Ritual futures: Spirit mediumship as chronotopic labor

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Abstract
This essay reflects on the still-present difficulty in approaching contemporary rural mediumship as coeval with their urban psychotherapeutic counterparts. Drawing on ethnographic work in rural Henan province in central China, I describe how both rurality and spirit mediumship have been rendered anachronistic through national imaginaries, anti-superstition campaigns, and psychiatric discourses. The essay centers on the case of a spirit medium located in the psychiatric unit, and the social evolutionary and developmentalist temporalities condensed in her cultural psychiatric diagnosis. I then turn to the medium's ritual work and cosmological account, which invert mediumship's position in space and time. The essay approaches mediumship's rituals as a form of chronotopic labor, which reworks the spatio-temporal coordinates they inherit from within. It closes by bringing together the conundrums of rural mediumship and those of urban psychotherapeutic and diasporic worlds, to consider psychic landscapes of dislocation, and other formulations of futures to come.

KEYWORDS
China, chronotope, cultural psychiatry, mediumship, ritual, temporality
As other contributors to this forum have noted, this set of papers emerged from a series of workshops on mental health among historians and anthropologists working throughout East Asia, including conversations on how we might imagine futures of mental health. The seed for this essay was sown when I noticed a slight difficulty during these discussions, conceptually and linguistically, to situate my ethnographic work on spirit mediumship in rural China as a thing of the present, not to mention the future. In spite of a shared intellectual familiarity with critiques of the culture concept and the denials of coevalness it often entails (Fabian, 1983), we at times slipped into the language of pastness when referring to contemporary mediumship—"those older practices," "those past practices"; in other moments, questions were raised with regard to the relevance of my work for the present, with the status of present-ness implicitly held by the worlds of urban psychotherapies.

It could be said, of course, that the tendency to speak of mediumship with an eye toward the past has to do with its inheritance of ritual repertoires older than the languages of psychiatry and psychology inherited by psychotherapies today. But I think more is at stake in the ongoing difficulty of keeping both rurality and mediumship from slipping into the past, even if we “know” otherwise. For several years now, I have been part of a collaborative project on cultural imaginations of rurality, exploring literary, aesthetic, and political renderings that produce distinct chronotopes of city and country, which have colluded with those of metropole and colony in global productions of surplus value (Bakhtin, 1982; Bosma & Valdés Olmos, 2020; Peeren, 2019; Stuit, 2020; Williams, 1975). Even when certain misrecognitions seem apparent, they remain stubborn forces to contend with, and it takes work to conjure otherwise. This work—this chronotopic labor of conjuring otherwise—I suggest, is precisely what is involved in the mediumship practices I encountered in Hexian, a rural county in Henan province where I conducted fieldwork in 2012–2013 and briefly in 2018. Whereas national imaginaries positioned Henan as a space of rural backwardness and abjection, and cultural psychiatry diagnosed spirit possession as mental disturbance and outmoded superstition, mediumistic rituals at once gestured toward and produced a world-to-come from a position of internal exile, carrying a futuristic quality that reworked its own spatio-temporal coordinates.

1 | MATTERS OUT OF TIME

Once the heart of the cosmopolitical universe and home to multiple dynastic capitals, wherein agricultural settlement signaled the civilizational as posited against the barbaric, today, the landlocked position and heavily agricultural status of Henan province has been recast as left behind following the post-Mao market reforms of the late 1970s. In an era of rural–urban labor migration that first concentrated capital investment in major coastal cities, Henan province has come to epitomize not only the sense of backwardness and poverty that modern China has aspired to exit, but also came to be caricaturized as a land of charlatans and thieves.

This national imaginary of Henan comes after years as a non-man’s-land in the 1940s between Japanese, Nationalist, and Communist fronts, mass famines of the 1940s and of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, and in the 1990s, an human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) scandal when villagers contracted the virus after selling their blood plasma for cash. In the 1990s and early 2000s, factories in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Beijing were known for explicit policies and at times signage at the factory entrance: “Henanese may not enter.” Stepping back further, this all comes after encounters with Western imperialism, marked by the Opium Wars and unequal treaties, after which the largely rural populace of China would itself become a sign of national weakness in the failure to “catch up” with a modern, weaponized world. Collecting these layers of history, Henan province has been described by Ma (2002) as “the China of China”—a psychogeographic site through which those in China externalize and impute what they imagine to be despicable about China itself, and about their own unbearable Chinese characteristics. Before my fieldwork, I was forewarned by urban friends and colleagues of the intellectual classes in China: Henan, they would say in hushed tones, is a bad place, surely not the site of “culture” in any sense that an a scholar would seek out.

In parallel, the practice of mediumship as a mode of healing came under attack across the 20th century, starting with late 19th century edicts to repurpose temples and turn them into modern schools, through anti-
superstition campaigns of the Nationalist party, culminating in more thorough Communist-era campaigns that destroyed religious infrastructure and banned all religious practice by the 1960–1970s during the Cultural Revolution. While some forms of religion have returned since the market reform and liberalization era through official recognition by the state, such “popular” practices as mediumship have returned through a gray zone, formally illegal due to their categorization as superstition, yet not so systematically persecuted as it was in the Maoist years (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011). Paired with the sense of Henan as a “bad” place in which there was nothing to see, so to speak, urban friends and colleagues who did not frequent rural regions would tell me that mediumship no longer existed in today’s China, at least among Han communities. They would suggest that I visit parts of Yunnan province instead, where state-designated ethnic minorities may “still” hold on to these practices—an ethno-national chronotopic crisscrossing with that of a perceived outmoded magico-religious mentality. My inquiry, in other words, was out of time and out of place. With the symbolic hollowing of the rural, of Henan province, and of mediumship practices in mind, I turn to Hexian, and enter the world of mediumship, in this case from within the clinic.

2 | DIAGNOSTIC CONDENSATION

The hospital and main temple in Hexian are situated across from one another. Dedicated to Fuxi, colloquially known as the deity (“grandfather”) of human ancestry, the temple has been built and rebuilt, from one dynasty to the next, before and since it came into ritual importance in the Ming Dynasty. In the early 1950s, the County People’s Hospital was constructed across from the temple, amid the “Patriotic Hygiene Campaign” initiated by the Maoist administration. In the aftermath of imperial encounters and in the name of nation-building, these mass public campaigns moved languages of health away from Chinese cosmology and toward those of bodily hygiene and racial fitness (Rogaski, 2004).

When we met, the spirit medium and patient I call Xu Liying was in her mid-60s. She was diagnosed with what have been termed culture-bound syndromes in the past, more recently reformulated in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5th Edition (DSM-5) in terms of cultural concepts of distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the back-translation from the Chinese term, the psychiatrist at the hospital used: Psychiatric Disorder Intimately Related to Culture. While most patients who spoke of possession as part of their experience received diagnoses of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or acute psychosis, Xu was exceptional, in some sense, on account of her lucidity. Beyond what her family and the psychiatrists saw as her excessive engagement with the spirit world, and specifically worries over her recent rituals at a major traffic intersection, she showed few other signs warranting diagnostic attention.

Meanwhile, the diagnosis itself carried a medley of temporal endorsements. In the textbook (Shen, 1982) used for reference at the ward, “psychiatric disorder intimately related to culture” was elaborated through various subtypes, from “Asiatic psychosis” (English in the original) to a section on “subcultural hysterical possession state.” Within the description of the latter in the textbook: “As Marx indicated, religion is a type of social concept... yet is a type of illusory reflection, originating from the narrow and ignorant concepts of the age of barbarism.” Faith in deities, the text went on to describe, constitutes “folk belief” (noted in both English and in Chinese). Such a tendency toward “superstition” was then explained in terms of a lack of scientific thinking among the uneducated “lower strata,” and China’s high proportion of rural residents, along with high rates of rural illiteracy. Rurality and class then merge with notions of primitivity, routed through an anthropological turn: “According to the famous anthropologist Malinowski... ‘If it were not for witchcraft, primitive people would not overcome practical difficulties and would not progress to a more advanced culture.’ Thus, witchcraft was very common in primitive society.”

Condensed in Xu Liying’s diagnosis were multiple productions of modern progressive time-space, in which spirit possession, tethered to tainted notions of culture, folk belief, superstition, and rurality, together tumbled into the social evolutionary past of primitivity. Not unlike how qigong practice found itself at the crossing of psychiatry and state intervention (Chen, 2003), mediumship occupies a fraught position between medical and legal terms. Beyond the world of psychiatric nosology, such spatio-temporal denunciations have also been drawn and reinforced through decades of
anti-superstition literature and campaigns (Nedostep, 2010). Yet, spirit mediums like Xu Lijing reverse the diagnosis, pointing instead to a time out of joint in cosmpolitical terms.

3 | COSMIC DOUBLING

"Why psychiatric disorders?" Xu Lijing mused. When I arrived at the ward that day, she was flicking sunflower seeds from an unfinished pile to a finished one on her hospital bed, naming harmful ghosts and demonic spirits under her breath, annihilating them one by one. She took a pause from her ritual duties to speak with me. "For instance, you or I become mentally ill; we all become mentally ill. What’s the aim? Before Old Mao died, he said, 'In the future, a million madmen will storm the palace—sweep out all cow ghosts and idiotic gods!'” Reformulating the lines from two Maoist sayings, including one that inaugurated the Cultural Revolution, for Xu Lijing, the "million madmen" that would "storm the palace" refers to the contemporary moment, in which deluded and sinister spirits—including corrupted, "fake" gods—have come swirling back after Mao’s death. This precarious cosmos, for Xu, is the origin of madness today: 'When Mao died, once Deng Xiaoping took office, how did he put it? 'No matter if it’s a black cat, or if it’s a green cat, as long as it catches mice, it’s a good cat.' Once this phrase was uttered—woosh!—the monstrous appeared in the world.” Giving a slight twist to the reform-era maxim on black and white cats—usually taken to refer to Deng Xiaoping’s commentary on market and planned economies—Xu Lijing paints a scene of chaos, in which humans are possessed by duplicitous spirits masquerading as deities.

Speaking from within Henan, which faces the characterological indictment of charlatanism, Xu Lijing points outward instead toward a cosmic geography saturated with greed. Echoing other mediums I met in Hexian, Xu Lijing describes the present and its symptoms—psychiatric and otherwise—in terms of a moral-political implosion, following the loss of sovereign guarantee. Back when Chairman Mao reigned, she said, ghosts and other malevolent spirits vanished—they didn’t dare appear. Mao, she explained, was the most powerful and virtuous figure, sent from the heavens at the brink of China’s demise. Thus it’s only understandable that after his death, delinquent spirits gradually came out of hiding, as there was no longer a true Chairman present. Xu Lijing was not the only one to relay this cosmological account. For most spirit mediums I encountered in Hexian, the period between Mao’s rise to power and the end of Mao’s life marked a pause for ghostly activity. Mao, they said, was sent down from the heavens in human form—some say by the Buddhist family, in particular Maitreya, the Future Buddha—to spark the Communist Revolution in China. Unaware of his own other-worldly origin during his lifetime, the Chairman was armed with the divine task of destroying temples and icons clearing existing decay to prevent China from full foreign domination. It was only when he returned to the heavens that Mao learned of his true divine identity.

Yet, according to some of the mediums, saviors such as Mao are only sent in moments of crisis, of absolute threat to China’s sovereign existence. In the absence of the Chairman, their spiritual task, then, was an arduous continuation of Mao’s unfinished revolution—what Xu Lijing and others like her called “walking Chairman Mao’s path.” In this account, madness is not simply an individual instance of psychopathology, nor is mediumship a culturalized instantiation of madness. Madness and possession mark a historical symptom of a haunted collectivity, and in some cases, a sign of one’s virtuous position as among those cosmically appointed to bring about a more just future, through the allocation of ritual tasks from one’s tutelary deit(ies). In consonance with various strands of Chinese cosmological thought, heaven’s movements were not considered external to the earthly realm (Hall & Ames, 1995; Hui, 2016), but to be carried out through the embodied work of the mediums. In Xu Lijing’s case, her task was to open up to the copresence of corrupt postreform spirits, allowing them to inhabit her body to annihilate them, barring them from causing further harm in the human realm. Other tasks were more visible than Xu’s quiet gestures. On the temple square, some laid-out ritual spreads with incense and Maoist era posters. Some generated their own depictions of Mao, joined with Buddhist and Daoist imagery and implements. Some wore Maoist era military uniforms and hats, with song, dance, and drumming that at times ended with calls of “long live Chairman Mao.” Through mediumship’s rituals and cosmological accounts, the status of the earthly, purportedly
secular state was cosmically doubled: political acts commonly read as antireligious, from temple destruction to the banning of "old customs," were swallowed into a longer temporality of dynasties and deities, unfurling differently into the future. I return to Xu Liying for another dimension, in which the discernment and annihilation of corrupt spirits was paired with an eschatological vision.

Given the current moment of heavenly and earthly decay, from deities to officials to temple-goers, Xu Liying told me, the human race is headed toward an apocalyptic time of a world aflame. Like other mediums who "walked Chairman Mao's path" in Hexian, the future was understood in terms of a cosmic face-off between imperialism and revolution, between corruption and virtue. As Xu Liying described it, upon the arrival of the end time, those living at the outer edges of the world will be burned and annihilated—the United States and Japan in particular, given their roles in invasion. Those in China, in turn, will stand at the center of the universe, the last to be destroyed. Within China, those Henan province—heart of the Central Plain—will stand at the center of China. Hexian, in the middle of Henan, would then be the center of the very center, the place from which the last humans would remain. And even among this final batch, only the few with virtuous hearts would be kept, to inaugurate the new world to come, a world of equality and fairness. Yet, just when this new world would arrive remained an enigmatic matter. As Blanchot (2003) writes, prophetic speech does not simply speak of events to come, but interrupts and takes away the givens of the present. Meanwhile, in Hexian, those who are medium-to the ongoing transformations of the disjointed cosmos continue their ritual work, between heaven and earth.

4 | PSYCHIC NOWHERES, RITUAL FUTURES

In the scholarship on culture and mental health in China (PRC), Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Sinophone worlds, mediumship has often been described in the language of traditional or folk healing (Kleinman, 1980; Kleinman & Lin, 1981; Tseng & Wu, 1985). In anthropological and cultural psychiatric literatures more broadly, the spirit medium and the shaman have been likened both to the psychiatric healer and the psychiatric patient, and their rituals juxtaposed with psychotherapeutic practices (Benedict, 1934; Devereux, 1956; Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Recently, ritual has also been taken up as a concept for a psychopolitical diagnosis of the present. In The Disappearance of Rituals, philosopher and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han describes a vanishing of symbolic stabilization, in which the possibility of "making oneself at home in the world" through ritual repetition and lingering has been washed out by the intensified rush of time amid neoliberal regimes of compulsive accumulation and consumption (Han, 2020, p. 2). There, ritual is posited as a counterpoint to a commodified, psychologized atomization; ritual thresholds, rhythms, and forms offer a different response to space and time than acceleration, proliferation, and sameness. Yet the conceptual generativity of ritual again runs into an impasse of modern spatio-temporal productions—the forms of collectivity that make the symbolic world of ritual possible is described as tethered to the site of the village as a "closed order" (p. 29). The text thus opens with a disclaimer, explicitly posing itself against the "nostalgia" of a "return to ritual"; ritual is instead evoked as a "background against which our present times may be seen to stand out more clearly" (p. vi).

Here, I add a different take on ritual with relation to psychopolitical conundrums today. Rather than a vanishing world whose momentary conceptual recuperation helps make visible contemporary psychic formations, rituals register and transform time, including such temporal impasses as disappearance-or-nostalgia. Ritual, in this sense, operates in part by moving beyond oppositions between synchrony and diachrony, reversibility and irreversibility (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). For the mediums I met in Hexian, ritual offers techniques for reworking the time-space they inherit, the time-space they were thrown into. It is a mode of spiritual engagement situated not within a sense of simple cultural continuity, but precisely in the devastation and aftermath of culture (Pandolfo, 2018). In and through their very inheritance and thrownness, mediumistic tasks of discerning spirits and contending with ghosts of history transform the chronotopic coordinates of their psychic and symbolic landscape. Drawing on repertoires of possession and exorcism, emperorship, Daoism, Buddhism, and Maoism, those who undertake the cosmic duties allocated by the Chairman and by other deities by no means reside in a closed order, whether by material or symbolic measures. Ritual operates as an open-ended repertoire, an
immanent theory and endless work, ever-innovating in a fragmented world (Puett, 2006). Amid mass rural outmigration to the factories of the world, the mediums take up their chronotopic inheritance at the so-called end of history, throwing it in a messianic gesture that simultaneously transforms time from within—the time it takes for time to come to an end (Agamben, 2002). To approach mediumship beyond waning yet undead tropes of city and country, backward and forward, local and global, I am interested in putting my work in Hexian in conversation with other worlds that share dispersed, fraught histories.

In Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation, comparative literature scholar David Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han (2018) describe what they see as psychic mechanisms of racialized suffering across two Asian American generations. Among second- and 1.5-generation immigrants born in the decades around the Civil Rights era, they write, depressive affects clustered around a racialized sense of Asian American identity, caught between the United States as a national object of desire (the "American dream") and the country of origin as a site of (partially) failed identification. Among a later cohort of first-generation "parachute kids" who arrived in the United States following the post-Cold-War expansion of global capital in East Asia, a sense of diffuse, unidentifiable anxiety emerged, which at times escalated into full-fledged panic attacks. Eng and Han find that this latter generation was not anchored to a Civil Rights language of race and rights, and seemed to exist in a "psychic nowhere," finding a sense of home neither in the United States as a site of immigration nor in their (at times multiple) countries of emigration, among them the PRC. Meanwhile, in the PRC, Zhang (2020) describes an "anxious China," where anxiety has come to indicate the pulse of contemporary life among the urban middle classes, both as an effect of breathless socioeconomic change and intensified market competition and as part of the rise of postsocialist therapeutic governance (see also Yang, 2015).

In a world of ongoing internal and transnational migration, many today seem to inhabit psychic landscapes of spatio-temporal dislocation. Engaging from one site of such mutually implicated geographies, the mediums in Hexian reckon with ghosts from histories near and far—from imperialist encounter to Maoism to the PRC's opening to a globalized economy. Just as the psycho-disciplines have been (and continue to be) innovated, contested, appropriated, and sidestepped by those in China since their importation (Baum, 2018; Chiang, 2015; Huang, 2015; Ma, 2012; Zhang, 2020), mediumship has been (and continues being) transformed as a technique for tarrying with ever-changing times. Beyond practices in time, mediumship also acts on and as time—registering its lack of coevalness according to developmentalist accounts, mediumship doubles down, so to speak, on its untimeliness, producing a critique of time at once internal to and beyond progressivist demarcations. Amid the national and global rise of psychotherapeutic logics and practices, ritual and mediumistic approaches to mind and madness are wont to be a part of the future of mental health in China and beyond, whether or not they have a proverbial seat at the table. To wit, I am by no means advocating for such a seat. Nor am I suggesting that the same ritual forms would speak across disparate communities. Rather, it is to register the other presents and futures already being lived out contemporaneously, as an underside to temporal regimes that appear more dominant at the moment. In this, I consider mediumship's rituals a mode of chronotopic reworking, activating other formulations of time and space, other futures yet unthought.

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ENDNOTES

1This case is also presented in my book A Time of Lost Gods (Ng, 2020), here in adapted form.
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