

# Shamanism and Spirit Possession in Chinese Modernity: Some Preliminary Reflections on a Gendered Religiosity of the Body

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## Abstract

Recent fieldwork in rural and small-town Wenzhou reveals that shamans, ritual healers, and spirit mediums have reemerged in the post-Mao era, slowing a long decline that may have started with the ascendancy of Neo-Confucianism in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and that was exacerbated by Maoist-era suppressions. Unlike the shamanistic cultures of contemporary Taiwan, Fujian, and Chinese ethnic enclaves in Southeast Asia, and what we know of China in late imperial times, most spirit mediums in Wenzhou today are women who do not engage in the bloody and violent public ritual performances found in those areas where male shamans predominate. This article reflects upon four possible explanations for the modern animosity toward shamanism and spirit possession by Chinese officialdom and mainstream Chinese society today. It suggests that the fourth possible explanation, one focusing on the bodily performances and gender of shamans, has not been adequately explored in the study of Chinese shamanism. This fourth explanation deserves attention in any future studies of spirit possession in contemporary China, as it does not treat China as an isolated case of shamanism in the world, but places Chinese shamanism in the larger global context of a shared reconfiguration of the human body in global modernity.

## Keywords

shamanism – spirit possession – modernity – gender – the body

## 巫術與中國現代性：有關性別與身體宗教性的初步探討

### 摘要

近期在溫州農村和小鎮的實地考察显示出巫術、巫醫和靈媒在後毛澤東時代再次出現，減緩了其經歷明清時期新儒學佔據統治地位，和毛澤東時代壓制形成的長期下降趨勢。與同時期台灣、福建和其他華裔生活的東南亞地區，以及我們所熟知的中華帝國晚期的巫術文化不同，如今在溫州大部分的靈媒都是女性，並且，她們沒有像男巫師一樣在她們主導的公開宗教儀式裡進行血腥和暴力的禮儀行為。本篇論文探討了四個可能的原因，解釋當今中國官方和主流社會對巫術和靈媒的反感和憎惡。文章中提出的第四個原因，關於巫師儀式表演和巫師的性別問題，至今未在有關中國巫術的研究中被深入挖掘。因此，這個問題需要在今後研究現代中國的靈魂控制等相關課題時得到更多的重視，不應把中國巫術作為一個孤立的個案，而應該把中國巫術研究放在更大的全球環境中，共同探討其在全球現代化中身體構造的重新組合。

### 关键词

巫術，靈媒，現代性，性別，身體

Shamanism (*wushu* 巫術) in China is an archaic religious tradition tracing back to the Shang Dynasty (1700–1027 BCE) and perhaps the Neolithic Age. I will define shamanism as a religious culture that revolves around certain gifted and respected holy men or women who have rare abilities to communicate with or be possessed by gods, spirits, or ancestors, to go into trance or ecstatic states, or to travel to other worlds, whether Heaven above, or the Underworld below. Shamans also have the ability to heal the sick through dancing, singing, ritual performances, exorcizing demons, and divining the future. Although Mircea Eliade (1989) in his classic work on shamanism dismisses spirit possession and denies that it is a “true” form of shamanism, I follow other scholars who have shown that spirit possession is just as archaic and important as the spirit travel that Eliade privileges (Lewis 2003:44–50; Teiser 1994; Boddy 1994; Sutton 2000:3).<sup>1</sup> Thus, I will use the

1 Mircea Eliade takes Central and North Asian shamanism as the model type of shamanism, and dismisses all other shamanic cultures around the world as derivative or “aberrant” and

terms “shamanism” and “spirit possession” interchangeably. I will begin with a brief discussion of shamanism’s history in China, and then describe my encounters with spirit mediums in rural and small-town Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, where I have conducted fieldwork since 1991. I will then explain the social contributions of shamanistic practice to Wenzhou society, which may also apply to other rural areas across China. Finally, I will try to explain why, despite the growing acceptance today of China’s “Three Teachings” (*sanjiao* 三教) (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism), spirit possession continues to be looked down upon and kept under tight control.

### Shamanism in the Chinese Past

Scholars and archaeologists of ancient China such as K. C. Chang have suggested that shamans and diviners (*wush* 巫師) were important “appendages of the archaic state” and conducted divining rituals in the Shang Dynasty court in communication with spirits of the ancestors of the king (Chang 1983:45).<sup>2</sup> The monopoly of shamanistic access to the ancestors and gods above, and the possession of precious bronze ritual vessels, imparted political authority to the king and his state. Shang Dynasty shamans were associated with the earliest

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“decadent” (1989:6, 450, 499–500). Since archaic religions have often been absorbed or integrated into later religious systems around the world, it is hard to be convinced that somehow Central and North Asian shamanism alone have remained unchanged and should serve as the standard against which other shamanisms are to be measured. Eliade repeatedly elevates spirit travel or magical flight as the true form of shamanism, and downgrades spirit possession. However, I. M. Lewis (2003:44–50) finds that even among what Eliade claims to be the *locus classicus* of shamanism—the East Siberian Chuckchee, the Arctic Tungus, and the Eskimos—spirit possession and the calling of spirits into the body are quite common. Similarly, Manduhai Buyandelger (2013:29) found in fieldwork among the Buryats of contemporary Mongolia that there was only spirit possession, and they were unfamiliar with shamans ascending to supernatural realms. Thus, we cannot presume a single original form of shamanism. It is best to see shamanisms past and present as having multiple cultural forms, some stressing spiritual travel, others focusing on spirit possession, some seeking the assistance or sacrifice of animals, others featuring trance, dance, and speaking in tongues, or ritual healing and exorcism, and the use of medicinal plants and ingestion of trance-inducing substances.

2. Chang Kwang-chih suggested that the animal motifs cast on Shang and Zhou dynasty bronze ritual vessels represented the animals who helped bring shamans together with the spirits in Heaven, whether through travels from earth to higher realms, or through the spirits descending from above to the living on earth (Chang 1983:65; 1986:365–367, 414–418).

writings on oracle bones for divination into the future. The Han Dynasty text *The Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhou Li* 周禮) states that shamans in the Zhou Dynasty belonged to the lowest class of state officials at the court, and their duties included presiding at state sacrifices, calling down the invited gods and ancestors, performing exorcisms, dancing at sacrifices for rain, and averting diseases and natural disasters (De Groot 1910:1188–1189). A passage in the fourth-century BCE text the *Discourses of States* (*Guo Yu* 國語) may be the earliest description of shamans in ancient China.

古者民神不雜。民之精爽不攜貳者，而又能齊肅衷正，其智能上下比義，其聖能光遠宣朗，其明能光照之，其聰能聽徹之，如是則明神降之，在男曰覡，在女曰巫。是使制神之處位次主，而為之牲器時服，而後使先聖之後之有光烈，而能知山川之號、高祖之主、宗廟之事、昭穆之世、齊敬之勤、禮節之宜、威儀之則、容貌之崇、忠信之質、禋絜之服而敬恭明神者，以為之祝。

《國語》楚語下，SEC. 10.<sup>3</sup>

Anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle. At that time there were certain persons so perspicacious, single-minded, and reverential that their understanding enabled them to penetrate and compare the worlds above and below, and their sagacity enabled them to illuminate what is distant and profound, and their bright insight enabled them to enlighten people, and their intelligence enabled them to hear things [from the gods] and penetrate through [what was said]. Therefore, the spirits would descend into them. Those who were thus possessed by the gods were, if men, called *xi* [shamans], and if women, *wu* [shamanesses]. It was these shamans who supervised the ranking and positions of the spirits at the ceremonies and prepared the sacrificial victims and vessels, and seasonal clothing. It was also they who ensured that those descendants of the former sages were able to know the designations of the mountain and river gods, the primary order among the august ancestors, the affairs of the lineage temples, and the *zhaomu* order of the generations [for rituals].

3 Scholars dispute whether the characters 覡 *xi* and 巫 *wu* in this passage refer to what we understand today as shamans. Michael Puett argues that they refer to ritual specialists, rather than shamans or spirit mediums, since the passage is calling for a clear separation between humans and spirits, and possession by spirits would go against that call. Victor Mair and David Keightley also question the translation of these characters as “shamans” (Puett 2002:84–86, 104–109). Scholars who believe these words refer to shamans include K. C. Chang (1983), Stephen Teiser (1988), and J. J. M. de Groot (1910).

These shamans made sure that rulers assiduously paid respects to the deities, and observed the authority of ritual propriety and ritual regulations. They helped the rulers put on solemn and lofty facial expressions and develop an ethos of loyalty and sincerity so that they could offer sacrifices with purity of heart and serve the deities with reverence. In these ways, they assisted the rulers in offering sacrifices.<sup>4</sup>

In the Han Dynasty, shamans continued to be used in the court as ritual specialists, diviners, and healers in the state religion.

However, once Confucianism came to dominate court life, there was always an uneasy tension between Confucians and spirit mediums. Donald Sutton explains this as the tension and competition between two powerful ritual traditions. On the one hand, there was the literate, cultured, austere, self-disciplined, and ponderous ethos of Confucian culture, which stresses decorum, social order, and hierarchy. On the other hand, the ethos of spirit mediums was spontaneous, ecstatic, “Dionysian,” and sometimes socially rebellious (Sutton 2000:5). Whereas the Confucians dealt with the presence of ancestors and spirits at their rituals with dignified and quiet respect, spirit mediums gave their bodies over to the gods, shaking violently, lacerating themselves, and uttering unintelligible speech. During the Song Dynasty (960–1279), organized Daoism frequently denounced the *wu* shamans, since Daoists saw spirit mediums as rivals in ritual healing and acquiring clients (Sutton 2000:6, 10). However, it was not until Neo-Confucianism became state orthodoxy in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties that active hostility toward and occasional persecution of spirit mediums took off. Both Ming and Qing imperial law explicitly prohibited spirit mediums (*shiwu* 師巫) on pain of punishment and death (*Da Ming Lu* 1999:89; Sutton 2000:18), but as was common in late imperial (and contemporary) China, the laws were not well implemented. As late imperial officials and gentry became more active in reforming local society and intervening to change social customs, they increasingly objected to what they regarded as the maleficent and disorderly influence of shamans at the local level. Shamans were given the label of *yin* (淫), variously translated as “excessive,” “heterodox,” “improper,” or “licentious” (Sutton 2000:4–5, 12–24). Thus, long before the nineteenth-century introduction of the Western concept of “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信), Neo-Confucianism had already embarked on undermining shamanistic power.

4 Derk Bodde's (1961:390) widely quoted English translation of this passage in the *Guo Yu* is incomplete and not very loyal to the original Chinese text, so I am adapting and revising his translation here, with the generous help of my colleagues Ron Egan and Xiaorong Li.

However, at the local grassroots level from the medieval period to the early twentieth century, shamanism persisted and thrived, embedding and integrating itself with local ancestor and deity cults (Teiser 1988:143). These local shamans have been quite diverse in the kinds of ritual forms practiced, and in the particular gods, ancestors, or animal spirits that inhabit them. Dancing and drumming in trance (Chau 2006:54–55) and possession by “fox spirits” (*huli jing* 狐狸精) (Kang 2006:97–126) tend to be found across northern China, while spirit-writing, self-laceration with swords, and the carrying of deity palanquins by mediums in trance seem to be common to southeastern coastal China and places in Southeast Asia where southern Chinese have migrated.

In addition to free-floating individual shamans and spirit mediums, there is another legacy of shamanism to be found: its absorption into Daoist and Buddhist practices. Eliade (1989:450) thought that Daoists, with their lore of flying immortals, dance steps in ritual healing, and communion with the gods, had “elaborated and systematized the shamanic technique and ideology of protohistorical China” and were the “successors of shamanism.” Similarly, Kristofer Schipper (1993:6) wrote that Chinese shamanism provided “the *substratum* of Taoism,” because so many Daoist healing and exorcistic rituals and incantations look like they derived from shamanistic precursors. We can see the influence of shamanism in contemporary Daoism in Wenzhou, where the Lu Mountain sect (*Lushan Pai* 閩山派) of Daoism, which emphasizes martial movements and exorcistic rituals for their priests and nuns, is especially strong. The goddess Mother Chen the Fourteenth (*Chen Shisi Niangniang* 陳十四娘娘), also known as Chen Jinggu (陳靖姑), is a major goddess in this sect. She started out as a historical person, born in Xiadu Village, outside Fuzhou, Fujian Province, in the Tang dynasty (Ye and Ye 1992). Today in Wenzhou, the religious oral storytelling rituals called “drum chants” (*guci* 鼓詞) have been revived after four decades of being banned. In these stories, Mother Chen is shown casting spells, conducting rituals and incantations, and engaging in martial arts to exorcise people of wicked demons (*yaojing* 妖精) and free whole communities from the Green and White Snake Demons. In one episode, Mother Chen descends into hell to save her sworn sister, the goddess Li the Thirteenth (*Li Shisan* 李十三), whose soul was being punished for having offended the gods. After traveling through the Ten Prisons of hell, Mother Chen finally discovers her sister mired in the dark Lake of Blood (*Xuehu Chi* 血湖池) and brings her back to earth and to life (Tang 2008:178–190). Likewise, Stephen Teiser has suggested that the popular Chinese Buddhist tale of Mulian, a disciple of the Buddha, has deep roots in indigenous Chinese shamanistic culture. In the medieval Buddhist Ghost Festival (*Yulanpen* 盂蘭盆) stories, Mulian travels to the darkest realms of hell to save the suffering soul of his sinful mother trapped there, and engages

in battles with the demonic armies of hell (Teiser 1988:140–167). These elements of spiritual travel beyond earth, exorcising demons, and communing with spirits in other worlds are the hallmarks of Chinese shamanism.

### Shamanism and Chinese Modernity

By the time Western imperialism arrived in nineteenth-century China, introducing the derogatory category of “superstition” that is contrasted with the lofty and exalted categories of “science” and “religion” (Yang 2008), Chinese shamanism had already been attacked by Neo-Confucianism as untutored and disorderly. With the advent of modernizing discourses, such labels as “superstition” and “backwardness” were grafted onto the older Neo-Confucian criticisms of shamanism. Then came the revolutionary whirlwind of Maoist China, when virtually all religious practices disappeared from public spaces. In the post-Mao period since the 1980s, spirit mediums have returned in many areas of rural and small-town China. They generally keep a low profile and operate below the radar. They are hardly noticed in the media, except occasionally when they are criticized for misleading the people, such as in the television news report discussed below. The areas where they are most prominent in terms of both numbers and public visibility seem to be the coastal cultures of Fujian, Guangdong, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the ethnic Chinese enclaves of Southeast Asia.

When I started fieldwork in Wenzhou in the 1990s, the dominant view in China of shamanism was that it is the lowliest and least desirable form of religiosity, earning it the epithets “feudal superstition” (*fengjian mixin* 封建迷信) and “charlatanry for cheating people out of their money” (*pianqian shouduan* 騙錢手段). Whether in official discourse or in mainstream urban attitudes, shamans were regarded with suspicion as either people with mental problems or people who fake possession in order to cheat the ignorant folk and engage in a dishonest but lucrative livelihood (Anagnost 1987). Whereas in ancient times, shamanism imparted political authority to rulers and its practitioners were described as “perspicacious” (*ming* 明), “intelligent” (*zhi* 智), and “sagacious” (*sheng* 聖), today it is associated with old and mentally disturbed women at the lower margins of rural society.

Nor has Chinese shamanism found in modernity a new social respect, in contrast to the recent national pride in shamanism in South Korea since the 1980s. In South Korea, shamanism has survived, first, the Christian missionary denigrations of it as “superstition” and “devil worship,” then the Japanese colonial prohibitions of the early twentieth century, as well as the repressive modernization drives of President Park Chung-hee in the 1960s and 70s when

shamans were persecuted (Kendall 2009). Taken up as a symbol of authentic Korean rural folk culture by the college student-led *minjung* or student movement of political opposition in the 1980s, Korean shamanism served as both protest theater and a nostalgic return to traditional culture (Kendall 2009). Today, famous Korean shamans are designated “Human Cultural Treasures” and called on to enact major public rituals, while ordinary shamans are sought out to provide charms, communications with the dead, and ritual services, often over the Internet (Kim 2003; Choe 2007). Similarly, during the Martial Law era of Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s, Robert Weller (1987:158) found that spirit mediums, called *dang-gi* (童乩) in Taiwanese, were also denigrated by the Guomindang state authorities, and there were attempts to outlaw them altogether. However, unlike mainland China, spirit possession was never banned in Taiwan, only restricted. Today it thrives in the open in Taiwan, as attested by the prominent and colorful presence of *dang-gis* and youthful troupes called “Eight Military Retainers” (*bajia jiang* 八家将), described vividly by Avron Boretz (2011) in ritual processions of the gods and religious festivals. These spirit mediums in ritual processions in Taiwan are composed mainly of men and boys who publicly display a working-class masculinist ethos, lacerating themselves with swords and saw-tooth shark spears, or burning themselves with incense sticks while in trance. Similarly, in Penang, Malaysia, where Chinese from southern Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan Island settled in the nineteenth century, the British colonialists for the most part did not interfere with the spirit medium cults of these Chinese settler communities. Thus, here as in Taiwan, the public ritual performances and processions of spirit possession are socially prominent, dynamic, and dominated by men (DeBernardi 2006).

However, in mainland China today, shamanism continues to be denigrated and marginalized in most areas, so that practitioners often live a subterranean existence mainly in rural areas. What are the particular historical conditions of Chinese modernity that have led to this continued marginalization in China? What do these conditions have in common with those found in Taiwan during the Martial Law era and in modern South Korea before the democratic changes of 1987? Below, I will describe three shamanesses in Wenzhou, and then reflect on a Central Chinese Television report about a spirit medium in rural Wenzhou.

### Shamanism and Spirit Possession in Wenzhou Today

In the Wenzhou area today, shamans are called by various terms. Male shamans are called “men of the deities” (*shenhan* 神漢), while female ones are called “old women of the deities” (*shenpo* 神婆), “woman of the Dao” (*daogu* 道姑), or



“spiritually efficacious women” (*linggu* 靈姑) or “spiritually efficacious female child” (*lingutong* 靈姑僮). I was advised to avoid using the term “old shamaness” (*wupo* 巫婆) in directly addressing a shamaness to her face, for this term has a pejorative sense. There are also the terms “child of a deity” or “servant of a deity” (*shentong* 神僮), and “servant-body” (*tongshen* 僮身), and “divination child” (*jitong* 乩童), which do not seem to be gender specific. There is also a class of vegetarian shamanesses, called “teacher-mothers” (*shiniang* 師娘). According to everyone I asked, most shamans today in Wenzhou are women, and many believed that these women generally have some sort of mental illness (*shenjingbing* 神經病) or physical ailment that predisposed them to hear voices, have visions, or go into trance. Most of them have very little formal education and cannot speak much Mandarin, only the local Wenzhou language. A primary ability of shamans in Wenzhou is their capacity to embody or communicate with deities or ancestors who speak through them. Spirit possession is called “coming on to the body” (*shangshen* 上身) or “dancing like the body of a shaman” (*tiao tongshen* 跳僮身) in local parlance. Elsewhere in China, the term “dancing to the great deity” (*tiao dashen* 跳大神) is used, but it is not favored in Wenzhou. Other shamanic abilities include ritual healing, exorcism of ghosts and demons, and seeing or divining the future. Some shamans are accomplished in all these arts, while most only have one or two abilities.

Compared with Taiwanese and Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese shamanism, Wenzhou shamanism is somewhat subdued. We do not have the laceration of the body with saw-shark teeth, or the walking over hot coals, nor the piercing of various parts of the body with spikes. Or at least I never saw these, nor did I hear about them being performed. When I described these ritual feats to Wenzhou people, many seemed a bit horrified. The dramaturgy of trance performances is similarly toned down. Nor I did see or hear about planchette divination-writing in Wenzhou, whereas it has made a comeback in Fujian.<sup>5</sup>

In 2004, Mr. Wang, an old diviner in Longwan District, told me that in the Yong Qiang (永強) area of Wenzhou, he knows of only three male shamans, but there are over forty women shamanesses. There are many more in Pingyang and Cangnan Counties in southern Wenzhou, and also in Yongjia County in the north, the less developed areas of Wenzhou. Said Mr. Wang, “They close their eyes and sing Beijing or Yue opera tunes. Then a god or someone’s ancestor enters ‘into their bodies’ (*shangsen* 上身) and they start to give voice to the

5 In 2010 in Xiamen, Fujian, I chatted with an old man who told me that he was chosen by the god to take up the planchette, a forked wooden cutting of a tree, which the medium held in his hands to write out the characters of the possessing god’s utterances. The strange thing about it was that, up until then, he was illiterate.

god. Sometimes they speak in strange tongues that no one can understand.” Mr. Wang works with several women shamans who come to him to have him divine an auspicious date for their clients, and then they advise their clients to do certain things on the lucky date. Most shamans operate at their own homes because officially, they are not allowed in temples, and they could be fined or even taken to jail if they are caught practicing in public. They often treat illnesses that doctors and hospitals could not cure. They also help people “seeking wealth or a son” (*qiucai qiuzi* 求財求子).

I asked Mr. Wang why most shamans in Wenzhou today are women, when in the old imperial days there were both men and women shamans. He thought it had to do with the fact that women’s minds are “simpler” and more “naïve or pure” (*danchun* 單純), therefore women are more sensitive and it is easier for them to hear the gods and ancestors and “communicate effectively” with them (*hao goutong* 好溝通). They are more receptive and sensitive to the gods’ presence and words, he thought. Another reason was that most of their clients are also women who firmly believe in them and regularly consult them, so they are sustained both emotionally and financially by a constituency that is female. “Men do not seek this occupation because there are many other opportunities open to men to make money,” said Mr. Wang. Thus, in Wenzhou I never heard or saw the public performances of strong men losing themselves in trance. These scenes of male ecstatic possession are, I believe, rare in Wenzhou, even in the mountain areas. However, my observations were limited, and further research is necessary to establish a better picture of shamanism in Wenzhou society today.

From 1991, when I started fieldwork in Wenzhou, to about 2003 or 2004, it was difficult to find shamans in the more populated urban areas of Wenzhou because they kept themselves hidden, relying on word of mouth to attract new clients. Some urban shamans can be found in small temples tucked discreetly away in a side lane. In rural or more remote mountainous areas, the local authorities either look the other way in concession to local beliefs, or they believe in shamans themselves. It seemed that by 2005, I was hearing about shamans operating more openly. That year, I heard of a shamaness in Kun Yang Town in Pingyang County, who dared to set up shop right at a busy intersection. Her rituals were believed to be so efficacious that huge crowds were drawn to her, obstructing traffic for several blocks. The local authorities finally allowed her to move into a small abandoned shrine honoring the god Erlang, located along the ancient highway from Wenzhou to Fujian Province, and ordered her to stay within its confines. By 2014, there seemed to be an increase in the number of shamans operating out in the open. In that year a Daoist priest in Cangnan County complained to me that his ritual business now encountered

two major problems. First, many lineages now hire only those Daoist priests who happen to be their own lineage members, regardless of the quality of their training or their knowledge of Daoist ritual culture. Second, a new crop of shamanesses have set up shop in newly built small temples, and many local families now go to them for their ritual needs. “Almost all of them are women,” he declared, wincing at the stiff competition he now had to deal with.

I was able to interview three women shamans in Wenzhou. In 2005, Mr. Wang the diviner took me to see a shamaness named Fragrant Orchid at her home in a village in Longwan District, Yaoxi Township. The room had an incense urn containing the incense ash from a local temple dedicated to the shamaness’ patron deity, the aforementioned Mother Chen the Fourteenth, also simply called “Mother” (*Niangniang* 娘娘) in popular parlance. The room was ringed by chairs around three of its walls, and festooned with red pendants thanking the goddess for prayers and requests answered, with such phrases as “If there is a request, it will be answered” (*youqiu biying* 有求必應), or “Thanks for the response and great kindness” (*daxie hong-en* 答謝宏恩), or “The god is full of achievement; she protects and defends” (*shengong huyou* 神功護佑). The first client had a son who was plagued with a neurotic disorder that made him at times paranoid and confused. The second client was there to request help for her husband, who was recovering after losing a finger in a factory machine accident. The third client asked the shaman when their family business would turn around and they could start to recoup their investment. With lit incense sticks in her hands, the shaman bowed in front of the statue of Mother Chen, then she closed her eyes and chanted passages that I did not understand. With her eyes still closed, she sat down and gestured for silence. After a while, we noticed her eyes twitching and her head jerking vigorously, and frowns taking over her face, but she did not utter any sound. Perhaps that day the god or ancestor chose not to speak through her. When she awoke, she chattered animatedly with one of the anxious clients, imparting what the god had told her. Unfortunately, the shamaness refused to be interviewed by me because she suspected that I was a Chinese journalist, there to write an exposé criticizing her for making money from the gullible. Leaving her home, Mr. Wang told me that she was nervous because she had not yet obtained her Daoist Association membership card, which would give her legitimacy before the law. He also added that her annual income from her services amounted to over 200,000 yuan (US \$30,000), which was well above the average income in the area.

My second interaction with a shaman was in 2008 in a picturesque village deep in the Western Yandang Mountains of Rui’an County. This village had seen a depletion of population in the past decade as the able-bodied adults

and youth had descended the mountain to the towns of the plains in search of wage work, leaving mainly the elderly and the very young behind. The village head was an ambitious leader who was trying to stimulate the local economy in his deserted mountain village by attracting tourists from the lowlands. One of the ways to do so was to reconstruct and expand the village's dilapidated old Yang Family Elder Temple (*Yangfu Miao* 楊府廟), dedicated to an important local god of the Wenzhou area, Yang Jingyi (楊精義). The head of the construction crew contracted to work on the temple introduced a shamaness from Qingtian County, a poor area northwest of the Wenzhou region. Although a Party member, the village head said, "She will imbue this temple with new life, so I welcome her." She was promised a certain guaranteed income for three years and entrusted with the management of the temple, so she settled into the village with her husband to await the completion of the temple.

This shamaness called herself a "deity-child" (*shentong* 神僮), and I will give her the name of Luo Jinhong. She told me that she used to be at another deity temple in Yongjia County in northern Wenzhou, but she was "chased out by bad people." She would not divulge the reason for her forced departure, perhaps finding those memories too unpleasant. Although she occasionally heard from gods, her powers were mainly in healing, not communicating with spirits. She came from three generations of Daoist priests: her maternal great-grandfather, maternal grandfather, and mother were priests of the Zhengyi sect who were never formally ordained. She never realized she had a calling until one day the goddess Mother Chen the Fourteenth appeared to her in a dream and told her she should "conduct rituals" in her honor (*zuo daochang* 做道場). She was reluctant to take up this profession because it involved rigorous training and she never learned to read. Soon afterwards, she fell seriously ill and could not eat, lying in bed day after day. The doctor said she had contracted hepatitis and told her she would not live past forty days. She refused to accept death and went into the mountains to seek an old "Daoist healer" (*fashi* 法師) for a cure. He performed a full day of healing ritual for her, and she stayed with him for one week. After she returned home, her whole body developed scales of skin which all peeled off, and she went back to the Daoist. This time he wrote three magical talismans (*fu* 符) with a calligraphy brush on paper for her, burned them, and poured the ashes into hot water, which she drank down. Miraculously, three days later, she felt better and eventually fully recovered her health.

Taking her brush with death and miraculous recovery as a sign from Niangniang that she must become a shamaness, she threw herself into her training. Each day, she followed a strict regimen. Three times a day in a quiet room, for two-hour periods beginning at 5:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m., and 7:00 p.m., she chanted mantras (*nianzou* 念咒) and memorized Daoist texts from an audio

recording. She repeatedly invoked the following names: Mother Chen the Fourteenth, her patron deity; the sage Laozi (*Taishang Laojun* 太上老君); and Jade Maiden of the Ninth Heaven (*Jiutian Yunu* 九天玉女), another goddess. "Please give me a hand and lift my body up" (*qingni fuwo yishen* 請你扶我一身) she pleaded with the gods. She persisted with the training seven days a week for seven weeks, totaling forty-nine days. Finally, one day she felt the "magical powers transmitted to her body" (*fali chuandao woshenshang* 法力傳到我身上). Years later, after she got married, her husband taught her how to read her family's Daoist books. Given her Daoist family background, her training in Daoist texts, and the gods she called out to for assistance, it is clear that Luo is affiliated with Daoist culture, even though nowadays, official Daoist culture considers living shamans an example of "superstition."

Luo was eager to recount all her healing triumphs. Indeed, the manner in which she recounted her accomplishments can only be described as boastful and relentless, for there was no stopping her. I can only give a few examples here. One of her earliest successes was helping a farmer who had lost seven pigs. She wrote three magical talismans and burned them, then mixed the ashes with rice porridge and fed the mixture to the three remaining sick pigs. To the gratitude of the farmer, all three were saved. She once warned a man not to travel between the first and the twenty-third of the fifth lunar month because she had a vision of him dying in a terrible accident. He ignored her, and sure enough, he and six others were crushed to death when a train derailed and fell on top of them. Once, a man brought his thirteen-year-old son to see her. The son was traumatized because he saw his dead mother in a vision, and he fell into a catatonic state. Years earlier, his mother had committed suicide by drinking poison after an argument with his father. Not only did Luo cure the son, she also told the father that when the son reached sixteen years of age, he would go abroad. The father dismissed this improbable idea, because one needed a great deal of money to go abroad. Luo triumphantly told me that three years later, his father happened to be standing nearby when a woman threw herself into the river. She attempted suicide because her husband, who was an illegal migrant working in Italy, had called her on long-distance telephone to tell her that he wanted a divorce. The father of the catatonic boy jumped into the river and saved the suicidal woman. In gratitude, the woman offered to take his son with her to Italy, where she planned to find her husband and talk him out of the divorce. So, just as Luo had predicted, at age sixteen, the boy went to Italy and worked very hard there, saving enough money to come back to Wenzhou and open up his own store.

In January 2012 in Wenzhou, I interviewed Cao Jinling, a shamaness I call the "reluctant spirit medium." "To be honest," said Cao, "I would rather have my

health than have the gods come to me, but they chose me, and so I must comply with their wishes." She lived with her husband and his parents in a modern apartment building in Kunyang Town, Pingyang County. The husband sold cell phones in their local town and in Shanghai, where he spent some of his time each year. Cao did not work because of her continuous ill health, and her two children were mainly raised by her mother. At the age of forty-six, Cao had only one year of schooling in her life, and both she and her husband were basically illiterate, although both spoke rudimentary Mandarin. She first started getting ill at the age of fifteen: her leg hurt, her whole body felt sore and weak, and she could not work. Over the years, she went to see one doctor after another, trying out both traditional Chinese medicine and Western biomedicine, but they all told her there was nothing wrong with her. Cao's husband started quarreling with her, accusing her of being too lazy to work or take care of her children.

When she was thirty-five, Cao and her husband moved to Taiyuan in Shanxi Province in north China to do business. It was there, far from home, that she again fell seriously ill and started to become possessed. She described the sensation as "going crazy" (*fengle yiyang* 瘋了一樣), or "like getting drunk" (*xiang hezuile* 像喝醉了). When she awoke from her possessed state, people described her as looking "crazy and unsteady" (*fengfeng diandian* 瘋瘋癲癲). During her possession, her eyes were closed, as if sleeping, but her body was not shaking convulsively, nor did she have saliva or foam flowing out of her mouth. However, following each possession, she hurt in her stomach and intestines (*duzi teng, changwei teng* 肚子疼·腸胃疼), and since she started getting possessed, she has lost a lot of weight, dropping down to her current weight of about ninety *jin* (斤; roughly ninety pounds). In her possessed state, people would ask Cao what was the matter and she would reply, in a strange, eerily low voice that was not her normal voice, that she was the goddess Mother Chen the Fourteenth. Sometimes a voice would also tell Cao that she was the goddess Li the Thirteenth, the "shamanic sister" (*tongmei* 僮妹) of Mother Chen. Cao was also possessed by Mother Chen's two brothers, named Fatong (法通) and Faqing (法青), and she also assumed the male identity of the Earth God (*Tudigong* 土地公), who often led the way (*yinglu* 迎路) for the other gods who possessed her. Each time she woke up from being possessed, she felt really exhausted, as if she had just returned from a long and difficult journey. She never remembered what she did or said while she was possessed, and could only rely on what people told her later. The "bodhisattva" (*pusa* 菩薩) would often appear to Cao in her dreams, she said, as if to convince her that she or he was real, and had taken up residence in her body, since Cao kept on doubting that she was a medium. "I never wanted to be a shaman," said Cao, "but for some reason, this is my fate."

Cao's husband recounted that he was really scared the first few times his wife was possessed, so scared that he could not sleep the whole night. He asked around in Taiyuan about this strange phenomenon and discovered that there were local people there who also got possessed, but by their local gods who were different from Wenzhou gods. "I found out this thing is fairly common, so that made me feel relieved," he said. The two of them even went to visit a few shamans in Taiyuan to find out their experiences and share stories. Cao and her husband were convinced that the Taiyuan local gods were all lower than Wenzhou's Mother Chen the Fourteenth.

Cao's reputation as a shamaness has been spread by word of mouth, and people from far and wide come to visit her in her home. Many come from the countryside where she herself came from, but others live in town or come from other towns in Wenzhou. They come asking for her help in petitioning Niangniang to grant them a favor: to give birth to a son, to ensure that their child will do well on an impending exam, to consult the goddess about a big decision they must make about their family business, or to be healed of an illness, for example. For good luck on their child's exam, they will provide their child's name and his or her row and seat number in the exam session, so Niangniang will know exactly where to find their child. When a client comes, she will go to a small altar in her apartment, offer incense, and invite Mother Chen down to her. "We cannot predict whether Niangniang will come down to us," said Cao. "Sometimes if she does not come down the first time, then we have to try again another day, and often the third time it works."

I asked Cao if she could make this a regular enterprise, going into business and developing her spirit possessions as her income base. Both she and her husband were quick to reply that they could not do this. "It is not good to make money off a god," they said. They do not advertise Cao's abilities at all. "It's only when sick people get well, when their pleas to Niangniang receive a satisfactory outcome, that people then start to spread the word on their own to their relatives and friends. It is not right for us to make money on purpose," they said. People did give small amounts to thank her for her services, such as fruit or twenty yuan at a time. While Cao did accept money for the services she rendered, the income did not seem very lucrative, nor did their home suggest high earnings.

### **The Contributions of Shamans to Local Communities and Economies**

In 2001, I heard several people referring to a popular national television show called *Focus Interviews* (*Jiaodian fangtan* 焦點訪談) that presented an exposé

of rural Wenzhou's "feudal superstitions" (CCTV 2000). Eventually, through *guanxi* connections with someone who worked at the television station in Beijing, I was able to obtain a copy of this half-hour show that first aired on Central Chinese Television in 2000. The show targeted the village cadres and Party leaders of Yandang Village in the mountains of Yueqing City (樂清市) for colluding with a shamaness in the village deity temple to "cheat people out of their money." The village cadres entered into a "contract" (承包 *chengbao*) with a shamaness whereby she would "get possessed" (*tiaotongshen* 跳僮身, in local parlance) and communicate with spirits on behalf of her village clients in the temple. In return for allowing her in the temple, she would deliver (*shangjiao* 上繳) to the village government 500,000 yuan (\$75,700) each year, out of her lucrative earnings. The show accused the shamaness of faking possession in order to cheat the "superstitious masses" of their money and decried the village cadres' violation of Party principles and desecration of the Party image. It also condemned the cadres for having the audacity to assist the shamaness at her ritual performances, chanting mantras and writing calligraphy, when they were Party members sworn to atheism. Although the show admitted that the money collected from the shamaness did *not* end up in the private pockets of the cadres, but *did* go toward public expenditures such as building local infrastructure and schools, it nevertheless claimed that the village reliance on "superstitious earnings" held up the "economic and scientific development" of the village. The show ended with a stern warning for other "ridiculous businesses" (*huangtang de jingying* 荒唐的經營), by informing the audience that all of the cadres involved had been "punished" (*shoudao chufen* 受到處分).

A woman cadre working in a Wenzhou township government told me in February 2001 that most people she knew in Wenzhou were very "turned off" (*hen fangan* 很反感) by this official television program chastising Wenzhou "superstition." They lamented that the village cadres and even the township official lost their positions over this incident. According to her, many Wenzhou village governments do indeed enter into contracts with shamanesses who operate in deity temples. She continued,

It's a common thing here in Wenzhou. If the village government doesn't do this, then all the money earned in the temple would just be kept in the private hands of the shamans. If the village takes a cut from the shamans' earnings, that's doing something for the collective. This should be called "collective spirit" (*jiti jingshen* 集體精神), it should not be treated like a crime because those cadres actually benefitted their village. It makes sense, it's good for the economy, it provides a source of revenue and spurs on the economy. Lots of people really believe in shamans, and every year



in the eighth lunar month, many people flock to that area. The “incense fire is thick and abundant” (*xianghuo hensheng* 香火很盛) at that time. In fact, the village became so prosperous, the show itself said that the village kept on being chosen “Advanced Unit” (*xianjin danwei* 先進單位) year after year!

Here we see that at the grassroots level, there is an entirely different understanding of the role of shamanic practices for local communities from that presented in the television show. People at the grassroots level in Wenzhou generally believe in the power of shamans and have no problems with shamans operating in local temples. Nor do they have any issues with their local cadres supporting shamans and tapping into or taxing the shamans’ incomes. In the local understanding, whether shamans can really heal people or not, their presence in local temples brings in more worshippers, who will purchase the incense and candles sold by the temple, make offerings to the deities, and donate more money to the temple. If the temple in which a shaman is based is the center of community gatherings and social activities, as was the case with the temple featured in the television show, then the shaman in effect served to bring the community together, and when worshippers donated to the gods so their wishes could be granted, they were also helping in the funding drive for community development. Thus, in stark contrast to the urban mainstream discourse about shamans cheating ignorant rural people, in many rural communities shamans are actually seen to benefit the collective interests of local communities and to help stimulate the local economy.

To gain a deeper insight into how shamans might contribute to local communities, we will turn to a recent ethnographic study conducted by Luo Jianjian (2008) of a village shamaness in southern Jiangsu Province and her role in the rebuilding of a local deity temple. The shamaness ZBM was a woman factory worker in her fifties in 1993 when she fell ill and could not obtain a cure from the many hospitals and doctors she consulted. Advised by a temple divination strip that she could only be cured if she built a temple, she set to work gathering money to rebuild a local deity temple to the god Lord Zong Guan. ZBM remembered playing in this old temple as a child, but it was later torn down in 1958 during the Great Leap Forward. One day in the early 1990s, Lord Zong Guan started possessing the shamaness’s body and giving her detailed instructions on how to rebuild his temple. She was very frightened and tried to get rid of him, but to no avail. After her health improved, she accepted her fate and, full of gratitude, she worked tirelessly with her village leaders to rebuild the temple. Soon, her special powers and access to the god attracted attention in the village, and she started curing others of illnesses and even helping infertile

women conceive children. According to the ethnographer, the shamaness acted as a catapult and inspiration for the whole village to join together to get the temple rebuilt. In the process of remembering the old temple of their childhood and rediscovering the deity Lord Zong Guan, the villagers were able to reconstruct their lost “collective memory” (*jiti jiyi* 集體記憶) and identity as a community, wrote Luo (2008:290, 294–295).

It would seem that, since shamans have the rare and mysterious ability of communicating with gods or ancestors, their presence in a temple often imbues the temple with a sacred aura of the presence of gods. Thus, shamans are invaluable in reactivating the sacrality and spiritual authority of a derelict temple or in imbuing a new temple space with a sacred presence. Without this sacred aura, a temple would not attract many worshippers (*xiangke* 香客), and when worshippers gather in great numbers, their temple donations and purchase of incense and candles bring economic benefit to the local community. If shamanic healing results in a record of successes, then even more people will flock to the temple. Furthermore, since local temples are material symbols as well as the social gathering places of local communities, shamans can be said to play important roles in jump-starting the ritual solidarity and collective identity of grassroots communities. Thus, when officialdom intervenes, harasses shamans, or tears down their temples, as the television program *Focus Interviews* exemplified, they are not only thwarting traditional grassroots efforts to self-start and stimulate their local economies, but also throwing a wrench into the delicate process of rebuilding indigenous civil society. In much of rural China, including Wenzhou, indigenous civil society is still established through traditional means, through the gathering of the community in and through ritual performances, and the collective effort to build sites to house these rituals.

In the case of the shamaness ZBM in Jiangsu (Luo 2008), although her charismatic authority transformed the rundown temple into the new center of village life, alas, the new deity temple was rudely torn down by state authorities only two months after its erection. Here, we see that shamanic authority is not an acceptable kind of religiosity for the modern Chinese state, which regarded the temple built by ZBM as an example of “feudal superstition.” Thus, the rebuilding of the next new village temple had to abide by the dominant society’s expectations for acceptable religiosity. It was only by being converted into a Buddhist temple, and by deploying “state symbols” (*guojia fuhao* 國家符號), that the new temple was accepted by higher levels of state authority. The shamaness ZBM, who had originally inspired the ritual solidarity of the village around the old deity temple, was driven out of the new Buddhist temple, like the healer Luo Jinhong whom I interviewed. In her place, a new Buddhist

monk was installed, and a new temple managerial committee was established, led by a village man who knew how to cozy up with officialdom and had wider social connections outside the village.

Why has the religious authority of Buddhism and Daoism been accepted by the state in the post-Mao period, while that of shamanism is still vigorously excluded from legitimacy? Shamanism or spirit possession is often denied as a form of religiosity, and it is restricted or banned from the public sphere in most areas of China. Thus, we need to explore, at a deep structural level of culture, the reason(s) for this mixed hostility toward and fear of shamanism on the part of mainstream modern China. Below, we will explore four possible reasons for the modern antipathy toward spirit possession. They are intended as informed speculations for other scholars to consider and take up in further research. Since this study is quite preliminary, and we still need much more empirical field research on the variety of shamans operating across China today and how they fit into local societies, these thoughts are merely a first attempt to reflect on the inner logic of four possible explanations through deductive reasoning, rather than truth claims based on testable or falsifiable evidence.

#### **Four Explanations for the Modern Antipathy toward Shamanism and Spirit Possession in China**

##### *First Explanation: Shamanism as Charlatanism*

The first reason for the hostility and suspicion of shamanism in contemporary China is the one given by most people I have encountered in China, especially officialdom: shamanism is dishonest, practiced by unscrupulous charlatans who cheat ignorant and gullible people of their money, and it is also an obstacle to China's modernity. It is regarded as "superstitious," anti-scientific, and promoting resistance to modern medicine. This explanation for the marginal status of shamanism in China today champions the victory of scientific thought and modern medicine, for the benefit of the bodily health and financial well-being of the population. However, I found that in Wenzhou, most people are not as gullible or as ignorant as the move to expose charlatanry presupposes. Many people in Wenzhou today express their doubts about shamanism, and they are best described as between belief and disbelief, acceptance and rejection of shamans and the efficacy of their cures, incantations, and ritual possessions. People often said that there were "real" and "fake" shamans: the "real" ones did not intend to get possessed and were not doing it for the money, while the "fake" ones knew how to put on convincing acts to maintain a lucrative business. A few people pointed out that some shamans and diviners had "assistants" who

quietly staked out different families to secretly gain knowledge of the internal situation of families, their recent births, deaths, misfortunes, and ambitions. Employing this secret knowledge gathered by their assistants, these “fake” shamans can bedazzle their clients and win their trust and awe by showing some divine knowledge about their otherwise hidden personal situations. Furthermore, I also heard from several people that most people with illnesses see a number of doctors of both Western and traditional Chinese medicine first, and only consult shamans when modern medicine does not work. People with family members suffering from mental illness will also consult shamans, after unsuccessful treatment by regular doctors and psychologists. Usually, the shamanic diagnosis is that some offended spirit or ancestor was trying to get their attention by afflicting their mentally ill family member. As to getting cheated, my experience of Wenzhou people was that they are not easy to cheat, for they are especially astute in matters of money. Thus, the fact that so many Wenzhou people first seek out modern doctors suggests that the need to defend modern science and medicine may not be the most satisfying explanation for the hostility to shamanism. The first explanation also does not take into account the vast body of work done by medical anthropologists to show how traditional healing frequently has a positive outcome on the mind-bodies of patients, who often respond well to the knowledge that they are taking measures to address the illness, and to the care and attention they receive from traditional healers.

*Second Explanation: Continuities with the Sovereign Power of Imperial China*

The second explanation that I can think of for the modern hostility to shamanism is that the modern state still exhibits the habitual (instinctual?) fears of imperial sovereign power to any independent or competing religious or charismatic authority. Here, China’s modernity is not posited as a radical disjuncture with the imperial past, but merely a surface reconfiguration of a deep-structural paradigm or cultural logic that has not been shattered by modernity. We have already seen from Donald Sutton’s (2000) work that before modern times, Neo-Confucian culture had already condemned spirit possession cults. In her account of late imperial spirit mediums who hosted fox spirits in northern China, Kang Xiaofei (2006:3) writes that already from at least the sixteenth century onwards, these mediums were relegated to lowly social positions, and officials, literati, and gentry elites commonly associated fox spirit mediums with the pejorative label of “heterodox” or “illicit” (*yin* 淫) cults.

Sinologists can easily point to a number of historical texts where the late imperial state reveals its deep suspicion of and animosity toward independent charismatic or divine authorities who may challenge the sovereign power’s

monopoly on divine authority or access to the higher divinities, such as Heaven. The imperial state attempted to control religious revelations through official compilations of Daoist and Buddhist texts and limited the ordination of their clergy. However, it was unable to control the utterances of individual shamans or the gods who spoke through them. The awesome power that shamans wield as incarnations of the gods confers on them the dangerous ability to give voice to gods who are positioned as transcending the political authority of the emperor, the court, and the dynastic power order. The unauthorized prognostications that shamans make about the future could propel discontent and rebellion toward the dynastic power order. Historians have detailed the imperial state's paranoia regarding shamanism as well as sectarian or heterodox religious movements and their leaders who wield independent charismatic authority (Tian 2005; De Groot 1901; Ter Haar 1999; Overmyer 1976; Palmer 2008). They have shown the different kinds of grisly punishments that were sometimes meted out in imperial China to self-declared diviners, mediums, or messengers of buddhas who pronounce an apocalyptic age. Indeed, having founded the Ming Dynasty in 1368 through a peasant rebellion inspired by White Lotus apocalyptic teachings about the approaching end of an era, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang was especially alert to future challenges to his own throne through similar means. The Ming Dynasty legal code (*Da Ming Lu* 大明律), first promulgated shortly after the establishment of the new dynasty, had this prohibition:

禁止師巫，邪術 --

凡師巫假降邪神，書符咒水，扶鸞禱聖，自號端公，太保，師婆及妄稱彌勒佛，白蓮社，明尊教，白雲宗等會，一應左道亂正之術，或隱藏圖像，燒香集眾，夜聚曉散，佯修善事，扇惑人民，為首者，絞。為從者，各杖一百，流三千里。

DA MING LU (1999:89)

#### Prohibitions against Shamans and Heretical Arts:

All teachers and shamans, who falsely call down heretical gods, write magical charms, make incantations over water, who use the divining planchette or pray to saints, calling themselves First Lord, Great Sire, or shamaness, or who misleadingly call themselves the Maitreya Buddha, the White Lotus Society, Manicheanism, or the White Cloud Sect, who disseminate heterodox and deviant arts and techniques, who hide images or statues, burn incense, and assemble crowds, who gather at night and disperse at dawn, pretending to do good deeds, but fanning and misleading

the people. Those who are the leaders will be hanged [or strangled]. Those who are the followers are to receive one hundred strokes of the cane, and to be banished three thousand miles (里 *li*).

Here we must reflect upon the religious inspiration and founding of each new dynastic order, and the embeddedness of this ancient form of sovereign power in theological foundations that brook no challenge from new independent charismatic religious forces. At the same time, we also need to keep in mind that historians have found that such Ming Dynasty imperial decrees were not really enforced or regularly implemented, so that by mid-Ming times, spirit possession and popular religion were flourishing as if undisturbed (Szonyi 2002:178).

The second explanation is borne out by modern Chinese state actions. David Palmer has shown the historical irony whereby Chinese Communist historians glorified White Lotus millenarian peasant rebellions as “feudal class struggles,” but in the early 1950s the Party violently suppressed religious movements, labeled “reactionary secret societies” (*fandong Huidaomen* 反動會道門), just as the Ming and Qing Dynasties had exterminated White Lotus forces (Palmer 2008). The largest religious organization affected was the syncretistic and eschatological Yiguandao (一貫道), whose leaders and adherents were executed and imprisoned in large numbers by both the Communists and the Guomindang in the 1940s and 50s. Both the late imperial White Lotus and twentieth-century Yiguandao religious movements subscribed to millenarian notions of the end of times when the savior Maitreya Buddha (彌勒佛) would descend to earth, thus posing a direct threat to the earthly state order. Similarly, in Taiwan in the 1970s and 80s, Robert Weller (1987:158) found that the Guomindang “opposed [spirit mediums] because their pragmatic flexibility immunized interpretation completely from state control, and thus created a great *potential* for dissident interpretation.”

A variant of the second explanation points to both the imperial as well as the modern Chinese state’s concern with religious organizations and large religious public assemblies that might grow increasingly out of state control. According to Daniel Overmyer (1976:23), “There is no doubt that the [imperial] Chinese government was particularly concerned about *collective religious activities which could provide the opportunity for riots or illegal organization* [my emphasis].” Such activities might include group pilgrimages, temple fairs and processions, public preaching, or group worship. Indeed, in my fieldwork in Wenzhou during the 1990s, many temple managers told me that they could not get official permission to organize ritual processions and carry their gods through the streets. Kenneth Dean (1993:113–114) vividly recounts how in 1987,

the ritual procession of the god Patriarch of the Clear Stream in Penglai Township, Fujian, was cut short by five vanloads of police who even fired shots, only to have local officials later beg overseas Chinese visitors not to report the police action, for fear of losing their financial investments. We know that the Chinese state grew increasingly uneasy with the “*qigong* fever” (*qigong* 氣功熱) of the 1980s and 90s, when vast crowds packed soccer stadiums to see a charismatic *qigong* master and feel with excitement the movements of *qi* (氣) in their own bodies (Palmer 2007). “*Qigong* fever” shares with rural spirit medium performances the ability to arouse mass enthusiasm and attract gatherings around charismatic bodily displays. Thus, according to the second explanation, mediums possessed by gods are a dangerous lightning rod for unwieldy crowds that may collectively turn against state authorities. In addition, since spirit mediums do not belong to formal institutions like the Daoist or Buddhist associations, but operate on their own in their homes, or in unregistered deity temples, state authorities regard them with suspicion because they are relatively free and unaffiliated with the monitoring agencies of the state.

In the second explanation, one cannot easily dismiss the possibility that historical patterns of state paranoia toward independent religious organizations persist into the modern age. However, merely relying on this explanation of historical continuity does not take into account the vast differences in the cultural construction of the imperial and modern state orders. For one thing, whereas Zhu Yuanzhang’s sovereign edict cited above did not feel the need to explain its rationale for banning these religious practices and punishing the perpetrators, in modern times, state indictments against spirit possession are generally couched in terms of suppressing “superstition” and the cheating of gullible people, and promoting modern science and medicine over quackery that harms the health of the population (Anagnost 1987). In other words, what is new about the modern state and social hostility to spirit possession is that it is expressed in what Michel Foucault (1991) calls “governmentalized” terms of protecting the health, financial well-being, and education of the population, and promoting the benefits of modern science and medicine for the people’s welfare.

Another crucial difference between late imperial and modern China that the second explanation does not account for is the fact that we find similar antipathies to shamanism and spirit possession in the modern world *outside* China, so that modern China is hardly unique in its denigration and marginalization of such practices. In twentieth-century Mongolia, shamans and Buddhist monks were brutally treated and executed by the Soviet-influenced socialist state (Buyanderlger 2013). We have already mentioned that in both

modern Taiwan and South Korea, shamanism was also demonized by the modernizing state and dominant social attitudes, and its ill fortunes did not take a turn for the better until democratic reforms in these societies in the late 1980s. In the modernizing Islamic country of Sudan, where most mediums are women, the label of “superstition” was also used to denigrate spirit possession, but when Sudanese emigrants and exiles arrived in Canada, they soon revalorized spirit possession as a proud marker of ethnic identity in Canadian multiculturalism (Boddy 1995). Indeed, spirit possession has disturbed modern colonial, nationalist, and global capitalist orders in such diverse places as Egypt, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia (Boddy 1994:419), where it has been actively suppressed or marginalized. Thus, besides looking into China’s imperial past, we also need to consider the question of what agencies in modernity have led to a shared antipathy to shamanism across such diverse cultural and religious traditions.

*Third Explanation: The Rationalization of Life in Modernity*

This question leads us to a third possible explanation for China’s modern hostility toward shamanism: in modernity, rationality and the rationalization of life are both necessary to sustain modern modes of life. The British social historian Keith Thomas described the rationalizing process whereby medieval Catholicism’s “magic” was systematically suppressed or removed as a result of the Protestant Reformation, and then the Enlightenment (Thomas 1971). Up until the seventeenth century, the Catholic Church in Europe regularly sold magical charms, went on witch hunts, and built up cults of various saints and their astonishing miracles, while Catholic priests ritually healed the sick and conducted exorcisms that freed people of demonic possessions. The Reformation was a cleansing and rationalization of the old and “superstitious” religious culture of the Catholics. Indeed, elsewhere I have shown that since the Reformation, Protestants applied the term “superstitious,” with its pejorative sense, to Catholicism (Yang 2008:11–19). Thus, it is a great historical irony, given their anti-imperialism, that Republican Chinese modernizers, and then the Chinese Communists, should adopt a term that originally came out of an internal struggle within Christianity, the religion of “the imperialists,” and use it to attack their own indigenous Chinese religions. Rationalization in the Protestant Reformation led to the purging of miracles, demons, witches, saint cults, even the Virgin Mary, and a drastic reduction in ritual life. Modernity brought with it, and was also brought about by, such rationalizing movements, which in turn led to both the emergence of capitalism and secularism in the modern age, according to Max Weber ([1904] 1958). Charles Taylor (2007:135–137) has suggested that the rationalization of religious life



crafted a new “buffered self” whose ego-boundaries are no longer “porous” to the comings and goings of spirits. Western capitalist modernity was predicated on the construction of the liberal individual self, who is figured as a rational and autonomous agent able to make rational decisions through a means-ends calculus.

A recent twist on the rationalization thesis is found in Paul Johnson’s work, in which he links the marginalization of spirit possession in early modern Europe to the rise of capitalism. According to Johnson (2011), spirit possession, which was an important part of medieval Catholic demonology, was purged from European culture after the Reformation and Enlightenment, and then projected *outward* as an anthropological concept and applied to non-Western, especially African cultures, as a sign of primitiveness and backwardness. Like the category of “superstition,” the notion of spirit possession in the modern West also served as a contrastive device to bolster the emerging category of “religion.” This new category of religion was purified of its previous associations with exorcism of spirits, and became the preferred and acceptable mode of religiosity in Western modernity. Johnson suggests that in modern European thought, spirit possession was contrasted with property ownership. Since property owners *owned* things or other people, someone who was “possessed” by outside agencies was not acceptable to modern Western capitalist logic. Capitalists can “own” others, but they must be in full control of themselves. Those who become possessed do not own or control themselves. Since Africa was the main source of slaves in European colonies, spirit possession came to be primarily associated with African cultures, where in the European imagination, Africans were “without will” and were “overwhelmed by instinct and passions” (Johnson 2011:396). If we follow Johnson’s argument, we might say that Chinese spirit possession is also disturbing to modern Chinese mainstream society because “the idea of the occupied body and spoken-through person” goes against the development of the “rational, autonomous, self-possessed individual imagined as the foundation of the modern state” in Enlightenment discourse (395, 398).

I can definitely agree with Johnson that in China, there is also a modernist push to produce rational self-possessed persons for the modern state, and disciplined laborers for state productivity. However, in China, especially rural China, the modern state cannot presume a culture already highly individualized as in Western traditions, but must contend with the strong culture of kinship and rural communalism. Nor does property ownership seem to be what the post-Mao official culture is aiming for, since property and ownership rights and laws are notoriously hazy and elusive, and the permanent owner of all land and most residential buildings is still the state, which only contracts land

and apartments out for a limited time. Nor does the Chinese state seem bent on constructing fully autonomous individuals, but rather subjects who are attached to the state and penetrated with state desires. Thus, spirit possession in Wenzhou does not seem to serve as the “Other” of the possessive individualism that Johnson documents for the modern West. Since China’s southeastern coastal cultures have produced the most astounding economic growth and material prosperity, and this economic growth has been entangled with the reinvention of traditional religiosity, it is clear that these people are perfectly capable of economic cost-benefit calculation while at the same time being open to strong religious forces.

The rationalization thesis can explain a great deal about the declining fortunes of shamanism in modernity; however, it cannot explain why shamanism and religiosity have not completely disappeared after concerted efforts to eradicate them. Indeed, in colonial-era South Africa, Jean Comaroff (1985) showed how European Christian missionaries in a strong Calvinist tradition managed to convert the Tsidi people, only to see their severe and disembodied Calvinism subverted by the Tsidi penchant for spirit possession and transformed into Christian Pentecostalism. In this hybrid form of African Pentecostal Christianity, Tsidi bodies shake, dance, and speak in tongues when possessed by the Holy Spirit, and their ecstatic and highly corporeal church gatherings and ritual performances refuse to accede to the austere demands for bodily restraint made by their colonizers.

Similarly, the rationalization thesis cannot account for the continued public presence of spirit mediums in such a high-tech and globalized economy as Taiwan, and the recent resurgence of spirit possession in areas of Fujian Province (Dean and Zhen 2010; Dean 2011). No doubt, Fujian’s geographical proximity to Taiwan, the language and ancestry its people share with many Taiwanese, and its ongoing economic and religious connections with the offshore island have brought new life to shamanistic culture in Fujian today. Ken Dean and Zhen Zhenman (2010) have documented how a new generation of young male spirit mediums from the Putian area of Fujian has been reinvented from scratch by sending young local men to their long-lost kin residing in Malaysia to relearn the lost art and rituals of spirit possession. These new transnational connections of spirit medium cults between Fujian, Taiwan, and Malaysia challenge the rationalization thesis that would predict a decline in shamanism with increasing industrialization and urbanization. Finally, the rationalization thesis does not address two key features of shamanism and spirit possession across the modern world: the main receptacle of the force of spirits and religiosity is the *human body*, and in many places, especially *women’s bodies*.

*Fourth Explanation: Body, Gender, and Charismatic Authority in  
Disciplinary Modernity*

I would like to propose a fourth explanation for the waning fortunes of shamanism in Chinese modernity. Perhaps what shamanism and spirit possession threaten in Chinese modernity is the bending of the human body by industrialized state disciplinary modes of power. In addition, spirit possession, whether experienced by the medium or the onlooker, also erodes the modern body's receptivity to mentalistic, ideological, and discursive modes of persuasion. Furthermore, since women predominate in Wenzhou as shamans today, we need to pay attention to the gendering of power relations in modern China.

The Chinese Communist Party has always relied on what it calls "ideology" (*yishi xingtai* 意識形態), "thought reform" (*sixiang gaizao* 思想改造), and "propaganda" (*xuanchuan* 宣傳), which all work primarily on the mind to educate and persuade the people through discursive means. Here, modern China is following in the footsteps of the Western Enlightenment and Cartesian thought, which places a high premium on the ability of the mind, the rational intellect, and discursive modes of power to move whole populations to social action and self-transformation. During the Cultural Revolution, despite the corporeal punishments of beatings and tortures, which suggest the persistence of what Michel Foucault (1979) called an older "sovereign power" of imperial times, the operations of a modern mentalistic and discursive power could also be found in such methods of subjectivization as public oral confessions, written self-examinations, "struggling against the private and criticizing the revisionist" (*dousi pixiu* 斗私批修) rituals, class struggle sessions, wall poster campaigns, newspaper editorials, Red Diaries, endless political study meetings, and the recitation of Mao's Little Red Book. Gone was the overriding importance of ritual in pre-modern Chinese life, whether Confucian life-cycle rituals, community rituals, or Daoist or Buddhist rituals, which inculcated social norms and ethics directly into bodily habitus and predispositions. In the post-Mao period, these mentalistic and discursive approaches continue without the corporeal violence of before, as seen in the continued emphasis on indoctrination through the mass media and media censorship. In contrast, spirit possession, like *qigong* and Buddhist or Daoist rituals, relies on the body to inculcate divine messages from other worlds. At the same time, practitioners also engage in healing techniques that work on the bodies of their patients.

Spirit possession also produces its own divine authority of the body. A shaking body is the visible sign of the presence of powerful spiritual forces that have descended to earth. As the official fear of religious public gatherings suggests, the body in these contexts can be quite contagious. In the *qigong* craze, mass gatherings of eager followers felt the mysterious movements of *qi* in their

bodies, and some were so overcome by the power of *qi* that they rolled on the ground (Palmer 2007). Although we seldom hear of spirit possession rallying such mass frenzy in China, it can be regarded as an “ur-” (*yuanshi* 原始) or “original” state of the ecstatic contagion of the body. Although spirit possession no longer holds sway among many Wenzhou urbanites, in rural contexts it persists as a threat to what Michel Foucault (1979) has called the modern “disciplinary regimes of the body.”

In a country that is hell-bent on catching up with the industrial West in manufacturing, infrastructure-building, and commercialization, one can easily understand why the image of the spirit medium’s body shaking and trembling with the force of a deity that has taken hold of it, speaking in tongues and uttering divine words from afar, would be disturbing and unappealing. For over three decades during the Maoist era, the ascendancy of the Marxist-Leninist discourse of “labor,” “workers,” and “proletarians” had made it quite clear what the primary responsibilities of the body were to be in modernity. According to the socialist hero Lei Feng, bodies were to serve as “common screws” (*luosiding* 螺絲釘) of the great machinery of industrialization and state-building, and as obedient foot soldiers of the Communist Revolution. Now that Chinese industry has been married to global capitalism, the body is not only bent to the regular motions of the machine, but to the profit-driven minute disciplinary mechanisms of efficiency, piece rates, and the maximization calculus, through counting time and keeping up with the clock. Bodies must now be engaged in labor that will benefit the GDP of the nation-state, and bodies should *not* be the servants of gods.

Occasionally, bodies have rebelled against industrial discipline, as in the garment factories outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia, set up by Taiwanese, Korean, Chinese, Hong Kong, and Singaporean companies that comprise a \$5-billion-a-year business (Wallace 2014). Here young rural peasant women workers have fallen victim to local vengeful spirits called *neak ta*, whose lands have been disturbed by the factory invasions. These spirits possess some women and bark out orders to others, causing mass fainting spells among the overworked female laborers and widespread work stoppages. More so than the attempts to form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining, the mass fainting and work stoppages have been very effective at raising the workers’ wages and gaining better work schedules. Some factory managers have even placated the *neak ta* with animal sacrifices.

These days, when *neak ta* appear on the factory floor—inducing mass faintings among workers and shouting commands at managers—they are helping the cause of Cambodia’s largely young, female and rural factory workforce by registering a kind of bodily objection to the harsh daily

regimen of industrial capitalism: few days off; a hard bed in a wooden barracks; meager meals of rice and a mystery curry, hastily scarfed down between shifts. These voices from beyond are speaking up for collective bargaining in the here and now, expressing grievances much like the workers' own: a feeling that they are being exploited by forces beyond their control, that the terms of factory labor somehow violate an older, fairer moral economy.

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The shaking bodies of spirit mediums in trance, showing the whites of their eyes or facial grimaces, or foaming at the mouth, are not bodies in accord with a modern disciplinary culture that has penetrated around the globe. Thus, I propose that a possible fourth reason why spirit possession is denigrated today is that it violates modernity's plan for the orderly industrial and state-disciplined body.

In the *Discourses of States*, we learned that in ancient China there were both male and female shamans, seemingly in about equal numbers. Donald Sutton observes that during the Tang Dynasty, spirit mediums were more often women than men, while later during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, male spirit mediums predominated. He ventures to suggest that this may be due to the higher social position of women during the Tang, and the decline of women's social status in late imperial times (Sutton 2000:7n24). The predominance of women shamans across mainland China today (Weller 1999:95–96) means that we must build a gender dimension into our emphasis on the body in modernity. We must explore the question of how and why, between late imperial times and contemporary China, a reversal occurred from a situation where male shamans predominated, to one where female shamans often outnumber male shamans today. Around the modern world, it is common to find that women outnumber men in spirit possession (Boddy 1994:415–418), prompting a few Western scholars to even argue that women are prone to trance and possession due to their relative deficiency of calcium (Kehoe and Giletii 1981; Raybeck, Shoob, and Grauberger 1989)! Certainly, one way to approach this gender discrepancy is to follow I. M. Lewis (2003) and his many examples of female spirit possession as a form of protest theater and opposition to power staged by the weaker sex in male-dominant societies. However, his analysis is too generalized and does not address the issue of modernity and gender transformation.

Let me here propose an explanation for the predominance of female shamans in Wenzhou and mainland China today, by way of the counterexamples in places like Taiwan, Fujian, and Chinese ethnic enclaves in Malaysia. Throughout modern Taiwan (Boretz 2011) and among Chinese Malaysians,

“Hokkien Chinese spirit mediums ... are overwhelmingly male” (DeBernardi 2006:173). We also see the dominance of male shamans in the examples of public spirit possession in Fujian studied by Kenneth Dean and Zhen Zhengman (2010). In Taiwan and Malaysia, there is a much stronger continuity between contemporary shamanic culture and late imperial times, due to the fact that modern authorities, whether the Guomintang state, British colonialists, or the Malaysian government, have been more relaxed about allowing shamanistic performances in public spaces. That is why these areas have continued the late imperial predominance of male shamans over female ones. Wenzhou, however, like the rest of mainland China, experienced a period of intense state suppression of religiosity throughout the Maoist era.

Significantly, according to Kang Xiaofei (2014), during the Yan'an period in the 1940s the Communists explicitly targeted male shamans (and ignored female ones) in their propaganda campaign to expose the fraudulence and the harm to medical health perpetrated by spirit mediums. In my reading of Kang's work, there is a structural parallelism in the gendered discourse of different Communist propaganda campaigns around spirit possession, Guomintang and landlord class exploitation, and Japanese imperialism. Male shamans were set up in a parallel position to other evildoers such as landlords, the Guomintang, and Japanese invaders. Although shamans were not cast as a heinous enemy like the other evildoers, they were similarly portrayed as aggressive male figures doing harm to feminized victims. The victims of male shamans, Yan'an's superstitious rural community, were placed in a structurally parallel position with the symbolic female body of the Chinese nation, so that both were female victims who needed the Communist Party to save them. In my view, the targeting of male shamans in Yan'an had to do with two factors: (1) the Party's perception that male religious authority was more significant than female authority, and a bigger challenge to their efforts to establish a new power order; and (2) the Party's desire to adhere to the powerful gendered discursive structure of male evildoers and aggressors versus the feminized victim that needed to be saved. Here, I am not arguing that the targeting of male shamans back in the Yan'an period directly explains the relative paucity of male shamans in mainland China today, but suggesting that female religious authority is less threatening to the new power order.

On the other hand, Fujian (and maybe Guangdong) were also part of Maoist China, but they seem to have more male spirit mediums today. This is perhaps due to these areas now receiving direct infusions of traditional shamanic culture from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, where historically they had many emigration connections. By contrast, historically, Wenzhou has had less emigration, and therefore receives many fewer infusions of overseas emigré

culture today. Emigrants from Wenzhou who departed during the Reform era left too recently to have amassed much wealth to plow back into reviving popular religion back home. Furthermore, these recent Wenzhounese emigrants carried too much antisuperstition logic inherited from the Maoist era, and they dispersed mainly to Europe, North America, Australia, or Africa, places where the conditions for practicing Chinese shamanic culture are not ideal.

Finally, in those inland areas of mainland China that have not seen the renewal of massive ties with emigré culture, and have undergone the Maoist secularization of life, shamanic culture has experienced severe marginalization and a decline in social status to a much greater degree than during late imperial times. Under these conditions men, who now have many more social, political, and economic opportunities than women, and who tend to be better educated and more proactive in seizing these opportunities, would likely eschew the occupation of spirit medium in favor of more prestigious pursuits in mainstream society. In contemporary China, masculinity has been radically redefined according to the ideal of success in business or politics, and many men would prefer to avoid emasculating themselves by keeping their distance from a traditional religiosity that is now low in status and gendered female. Thus, the tendency is for women in mainland China to take up the marginalized professions of traditional shamanism.<sup>6</sup>

In the modern world, there has emerged a pattern whereby men's bodies have been more firmly drafted and inserted into the public and rationalized world of work and the disciplinary strictures of modern life. In contrast, rural women's bodies have been relatively sheltered from the rationalized and disciplinary public world and are still linked more firmly to the domestic sphere, where they are often seen as the guardians of an inner sanctum where the core values of traditional culture are preserved (Chatterjee 1993; Gole 1996). Thus, women's bodies in rural China are perhaps more sensitive to the callings and rhythms of traditional culture and more attuned and responsive to the voices of spirits and ancestors. Since women are more likely to go in person to consult

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6 In contrast, Manduhai Buyandelger found that among the Buryat of Mongolia, during the violent prohibitions on shamanism in the Soviet era, shamanism was mainly practiced by women. In the post-Soviet era of capitalist economy, men now greatly outnumber women shamans, because women find it difficult to juggle wifely and motherly duties along with exhausting shamanic performances. Due to patriarchal strictures against single women and unescorted travel by women, female shamans find it hard to compete for prestige and customers with male shamans (Buyandelger 2013:171, 192–199). Since there are not as many other economic opportunities for men in Mongolia as in Wenzhou, many Buryat men take up shamanism as a lucrative occupation.

spirit mediums, their bodies may also be more responsive to shamanic healing techniques than men's bodies. So we must add a gender dimension to our fourth explanation for the lower status of spirit possession in Chinese modernity and examine how women's bodies are more sheltered from modern discipline, or more often marginalized from modern institutions, and therefore more immune or resistant to the disciplinary and ideological ravages of modernity. This may explain why more women than men become spirit mediums in contemporary China. At the same time, the state feels less paranoid about female shamans, for in a patriarchal society it is more difficult for a female shaman to attain a charismatic authority great enough to ring alarm bells in the halls of power.

### Conclusion

I have examined four possible explanations for the marginalization of spirit possession in modern China, each of which can explain some aspects but not others. The first two explanations are formulated within the context of China and treat the animosity toward shamanism only in terms of Chinese circumstances. The first one accuses spirit mediums of preying on gullible people. However, most people in Wenzhou are not so gullible, and often seek out spirit mediums after failing to be cured by traditional Chinese medicine or modern biomedicine. There are recurring themes of state power in late imperial and modern China, and one can posit a continuity rather than a rupture in the history of state paranoia. However, the second explanation does not allow for talking about the real transformations of modernity that have occurred. There are certainly deep structures of the past that are still operating in the present; however, they are also overlaid by or reinterpreted by new structures created in our modern globalized world. The third explanation is able to position China in a globalized world, sharing similar patterns of rationalization. However, the rationalization thesis is not able to explain how and why, after over a hundred years of intense state-led rationalization efforts, and the recent post-Mao commercialization of China, these processes have not managed to wipe out shamanism, which is in fact making a comeback. The rationalization thesis also cannot address the crucial element of spirit possession: the centrality of the body as a vessel of divinity or medium of communication between human and divine worlds.

I suggest that the fourth explanation is the most neglected one, and the one most in need of further scholarly investigation. There is a clash between the unfettered, expressive, and unpredictable spokesperson for the gods, and



the disciplined industrial or clerical laborer. The prevalence of female shamans can be seen to be linked to places that have experienced a dramatic restriction and marginalization of shamanic practice, at the same time that new economic opportunities have emerged that lure men away from traditional shamanistic pursuits. Much more than late imperial Neo-Confucian discourse, modernity has lowered the status of mediums, resulting in the feminization of shamanism in Wenzhou and elsewhere in China. While shamanism in Taiwan and Malaysia has stronger bonds with late imperial male-dominated Chinese shamanism, the kind that is practiced in Wenzhou today is predominantly female, a departure from the past. Women's bodies, which are still often in or near the domestic sphere, are relatively more sheltered than men's bodies from industrial or political disciplinary mechanisms in workplaces, and therefore more sensitive and receptive to the voices and movements of the gods and ancestors. Since male shamans are still embedded in the patriarchal culture of traditional shamanism, female shamans today can be seen as a front line of transgression against both old patriarchal and modern disciplinary mechanisms.

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