

# "Knowing Hands" Workshop Convenes International Scholars to Explore the Global History of Hand-Memory Techniques

By Huang Qiansheng

From September 12-14, 2025, a landmark academic workshop titled "Knowing Hands: Chinese Hand-Memory Techniques in Situ, Comparison, & Contact" was successfully held at the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (CAS-E) in Erlangen. This three-day, invitation-only event was organized by ISCSD Vice President Marta Hanson, ISCSD Secretary Stéphanie Homola, and Research Assistant Jasmin Rother. It brought together a distinguished group of international scholars to investigate the intersection of hands, memory, and cultural practices across a wide array of historical and geographical contexts. The workshop aimed to foster a rich, interdisciplinary dialogue, examining the practice of writing knowledge on hands and tactile memory systems through a series of academic presentations, dynamic discussions, an animation workshop, and unique musical performances.

The core mission of the workshop was to explore the diverse epistemic roles that hands have played in Chinese and European traditions from the early medieval period to the present, with a focus on disciplines including divination, musicology, healing rituals, calculation, medicine, meditation, and spiritual practices.

## In-Depth Exploration Across Thematic Panels

The conference agenda was structured into thematic panels, allowing for a deep and focused exploration of how hands have been used as tools for knowing, calculating, and creating.

- **Divining Hands:** This session delved into the use of hands in prognostication. Presentations included Cheng Wan-Chun's research on calculating life's destiny through palm mnemonics tied to celestial stars, Adeline Herrou's ethnographic study of a contemporary Taoist monk using hand calculations in combination with oracular bamboo sticks, Gao Yu's analysis of a specific palm-based method for horoscope calculation, and Xu Chang's study of how the hand is used to learn, practice, and transmit cosmological concepts.
- **Musical Hands:** A particularly vibrant session explored the critical link between hands and music. Susan Weiss offered a 30-minute keynote on "A Syncretic Hand: Speculum et Prospectum". Other speakers included Addi Liu, who discussed a 17th-century Sino-European Guidonian hand in Beijing, Li Guangming, who analyzed Zhu Zaiyu's innovative finger-palm diagrams for

tonal structures, and François Picard, who examined the reciprocal crossing of two different musical hand traditions between East and West.

- **Healing Hands:** This panel focused on the hand's role in medical and ritualistic healing. Henrik Hjort Sørensen presented a study on Dao-Buddhist hand charts from the Pelliot Manuscript P. 3538 (8). Asaf Goldschmidt and Marta Hanson co-presented their research on the function of hands in Chinese exorcistic healing rituals, while Chang Chia-fang introduced a novel pediatric diagnostic technique of "reading fingers" from medieval China. Xu Chang concluded the panel with an example of a five-finger-tip mnemonic for the five-phases doctrine in contemporary training in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).
- **Religious, Meditating, and Mnemonic Hands:** Several sessions were dedicated to the use of hands in spiritual, contemplative, and memory-focused practices. Kimberley Rivers spoke on "Ciromancia spiritualis" (spiritual chiromancy) for divination, while Yari Pérez Marín presented the translation of hand-based Christian religious tenets into Huastec in Spanish Mexico. The focus then shifted to medieval Europe with presentations by Hannah Lucas and Nicole Rice on English meditation hands, by Temenuzhka Dimova, Clément Poupard, and Fu Yaliang on European *ars memorativa*, and by Stefano Rapisarda on the distinctive tradition of chiromancy in Europe. A cross-cultural perspective was offered by Hannah Lucas in a separate talk comparing Buddhist and Christian hand mnemonics for embodying attention. This section concluded with Su-Yeon Seo and Mårten Söderblom Saarela discussing how hand mnemonics were used in Chinese phonology for memorizing rhyme tables and for playing the "Shooting Characters" game, respectively.
- **Calculating and Knowing Hands:** The final two panels broadened the scope to cover calculation and other forms of specialized knowledge. Matthias Hayek discussed the use of the hand in 17th-century Japanese divination techniques for reckoning fate. Other presentations examined the "abacus in hand" by Philip Cho, calculating hands in Ming Dynasty daily-use encyclopedias by Monica Klasing Chen, and hand mnemonics related to the Chinese taxation systems by Martin Hofmann. The concluding "Knowing Hands" session featured even more diverse topics such as hand-sign consecration in Japanese Tantric Buddhism by Lucia Dolce, the use of the hand for reckoning legal punishments by Jérôme Bourgon and for learning complex medical knowledge related to cosmological cycles of time by Zheng Xinyu, and hand-divination techniques featured in Ming-Qing Chinese fiction by Vincent Durand-Dastès.

### **Special Events: Performance, Skills-Sharing, and Collaboration**

Beyond the formal presentations, the workshop was enriched by several special events designed to foster practical skills and collegial exchange.

A major highlight was the "Musical Hands Performance & Recordings" session, where researchers and musicians Cheng Wan-Chun, Li Guangming, Addi Liu, François Picard, and Susan Weiss collaborated on a live musical demonstration. This unique performance featured both Western Guidonian-style pieces and traditional Chinese music based on the five-tone and twelve-law chromatic scales (五音十二律). Their performances powerfully illustrated the theoretical concepts discussed in the panels.

In a practical skills-sharing session, Addi Liu and Lan Li led an "Animation 101 Skills using Powerpoint or Keynote" workshop. This tutorial was designed to provide scholars with the digital tools to better demonstrate and visually emphasize the intricate sequences of movement and memory inherent in the specific hand techniques they study.

The collaborative atmosphere was further nurtured during two evening dinners at local Erlangen restaurants, "Kitzmann Brewery" and "Treehouse". These informal gatherings provided valuable opportunities for participants to network, forge new collaborations, and continue the day's stimulating discussions.

### **A Foundation for Future Research and Collaboration**

The workshop concluded not as an end, but as a launchpad for the next phase of the "Knowing Hands" project. The organizers outlined an ambitious and comprehensive plan for future outputs. These next steps include the launch of a scholarly database in 2026. A digital online exhibition and an accompanying printed catalogue are scheduled for publication in 2026.

The network will reconvene for a follow-up "Handy Knowledge" workshop in Paris in the fall of 2026. Furthermore, the research presented will be disseminated through a series of major scholarly publications, including an edited volume on hand divination with Brill, a Routledge/Curzon anthology on epistemic hands in the Chinese world, and a second comparative anthology on epistemic and mindful hands, with publication deadlines extending from 2026 to 2029.