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## High spirited: spirit-work in contemporary China

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HIGH SPIRITED:  
SPIRIT-WORK IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

by

David Armstrong Pantaleoni

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Arts  
degree in Religious Studies in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Morten Schlutter

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

David Armstrong Pantaleoni

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree  
in Religious Studies at the May 2015 graduation.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The People's Republic of China is home to numerous beliefs, practices, and customs dating back hundreds, if not thousands of years. In the time since the death of Mao Zedong, many religious practices have been revived, including the practice of spirit possession. Through careful examination of books, articles, videos, and other sources, I have come to the conclusion that individuals now capable of being possessed in China are a break from previously documented spirit-mediums, nor do they fit into the category termed 'shamans' best defined by Mircea Eliade and I.M. Lewis. These individuals are heirs to a long history, but have innovated as well as revived previous practices. They now embody a new category, one I have termed spirit worker. Spirit workers incorporate aspects of both traditional spirit mediumship as well as what has been termed shamanism. Although I did not have a chance to do my own fieldwork, through looking at the various sources, we can come to understand how spirit-workers have begun to emerge in China, and what the future may hold for these individuals.

## **PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

Possession is among the most powerful experiences in the religious world, regardless of the religion practiced. This paper is an examination of the lives of contemporary individuals in the People's Republic of China who engage in possession practices on a professional level. Through articles, books, and videos I hope to show that the category of spirit-medium in China is a changing one, and may no longer be applicable. Instead, there is a new category, that of spirit-worker. Spirit-workers, as compared to those who came before them, embody a combination of both traditional spirit-mediums and figures that had previously been identified as shamans.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2009, while I was studying in Yunnan in the People's Republic of China, I saw a Dongba of the Naxi people perform a ceremony while near Lijiang. The Dongba's performance was the first time I had seen such work in person. While part of the rite was doubtless staged and there was no offering of blood to the gods, the music and the atmosphere of the performance became charged with a special sort of energy. I do not think the Dongba entered trance, nor was it his intention to do so. Even without the trance, I will always remember the charge of power that came in the air as he began to use a small drum, and his chanting as it rose and fell. This experience, as much as any other helped to prime my interest in the lives and experiences of spirit-workers in contemporary China.

Since the death of Mao Zedong<sup>1</sup> in 1976, Mainland China has undergone a series of radical sweeping policy changes touching all aspects of society. These changes are, in their own way, as radical as those that Mao instituted during his tenure in power. The economic reforms in China especially have allowed it to rise and become one of the great markets of the world. Just as significant as the economic changes have been the social transformations that have occurred. While China might not be as open as the United States, Great Britain, or many of the other 'Western' nations, there is now more space of Chinese nationals to do and say more things. This is especially evident in the sphere of religious activity, as forms of religious expression are now allowed after having been suppressed for decades

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use the *Pinyin* style of Romanization for Chinese words as it is the style with which I am most familiar. When I quote from sources using Wade Giles, I will not alter the text.

during The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and The Culture Revolution (1966-1976). Among the practices experiencing revitalization are those similar to the *Donga*, the practices of spirit-mediums and shamans. Even as these practices are revitalized, they are experiencing transformation so that they are becoming a new form of religious experience.

Spirit mediums have been part of Chinese culture and 'Popular'/Folk Religion probably since before the beginning of written history in China. While they have been welcomed by various religious and political powers throughout the centuries, spirit-mediums have often been on the fringes of society, and more often than not have been the targets of persecution. Although laws within Mainland China do not protect their practices, there are many places where spirit-mediums and shamans continue their practices. While they are not yet part of the mainstream, the re-emergence of spirit-mediums and shamans shows their services are still required by many parts of the community. In looking at the performances of these individuals since the death of Mao, we must ask ourselves how the roles these individuals assume through performance are meeting a societal need.

Furthermore, by looking at contemporary practices, we will see how individuals engaged in these sorts of activities in many cases cannot be placed into the classic categories of shaman or spirit medium, which will be classified in the second chapter. The distinction between spirit mediums and shamans has always been a porous rather than firm one, and with the disruption in both traditions caused during Mao's reign, both spirit mediums and shamans began to resemble

each other all the more. As these individuals work with spirits and other such superhuman agents, including gods through the means of possession might be called a spirit-worker. While I am examining spirit workers primarily in the contemporary period, I will use the category of spirit worker in the past as translations for certain terms have shifted overtime and as such, I may term hard to define individuals in the past in the umbrella term of spirit worker.

I will attempt to primarily focus the majority of this project on the practices of spirit workers still living and working in the People's Republic of China. With this in mind, I will occasionally draw upon sources from overseas, especially from Taiwan. Part of this is due to the fact that until the 1980s, any research on Popular Religion and associated practices had to be conducted in Taiwan, as doing research into any form of religious practice in Mainland China was incredibly difficult. Even some contemporary scholars who are engaged with questions related to spirit workers frame their projects in anthropological terms for the ease of research. Taiwan is especially useful as a case study as many aspects of Chinese culture come from a particular province, Fujian. Taiwanese culture has, of course, evolved into its own rich entity, but its deep roots in Fujian traditions are useful when comparing how spirit-workers in contemporary Fujian compare to their Taiwanese counterparts. Additional sources from the Chinese Diaspora might show how particular aspects of Chinese Popular Religion has interacted with new host cultures and incorporated elements not present in Mainland China. This, in turn, might shed light on what may happen to spirit workers in the Mainland as The People's

Republic begins to become increasingly engaged in a globalized marketplace of religious ideology.

Even as I attempt to address how spirit workers have functioned in China since 1976, I will address the history of shamans and spirit-mediums in pre-Maoist China to understand best how why spirit-workers act in the ways they do. Considering the centuries of Chinese history, I will not be able to give a complete history of spirit-mediums and shamans. Instead, I have chosen to give an overview with the best available information, demonstrating how attitudes towards individuals who channel superhuman agents have changed. As my Chinese reading skills are not advanced enough for me to access primary source documents, I am relying upon sources I could find in translation, and as such there are certain periods that will have less documentation than others. Historical context for spirit mediums also helps us to understand why spirit-workers have stepped into certain roles in the present. When spirit-workers act in ways that are historically backed, they may not be perceived as acting in a religious manner but in a 'traditional' manner, thus have a level of protection for their activities.

While examples from other ethnicities within the People's Republic will be cited, a majority of cases will be looking at Han examples. This is not to discount the experience of non-Han ethnicities in contemporary China, but is trying to focus on a majority experience and seeing how the experiences of an ethnic group might vary between regions within China (as the Han are the dominant ethnic group in Mainland China). This range of diversity within spirit-worker practices will show

how the category of spirit medium and shaman can be crossed, and through the crossing of this barrier will show the process of innovation that is occurring within what is perceived as being a relatively static experience. Furthermore, by focusing on Han experiences, I hope to show how Han spirit-workers are able to synthesize many elements from various traditions in ways that allows for them to best serve their particular client base.

## 2. THEORY

One of the reasons I have engaged in this project is to show how the imported categories of spirit mediumship, shamanism, and magic might not work within the Chinese symbolic system. They are all part of the legacy left by Western scholarship, and attempt to classify individuals and practices. Even religion is an imported category, as the term religion, (*zongjiao*/宗教) did not exist in Chinese until after the 1850s.<sup>2</sup> In Chinese, there are at least two different terms that can be translated into English alternatively as either 'spirit medium' or 'shaman'.<sup>3</sup> These terms are (*wu*/巫), (*jitong*/乩童), and there are others.<sup>4</sup> The second term can be reversed and read as *tongji* while retaining the same meaning. There are some scholars who, in the same article, will title the same individual as either a shaman or spirit medium, showing that the lines between these categories is becoming even more blurred in Western scholarship. However, a thorough understanding of some of the classical differences between shamans and spirit mediums may be necessary in order to demonstrate how contemporary individuals break from these patterns.

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<sup>2</sup> Nedostup, 2001, 14

<sup>3</sup> Some translators will use the translation 'witch' for this term. However, considering the pejorative associations with the word and the agendas of the translators using such a term, I will try to refrain from using this translation myself. If a source I am citing uses the word witch, I will not alter it.

<sup>4</sup> *Wu* is normally translated as shaman, however there are a few translators who have decided on spirit-medium. *Jitong* in a literal if rough translation might best be read as 'divining youth.' *Jitong* is also a regional expression, mostly found in Fujian and recognized limitedly outside of it. While some provinces have adopted *jitong* to describe their own spirit-mediums, there are many provinces that might have their own terms. However, as *jitong* is a term found in much anthropological and religious studies literature, it is a term that might have been exported. When *jitong* has been reversed (*tongji*) it has sometimes been Romanized as *dangki* or *tang-ki*.

In looking at shamanism as a practice, I will draw heavily upon both Mircea Eliade and I.M. Lewis, as they are amongst the first two scholars to attempt to make shamanism a larger category. Eliade especially is among the most influential scholars on contemporary shamanism. While he borrowed from earlier scholars, including Sergei Sirokogorov, he “...built on the detailed ethnographic work of his predecessors as well as the numerous syntheses that had already been formulated, adapting their findings for use in the emerging discipline of the history of religion.”<sup>5</sup> In turn, both of these scholars have been hugely influential on the conversation of what is shamanism and how such a term might be understood. It is important to know that while both shamans and spirit mediums can potentially use magic, they are not inherently magicians (someone who strictly uses magic).

## **2.1 Defining Magic**

Magic is one of the more difficult terms to define as there are so many interpretations of what can be considered ‘magical’, and these interpretations are, of course, culturally bound. Magic is one of the many terms that could be used to describe the activities of either shamans or spirit mediums in China, but individuals engaged in such practice do not think of themselves as practicing magic. However as some scholars have used the term ‘magic’ in their descriptions of the practices of spirit-mediums or shamans, there needs to be some understanding of what magic might mean. Another issue is the connotations associated with the term magic, as especially in the Western context it has acquired something of a negative

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<sup>5</sup> DuBois, 2009, 24

reputation.<sup>6</sup> A further difficulty with the term is its close ties to ‘mysticism’, which is another highly charged term. The social sciences have had a long and difficult relationship with magic, and two early anthropologists, “...Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer, claimed that magic does- or tries to do- what science does, but not so well. Magic is a primitive practical science that included technology, medicine, and the rest.”<sup>7</sup> One of the key aspects of magic, however it is defined, is belief. Belief is a key part of what powers many aspects of magic. Understanding the aspect of belief helps transform a normal act (such as turning on a light switch) into a potentially magical act. I add the aspect of belief to a working definition where magic might be thought of as specific actions combined with belief designed to influence the world around them, potentially through supernatural means.<sup>8</sup>

For spirit mediums and shamans then, magic might be a tool that, “...speaks to realms other than material reality. These realms are understood in varying ways, but a spiritual other world that may nevertheless be an intrinsic part of the everyday material world is a common theme.”<sup>9</sup> Here, magic is an instrument and might be best understood not as an activity but as a way of thinking. As most people might be able to engage in such styles and modes of thought, anyone has the potential to become engaged in the magical process. In such a construction, magic is an activity that is not separate from the religious activity of the shamanic or spirit medium experience, but rather is a part of it as both categories would use this mode

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<sup>6</sup> Glucklich, 1997, 6

<sup>7</sup> Glucklich, 1997, 9

<sup>8</sup> Glucklich, 1997 8

<sup>9</sup> Greenwood, 2009, 8, Kindle Edition

and style of thinking in their performance. This shows that magic does not have to exist separately from religion as it tends to do in Western constructions.<sup>10</sup>

## **2.2 The Category of Popular Religion**

Both shamans and spirit-mediums in addition to using 'magic' operate in the nebulous field that might be defined as 'Chinese Popular Religion.' Not recognized by the Chinese Communist Party and often deemed superstition; it is hard to say how many individuals participate in activities associated with Popular Religion. From personal experience, I know some Chinese who do not distinguish between Popular Religion and Daoism. This may be due to the large overlap in ideologies that can and has occurred between the two, or it could also be attributed to the non-exclusive nature of both. Whatever the cause, some individuals who might be thought of as practicing Popular Religion do not see themselves as doing so, but this does not mean that the category of Popular Religion in China does not exist.

One way of thinking about Chinese Popular Religion might be, "...what people actually did rather than simply what they were supposed to do."<sup>11</sup> This however does not escape some of the problematic issues that can be associated with a notion such as popular religion, which while an improvement on the possibly pejorative 'folk religion', might be thought of as implying a struggle between elite and non-elite practice. However, by seeing Chinese Popular Religion as "...characterized as a set of fundamental values, traditional practices, and attitudes that span all classes or regions, or as a distinct set of social organizations that have come to mediate elite

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<sup>10</sup> Greenwood, 2009, 8, Kindle Edition

<sup>11</sup> Bell, 1989, 38

and peasant worldviews,"<sup>12</sup> we have a more inclusive idea of what Chinese Popular religion might be. This view, though, does not define what Chinese Popular Religion is.

One of the defining characteristics of Chinese Popular Religion, much like Buddhism and Daoism, is its inclusiveness. It, like the better-known systems, is open and allows for many elements to peacefully coexist. As such, Chinese Popular Religion or Religions are, "...not restricted to one source of religious ideas but are combinations of ideas on magic and doctrinal element of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism...folk religions are diffused and eclectic."<sup>13</sup> While there are overlaps between regions in some of the ideologies and core concepts, with the wide range of geographic as well as linguistic diversity, it might be best to think of Chinese Popular Religion rather than a single unified entity or way of thinking as a multifaceted phenomena with many aspects, thus not a Religion, but as Religions.

### **2.3 Of Shamans and Spirit Mediums**

One of the issues facing both spirit mediums and shamans is that "...ethnologists have fallen into the habit of using the terms 'shaman,' 'medicine man,'...and 'magician' interchangeably to designate certain individual possessing magico-religious powers...if the word 'shaman' is taken to mean any magician...throughout the history of religions."<sup>14</sup> Especially considering the long histories both shamans and spirit mediums have in China, distinguishing between

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<sup>12</sup> Bell, 1989, 42

<sup>13</sup> Law, 2005, 90

<sup>14</sup> Eliade, trans. Trask, 1964, 3

the two types of experience in the past becomes difficult and we must be ever mindful of the question if archaeologists are able to separate and distinguish shamanism from other beliefs or practices present at the time?<sup>15</sup> Based on what sources we do have, most of what is seen in China throughout history might fall into the classical category of spirit mediumship. However, what might potentially be defined as shamanism during the contemporary period might not have been classified as shamanism when the activities were initially practiced. This is part of why I draw on both Eliade and Lewis, who are arguably the two who did the most to classify shamanism. However, there are many scholars who argue the definitions of shamanism created solely by Eliade have become a catch all for any form of practice that cannot otherwise be easily categorized.<sup>16</sup>

One of the issues facing early scholarship on shamanism was the institutional bias against such practices within the West. For a long time, "...the decentralized nature of shamanic traditions...and their seeming lack of the trappings of more familiar Western religions...shamanism did not seem to meet the definitional threshold of 'religion'."<sup>17</sup> This unwillingness to classify shamanism as part of the religious might have been why scholars of religion were slow in adopting the study of shamanism. Even with the beginning of professional anthropology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when scholars sought out societies that practiced shamanism, they did it with the intention of witnessing, "...a holdover from a different stage in human

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<sup>15</sup> Nelson, 2008, 56

<sup>16</sup> Nelson, 2008, 57

<sup>17</sup> DuBois, 2009, 5

cultural evolution.”<sup>18</sup> The attitudes towards shamanism as something lesser continued for a long time and it wasn’t until scholars like Lewis and Eliade that the tone of the conversation began to change in a significant manner. However, even with the contributions of these two scholars, there were parts of the academy that did not regard shamanism seriously.

A defining characteristic of both spirit mediums and shamans is their ability to enter trance states. Trance states can be induced by any number of potential stimulants, but how the trance state is achieved is less important than how the surrounding community interprets the trance state.<sup>19</sup> Any number of people can be primed to enter a trance state, and certain rhythms and movements associated with behaviors designed to induce trance might help activate certain centers of the brain prepare for the possibility of entering a trance.<sup>20</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that the brain patterns of individuals who enter into these trance states is quite similar to individuals who engage in certain types of deep meditation, but how this effects what is experienced during a trance as compared to what is experienced during meditation was not explored.<sup>21</sup> This reinforces the key aspect of interpretation in shamanic or related practices. The medical possibility of trance is an important characteristic of both spirit mediums and shamans but it is not the only tool that defines these individuals. While possession might not be unique to spirit mediums and shamans, both are believed to have the ability to invite spirits,

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<sup>18</sup> DuBois, 2009, 22-23

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, 2003, 34

<sup>20</sup> AvRuskin, 1988, 294

<sup>21</sup> AvRuskin, 1988, 295

demons, or divinities into their body. This use of ecstatic trance to channel the supernatural forces into their bodies is also how both spirit mediums and shamans derive the majority of their religious power and/or authority.

A further similarity in both spirit mediums and shamans is that there is a sense of calling to the work. Both seem to believe that if chosen for the work, marked, then it is not work that cannot be avoided. Both spirit mediums and shamans believe that the, "...vocation is obligatory; one cannot refuse it. If there are no suitable candidates, the ancestral spirits torture children, who cry in their sleep, become nervous and dreamy, and....are designated for the profession."<sup>22</sup> Both potential shamans and spirit mediums who initially tried to resist the call of their work found themselves plagued by nightmares, illnesses, or misfortunes. In both spirit-mediums and shamans, a period of sickness as a child seems to be ideal as a creative force. However it has to be certain kinds of illness. Seizure disorders are especially potent as a sign of either a potential spirit medium or shaman.<sup>23</sup> It is an especially powerful sign of a spirit medium or shaman if the individual remembers the dreams they had during this sickness or anything they see during their seizure. These dreams may help to guide the future shaman or spirit medium to the function they will play in his or her community.<sup>24</sup>

It is in the realm of possession and the type of possession that the differences between spirit mediums and shamans begins to emerge. There is some sense of controlled possession when it comes to shamans, while spirit mediums are

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<sup>22</sup> Eliade, trans. Trask, 1964, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Eliade, trans. Trask, 1964, 27

<sup>24</sup> Eliade, trans. Trask, 1964, 35

traditionally thought of as lacking that same potentiality of control. A clear example of this is that shamans envisioned their trances as sending them on a journey to other levels of reality while a spirit medium, classically, claims no memory of what occurs when the gods ride their body. This dimension of control can be expanded to the type of possession that occurs where, “...shamanism involves controlled spirit possession; and that, according to the social context, the shaman incarnates the spirits in both a latent and an active form, but always in a controlled fashion. His body is a vehicle for the spirits.”<sup>25</sup> While a spirit medium might also turn their body into a vehicle for the spirits, or become the incarnation of a spirit through possession, the key word is ‘control’. In this context, Lewis is suggesting that those who don’t control when and how the spirit might take them are not shamans. It is the language of control that is one of the most defining parts of what classically defines a shaman as compared to a spirit medium.

Further on the subject of trances, there are long traditions talking about the shamanic experience of spirit journey. Shamans traditionally are thought of as capable of engaging in spirit journeys during their possession trances, while spirit mediums become empty vessels, their souls going where they know not where. The shaman then is someone who, “...specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld.”<sup>26</sup> During these spirit journeys, the shaman, “...persuades or even fights with the gods

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis, 2003, 45

<sup>26</sup> Eliade, trans. Trask, 1964, 5

in order to secure benefits of his fellow men.”<sup>27</sup> When the shamans spirit returns from their journey, they are able to detail to their congregation what they experienced. The combination of fighting with the gods and remembering of spirit journeys is part of what has separated spirit mediums from shamans, even in parts of China where the traditions exist side by side. However, distinctions drawn only on the envisioning of spirit journey are not always useful, as there are some cases where an individual is capable of either becoming a vessel for the gods, or journeying out to meet them and remembering the experience.<sup>28</sup>

While spirit mediums also have the ability to call upon their spirits during consultation or for particular purposes, the control of spirit by shamans is imagined by some to be greater than the control spirit mediums exercise. In many contexts, the shaman is perceived of the ability to command the spirits to do work in a matter of subjects, be that for divination or to effect the physical world (such as changing the weather). Spirit mediums can induce trances, but generally seem only to be able to do that.<sup>29</sup> They, generally speaking, seem to lack the capability to call upon their spirit(s) to do more than possess their bodies. Furthermore, depending on the region, spirit mediums may only perceived as powerful when under states of possession, at least traditionally speaking. This perception is changing though and it will be discussed later. Shamans, in comparison, are more likely to be viewed as

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<sup>27</sup> Lewis, 2003, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Nelson, 2008, 58

<sup>29</sup> Some of the cases where the spirit medium was able to initiate the bridge with the supernatural realm include those cited by Erin Cline, Kenneth Dean, Lizhu Fan, David K. Jordan, and a medium who said as much during an interview on Youtube who I title Ms. Li.

more supernaturally potent more of the time. This may have to do with the additional knowledge a shaman acquires as compared to spirit mediums.

The ability to fight with the spirits and negotiate with them is an ability that seems unique to shamans however. It is part of the shaman's ability to, "...communicate with spirits, travel the cosmos in search of errant or recalcitrant souls, and minister to the particular needs of clients." <sup>30</sup> By communicating or doing battle with the spirit, the shaman is able to transform a potentially harmful spirit into a guardian, either of themselves or of their community. This transformation of the spirit shows the shaman's ability to influence the supernatural world in the way a spirit medium could not. It is also part of the language of control that traditionally separates spirit mediums from shamans. In either re-securing the aid of a spirit or converting a spirit from an aggressor into a guardian, the shaman has become associated with that spirit. The tradition of guardian spirits has been one of the distinguishing characteristics of shamans.<sup>31</sup>

A practice unique to spirit mediums not found in shamans is corporeal mortification. Spirit mediums, under states of possession, often flay, pierce, cut, and otherwise harm their bodies without showing any signs of physical pain to prove that they are being possessed. This practice of physical self-harm seems to have been a strictly male one and is still practiced by overseas Chinese who engage in possession. Male spirit mediums in Singapore, for example, will use the dried nose

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<sup>30</sup> DuBois, 2009, 6

<sup>31</sup> Greenwood, 2008, 33 Kindle Edition

extension of a sawfish to hit their back to the point where blood has been drawn.<sup>32</sup>

There are no accounts of shamans of engaging in similar practices.

What might be one of the strongest separations between spirit-mediums and shamans in the traditional literature is the aspect of training. . In many cultures “...a shaman is not recognized as such until after he has received two kinds of teaching: (1) ecstatic (dreams, trances, etc.) and (2) traditional (shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology, and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc.). This twofold course of instruction, given by the spirits and the old master shamans, is equivalent to an initiation.<sup>33</sup>” More than this, in some ideologies, in a shaman requires a successor in order to be seen as effective as the ability to keep the knowledge alive is one of the important skills a shaman might be required to demonstrate.<sup>34</sup> Most spirit medium traditions in Mainland China in the contemporary period seem to have very limited training, if at all. It is far more common that spirit mediums spontaneously emerge, their gifts manifesting with no formal instructions. This may be a result of interactions with Qing era shamans, as there were allegedly cases amongst Manchurians of shamans emerging without any lineage, despite the strong association of shamans and familial lineage in Manchurian contexts.<sup>35</sup> This is purely conjecture though, as there is little evidence to support a widespread dispersal of Manchurian shamanism among the Han.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujKhGm3cLZo> 0:58-1:20

<sup>33</sup> Eliade, trans. Trask, 1964, 13

<sup>34</sup> Eliade, trans. Trask, 1964, 16

<sup>35</sup> Eliade, trans. Trask, 1964, 17

In short, shamans are believed to have the ability to command the spirits in addition to entering trance states. When a shaman does enter a trance state, the shaman's soul or spirit is often envisioned in going to other realms of existence where the shaman can either battle or negotiate with the spirits. Shamans often have to undergo extensive training in order to become a shaman, and the potential for shamanism can run in families. Spirit mediums, on the other hand, are conceived of as having less control over their trances, and may require little to no formalized training. Furthermore, when entering a trance state, spirit mediums don't have the visions of shamans, their souls are not thought to journey to any specific plane of being. Spirit mediums can potentially occur anywhere, and being the child of a spirit medium does not mean that the child will become a spirit medium.

While there could be arguments for the division between shamans and spirit mediums in a Chinese and many ethnographers and still use such categories, I hope to have shown that the division between shamans and spirit-mediums could be an arbitrary one. I bring up the classical separation of spirit-mediums and shamans on theoretical grounds in order to show how contemporary spirit workers cross the lines between the two categories and at times have embodied aspects of being both a spirit medium and a shaman depending on their particular situation. However, without understanding how a division between the two classes might be constructed, the rise of spirit workers and what they are capable of doing in modern society as compared to their antecedents. We must also be careful when at looking at past materials as there is very little by individuals who were shamans or spirit mediums about what they considered themselves and how they constructed their

own ideology of self. Only through a careful examination of how the divide has been constructed and what previous spirit mediums or shamans have done can we in the present come to a more thorough understanding of what contemporary spirit workers are doing and how they differ from those who came before them.

### 3. HISTORY

One of the difficulties about talking about the past is seeing clearly what Eliade and Lewis would have defined as a shaman in operation. Considering the wide range of China and depth of history, it is possible “shamans” have operated, but it is close to impossible to tell how these individuals might have understood themselves or their powers. An exploration of history is necessary to show how some of the current attitudes towards spirit workers have come into being I will endeavor to remain as objective as possible, but this will be difficult considering that some source material uses derogatory language about spirit mediums and shamans. These accounts are key as they are powerful illustrations of the difficulties faced by both groups the past. These past stigmas in some cases have endured into the present and effect contemporary spirit workers.

It is impossible to know when shamanism or spirit mediumship emerged in China, and is most likely a prehistoric event. It is possible either spirit mediums or shamans were central figures in the early religions of China. In many parts of the ancient world there is a sense that, “...participation in spirit mediumship cults has also been widely regarded as obligatory. This does not mean that everybody is a medium. But it is everyone’s duty, if called upon, to participate in possession ritual the performance of which is regarded as essential for the common good.”<sup>36</sup> As contemporary spirit workers continue this communal access to the divine realm, it is possible this is a continuation of those early practices in new forms. Like elsewhere in the Ancient World, it is possible ceremonies in antiquity began with

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<sup>36</sup> Beattie, 1977, 5

either a prayer or invocation to the spirits, an aspect of many parts of spirit medium cults.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.1 Early Period (Shang through Western Han)

Some scholars have argued Shang (approx.. 1600-1060BCE) elites served as forms of spirit-mediums or shamans due to their involvement with the ceremonial divination that was a major aspect of what we know of Shang religion.<sup>38</sup> Another figure who played a major role in addition to these elites was known as *wu*, a term that later became associated with shamans in some translations. The *wu* functioned primarily as a diviner, but the *wu* may have also served as healer and as someone who could cross between the physical world and the spirit world.<sup>39</sup> There are very few inscriptions from the Shang period that mention *wu* directly, so what the *wu* were to the Shang exactly and how they acted remains unknown. While some have attempted to compare the *wu* to Siberian or Manchurian shamans, the heterogeneous texts on *wu* from the Zhou (1046-256BCE) and later periods composed of eclectic, Confucian, and Daoist sources, the ability to compare the *wu* of antiquity to the shamans operating in Siberia on Manchuria is at best a difficult exercise, as these sources do not present a unified image.<sup>40</sup>

By the time of the Zhou, the *wu* had acquired a sinister reputation in some circles, perhaps showing the first seeds of what would be a long tradition of suspicion surrounding spirit work. Scattered sources throughout the Zhou and into

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<sup>37</sup> Beattie, 1977, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Boileau, 2002, 351

<sup>39</sup> Boileau, 2002, 352

<sup>40</sup> Boileau, 2002, 356-357

the Western Han (206BCE-207BCE) “...present the *wu* in a less favourable manner and suggest an understanding of the details of their activities in the Zhou era, either in ritual or historical context.”<sup>41</sup> Another text from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, *Zhouzhuàn*, is claimed by later literati to “...deplore spiritual beings, sacrifices, and cults that they described as *yin*,”<sup>4243</sup> and these cults may have contained spirit-mediums at their center.

It is also during the Zhou, with the beginnings of (*daojiao*/religious Daoism) 道教 (that, “...Daoism transformed under the influence of popular shamanistic techniques of ecstasy and interaction with the spirits. It linked these with Zhuangzi’s ideal of untrammled freedom in the ideal of immortality or transcendence. As a religious ideal this meant to leave the world behind in ecstasy and survive...among the stars.”<sup>44</sup> Even with transformations offered through ecstatic experiences, early Daoists remained leery of spirit mediums. One of the ways in which Daoism began to distinguish itself from animist and shamanic traditions was when early Daoists “...rejected shamanic trances, blood sacrifices, and orgiastic fertility rites, and replaced them with written communications to the gods. Expressing their prayers and wishes in petitions...they established a formal line of communication with the otherworld.”<sup>45</sup> Despite such prohibitions, visions described by the early members of

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<sup>41</sup> Boileau, 2002, 358

<sup>42</sup> Sutton, 2000, 4

<sup>43</sup> *Yin* may be a term referring to negative, malign, or passive groups. Originally coming from a term meaning the dark or shady side of a hill, *yin* came to be associated with the feminine, death, and negativity in Chinese popular thought.

<sup>44</sup> Kohn, 2004, 43

<sup>45</sup> Kohn, 2004, 65

the School of the Celestial Masters match many descriptive accounts by shamans.<sup>46</sup> It may be impossible to know just how spirit mediums interacted with the early Daoist establishment, but the combination of prohibitions and visions found in Daoist sources suggests both a desire to distinguish itself from popular practices and a debt to those sources.

One characteristic of *wu* in this early period is *wu* seem to be a gender or sex neutral position. Some sources hint that *wu* might be roughly correlated to females while there may have been another term applied to males.<sup>47</sup> This point of view might have been imposed from later sources. By the time of the *Zhouli* (*The Rites of the Zhou*, one of the three classics of Confucianism), a term that might have referred to a male shaman or spirit-medium had dropped out of usage, leaving *wu* as the only term describing these professionals. However, these individuals could still be sexed either by adding (*nan/man*) 男 or (*nü/woman*) 女 before *wu*, distinguishing them.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of the biological sex of these early *wu*, they engaged in a number of tasks continued by contemporary spirit-workers.

Within the *Zhouli*, “One important point emerges...the tasks of the *wu*, male and female alike, seem to have had a close connection with inauspicious events—diseases, death, droughts or floods.”<sup>49</sup> The associations of the *wu* with these events might be part of what led to the stigmas against spirit-mediums and shamans in later generations. There are other sections though where *wu* work as healers.

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<sup>46</sup> Kohn, 2004, 88

<sup>47</sup> Boileau, 2002, 357

<sup>48</sup> Boileau, 2002, 359

<sup>49</sup> Boileau, 2002, 359

Details are few, however there are ways of reading *Zhouli* to see the *wu* as being part of the healing rituals performed by doctors.<sup>50</sup> There are some unclear passages where the distinction between *wu* and the healers of physical maladies is close to non-existent, tying the potential of spiritual trouble to physical health.<sup>51</sup> There is even a case from the Eastern Han period (approx. 25 CE- 220 CE) where spirit mediums worked together with doctors in the treatment of a high born official as seen in a document detailing the death of the official where neither the treatments of doctor nor medium were effective.<sup>52</sup>

### **3.2 Middle Period** (Eastern Han through Song)

The collaboration between doctors and spirit-mediums is indeed a long lasting one. In a later text, *Recipes for Fifty-Two Ailments*, diseases attributed to demons are dealt with when “...the physician or the spirits he conjures subjugate the demon by violent means, using magical weapons such as a rammer, a thuja-wood pestle, or an iron hammer.”<sup>53</sup> When facing epidemics during the post Han period, before the Tang (618-907 CE), there are records that indicate both spirit mediums and doctors were involved with the preparations to ward off the disease.<sup>54</sup> The spirit medium as healer is something still encountered in the contemporary setting when conventional treatments are perceived as ineffective, or in addition to more ‘sanctioned’ forms of healing.

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<sup>50</sup> Boileau, 2002, 359

<sup>51</sup> Boileau, 2002, 360

<sup>52</sup> von Glahn, 2004, 99

<sup>53</sup> von Glahn, 2004, 108

<sup>54</sup> von Glahn, 2004, 108

No matter the close associations between spirit mediums and healing, they never fully entered the realm of medicine. Rather, they gained a new classification during the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE). They were classified as ritual masters (*fashi*). These ritual masters “...specialized in one or another set of liturgical therapies for exorcising demons and restoring health to afflicted persons. This term can be traced to earlier periods, however it becomes more inclusive and more widely used during the Song. The term *fashi* encompassed every denomination of religious practitioner...ranging from unlettered village mediums to learned masters of scripture. Their common denominator was the ability to invoke a specific patron deity by means of spirit possession and metamorphosis whereby the deity inheres in the body of the *fashi* and endows him with its supernatural power.”<sup>55</sup> While shamans and spirit mediums were not the only *fashi*, many of the characteristics of *fashi* are traits of both, especially gaining power through possession by a spiritual entity, either divine or demonic. There is a possibility later spirit mediums borrowed from the ideas surrounding *fashi* to help redefine their own identity and become more acceptable to society. However, early sources including the *Zhouli* make it seem possible that trance was already a technique in use by *wu*. We must remember though, “The notion of trance depends heavily on the subjective interpretation of the scholar and thus cannot form the basis of scientific studies.”<sup>56</sup> Also, during the Song, expansions of the Daoist practice of Inner Alchemy might be related to the expansion of other ritual practices including exorcisms and other such ‘magical’ services.

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<sup>55</sup> von Glahn, 2004, 154

<sup>56</sup> Boileau, 2002, 360

### 3.3 Late Period (Yuan and Ming)

Despite the Mongol emphasis on records, as exemplified through their extensive legal codes and documents, not much is known of the interactions between the Yuan and spirit mediums. The emphasis on record keeping though is among the traits that passed to the later ruling dynasties, as during both the Ming and Qing periods there are voluminous records on a number of subjects, including spirit mediums.

Expansions of commerce in the Ming (1368-1644 CE) allowed for the lower classes to truly have a culture separate from the literati. As such, individuals began to form local organizations, “...many of which engaged in direct communication with the spirits, either by automatic speech or through spirit-writing. The latter employed the planchette, a tray of sand in which a medium in trance would write characters dictated by the gods...among the material received in this manner are...instructions on the organization and formation of sects and cults, which were often obeyed to the letter.”<sup>57</sup> Even with the expansions of lower class-culture that occurred, opinions on spirit mediums and shamans were far from unified. Documents from elite sources during the Ming show an aversion to both ‘shamans’ and ‘spirit mediums’. This may have to do more with the language of the time than any perceived lack of distinction.<sup>58</sup> This discrimination against spirit mediums was reflected in the legal codes of the time wherein if a patient died under treatment of a

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<sup>57</sup> Kohn, 2004, 172

<sup>58</sup> Sutton, 2000, 1

Daoist priest or spirit medium, that religious official could be strangled.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, “Both Ming and Qing codes prohibited ‘spirit mediums (*shiwu*) who, on the pretense of calling down heretical gods, write charms, recite spells, do spirit writing, and pray to the sages,’ and lumped them together with secret societies as deceptive and inflammatory influences on the people.”<sup>60</sup> Even with all of these tensions between high and low, there are plenty of examples of the influence of low-class culture and practice. This might best be seen in the expansion of supernatural and magical practices found in the ‘low’ fiction of Ming period authors. These novels may have included characters whom either used body magic practices (such as *qi* cultivation) or had divine powers (such as are bestowed on a mediums/shamans).<sup>61</sup> This treatment in fiction is not united thought: there are other pieces wherein “...spirit mediums appear to be no better than charlatans and fools, and at worst trouble makers.”<sup>62</sup>

### 3.4 Qing, Republican, and Communist

Tensions between literati and spirit mediums are reflected in the pamphlets and gazettes of the Qing (1644-1911 CE). For the literati, the dislike for spirit mediums might be tied to expansions of neo-Confucian ideology in earlier periods. An issue facing the critics of spirit-medium and shamans is that, “Shamanism was an elusive target. It lacked a textual canon or an institutional tradition of its own. Its rites necessarily elaborated upon existing local beliefs and were interwoven with

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<sup>59</sup> Sutton, 2000, 1

<sup>60</sup> Sutton, 2000, 18

<sup>61</sup> Kohn, 2004, 172

<sup>62</sup> Sutton, 2000, 16

local ritual practice.”<sup>63</sup> Even though spirit-mediums and shamans were a nebulous target, “...gazetteers dismissed them as worse than useless, and singled them out for repression and reform by the local elite.”<sup>64</sup> The authors of such texts did not push for extermination campaigns of superstition through violence though. Rather, Qing period authors, especially during the late imperial period, sought “...the spread of Confucian values by the example and numerical increase of the local literates.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore beyond the gazettes and papers of the period, “An unfavorable image of spirit mediums pervades serious Qing writing. While shamanism figures as a significant popular social custom...it is almost invariably...[as]...the target of criticism.”<sup>66</sup> Part of why the tension between Confucians and spirit mediums might have erupted to the extent it did during the late Qing was the social chaos of the period. Some segments of society doubtless saw a return to the glories of earlier periods through the spreading of Confucian virtues. Others engaged in practices such as spirit-writing, where the divine would directly instruct them and potentially lead them to greatness.

Spirit-writing can still be observed in overseas Chinese communities, especially in Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan, where it remains a vibrant part of the practice of Chinese Popular Religion. However, on the Mainland, the practice has seemed to have died out. The endurance of the practice is impressive, but what was written by the possessed during the Qing sheds much light on the social realities of

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<sup>63</sup> Sutton, 2000, 22

<sup>64</sup> Sutton, 2000, 1-2

<sup>65</sup> Sutton, 2000, 35

<sup>66</sup> Sutton, 2000, 17-18

the period. Some recorded messages in trance were almost what you might expect of a contemporary medium including when a missionary in Hong Kong (when under British control) witnessed a medium scribe out a message to a mother from a deceased daughter.<sup>67</sup> Things written by mediums and shamans in their states of ecstasy, "...were issued by both popular and unknown deities, and contained information on the organization and life of the otherworld; accounts of the creation, development, and eventual end of the of the world; hagiographic details on the life and efforts of the transmitting deity; practical materials on chants and talismans, and instructions for healing efficacious ceremonies."<sup>68</sup> In the social turmoil of the later Qing period, it might be best to think of "Chinese spirit-writing, like other forms of shamanism, [as] one route to authority and influence during social crisis."<sup>69</sup>

Facing defeats at the hands of the Europeans powers created a sense of decline in Qing authority, and "...when the legitimacy of a regime declines sharply as in late-Qing China, or when the political system is perceived to be in chaos, opportunities for shamanistic leadership and authority multiply."<sup>70</sup> Even with all of these opportunities or perhaps because of them "...spirit mediums reportedly had low prestige and were frequently suspected of fakery and of venal motives.<sup>71</sup> The potential exploitation of the chaos for personal motives by spirit-mediums and shamans are perhaps the greatest factor in contemporary tension between the political establishment and spirit workers. Spirit mediums engaging in this sort of

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<sup>67</sup> Scott, 2007, 110

<sup>68</sup> Kohn, 2004, 182

<sup>69</sup> Lang and Ragvald, 1998, 300

<sup>70</sup> Lang and Ragvald, 1998, 312

<sup>71</sup> Lang, and Ragvald, 1998, 313

practice would often form small groups of disciples, all eager to gain further instruction or clarification from the divine presence, potentially disrupting the social fabric they were apart of to observe their particular spirit-medium engage with the divine. As the writings done by mediums while under possession “...were frequently used to control and manipulate the inner circle of devotees and followers, rewarding, praising, exhorting, admonishing, condemning, and occasionally expelling followers according to the extent of their loyalty and their adherence to his moral program,”<sup>72</sup> it is easy to see how these writings might have potentially pushed members of spirit-medium groups either into political actions.

The spirit mediums of the late Qing also may have posed an ideological threat to Confucian power structures as they incorporated elements of Protestant Christianity. Especially in large cities, missionary tracts were circulated freely, and the ideology may have influenced spirit mediums. There are passages written by spirit mediums that are “...very similar to some of those found the Yahwist ‘prophetic’ writing dating from the pre-exilic period in ancient Israel...in both the Israelite and Chinese material, a deity calls for charitable treatment of the common people and condemns the cheating and deception of urban merchants.”<sup>73</sup> The incorporation of Judeo-Christian ideology could have reminded both Qing elites and literati of the *Taiping* Rebellion (1850-1864 CE), and perhaps inspired fears of another such uprising. While not all spirit mediums engaged in such practices, there may have been enough to be wary of spirit mediums in general. Tensions between

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<sup>72</sup> Lang and Ragvald, 1998, 318

<sup>73</sup> Lang and Ragvald, 1998, 318

Qing literati and spirit mediums may never have come to confrontation, perhaps because “Spirit-writing....has limits as a method of providing services to worshippers and controlling them. In the transition to mass worship....the...method has been abandoned.”<sup>74</sup>

The early part of the Republican period (1910-1949) continued many of the attacks on spirit mediums and shamans begun in the Qing. During the Republican period, the Nationalists struggled to create a category of ‘superstition’ as separate from ‘religion’, which was difficult as the category of religion was an imported idea from Japan, which had already undergone dramatic Westernization.<sup>75</sup> Prior to the introduction of religion and superstition as separate categories during the late Qing “...Chinese...lacked a single term to denote a discrete category of beliefs and rituals about the supernatural.”<sup>76</sup> The debate over what constituted religion in the Qing and Republican period also included debates on what practices would be allowed. Even though the Nationalists were going to allow the practice of religion, as compared to what would happen during the Cultural Revolution and Great Leaps forward under Mao, many Nationalists were in favor of reducing rituals or recrafting them to be more in service of the state. It is possible that the sometimes militant Christianity of

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<sup>74</sup> Lang and Ragvald, 1996, 325

<sup>75</sup> Nedostup, 2001, 17

<sup>76</sup> Nedostup, 2001, 18

Sun Yat-sen<sup>77</sup> may have factored into Nationalist ideologies and part of why the Nationalist party was so ready to attack what it defined as 'superstition'.<sup>78</sup>

The primary years of the anti-superstition campaigns were from 1928 until 1930, but the leadership of the Kuomintang (KMT) continued various programs until they were driven from their capital by Japanese forces in 1937. Some techniques used by the Kuomintang used in their anti superstition campaigns included the creating of relatively simple songs/chants so that people could easily recite and understand them and thus be part of the battle against "...bodhisattvas or earth gods, telling fortunes, consulting geomantic texts, writing charms, or accepting the teaching of a new syncretic cult."<sup>79</sup> Such techniques were part of the Nationalist's goal, where this "...was meant not simply to transfer power, but to transform the people. To do so the party...needed to teach people how to be citizens of the Republic of China."<sup>80</sup> Despite being on opposite ends of the political spectrum in many ways, the Communists continued many projects begun by the Nationalists in terms of the modernization of China, including the attacks against superstition which did include attack on spirit mediums and shamans.

Although both Communists and Nationalists attacked spirit mediums and shamans, the practices endured at least well enough to enter the early part of the Communist regime. Despite, or perhaps because of the massive changes of the Great

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<sup>77</sup> In this section, I have chosen to use the Wade-Giles systems of Romanization for both Sun Yat-sen and the Kuomintang as these are the names that would be most familiar for a Western audience

<sup>78</sup> Nedostup, 2001, 44

<sup>79</sup> Nedostup, 2001, 13

<sup>80</sup> Nedostup, 2001, 15

Leaps Forward and the Cultural Revolution there are documents indicating the operation of spirit mediums during arguably the most severe of the anti-religious times. This may be due in part to the difficulty in access to 'modern' medicine by large numbers of people in the countryside, so "...Instead they relied on a variety of healers, including female and male spirit mediums...Daoist priests, herbalists, midwives and itinerant hucksters, and on a variety of therapies, including drugs, acupuncture, moxibustion, charms, spells, amulets, divination, incantations and, above all, exorcism. In popular health practice medicine and exorcism were barely separable, especially in types of illness perceived to be demonic in aetiology."<sup>81</sup> These individuals, despite their best intentions, were likely responsible for a number of miscarriages that were induced as part of their curing process for any number of ailments.<sup>82</sup> While unfortunate, these amateur healers were dealing with a difficult situation as best they could. Considering the millions of deaths that resulted from both the Great Leaps Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the miscarriages by women who sought curing from spirit mediums takes on a political dimension. It was something the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could attack and use as a scapegoat and as a distraction from the millions who were dying from disease and starvation (the side effects of The Great Leaps Forward).<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Smith, 2006, 1005

<sup>82</sup> Smith, 2006, 1006

<sup>83</sup> There is still debate over the numbers of individuals who died due to starvation, illness, political purging, and other causes during the Great Leaps Forward. Party sources of the time (1958-1962) put the number as low as 20 million. Other scholars have estimated the death toll was as high as 70 million. A professor of Hong Kong University sorted through previously unavailable sources estimated the death toll at 45 million (Dikötter, Frank.

This brief examination of the historical record shows some of the many factors facing contemporary spirit-workers. The current constitution of the People's Republic of China states, "The State protects normal religious activities"<sup>84</sup> without defining what 'normal' might mean. However, 'normal' as defined by the Chinese state likely does not include any of the practices of past or present spirit workers, and as such, they have had to adapt themselves in order to survive with the times.

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"Mao's Great Leap to Famine." *The New York Times*, December 15, 2010. Accessed February 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/16/opinion/16iht-eddikotter16.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/16/opinion/16iht-eddikotter16.html?_r=0).)

<sup>84</sup> [http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content\\_1372964.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372964.htm)

#### 4. RISE OF THE SPIRIT WORKER

One of the issues that I faced in this paper was that I had no chance to do my own fieldwork, as such I have to rely on the reports of others with their own biases and observations. I had no way of confirming what was written, nor how the communities/individuals described have changed in the time since the authors have written. Still, relying on the reports to which I do have access, I firmly believe there now exists a category that is neither shaman nor spirit medium. This is the category of spirit worker to which I referred in the introduction. Many individuals in contemporary Mainland China fit into this category, and another reason this category is useful as it allows for a wide range of activities. What one individual terms a shaman could potentially be termed as a spirit medium by another, and so between these two terms, I believe exists the spirit worker. In looking at spirit mediums and shamans both as spirit workers, I am going to be emphasizing the similarities more so than the differences highlighted previously.

At this point I am going to introduce the case studies who will be referred to throughout the rest of both this chapter and the remainder of my thesis. Firstly is Ms. Li, an older woman of indeterminate age. She was interviewed in 2008, but the interviewer does not specify where the interview took place. She began serving her possessing gods later in life with her first trance not occurring until she was past the age of 40.<sup>85</sup> Despite her advanced age, she still enters trance on occasion and continues to engage in spirit work when she can. A second fulltime spirit worker whom works in Northern China is Ms. Wu. Ms. Wu has served her gods for over two

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<sup>85</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>.

decades, and began her service shortly after the death of Mao.<sup>86</sup> A third spirit worker is Ms. Lin, who is married to a farmer and has served her possessing gods for 17 years. The final case study is Ms. Huang, who is a relative by marriage to Ms. Lin. Ms. Huang first experienced her gods around her 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday, but it was not until sometime later that she became a spirit worker.<sup>87</sup> Both Ms. Lin and Ms. Huang operate in Fujian province, one of the areas most studied by anthropologists and sociologists who are interested in the studies of mediumship. While these will not be the only individuals I refer to, they will be the most common figures in my discussion of spirit work.

One sign of the emergence of spirit workers are the increasing numbers of mediums who have experienced visions of their possessing gods. Ms. Li, who identifies herself as a spirit medium, has had dreams in which her primary possessing god appears to her. In these dreams, the god appeared with two small children, whom she believes to be the children of the god.<sup>88</sup> Ms. Huang also has experienced a vision of Guanyin (one of her primary possessing gods), but the details of the experience are more vague.<sup>89</sup> While these may not seem significant occurrences, these break from tradition. Previously, a spirit medium might only know which gods possessed them from certain trance indicators associated with different divinities. To directly receive a vision of the possessing spirit enters the realm of otherworldly journeys associated with shamanism, especially as in the

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<sup>86</sup> Fan, 2003, 364.

<sup>87</sup> Cline, 2010, 528

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>.

<sup>89</sup> Cline, 2010, 528

vision described by Ms. Li, where the possessing god 'descended' into her dream. Dreams are already perceived of as a liminal state between the worlds, so for the medium to have experienced the sensation of a god descending would indicate that they themselves have risen to a place where the god can reach them, perhaps a form of a spirit journey. This blurs the distinction between merely being a spirit medium and shaman by the classical definitions of the terms.

Another way the categories of spirit mediums and shamans has blurred comes from outside of those who practice as either category, and is due to economic rather than social factors. Since the re-opening of China after the death of Mao, many overseas Chinese have been investing amounts of money into their ancestral villages, paying for rites for their ancestors. Overseas Chinese have invited ritual masters from all sectors (be they spirit-mediums, shamans, Daoist ritual masters, and/or Buddhist monks) to reinvigorate their communities.<sup>90</sup> Here the notion might be that both spirit mediums and shamans have the same sort of ritual efficacy as each other as they both access the divine directly. Distinguishing about control of the spirits or how the official embodies this divine power might not be a factor for overseas Chinese. Either spirit mediums or shamans have the potential to the channel the gods during trances, so both are able to "...forge a direct connections between the people and the gods."<sup>91</sup> Sometimes, both spirit mediums and shamans have both been consulted by prospective parents for rites to either affect the sex of

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<sup>90</sup> Dean, 2010, 249-250

<sup>91</sup> Cline, 2010, 547

an unborn child or prognosticate the sex of future children.<sup>92</sup> By not insisting on the distinction between spirit mediums or shamans in payment, those giving money for services are economically shifting the power to anyone who has the potential to enter trance states and would be willing to participate in the rites required. This then would encourage spirit mediums and shamans to act like each other as they would both want to be perceived of as efficacious and receive the invitations to ceremonies so they can either make their living or supplement their livelihood.

The economic contributions of overseas Chinese further blurs distinction between spirit mediums and shamans when the contributions go to a series of temples that are loosely affiliated with each other where training sessions for spirit mediums are held.<sup>93</sup> This family of temples, both in and outside of Mainland China, has “...held numerous and regular spirit medium training sessions (*guanjie*) over the past several decades. In addition, a number of ritual innovations have occurred in these...temples...these innovations include the development...of a new set of ritual initiations in the cult of the Goddess Ou Xiang and in techniques of spirit writing and ritual dance for women’s group.”<sup>94</sup> This might not seem like much, but by having sessions to train spirit mediums, including the first training for female spirit mediums in the Mainland *Putian* temple in the summer of 2007,<sup>95</sup> the temple structure is blurring the line between shamanism and spirit mediumship. As mentioned in the Theory section, it is in shamanism where there is a very large

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<sup>92</sup> Law, 2005, 100

<sup>93</sup> Dean, 2010, 243

<sup>94</sup> Dean, 2010, 243

<sup>95</sup> Dean, 2010, 243

concern over training and lineage. Most spirit mediums, in contrast, are self-taught.<sup>96</sup> By hosting training sessions for spirit mediums, the donations and temple structure is giving the spirit mediums something which may have previously been restricted to the realms of the shamans in giving them access to ritual texts, and knowledge coming from a single source, thus establishing lineage. If these spirit mediums go on to teach others then, either through the temple or independently, then they are helping to further the lineage structure and enter the realm of the shamans.

Even without the ritual texts and specialized formula offered through temples, some mediums have begun to engage in lineage practices. These lineages contain specialized ritual knowledge that may include rites designed to induce trance in the spirit medium.<sup>97</sup> Tensions can arise over to whom knowledge of the rites is passed, as it may depend on a number of factors including who marries in and out of the family, and who is perceived as being a medium or a potential medium and their relation to other mediums.<sup>98</sup> This might be tied to family based charisma, as seen in certain forms of religious Daoism,<sup>99</sup> but it also suggests that mediumship or the capacity for mediumship is something that can be transmitted through family lines. As seen in Eliade's and Lewis' framework, this could be interpreted as possibly shamanic. By suggesting that mediums can pass on their

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<sup>96</sup> All four women who serve as my primary case studies have had no formal training in the art of spirit-mediumship or shamanism. Rather, they felt the call to serve, and after accepting the call as a part of their life, they began acting directly as mediums. They needed no organized structure to begin operating or to enable them to engage in trance more effectively.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, 2007, 110

<sup>98</sup> Brown, 2007, 110

<sup>99</sup> Brown, 2007 110

power, this means that mediumship is becoming a tradition with a family or closely linked individuals, making them more like shamans. By tying certain forms of ritual knowledge into family structures, it ensures that only members of certain lineages have access to the rites. In so doing, they are restricting access to divine power and creating different forms of the experience, which is closer to what might be seen from shamans, at least classically speaking. Furthermore, by passing down techniques that can induce trance, the medium is attempting to call the spirits to them. Rather than being the instrument of the gods, the rites to call the gods begin to suggest mediums are looking for ways to control their access to the supernatural realm. The language of control is also something associated with shamans far more than it is associated with spirit-mediums.

Closely associated with restricted knowledge comes the professionalization of spirit mediums, further linking them with shamanic activity. There are increasingly more individuals who might attempt to be full time mediums.<sup>100</sup> This then would mean that much like the shaman, the spirit medium is always on the clock. However, this might be difficult for the potential spirit medium as their possessing spirit(s) may not allow them to become a full time religious official.<sup>101</sup> An additional issue facing individuals who might want to engage in such a profession fulltime comes from legislation. Taxation and legislation against spirit mediums might be part of the reason why there are not more professional spirit mediums

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<sup>100</sup> Of the four women in my case studies, all of them have become full time spirit workers. Two of them, Ms. Huang and Ms. Lin have also turned parts of their home into small shrines for their possessing gods.

<sup>101</sup> Jordan, ND, <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/medium-main.html>

among the Han.<sup>102</sup> Part of why the women who form the core of my case studies have been able to become fulltime mediums is because they no longer faces a challenge to the authorities the same way a younger individual who might be attempting to do the same thing would be. For younger individuals who are seeking success as spirit mediums (however that might be qualified), “It appears that as it grows and attracts an even larger clientele, as it outgrows the front parlor or converted house...your mediumship will begin to pose organizational problems.”<sup>103</sup> Still that there are any individuals at all who are attempting to become full time spirit mediums is indicative that they want to professionalize what they are doing. For them, much like the shaman, it might be something that needs to be lived and lived fully in order to be fully apart of their world.

A final way the categories of spirit mediums and shamans are being blended is the perception of mediums when they are not possessed. While shamans are always perceived as supernaturally powerful, spirit mediums are traditionally perceived only as powerful when they are hosts for their possessing gods. However, by introducing the possibility of mediums being chosen for moral factors, being favored by the gods because of their morality, the medium becomes more than a medium. By accepting the gods and that the gods might then choose their host based off of the exceptional moral character, that then means they would be treated with respect at the least by those who have come to seek their services.<sup>104</sup> This would elevate the status such an in the community, as they would always be seen with the

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<sup>102</sup> Jordan, ND, <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/medium-main.html>

<sup>103</sup> Jordan, ND, <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/medium-main.html>

<sup>104</sup> Cline, 2010, 542-543

potentiality of supernatural favor. This would render the medium much more like the shaman, who is always respected because of their close tie to the supernatural world. This shift suggests that mediums are more than, "...temporary manifestations of gods with divine power to help people,"<sup>105</sup> but rather are becoming walking manifestations of the divine in the everyday. An individual who perfectly embodies this is Ms. Wu, who has become in many ways the living embodiment of her primary possessing god (The Silkworm Mother). This is so much the case that the reputation, numinous power, and imagined efficacy of both the god and the medium are the same in her.<sup>106</sup> While Ms. Wu might be an outlier at present, it is possible that more and more mediums will begin to follow her example, and become the living embodiments of their primary possessing god. In so doing, they cease being strictly a medium but are closer to the shaman and perhaps even beyond that category.

For these reasons, the category of spirit worker is the best to term many of the individuals who are currently operating in Mainland China. They have stepped beyond the traditional boundaries that separate mediums from shamans, which were already thin to begin with. While distinctions can still be drawn between these two modes of operation, the spirit medium and the shaman seem to be growing closer rather than further apart. By creating an all-inclusive title, the spirit worker encapsulates both experiences while allowing for new modes of expression of the experience to arise and remain authentic, as it might be a hybrid form of work.

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<sup>105</sup> Fan, 2003, 361

<sup>106</sup> Fan, 2003, 369

## 5. SPIRIT WORKERS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Understanding some of the history and the construction the category of spirit work, I now attempt to show how spirit workers think of themselves and what they are doing. Here, I shall attempt to use as many first hand accounts as possible. The diversity of workers' experiences, performances, and understanding of their own abilities will help us see the manner in which they relate to the world around them. As spirit workers describe their own lives, and those close to them talk about their work, we can come to understand what it means to them to serve their gods. Furthermore, the ways in which spirit workers talk about themselves and their work will help us understand how they function in contemporary society as compared to antiquity. There is some difficulty with this, because even though there are now spirit workers who are more open about their experiences, many are more reserved as, "The world of the *dangki* remains very much unknown to the average Joe on the street. Most *dangki* interviewed kept their lips sealed, and refused to leak a word about the emotional and mental experience when questioned."<sup>107</sup>

Ms. Li firmly believes that her fate has been effected by choosing to answer the call to become what she is. Like many before, she claimed to be reluctant to serve her gods when she first had dreams she attributes to her primary possessing divinity. Before she accepted her role as a spirit worker, she had considered herself loosely a part of a Christian community. However, after she accepted her calling, possessions by the gods, and becoming a spirit worker, she no longer participates in

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<sup>107</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf0RV2ifN3Y> (9:50-10:04)

Christian services.<sup>108</sup> This could be a way to repay her primary possessing spirit for its generosity to both her and her family, as she credits this god with enabling her to get the funds she needed to purchase/maintain her home.<sup>109</sup> Ms. Li's relationship with Guan-yin,<sup>110</sup> her primary possessing god, is slightly reminiscent of the relationship Ms. Wu has with her primary possessing god, the Silkworm Mother. Both women attribute their success to their god, and do what they feel will make the god happy. The more the spirit-worker does for the god(s) or in service for the god(s), the more likely the gods will act in a beneficial manner for their hosts.

Ms. Li also states that she feels she has lost some of her potency as she has grown older. Although she did not begin serving her primary god until she was almost fifty years old, the number and intensity of her trance states has reduced as she has increased in age.<sup>111</sup> When she started serving, she claimed that possession by Guan-yin was close to a daily occurrence, but as she has grown older the number of her trances has greatly reduced.<sup>112</sup> This might be tied to Daoist notions of the body, in which a body loses vital essence as it ages. As she would be conceived of producing very limited amounts of certain forms of *qi*, she may no longer be thought of as fit as a host to divine energies. Tied with the decrease in trance states, she also commented on the difficulty of inducing trance states. She claims that after she

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<sup>108</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>.

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>.

<sup>110</sup> Guan-yin is the Goddess of Mercy, and is an adaptation of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Despite beginning in Buddhism, Guan-yin has shrines in both Daoist and Buddhist holy sites, and is arguably one of the most popular gods. As Buddhism, Daoism, and Popular Religion are generally non-restrictive, it is not surprising to hear of spirit-workers channeling her. What is surprising is the fact that spirit-workers in the mainland are working with such widely known gods, as most mediums in Taiwan tend to work with more local divinities.

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>.

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>.

started serving Guan-yin, it was very easy for her to initiate trance on her own, but it became much more difficult for her to do so as she has gotten older.<sup>113</sup> Age however is only one of the factors that might play into the ability of a spirit worker to interact with their gods, as other factors may include health, moral standing, and other factors.<sup>114</sup> Moral factors will be dealt with later in this chapter

One of the characteristics common to many spirit workers is the diversity of the gods they can channel. The possessing gods are not restricted to any one particular pantheon. Ms. Huang, for example, claims to have the ability to channel, at will, Daoist gods, local gods, and Bodhisattvas as well.<sup>115</sup> Some gods who might possess a spirit worker have no name or title. Such possessing spirits often times are strictly local spirits, who are venerated by a very small community.<sup>116</sup> For spirit workers who serve multiple gods, they see no issue in drawing from multiple pantheons. This may be because, "Folk religions are...not restricted to one source of religious ideas, but are combinations of ideas on magic and doctrinal elements of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism."<sup>117</sup> Thus any spirit who might be seen as potentially efficacious, or any spirit that is seen as needed by the community might become a spirit channeled by the spirit worker.

As compared to Taiwan, where a majority of spirit mediums favor working with a small collection of gods, three out of the four primary case studies I draw upon dealt with three or more gods on a regular basis. Drawing on such a large

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<sup>113</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>.

<sup>114</sup> Cline, 2010, 524

<sup>115</sup> Cline, 2010, 528

<sup>116</sup> Cline, 2010, 524

<sup>117</sup> Law, 2005, 90

range of supernatural resources is reflective of Popular Religion in general where, “Local temples have in the first place an intrinsic sensitivity to changes in the residential composition of the locality and to whichever deity’s cult is celebrated for its efficacy (*ling*). New deities may be added, old ones and their festivals decline in importance.”<sup>118</sup> The variety of the gods who are called on by a spirit worker during the course of their work allows them to address a broad number of potential concerns. Issues addressed to one divinity might not be appropriate for another. These gods then might act as specialists, instructing individuals based on specific issue facing a petitioner at any one time.

A spirit worker might even draw on figures from the past in an attempt to invoke a certain sense of purpose into their client. This too is part of Chinese Popular Religion, where anyone has the potential to become a god. These defied historical figures then act as guards and guides to the living. One such case comes from Yunnan, where, “...the shaman called on Chairman Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping to assist her in driving out demons...The shaman incorporated political slogans and phrases from the Chinese national anthem into her ritual incantations. She wore a shoulder bag affixed with a Red Guard armband and marched around the madman’s courtyard as if she was going into battle. The shaman bowed to the gods and burned incense, but she invoked the ‘gods’ and the experiences of the Chinese revolution.”<sup>119</sup>

Considering the wide range of possessing gods, their effects on their hosts can be widely varied. At least three of the spirit workers who form the case study of

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<sup>118</sup> Feuchtwang, 2001, 146

<sup>119</sup> Chao, 1999, 505

this paper describe post trance symptoms, signs that they have been possessed. With the wide variety of gods that can potentially possess a spirit worker, it is not surprising that they describe a wide range of sensations during their encounters with the supernatural realm. For example, Ms. Huang, who channels Guan-yin claims, “I never fell any pain or discomfort when Guan-yin comes. Guan-yin would never do anything to hurt me.”<sup>120</sup> Ms. Li, another host to Guan-yin, says she feels calm or at peace after they have been the host of the goddess.<sup>121</sup> Not all gods are as gentle as the Goddess of Mercy though. Gods especially associated with death, the dead, and the realms of the underworld are known for difficult trances. Ms. Lin, who can host certain gods of the netherworld, channeled these gods when she experiences illness, fatigue, or a prolonged sensation of cold after the trance has ended.<sup>122</sup> None of her other possessing gods leave her with such post-trance symptoms. These post trance symptoms are only one side of the equation however. Some gods choose to show themselves earlier.

Closely associated with these post trance symptoms of possession are trance indicators, behaviors a medium might engage in before they are to be possessed by their god or just after they have come out of a possession state. This can be a habit the spirit worker does not normally engage in. For example, Ms. Huang, “Smoking is one of her trance indicators ... and the gods-in-the-medium often continue to smoke during trance sessions. Ms. Huang emphasized that it is the gods who want to smoke, not she. Her husband added that his wife, “...usually does not smoke very

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<sup>120</sup> Cline, 2010, 528

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>

<sup>122</sup> Cline, 2010, 527

much, but doing the work of the gods makes her smoke constantly.”<sup>123</sup> Ms. Li, in addition to having post trance symptoms, would sometimes experience visions of Guan-yin, and being incredibly calm before her trance would begin.<sup>124</sup> As this shows, spirit workers are capable of experiencing both trance indicators and post trance symptoms, and that the nature of the possessing spirit does not necessarily mean a spirit worker will be more or less likely to experience either indicators or symptoms.

From Ms. Huang’s case, we get a very potent image in the ways that a career as a spirit worker effects the spirit worker’s relationship with their family members. The ways in which family members react to a spirit worker’s presence in the household is as diverse as the variety of gods that the individual can channel. However, it is not uncommon for many family members to at least initially be dismissive of the displays a spirit worker might engage in, dismissing it simply as superstition.<sup>125</sup> In Ms. Lin’s family, for example, some family members initially “...experienced doubt and fear when their mother first became a spirit medium, but her son says they greatly respect her work now. He emphasized that he is college-educated and knows that what happens to his mother when she is trancing cannot be explained by science. ‘At first I thought it was just superstition, but over time I came to believe because I saw her do so many inexplicable things. You just can’t explain them. When the gods are in my mother’s body, it isn’t [my mother].’ He

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<sup>123</sup> Cline, 2010, 530

<sup>124</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oIejlyX2No>

<sup>125</sup> Cline, 2010, 525

added that he has seen her do things in a trance that she cannot do ordinarily.”<sup>126</sup>

The emphasis on education is telling as it shows an attempt by this son to put himself into the realm of the learned and thus distance himself from what might be thought of as simple superstition. Sometimes, the family members of the spirit worker will help them in their work, assisting them with their clients by either interpreting what the gods-in-the-worker say or bring the possessing spirit items it might want.<sup>127</sup>

There are some cases where a spirit-worker has served as the center of local devotional practices. Ms. Wu is perhaps the best case study to draw upon in this particular example. Indeed, “Their beliefs have the power to push the development of popular religion in folk society, to help in the fight for survival and dealing with relationships with other in daily life.”<sup>128</sup> In Ms. Wu’s case, she did not begin her career as a spirit worker with any ambition to become such a popular figure. Instead she claims to have seen herself as, “...an ordinary woman, no different from her female neighbours, and had two sons and three daughters. Her husband died when she was 50 and she had no intention of being a medium at that time. She says that she did not practise any religion: ‘I was too poor to believe in god.’ However, she knew about the cult of the Silkworm Mother from her childhood.”<sup>129</sup> This sensation of feeling normal, and of resisting the call to serve the gods at least initially is something many other spirit workers have experienced as well. An unnamed spirit worker initially resisted by saying, “At first I thought...I’m too young. I should do

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<sup>126</sup> Cline, 2010, 526

<sup>127</sup> Cline, 2010, 530

<sup>128</sup> Fan, 2003, 362

<sup>129</sup> Fan, 2003, 364

something else. It doesn't sound good to be a shaman and I will be laughed at."<sup>130</sup>

This may be tied to the notion that it is undesirable to become a spirit worker or be associated with spirit work due to the centuries of stigma attached to the practices.

People "...who are not *tang-ki*<sup>131</sup> themselves speculate that it is because of the 'inconvenience' of being subject to possession at any time at the whim of a god ...Those who are *tang-ki* have little to say on the matter, except to recount their trials in trying to resist this calling."<sup>132</sup>

There might be a sense that in order to truly be a spirit worker, the individual has to at least initially resist the call to serve their gods. Along with this is the notion that the gods will torment the potential spirit worker both psychologically and potentially physically until they answer the call of the spirits to serve. However, if they are perceived of as authentic, they can become incredibly popular. This is due to the fact that spirit workers, "...are respected because they were chosen by the gods to be their conduits, and not primarily because of any ability to prognosticate or give advice, for, by their own account, they do not do either. Spirit mediums thus have a different kind of religious authority than priests."<sup>133</sup> When possessed by one of their gods, they become "...a representation of an incarnated deity in a human form."<sup>134</sup> However, not all communities are untied on the notion if the spirit worker should receive special treatment when they are

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<sup>130</sup> Law, 2005, 97

<sup>131</sup> This is yet another possible Romanization of *tongji*.

<sup>132</sup> Jordan, 1972, 73

<sup>133</sup> Cline, 2010, 538

<sup>134</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf0RV2ifN3Y>. (0:32-0:37)

not in states of possession, and not all spirit-workers are comfortable with receiving extra attention because of their gifts.

Despite the popularity of some spirit-workers, they do not see themselves as anything special. Ms. Wu believes she is only powerful when she is channeling her gods and is working actively in healing. She described this when she stated, “With sacred power, I can heal any disease. Otherwise I am not divine. I won’t come with sacred power without the help of Silkworm Mother.”<sup>135</sup> Ms. Wu firmly feels that the only way she has any form of power is when she is channeling her primary god (in this case the Silkworm Mother). Without the Silkworm Mother working through her, she would have neither the power to heal nor religious authority (divinity). However, there is a sense of otherness that comes with being engaged in spirit-work. This may be because, “...people still believe that the gods chose these women to be their conduits because of certain virtues and qualities they possessed.”<sup>136</sup>

This then would suggest that there is potentially a moral dimension that comes along with being a spirit-worker. If this is so, then the medium needs to be able to do more than, “...go into trance, to speak with the voice of a god (or possibly several gods, and to mortify your flesh without feeling pain. For moderate success as a medium, you also require a good understanding of Chinese culture and society. You need to know who is in the Chinese pantheon, how human problems may be caused by supernatural forces, and what steps can be taken to solve them in the framework of exorcism or other supernaturalism.”<sup>137</sup> By introducing the possible

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<sup>135</sup> Fan, 2003, 366

<sup>136</sup> Cline, 2010, 542

<sup>137</sup> Jordan, N.D., <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/medium-main.html>.

moral component, it changes the relationship between spirit-worker and their possessing spirits. There then is the possibility that spirit-workers will be abandoned by the spirits if they act in a way that the spirits deem unacceptable. Continuing to be an efficacious spirit-worker then allows for them to be perceived of as in the favor of the gods, thus they potentially gain some standing in their community due to, "...If people believe in and respect the gods, and if they believe the gods choose someone to be their medium because of that person's exceptional moral character, then it is likely that they would have a heightened sense of respect and appreciation for that individual."<sup>138</sup> Thus in some cases the reputation of the god might be the same as the reputation as the spirit worker, such as the case of Ms. Wu, who was the only member of her community to have access to a certain form of divine power for a period of close to twenty years.<sup>139</sup>

The moral dimension of spirit work would help to explain how some spirit workers have become the centers of local religion life. The spirit worker being perceived of as blessed by the supernatural realm would deserve, to some extent, the attention of the nearby community. Rather than being attached to a particular temple, the home of the spirit worker then might become a small center of worship for their primary possessing spirit. This is especially the case if they are ambitious and fully embraces their role as spirit workers.<sup>140</sup> Alternatively, the presence of a powerful spirit-worker or a spirit worker who is able to channel their gods on a regular basis might inspire a community to either rebuild old temples associated

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<sup>138</sup> Cline, 2010, 542-543

<sup>139</sup> Fan, 2003, 369

<sup>140</sup> Jordan, N.D., <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/medium-main.html>.

with the possessing gods or establish new ones.<sup>141</sup> Here is where the presence of a powerful spirit worker with a good reputation is beneficial in the mainland, as they might be needed to allay the fears of the communist party officials. Looking again at Ms. Wu, who channels the Silkworm mother, officials in her village, "...did not stop the development of the cult...most importantly because Mrs. Wu as the representative of the Silk Worm mother is an old lady. She is thought to be superstitious...Village leaders did not interrupt temple rebuilding."<sup>142</sup>

These experiences of spirit-workers, their family members, and by extension the communities of which they are a part paint a dynamic picture. The spirit workers are clearly engaged with not only with their communities, but also with themselves in ways that might not have been previously documented. They are aware of how their work effects them and by extension their families within their particular community, and have begun (in some cases) to be sought out for their expertise by a wider range of people than just the local neighborhoods. The self-awareness these individuals and their willingness to be more open about the experiences of being part of such a long tradition sheds some light on the traditions of silence surrounding spirit work, perhaps showing that they may not need the shadows of superstition in order to be fully incorporated into contemporary life in Mainland China.

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<sup>141</sup> Fan, 2003, 370

<sup>142</sup> Fan, 2003, 371

## 6. SPIRIT WORKER IN MODERN SOCIETY

Through examining some of the first hand accounts of spirit workers, we have seen some of the variety of issues they face. Like other individuals who channel superhuman agents, they face a series of challenges for the secular world. What is incredibly important to remember is, “In China, magic coexists with science as a valid system of meaning. However, by insisting on explanation through material cause, “...the state is forcing the discourse in an attempt to impose one system of meaning over another.”<sup>143</sup> This might not be unique to the Chinese context, but it is what informs the daily context of spirit workers in the Mainland. As such, it is an important frame as we attempt to understand how spirit workers have adapted to and more importantly how they practice their craft even as stories are/were circulated “...to discredit the claims of shamans and diviners to supernatural sight by showing the worldly ways in which they gain access to the details that ground their oracles in everyday reality.”<sup>144</sup>

Counteracting these challenges from on high, “Many Chinese turn to the revived religions for support when they feel overwhelmed by the changes that have taken place in the post-Mao era.”<sup>145</sup> Thus the re-emergence of spirit mediums and the rise of spirit workers might be to some extent expected as they are directly addressing the needs of individuals. This is especially true in the sphere of healing. While Allopathic medicine is quite common in contemporary China, a spirit worker

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<sup>143</sup>Anagnost, 1987, 46

<sup>144</sup>Anagnost, 1987, 50

<sup>145</sup> Law, 2005, 103-104

can address needs Western trained doctors cannot. Possession and exorcism in particular have long traditions within the corpus of Chinese Traditional Medicine, and as such it is not surprising to see even today that, “The belief in and fear of demons are exceedingly important in Chinese life and worship, for where medical science has failed to provide adequate explanations or treatment for sickness, the Chinese people naturally attribute the causes of disease or disaster to supernatural spirits.”<sup>146</sup> The spirit worker then might become a sort of last-resort to whom the sick turn to address illnesses that might have no other way of being dealt with. While the patient seeking healing from a spirit worker might know that a cure in the allopathic sense is impossible, the medium might offer the possibility of healing from at least a social stand point.

While healing is a major part of both past and contemporary spirit-work, it is far from the only task that spirit workers are engaged in. In addition to examining the spirit worker as a healer, I also intend to examine the spirit worker as a link to the ancestors, diviner, and community leader. These functions are not necessarily exclusive from one another and they do overlap. Also the function one aspect within the spirit workers tools can serve the ends of the others. As such, these functions while having distinction are related to and support each other.

### **6.1 As Link to the Ancestors**

One of the major ways that mediums continue to function in contemporary China is as a link between the ancestors and their living descendants who care for

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<sup>146</sup> AvRuskin, 1988, 287-288

them. Since the death of Mao, many parts of China have experienced a revival of ancestor rites.<sup>147</sup> Spirit workers with the ability to contact either specific ancestors, or the gods associated with the dead and the various realms of the afterlife might be called in when family members suspect an ancestor might not be satisfied with the offerings they are receiving. Appeasement rites for the spirits of the deceased are incredibly varied, as there are many ways in which a specific ancestor may care to be honored or venerated. In one particular case, an unnamed spirit worker after being called in informed the family that the deceased relative wished to be reburied, as they were not satisfied with their first burial service.<sup>148</sup> This fits with the notion that, “Although any number of demonic forces can cause illness, among the most common are the disaffected spirits of human dead, particularly one’s own ancestors (*jia xian*). Human spirits are usually angered by specific causes, such as the desecration of graves or a lack of filial piety on the part of their living descendants.”<sup>149</sup>

In seeking the help of a spirit worker then, an individual or family is not only trying to appease their ancestor, but also trying to heal themselves. Now that filial piety can be more openly displayed, piety to the deceased is no longer something that needs to be kept hidden. Thus, there is a debt that is owed to the ancestors, and part of appeasing them might be consultations with spirit workers to ensure they are receiving the best quality in the next world. How the spirit worker advises their client might be influenced to an extent on the socio-economic standing of their

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<sup>147</sup> Law, 2005, 90-91

<sup>148</sup> Law, 2005, 97

<sup>149</sup> DuBois, 2005, 70

client, such as when a particular woman, "...was told to burn...paper gold ingots to her mother-in-law, who owned a gold shop in the next world. Another woman whose mother-in law passed away was told by [the spirit-medium] who had been transformed into the old woman, not to throw away her favorite old chair, for she still came to the house to sit on it."<sup>150</sup> These series of different instructions might have been tailored to fit the life styles of the clients, and been directed so that the client could be a filial child by either giving what they could afford or keeping mementoes that they might otherwise have sold.

Another way in which the spirit worker might take economic factors into consideration is shown when a relative of a recently deceased individual was advised by a spirit worker to remove all the jade from a coffin before the corpse was cremated.<sup>151</sup> Here the spirit worker is acting in both a practical and filial capacity. As jade is valuable, the spirit worker is encouraging the client to hold onto something of value, but more than that, the jade might hold sentimental value and it could potentially become an heirloom. In keeping the jade and preventing it from being consumed by the flames of the cremation, the spirit worker was ensuring that the spirit would not be upset by the destruction of a favored or valuable object. In addition to all of these services, the spirit worker can indicate to their client if the supernatural realm accepted their offering. This might offer their client closure, and enable their client to feel 'healed', from a social perspective at least.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Scott, 2007, 111

<sup>151</sup> Scott, 2007, 111

<sup>152</sup> Scott, 2007, 110

In looking at spirit workers who speak on behalf of the dead, we are able to go into depth about an issue previously hinted at through out this paper, the sex of the spirit worker. In Mainland China at least, it seems that female spirit workers are preferred for working with the spirits of the deceased. In the two cases previously mentioned, both of the spirit workers who were consulted were female. This is especially interesting as the gods associated with either the heavens or the hells are known to take on the voices and mannerisms of the deceased, but they seem to be disguised as the deceased directly communicating to the living through a spirit worker.<sup>153</sup> This in particular may be a factor in why female spirit workers are preferred for this sort of consultation as, "...since the dead are speaking from the hells, they are often emotionally distraught: 'Women can more effectively express the emotions of the dead than men.'"<sup>154</sup> This ability to capture the emotional experiences of either the dead or the gods posing as the deceased might for the clients of the spirit worker be part of what is needed so they can experience catharsis or the urgency to act for their ancestor in distress. If a male spirit worker cannot provide for them, then they would need to see a female spirit-worker.

The ability of female spirit workers to channel the gods of the dead and other traditionally masculine divinities may be a recent ability in their arsenal of techniques due to disruptions that occurred during the Maoist era, as before the time of Mao, there are few if any records of female spirit mediums acting in such a

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<sup>153</sup> Cline, 2010, 526-527

<sup>154</sup> Cline, 2010, 539-540

capacity.<sup>155</sup> Another, relatively speaking new phenomena for female spirit workers is the ability for them to be the host of male gods. In both Taiwan and Singapore, according to some researchers, most mediums seem to be possessed by gods of their own sex or gender orientation. Contemporary mediums in China are reported as working with gods of both genders.<sup>156</sup> This might be seen, for example, when Ms. Lin channels one of the hell gods, as this particular hell god is male identified.<sup>157</sup> Ms. Huang is the host of eight different divinities, and of those four are strongly male identified.<sup>158</sup> Even Ms. Wu, who is so strongly tied with the Silk Worm Mother, has been at times the host of a male identified divinity: The Horse King.<sup>159</sup> However, I did not come across any cases where a male spirit worker channeled a female divinity.

In having female spirit workers channel both male and female gods and be able to give pathos to the voice of the gods, the female spirit workers are at least in some cases removing the need to have a male-bodied spirit worker present at ceremonies.<sup>160</sup> Furthermore crossing of the gender line in some shaman traditions is a well-documented phenomenon, such as in Korean forms of the practice. For

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<sup>155</sup> Cline, 2010, 527

<sup>156</sup> Cline, 2010, 529

<sup>157</sup> Cline, 2010, 527

<sup>158</sup> Those four being The Historical Buddha also known as Sakyamuni, Maitryea who is the Buddha that is yet to come, The Jade Emperor who is regarded as one of the most influential Daoist divinities, and the Great Saint Who is Equal to All, who may be a version of the Monkey King. These gods are also unusually high-ranking gods and spirit mediums in Singapore have never been known to channel some of them (Cline, 2010, 528-529).

<sup>159</sup> Fan, 2003, 364

<sup>160</sup> This ability for spirit workers or ritual specialists does not exist within all Chinese ethnicities. Within one Chinese minorities, the Zhuang, the ritual specialists capable of being possessed do not seem to be possessed by opposite gendered or opposite sexed gods (Wilkerson, 2007, 151).

individuals identified as spirit mediums in China to now be doing what a shaman is capable of doing further suggests to me that spirit mediums in the Mainland further blend the categories. As such, I find the title of spirit worker helpful.

## 6.2 As Diviners

Another service spirit workers traditionally offer, is as a divinatory oracle. Perhaps it is because of the reputation of both orders as oracle that many stories were and sometimes still are circulated, “...to discredit the claims of shamans and diviners to supernatural sight by showing the worldly ways in which they gain access to the details that ground their oracles in everyday reality.”<sup>161</sup> Still, even with such stories in ready circulation, it does not discourage individuals from seeking the skills of a spirit worker to gain answers to pressing questions. Part of why consultations of mediums might endure has to do with the belief in magic as, “Magical belief does not preclude critical judgment in distinguishing a ‘false supernatural’ from the ‘true.’ The consensual nature of the ‘magical situation’ contains a complex balance of credulity and skepticism.”<sup>162</sup> The sorts of questions asked to a spirit worker in such a consultation are indeed numerous. While these questions can be related to deceased ancestors and how they are doing in the next world, they do not necessarily have to be about such a subject. Other concerns are numerous and include the sex of future children, the fidelity of a spouse, the likelihood of a child being either accepted to a university or a job, or what might be the potential preternatural cause of an illness. Even if the spirit worker is not the

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<sup>161</sup> Anagnost, 1987,50.

<sup>162</sup> Anagnost, 1987, 51

one who is doing the prognostication, there are some instances where even the presence of a spirit worker, especially if the spirit worker is currently being possessed is likely to improve the outcome of a divinatory reading, as “...divination in the Chinese sense is an act of communication between men and supernaturals,”<sup>163</sup> thus the presence of a supernatural force would increase the accuracy of a reading.

The list of methods of divination in China is as varied as the reasons why one might seek a diviner in the first place. One method that has received a lot of attention in the past is that of spirit writing, when a spirit worker goes into a state of trance and would produce documents attributed to the gods who were in possession at the time. The practice of spirit writing may have blended both the practices of mediums and the Daoist clergy as there are some records where a priest would begin the ceremony and the medium would go into the trance.<sup>164</sup> While spirit-writing remain a vibrant practice in the Chinese diaspora, used by mediums both in Taiwan and Singapore, it does not appear to be a tool that many contemporary Mainland spirit workers seem eager to employ. This may be due to the associations of the practice with, “...many sectarian movements during the late Qing and Republican periods.”<sup>165</sup> This association with the past, especially a violent period of the past might make the practice of spirit writing dangerous for spirit workers in contemporary China. Being associated with the sorts of activities that could potentially lead to anti-government actions would make it much harder if not impossible for the spirit worker to earn their living. By having a written rather than

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<sup>163</sup> Jordan, 1972, 84

<sup>164</sup> Kohn, 2001, 172

<sup>165</sup> DuBois, 2005, 132

oral instruction, it means the spirit worker and their advice can be far more easily traced. Furthermore, an additional issue with spirit-writing is that any medium can perform the action, and with no unified hierarchy, the texts produced by mediums within the same lineage all have the potential to become equally valid, thus leading to a lack of systematic doctrine for any sect that may want to use these texts.<sup>166</sup> This is not say the practice of spirit writing has completely died out in mainland China, but it is not a practice that is as actively engaged in as it is in Taiwan or other parts of the Chinese diaspora.

When a spirit worker is directly questioned in the course of a divination, if the spirit worker is under a state of possession, there is no guarantee that the spirit worker's response will be intelligible. One of the common signs of the possession of a medium is when the medium begins talking in a close to impossible to understand form of speech called 'gods' language wherein, "Questions posed by family members about recent illnesses or tragic events are answered by the medium a version of everyday speech distorted by odd expressions, belches, and shrieks."<sup>167</sup> Even in cases where the gods in the spirit worker are capable of using the local dialect, the client may experience difficulty in understanding what the god is saying as the god's pattern of speech can be incredibly difficult to understand.<sup>168</sup> Oftentimes a family member of the spirit worker might help to serve as an interpreter between the god in the spirit worker and the client. There have been a few cases where spirit workers under possession by different gods where in the same physical with each

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<sup>166</sup> DuBois, 2005, 132

<sup>167</sup> AvRuskin, 1988, 289

<sup>168</sup> Cline, 2010, 533

other, and the gods 'sang' to each other in a way that even those experienced listening to the talk of the gods had difficulty understanding.<sup>169</sup>

During the course of a trance, "The gods-in-the-mediums frequently provided three different kinds of information: (1) a description of the current situation, (2) a prediction of how the situation will change in the future, and (3) advice about what the questioner should do to ensure that good predictions will be fulfilled."<sup>170</sup> By leaving their prediction vague, the spirit worker potentially covers himself or herself from being thought of as ineffective as a host of their particular god. Furthermore, if a bad even should happen, the medium can always claim that the individual did not either follow the advice provided or did not correctly interpret the advice provided. This is best exemplified when the god in the spirit worker phrases themselves in conditional rather than concrete language. Thus, if the questioner doesn't meet the right set of conditions or misinterprets the conditions, the supplicant has no one to blame but themselves.<sup>171</sup> This practice is hardly unique to Chinese forms of divination and fortune telling, and probably goes back a long within China itself. This combination of hard to hard to understand language and conditional patterns of speech might also be a way of giving the client a sense of authenticity. The client might come in with the expectations of not being able understand nor receive a clear answer from the spirit medium in a trance state. Thus, the performance of the spirit worker might be an adaptation meet the expectation of their cliental. Hearing the hard to understand words and highly

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<sup>169</sup> Cline, 2010, 533

<sup>170</sup> Cline, 2010, 535

<sup>171</sup> Cline, 2010, 536

conditional way spirit workers phrase themselves while in states of possession might help prime the client to potentially enter some of the same magical mode of thinking that the spirit worker himself or herself is engaged in.<sup>172</sup>

### 6.3 As Community Leaders

Another way the spirit worker may serve is as a form of community embodiment. This is most clearly seen with Ms. Wu, whom for her community has become deeply tied with the Silkworm Mother. Her efficacy in her work as inspired her community to regard the cult of the Silkworm Mother as *ling*.<sup>173</sup> The more work Ms. Wu engages in, the more the reputation and perceived power of The Silkworm Mother grows. Even in communities without a figure like Ms. Wu who is so closely tied to one particular divinity, it is not uncommon for a spirit worker to accompany other religious officials in soliciting donations for either repairs to existing temples or new temples as the spirit worker serves the gods directly, and this might lead a potential patron to be more generous.<sup>174</sup> Here, the spirit worker does not need to be possessed in order to perform in their capacity. They need only the possibility to enter possession. This allows for the spirit worker some freedom potentially as this is one of the aspects of their calling where they do not need to call upon their gift. Instead, all that is needed for a spirit worker to be effective in soliciting donations is

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<sup>172</sup> Greenwood, 2009, 7

<sup>173</sup> *Ling* is one of the difficult terms to translate into contemporary English, as it is not a term that would be commonly used by most people. In looking at *ling* we have to remember that, “*Ling* is the dangerous quality, belief in which imperial and republican regimes sought to control. Daoist also had an orthodox version of *ling*. To classically trained Daoists, *ling* is of celestial origin, but true only of the Middle, that is the Human (Feuchtwang, 2001, 151).” A rough translation of *ling* is ‘numinous’ or ‘numinous potential’.

<sup>174</sup> Feuchtwang, 2001, 148

a reputation of efficacy. Knowing the spirit worker has been or can be a successful conduit of divine power, that is likely enough to encourage those around them to donate, lest they anger the divine authorities.

#### 5.4 As Healers

Even while spirit workers serve as conduits of the dead, oracles of the gods, and embody the potential power of the divine, the primary work most spirit workers seem to be engaged in is as a healer. As demonstrated in the history section, there is a long tradition within China of both spirit mediums and shamans being called upon to offer their services within a healing capacity. At least in this context, “Physical problems are not the only causes of disease, which can also be caused by the relationship of the patient with others and immoral behavior. Mediums, like local doctors, are familiar with people’s problems and beliefs, so they can explain the causes of disease which are supported by their patients’ belief in the existence of sacred power.”<sup>175</sup> A spirit worker is needed both to diagnose and suggest a cure for any supernatural issues that might at the root of problems rooted in this world. In this way, the spirit worker is both diviner and healer, so the roles cannot be easily separated, especially when the topic of divination is related to health or misfortune.

It is also within the sphere of healing that we must again come to the question of sex and gender and how these effect spirit workers offering certain services. Previously, and still in some areas as men are charged with more *yang*

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<sup>175</sup> Fan, 2003, 368

(active) energy, they are preferred as either healers as the *yang* energy of a male body might help to counteract the *yin* (passive) energies responsible for the negative situation.<sup>176</sup> However, this is not universally true. There seem to be some issues, especially for female clients, where a female bodied spirit worker might be preferred to their male counterpart. For certain fertility rituals, for example, female spirit workers who are still capable of becoming pregnant may be the most preferred.<sup>177</sup> This would turn the taboos of menstruation on their head, where something that had been ritually polluting might become a desirable trait, a sign of power almost. Having menses and menstruation become signs of power is doubtless a sign of the change that have occurred perhaps due to the disruption of tradition caused during the Mao's regime, as spirit mediums in both Taiwan and Singapore are still very cautious about menstruating women.<sup>178</sup>

The style and modes of healing used by spirit worker have slight variation depending on their region, but share many common qualities. Almost all of the spirit workers attribute the success of their rituals to the *ling* of the gods channeled while under possession. Especially once one accepts their role as a mediator between the divine and the mundane, the collected attitude of a community can "...create a 'gravitational field' within which the shaman assumes his or her role."<sup>179</sup> Here the spirit worker is charged not only with the power of the gods, but also the power of the community. An example of this might be Ms. Wu, whose reputation is the same

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<sup>176</sup> AvRuskin, 1988, 288

<sup>177</sup> Cline, 2010, 531

<sup>178</sup> Cline, 2010, 531

<sup>179</sup> Anagnost, 1988, 52

as that of the god she serves. She carries not only the power installed in her by the divine, but the power installed by a community. Her case is very similar to another spirit worker who was first identified after the Cultural Revolution. In the case of that spirit worker, "As her reputation for being an effective healer grew, her ease in assuming the role increased and she attained competency in performance that reinforced the faith of her public."<sup>180</sup> For both of these spirit workers, as well as for others, once they gain a reputation of efficacy, they might become charged with more than divine power, but also the power of the community. While they will continue to credit their healing capability to the divine, perhaps why they have divine power may be due to the faith the community has placed in them.

However, even with all the reliance upon divine power as a mode of healing, there might be the beginnings of a change as spirit workers begin to channel newly deified individuals. There is at least one spirit worker who invokes the deified heroes of the Communist Revolution including Mao himself. This, "attempt to supersede local gods with state deities was unconnected to any state project aimed at political domination. Indeed...The state condemns shamanism as...superstition."<sup>181</sup> By incorporating Communist songs and slogans, the spirit worker might have been attempting to rouse within the client a revolutionary zeal to fight off the spirits that possessed him.<sup>182</sup> Here rather than rely strictly upon the power of the supernatural realm, the spirit worker might have been trying to get their client to realize their own ability to fight off malignant forces. The client then at

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<sup>180</sup> Anagonost, 1988, 53

<sup>181</sup> Chao, 1999, 525

<sup>182</sup> Chao, 1999, 510

least had some of the ability to raise himself up, and improve himself, by following the examples of revolutionary characters. It is important to remember that, “...the shaman was not suggesting that the madman’s affliction could be cured solely by his personal reform, for her ritual act...still required the intervention or patronage of deities or perceived powers, as well as the intervention of the shaman herself,”<sup>183</sup> but rather might have been attempting to match the attitudes of the time by using examples of the past. By calling upon past heroes who were able to rise up to greatness through personal sacrifice, the spirit worker might have been suggesting to the client, at least on the subconscious level, that they have the potential to improve themselves and their station, as all do in post Maoist China. Perhaps the interposition of the past with such modern notions may be part of why this particular ritual was not seen as efficacious.

In conclusion, the social roles of the spirit worker now touch on a wide range of spheres. In speaking for the dead, embodying their communities, providing answers to difficult questions, or acting as healers, the spirit worker is thoroughly involved in many aspects of contemporary society. While they might not be accepted by the power structure at large, they continue to provide much needed services for many individuals and as they continue to perhaps draw prestige and interest to their villages, local Communist Party officials and village heads may tacitly endorse the continuation of spirit work because they see the spirit worker first as an individual rather than as a spirit-worker.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Chao, 1999, 512

<sup>184</sup> DuBois, 2005, 83

## 7. CONCLUSION

In the fall of 2009, for his Independent Study Project (ISP) with the School for International Training (SIT), one of my classmates went to Gansu to investigate archeological digs. While there, he came across a spirit-worker who claimed to channel not only some of the Daoist Immortals, but individuals such as Julius Caesar and John the Baptist. She believed herself to be a descendant of Roman legionaries who are attributed to have lived in the nearby area. While she was unable to write in Latin or Aramaic according to my classmate, the inclusion of two such well-known Western figures in the arsenal of her possessing gods shows just how adaptable the tradition of spirit work can be to any situation. Although she might not have been able to produce historically accurate mannerisms and language, she was giving the people of her community something they needed: a connection to the past and perhaps a way of establishing themselves in the future.

As I believe I have shown throughout this paper, the tradition of spirit work in Mainland China has been incredibly resilient. Spirit workers are now engaged with their communities in new and interesting ways. Figures like Ms. Wu and the spirit-worker in Gansu who are channeling figures from local antiquity are giving new life to the past. Doing so, they are revitalizing local culture and potentially generating tourism. Even the spirit worker who attempted to channel Chairman Mao in a heavily Naxi area was attempting to blend Han and Naxi sensibilities to create an integrated future where the combination of both cultures is able to provide a chance of hope and renewal for communities that are being challenged in

a world that is changing rapidly. Spirit work might be dismissed as, “...too trivial or perhaps too difficult to control in any comprehensive way,”<sup>185</sup> by Government authorities, but as government officials begin to realize the potential gains that come from having an efficacious spirit-worker being part of the community, it might well be possible that more and more spirit-workers will at least be tolerated rather than persecuted.

In many ways, this revival of spirit work in the mainland might be seen as similar to the neo-Pagan traditions that began to sprout after Gerald Gardner declared himself a witch, publically. While the social situation in China is radically different than that of England during the 1950s, however the combination of innovation of new techniques and possessing spirits while returning to a pre-Communist form of spirituality in many ways mirrors what Gardner did through his synthesis of modern Wicca. While spirit workers are yet to form anything as organized as a Wiccan coven, they will continue to innovate new practices to better connect with their past, and give themselves an identity supported by the traditions of generations past. All the while, the category of spirit medium and shaman used by social scientists might grow ever less distinct as spirit workers begin to incorporate a wider ranger of practices.

There are still many questions left unanswered and they do bare further investigation. One of the areas I would like to see more fully explored is how the issues of sex, gender and economics are fully playing out with the increasing numbers of women who engage in spirit work. Even when the power and authority

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<sup>185</sup> Anagnost, 1987, 43

is attributed to the possessing spirit rather than the spirit worker, “...women clearly *do* enjoy elevated status in their families and communities-although nowhere near the status of the gods-as a result,”<sup>186</sup> when they engage in spirit work. How specifically this changes family dynamics and relationships needs to be further examined. Also, comparing spirit workers in rural areas to their urban counterparts might reveal how the differing needs of urban and rural individuals are being met, or it may prove like in Taiwan, “Urban *tang-ki* do not differ from rural *tank-ki* in broad outline: they are possessed...answer questions from clients, prescribe medicines...and so on.”<sup>187</sup> If there is no significant distinction found between urban and rural spirit-workers in the Mainland, it may show that urban and rural culture are not as differentiated as some might believe.

While it is impossible to know what the spirit worker of the future will look like I believe that rather than vanishing in the face of technological and scientific advancement, they will endure as they have endured for over two millennia. Science and medical technology may be able to treat the physical causes of illness with increasing effect, but as long as the mind remains troubled and a sense of duty to the world beyond the self endures, the need to know the supernatural causes of maladies will remain. As such the divinatory and healing aspects of the spirit worker’s trade will always be needed. Spirit workers address needs that cannot be answered through the advancement of science and technology, and even though what they do might be classified as superstition, they and their practices endure.

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<sup>186</sup> Cline, 2010, 542

<sup>187</sup> Jordan, N.D., <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/medium-main.html>.

With further research, future scholars may find that spirit workers take on more functions to adapt to the realities of life under the strict laws in the People's Republic of China. There may be few full time spirit workers, but they will always be on the fringes. While China is certainly more open than it was during the time of Chairman Mao, in many ways it is as strict as ever about what sort of practices it allows to flourish. While they may never be fully integrated with society, I predict spirit workers will continue to speak for the gods and give hope to individuals where science and the promises of the modern age have failed, as might clearly be demonstrated by a young woman I knew when I taught in China. She traveled five hours by bus and then another unspecified distance by car to speak with a known spirit worker in our province as she had specific questions about the future the professors at her university could or would not answer. As long as the future remains uncertain and issues with the past remain unresolved, then spirit workers will continue to provide their services.

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