, Ouija board) since they were in primary school. The fact that this exaggerated experience or rumors cannot be proven by science has remained mystical to the public. New Age practices including past life regression by hypnosis, aura testing and extra-sensory perception, for example, has strived to merge with science to provide a solid ground for its existence in reality, given that the common skeptical view on it as pseudo-science. However, many may not discover or yet would still want to experience it despite the critics.

Another crucial factor for the existing New Age movement in Hong Kong is based on the persuasion of social culture developed from materialism, consumerism and capitalism.

Most people who participated in the movements did so as consumers, they spent a couple days joining the meditation courses at centers and returned to conventional lives (Bruce, 1996:179). People had long developed the mindset in which spending money could please the gods in different religions, there has been tithing and donation in Christianity, while Buddhism has "adding incense and oil money" to show one's sincerity to god. Outside the religious realm, the expansion of markets has encouraged more book publishing, spiritual courses and tools that could fulfill people's wish to spring up. The New Age movement has engaged in the market as a public hobby in which people who are interested (doesn't have to be believers) can join and buy stuff for their friends as presents. For example, crystals, amulets, essence oil etc. The mystical function of "magic" or "energies" has added a layer of mystery and attraction to its market value.

Commercialization later brings along professionalism in New Age courses. New Age belief system was soon developed into a full picture of professionalism. There are more courses and even professional certificates offered to participants, more professions rooted in energy healing, tarot reading, fortune telling, astrologer etc. More consumption for professional readings, counselling and healing when the idea is exposed to the public. Courses are usually expensive, in order to prove its uniqueness and effects in life. The fully branched system in teaching, learning and practicing built its' legitimization. For example, the tarot card course organized by the HK Federation of Trade Union with HK New Age Centre has been continuing over 15 years.

Apart from traditional religion and science, people start to search for a broad, inclusive and whole accumulating ideas that could explain everything in life. As they realized the

negative impact on nature brought by economic development and the imbalance situation between work and life, they valued concepts that could satisfy their pursuit in holistic, mindful and healthy living. Meanwhile, New Age promotes self-awareness and conscious living, it transforms the complicated mixings of religious ideas into something unique and "new", therefore many people found its teaching echoing with things they learned from other places previously. For example, from Buddhism, some informants reflected that the New Age belief gives them inspiration on life, human body and their reality, thinking it usually has a more direct and immediate effect on their life, in comparison to traditional religion. June, a 19 years old student told me: *"Most of the tests in New Age offer advice, provides direction and clues for a person's present and future. For example, tarot cards. It helps you understand yourself more and give you the opportunity to reflect on your own weakness and strength, similar to the function of religion. However, the result of these tests is shown more explicitly within a shorter period of time. It takes longer when you pray to God and look for "signs" in daily life."* From this we see that for believers, functions are seen as important in faith.

All in all, the economic and social transformation of the society has posed significant impact on Hong Kong citizen's ideologies of spiritual pursuit. Neo-liberalism and individualism, particularly, are crucial push factors in this transformation in understanding of faith and life philosophies.

The study of "Self" in New Age

The self is coherent, bounded, individualized, intentional, the locus of thought, action and belief, the origin of its own actions, the beneficiary of a unique biography (Rose, 1995:3). New Agers has come to believe that the world is made up of one, the biggest and primitive origin, such that everyone is god and possess god's power while our thoughts is the only condition to construct and create our reality. Therefore, the idea of "self" is a crucial factor in exercising power within New Age system, we can hardly evaluate the mechanism of their beliefs without understanding the composition and the function of self, especially when self-responsibility and self-choices are highly stressed in their mindset.

The internal universe of the self, the profound "psychology", lay at the core of those ways of conducting ourselves that are considered normal and provided the norm for thinking and judging the abnormal- no matter in the realm of gender, sexuality, vice, illegality or insanity (Rose, 1995:4). Meanwhile, many would agree that our lives are meaningful because we can discover our self, be our self, express our self, love and be loved for the self we are.

Both concepts of the physical self or the spiritual self suggested in religions or New Age are invented by humans. The only difference is that the physical self is often clearly known but the spiritual self is less familiar and more abstract for people to understand. There is a negative relationship between the spiritual self and the physical self, they are mutually exclusive at the end, the stronger the physical self, the weaker the spiritual identity possible to be symbolized.

The self indeed functions in a self-evident manner. This ideal of the unified, coherent, self-centered subject was most often found in projects that bemoaned the loss of self in modern life, that sought to recover a self, that urged people to respect the self, assert our self and

take responsibility for our self- projects whose very existence suggests that selfhood is more an aim or a norm than a natural given (Rose, 1995:4). Rose (1995) suggested that the universal self was reciprocally found in projects to articulate a knowledge of a person, a knowledge structured by the presupposition that the human being is without limits.

For New Age, the idea of self-manifestation from within assumes the absolute existence of self (soul) identity in which its' aim is to claim back the power from outside to inside, and reserve the control from within. As a matter of fact, if everyone is god, then no one is god, "the" god has lost its meaning thus everyone has the absolute freedom in their life. One of a common critique for New Age is that it tries to normalize and justify the negative experience of what we couldn't control and force people to confront it as natural as destined or somehow agreed upon before birth. In such a case, we had allowed bad things to happen to us. For example, it tends to justify the criminal experience from the victims' perspective and turned it into an explanation that they are both actors in this life; by isolating the experience from a true "self"(soul), the mechanism is trying to create distance from the negative happenings of the person.

The invention or the idea of "self" indeed helps to generate and exercise power in reality. It is believed to be **historicized and culturally relativized** within the social theory (Rose, 1995:5). It can be fractured by **gender, race, class**, fragmented, deconstructed, revealed not as human's inner truth but as their **last illusion**, not as our ultimate comfort but as an element in **circuits of power** that make some of us selves **while denying full selfhood to others** and thus performing an act of **domination** on both sides (Rose, 1995:5).

The New Ager's choices are their fulfillment of the attributes of the choosing self - expressions of personality. Their practice of freedom appears as the possibility of the maximum self-fulfillment of the active and autonomous individual. The didactics of self-fulfillment in New Age were disseminated by the businessman in which it projects desires and dissatisfaction of the individual that leads to inspecting oneself, accounting for oneself and working upon oneself in order to reach one's potential, achieve joy and exercise one's autonomy (Rose, 1995:17). The healing in New Age could be another way of subordination to the therapeutic authority, in which to become an autonomous individual, a person is told to practice particular kinds of thinking.

Conclusion

From the study, I got to know how religious evolution has transformed through three phrases: from the substantial one God, through an era of debate and competing Gods, to an immaterial and diffuse one God, a cosmic consciousness which can be claimed as the underlying "reality" beneath whatever deviant and divergent visions one may have (Bruce 1996:5). This project has given me a valuable chance to gain a deeper understanding on New Age community in Hong Kong and people who practice in the psychic field. Instead of looking into the duality of true and false, I realized it is more essential to look into believers' mental needs in a belief and the driving force behind their thinking. The idea of New Age is in fact abstract, fluid and free, and anyone could quit anytime if they don't want to engage in it anymore. There are no authorities, rules or rituals which could limit their act. However, there are people who enjoy practicing magic, tarot cards, yoga,

meditations more than praying and offering incense. There are so many different kinds of living styles, yet they are never truly be separated from the construction of society. After all, New Age religion has little of the profound social impact compared with other religious movements. It didn't or couldn't change the political structure of the society, perhaps with its comparatively short history. There is no example among the people that I talked to who regard New Age as the official belief in family unit, it is often just personal. In addition, the modern society sees greater segmentation and differentiation in the "self", some believers think they have to take actions that violated social expectations so as to realize the "true" selfhood. Society, with the laws and normative restrictions, is often seen as an obstacle to self-fulfillment nowadays (Durkheim, 1951). While spirituality, becomes an "invisible" pursuit of self-autonomy, what will be the future of religion? Will it disappear one day or will it become self-oriented practices? With the rise of new modes of religiosity, it demands our new styles of analysis and new categories of thoughts.

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