

Action-Taking Gods: Animal Spirit Shamanism in Liaoning, China

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Abstract

This thesis explores animal spirit shamanism (*chuma xian*) as it occurs in Liaoning, China. Aspects of this form of shamanism to be discussed and analysed include its origins, development, and practices; its relationships with Manchu shamanism and the Han Chinese cult of the fox; its medical implications and its involvement with Buddhism, Daoism, and other local cults. The history and characteristics of the *chuma xian* practice are closely tied to questions of power, and reflect Foucault's theory of power pluralism. This thesis argues that *chuma xian* practice is a particular product of local history and ethnography; it is also a means for expressing and exercising local religious beliefs of the people in Liaoning, especially within under-privileged groups (socio-economic status, etc.) within society.

Précis

Ce mémoire explore le shamanisme de l'esprit animal (*chuma xian*) tel qu'il existe en tant que phénomène dans la province de Liaoning dans la République Populaire de Chine. Les aspects de cette forme de shamanisme qui sont discutés et analysés incluent ses origines, son développement et ses pratiques spécifiques, ses liens avec le shamanisme Manchu et le culte Han du renard ainsi que ses implications avec le Bouddhisme, le Daoisme et d'autres cultes mineurs. L'histoire et les caractéristiques de la pratique *chuma xian* sont étroitement reliés aux questions de pouvoir et reflètent certains aspects de la théorie du pluralisme du pouvoir de Michel Foucault. Cette thèse soutient que la pratique *chuma xian* est le produit de particularités historiques et ethnographiques locales et qu'elle est un moyen, pour la population de Liaoning et spécialement au sein de groupes socio économiquement défavorisés, d'exercer des croyances religieuses.

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I experienced major depression and anxiety stemming from both family issues and visceral experiences of inequality that this research gave me, rendering me unable to work for more than half a year. Over the months, countless people have provided me with myriad kinds of help, and I am indebted to everyone who has supported me in this process. In particular, my Ph.D. supervisor Dr. David Cooper and my friends Beatrice Grenier, Anne-Sophie Pratte, Tao Lei, Jimmie Tom, Dasha Smirnow and Alex Zhang all helped me significantly in maintaining my mental stability despite the great challenges they were facing in their own lives.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Having grown up in Liaoning, I became familiar with the practice of *chuma xian* 出馬仙 (action-taking transcendent beings or gods)¹ as a child. The *chuma xian* are shamans² who treat human illnesses and injuries as well as perform divinations and exorcisms while possessed by animal spirits. In late imperial and Republican China (17th to mid 20th century), the practice was sometimes called (the worship of the) Five Great Families (*wu da jia* 五大家), which incorporates five animal spirits: *hu* 胡 (fox), *huang* 黃 (weasel), *chang* 常 (viper), *bai* 白 (hedgehog), and *hui* 灰 (grey rat). Alternatively, it is referred to as the (worship of the) Four Great Clans (*si da men* 四大門), which was the most common term amongst its practitioners during the Republican period. The Four Great Clans typically include *hu* 胡 (fox), *huang* 黃 (weasel), *bai* 白 (hedgehog), and *hui* 灰 (grey rat), but there are sometimes hyper-local variations from region to region and even from household to household. In actual practice, I have encountered over a dozen kinds of animal spirits referred to as the *xianjia* 仙家 (honorific transcedents) which fit into these categories of Great Clans, including wild beasts, tigers and leopards, to common animals seen in the countryside, such as moles and toads. The distinctions between different animal spirits are insignificant in practice, but they have implications for the formation of this practice, which will be highlighted in Chapter 2.

These animal spirits take possession of mediums (who are referred to as the *dizi* 弟子, or disciples) and subsequently perform healings, ritual assistance, exorcisms, divinations and

¹ The Chinese word *xian* is often translated as “transcendent” in scholarly works that distinguish between different kinds of Chinese deities. “God”, on the other hand, is used to refer to deities in general.

² The *chuma xian* is only one type of shaman or medium, but these terms will mostly be used interchangeably in this thesis as this is the primary kind of medium/shaman to be discussed, unless otherwise stated explicitly.

communicate with ancestors for the medium's community. The mediums consider themselves to be disciples of the *xianjia* rather than merely mediums or mouthpieces. They utilize the word *dizi* as a first-person pronoun when talking to *xianjia* at a *xiantang* 仙堂 (shrine).

This shamanic³ practice of liaising with transcendents does not have a single, common name and in many cases it does not even have a name. It is a concept that is hard to name even for practitioners and followers, and as such it is something difficult to name in an academic setting. I have heard people referring to the mediums as “one who does fortune telling” (*kanshierde* 看事兒的), “one who treats illness” (*kanbingde* 看病的), “one who wears sticks of incense on the head ” (*dingxiangtoude* 頂香頭的), or the transcendent (*xian* 仙). It is important to note that *chuma xian* is only one of the names used for these shamans, and this term is used in many cities across Liaoning Province as well as certain places outside Liaoning.

I have an etymological reason for choosing this term (*chuma xian*) to describe the shamans discussed in this thesis. “The Four Great Clans” refers to a practice by gods who borrow a shaman’s body to perform healings and exorcisms, whereas terminology like “one who treats illness” refers to the mediums themselves, as individual beings. The term *chuma xian* is more encompassing, implying that the shamans and the gods act as an organic whole, whereby in their actions, form and content perform together.

Although I came to know of *chuma xian* practices at an early age, this is not the experience of the majority of urban people. Much of the urban population is actually not aware

³ Heinze (1988) makes the distinction that shamanic practitioners serve their community as healers and it is a life-long commitment, whereas the shamanistic practice is only for self-cultivation and other occasional purposes.

of *chuma xian*. A metaphor drawn from popular literary series *Harry Potter* helps to explain this lack of awareness. In the novel, normal people who know nothing about the existence of magic and wizards are called “Muggles” (Rowling, 1999). The majority of population in the fictional society of *Harry Potter* are Muggles, and nobody reveals the existence of an alternate world of wizardry to these Muggles. However, if someone knows about even one wizard, that person will have access to a large body of knowledge about the entire wizarding world. In the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century, the phrase *fengjian mixin* 封建迷信 (feudal superstition) was used in China to describe not only “heretical” practices surrounding shamanism, but also a lot of practices by official, recognized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam). It was shameful to make mention of visiting mediums or to admit that one was a medium. The situation has changed over recent years, and it was surprising for me to discover during my fieldwork that people are more widely aware of the practice nowadays, and that more educated people now visit shamans.

The *chuma xian*, like other forms of Chinese popular religion, has no uniform name. Its components are often collectively referred to as Chinese popular religion, though it is not one religion. It includes elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, the imperial cults, Daoism and Chinese mythology, but it is identifiable with none of them in a substantial manner. *Chuma xian* is popular in the sense of being established within regions with their own particular local cults. Scholars have been working to comprehend how these religions work together as a whole. The “condominium theory,” the “buffet theory,” the “effective theory,” and so forth attempt to explain the syncretism and the acceptance of different traditions by people, but not the

relationships among and between them.

Stephan Feuchtwang (2001) argues that popular religion is a way in which domestic forces use locality to organize themselves or to fight against a central power. Kang (2006) suggests that there always is a need for local deities, which is why when the Royal Mother of the West and the Goddess of the Azure Cloud were promoted to higher ranks as national goddesses and were worshiped by dominant social groups, people on marginal and local levels came up with alternate goddesses, like Granny Wang and the foxes. The above two kinds of theories (Feuchtwang and Kang) can work together to explain the mobility of the *chuma xian*, which is a practice that lies at the bottom level of social stratification but can be coordinated with all the other religions.

Literary and archival sources are drawn upon in this study, but most of the sources are discourses and observations from the fieldwork I conducted in Northeast China, largely in Liaoning Province, but also in Jilin, Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia. I interviewed ten mediums, ten clients⁴ and five Daoist priests in the course of my fieldwork from November 2012 to May 2013. In addition, since I grew up exposed to such practices, conversations with and observation of people involved with these practices over the years have also provided me with much valuable information.

Shamanism versus Mediumship

⁴ People who seek help from the mediums can be referred to as patients, worshipper, or practitioner, but I consider “client” is the best term to reflect the relationship between the help seekers and the mediums. Therefore the term “patient” is only used in this thesis for situations where a person seeks healing from a medium.

This section will clarify the term *chuma xian*, used to discuss this practice throughout this thesis with particular attention to considering whether this practice constitutes shamanism or mediumship. However, this discussion will go beyond merely the term and etymology. It will incorporate a comparison between *chuma xian* and Northeast Asian shamanism as well as between *chuma xian* and Southeast Chinese and Southeast Asian mediumship, as these are major indicators for determining which term best defines the *chuma xian* practice and where to situate it in relation to world shamanism.

The Definitions

The terms “shamanism” and “mediumship” have been separately representative of different practices since the work of Mircea Eliade. Eliade’s *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964) was the first comprehensive survey of shamanism around the world that did not degrade the practice and treat it as an “uncivilized” object of scorn. Beyond his comprehensive survey, Eliade aims to situate shamanism within the history of religion. Shamanism appears to be at the basis of all religious thought in different time periods and locations. It is present not only in so-called “primitive” communities such as the indigenous peoples of Siberia, Australia, Polynesia and North and South America; but also in “civilized” and more globally-established religions.

Eliade defines Shamanism as a religious practice characterized by major non-conscious ecstatic states reached by the Shaman. During this state, “the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the

underworld”(Eliade, 1964, p.5) According to Eliade, this kind of “trance” or “ecstasy,” is key to defining a shaman. It separates the shaman's role from that of “magician” “medicine man” and “sorcerer”, and leaves spirit possession to another separate practice.

A similar distinction [between Shaman and other ecstatic healers or magicians] is also necessary to define the shaman’s relation to ‘spirits.’ All through the primitive and modern worlds we find individuals who profess to maintain relations with ‘spirits,’ whether they are ‘possessed’ by them or control them” (p.5).

This kind of possession along with other “primitive” religious practices are later ruled out as forms of shamanism by Eliade and his Siberian-rooted shamanism theory.

This definition raises debate about whether possession by spirits can be counted as shamanic practice, which is significant in defining *chuma xian*. There are two main reasons why Eliade’s definition of shamanism does not apply to the practice of *chuma xian*. Firstly, there are two kinds of spirit possession related to the *chuma xian* practice and the nature of these is quite distinct. One kind of spirit possession, as described by scholar I.M. Lewis in his classic *Ecstatic Religion: an Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (1971), is a kind of profession whereby the mediums perform healing, exorcism and other services to people through being possessed by gods. The other kind of possession is where spirits possess people in a way that requires an exorcism. These two kinds of spirit possession, although similar in the way that the possession operates, are quite different in nature and overall function. The first, “professional” form of spirit possession functions the same way as the shamanism defined by Eliade, although the technique is different. Also, as we will discuss later, in the *chuma xian*

practice, mediums do have significant control over the gods/spirits.

The second kind of spirit possession, on the other hand, can be divided into two sub-categories within its practice in Chinese mediumship in Southeast China and Southeast Asia, as well as the *chuma xian* practice. The first category is possession by evil spirits, the undeserving dead and ancestors, and the second category being possession by offended deities. Jean DeBernardi states in *The Way That Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang* that the causes of these two types of contact with a spirit are provoking offence (*fande* 犯的) and collision with a spirit (*chongde* 冲的) (Debernardi, 2006, p.106). The solution for offending a deity or spirit is to make an offering, whereas the solution for collision with a spirit is an exorcism.

The following table summarizes the techniques and functions of the above-mentioned practices.

	Techniques	Functions
Eliade's Shamanism	Trance	Healing, etc.
Mediumship	Possession	Healing, etc.
Collision	Possession	Harming (revenge, request, etc.)
Offence	Possession	Harming (punishing)

Table 1

As we can see from the table, Eliade's version of shamanism has the same function as

mediums who are possessed by gods and perform healing along with other kinds of services. However, mediumship shares the same aspects of possession through collision and offence although with quite different functions. Thus, there are options to categorize the practices either according to their functions or according to their techniques. Eliade's approach categorizes shamanic and shamanistic practices by their techniques, which is problematic since practices with the same techniques can have quite different functions.

Another reason that Eliade's approach is problematic is that some practices apply different techniques—*chuma xian* is one example of such a practice. In the *chuma xian* practice, the mediums whose soul ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld, and the mediums who are possessed by control spirits are of the same vocation, simply with different specialties. Thus, whether spirit possession healers should be categorized as shamans and the extent to which they are similar to or differ from the trance shamans is a question to be addressed.

In *chuma xian* practice, communicating with ancestors through ecstatic trance is called *guoyin* 過陰 (literally “passing to the underworld”). According to mediums I interviewed, in modern times there are fewer mediums who possess this specialty and fewer people in need of this service. Nevertheless, this technique forms part of the repertoire of both *chuma xian* and related larger communal rites referred to as the Great Dancing Gods. There are two main functions of the *chuma xian*'s trance: healing and communicating with ancestors. The routine of communication with ancestors is sometimes bonded with rituals of exorcism because there are various approaches for ancestors to get in touch with living descendents. Here, exorcism is required if the contact is harmful to the living. Such an example demonstrates that it is

questionable to wholly separate trance and spirit possessions and to label them individually as “shamanism” and “mediumship”, because the practices overlap and interact with each other, and are likely derived from the same root.

Lewis redefines shamanism after Eliade by including spirit possession as part of its practice. He revisits some of Eliade’s primary sources, demonstrating that Eliade’s definition of Shamanism is regional rather than global. Eliade’s version of the “mythical flight” (the shaman’s trance) to the upper- and under- worlds is symbolized by the climbing of cosmological trees and mountains, which is a regional phenomenon specific to Siberia. There are certainly some characteristics of Siberian shamanic practice that are similar to or the same as shamanic practices in other parts of the world. However, Eliade generally uses traits unique to Siberian shamanism to define the practice and tends to attribute similar practices to being of Siberian origin.

Eliade’s elaborate narrative indicates that some characteristics of his definition of shamanism are very much identical to the *chuma xian*. For instance, a potential shaman first receives a sign of their shamanic future by becoming sick and through dreams. Furthermore, in most cases, the shaman does not make the decision to become a shaman: rather, they are chosen. Potential shamans who receive or experience revelations then become apprentices of a skilled shaman and start to learn the techniques of the practice. After learning the repertoire of shamanic practice, the apprentice undergoes a ceremony of shamanic initiation and becomes formally recognized as a shaman. The Northern and Central Asian shamans — Eliade’s primary focus — are not priests, and do not participate in ceremonies such as birth, marriage and death, unless something unusual occurs (p.181). Magical healing is the principal function of the shaman in

Central and North Asia (p.215). This is the case for most shamans around the world, and Eliade attempts to demonstrate that this stems from a North and Central Asian influence. According to Eliade, magical healing is achieved by traveling up to heaven and down to the underworld, and bringing or taking souls to the appropriate places. For example, if someone is sick because his/her soul has been misplaced in the underworld, the shaman will descend to the underworld and take the soul back, if possible.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships and overlaps of the characteristics shared between Siberian shamanic practice, the *chuma xian*, and shamanism in other parts of the world. Evidently, these practices share commonalities while having their unique traits. Shamanism should be a broader term than one that only defines one kind of practice amongst a number of similar ones. The reason why Eliade defines shamanism based on the Siberian tradition is because he is proposing a Siberia-derived model for the evolution of shamanism. However, he negates the importance of chronology, which is an unreasonable oversight when discussing evolution. Furthermore, in discussing the etymology of the term shaman, he does not make clear whether the diffusion of the term among different regions or ethnic groups also involved the introduction of new practices. For example, when Eliade states that “the majority of the names of spirits among the Tungus are borrowed from the Mongols and the Manchu” (496-497), did the spirits exist under other names before these names were borrowed, or does this process of name borrowing signify an increasing number of new spirits? This is important because if every cultural entity discussed had engaged in shamanic practice before the term itself came into existence, the definition of "shaman" would be rather artificial, and less standard and similar

across cultures than Eliade suggests.

When Eliade considers shamanism in other parts of the world, including North and South America, Southeast Asia and Oceania, Indo-Europe, and the Far East (Chapter Nine to Twelve), he implies that the origins of some shamanic practices are impossible to trace and thus attributes them to trans-regional transmission. This is a problematic and essentialist view because while interactions, both trans-regional and local, are responsible for the development and spread of religious practices, this diffusionist view neglects common human-nature relationships all over the world.

It is difficult to find a place for *chuma xian* within Eliade's framework. Although applying comparative approaches, he does not compare his narrowed down conception of shamanism with the practices ("magician" "medicine man" "sorcerer" and so on) which are inherently ruled out by his narrow definition. Interestingly in Northeast China, *chuma xian* and the Great Dancing Gods are both characterized in ways similar to the version of shamanism that Eliade defines, though they feature different aspects as well. *Chuma xian* shares the initiation process (occurring through sicknesses and dreams, with similar learning techniques and initiatory ceremonies) with Eliade, and the Great Dancing Gods have symbolic costumes and musical instruments similar to those that Eliade describes. An example in Chapter 3 will show that the *chuma xian* and Great Dancing Gods were perceived as one practice in the Republican Period (at least by some people), though they are now separated. However, if the two practices were conjoined again, we could see that these practices together match up with Eliade's account of shamanism.

The above discussion about the definitions of shamanism serves to clarify the terms of shamanism and mediumship, and to highlight that the *chuma xian* practice includes both modes. However, it appears that "shamanism" is a term which should be used less exclusively, and the *chuma xian* practice can be considered to fit into the categories of both shamanism and mediumship.

The Comparisons

A further reason for establishing the appropriate term for *chuma xian* is that the practice needs to be situated in the broader picture of shamanism or mediumship. In the existing literature about shamanism and/or mediumship that closely relate to *chuma xian*, there are two main communities: those who study Northeast Asian shamanism and those who study Southeast China and Southeast Asian mediumship. The two types of practices are not vastly different, and the main reason that those practices are referred to differently is likely the individual preferences of the two separate academic communities. Northeast Asian (Korean, Mongolian and Manchu) shamanic practices, including both the use of trances and healing through spirit possession, have been referred to as shamanism. Healers from these traditions, again including both trance shamans and spirit mediums, are referred to as shamans. On the other hand, healers in Southeast China and Southeast Asia — both those entering trances and those dealing with possession, — are referred to as mediums, with their practices being deemed mediumship. Thus, in choosing a term for the *chuma xian* practice, the connection of this practice within a particular community is inherently implied. Therefore this section will conduct a brief comparison to determine to which

community *chuma xian* belongs.

The *chuma xian* practice shares common characteristics with both Northeast Asian shamanism and Southeastern mediumship. However, certain aspects of its practices place it closer to Northeast Asian modes of shamanism: geographical location, the gender of the mediums/shamans, the pantheon and other characteristics in its practice.

Chuma xian practice can be found in Northeast China as well as North China (*huabei* 华北) around the Beijing area. These regions are geographically far closer to Mongolia and Korea than the Southeast. Chapter 2 will further demonstrate the close ties in these regions to Manchu culture through the Han Chinese immigration to Liaodong in the late Qing dynasty (1644-1911). In comparison, Southeast China and Southeast Asia (mainly Singapore and Malaysia) are also linked by a special history of immigration.

A further key link with Northeast Asian shamanism is that the *chuma xian* are almost exclusively women, which is also the case for Manchu shamanism, Korean shamanism, and Mongolian shamanism. On the contrary, Southeast Chinese and Southeast Asian mediums are almost exclusively men. The Northeastern shamans tend to provide services by themselves, whereas the shamans in Southeast China sometimes collaborate with Daoist priests. Furthermore, Southeast Chinese mediumship can be acquired through training, yet the Northeastern shamans are normally chosen by the gods.

With regards to the pantheon, the gods who take possession of mediums are normally animal spirits or spirit of some other natural source for both the *chuma xian* and other Northeast Asian shamanic practitioners. The *chuma xian* have animal spirits, such as a fox and a snake as

their gods. Again, in contrast, Southeast Chinese and Chinese Malay mediums are more commonly possessed by Buddhist or Daoist deities, or other deities from Chinese mythology or folklore such as the Kitchen God⁵ or the Third Prince⁶. Another noteworthy difference between the Northeastern shamans (including the *chuma xian*) and their Southeastern counterparts is that for the former, multiple gods can normally possess an individual medium. As such, they have an entire pantheon on their shrine, whereas for the latter, only one god typically possesses each medium.

Many other subtle details in these practices further separate the *chuma xian* from other Chinese styles of mediumship and link it to Manchu, Korean and Mongolian practices, including (but not exclusively) the lifestyle, daily work, and linguistic style of the shamans.

However, the above comparisons and distinctions only indicate which regional practice *chuma xian* is closer to in rough and general terms, because there are variations within each region, too. For example, DeBernardi (2006, Part 2, “Spirit Medium”) shows that in Malaysia, even mediums with minimal education teach others the moral values of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Islam and other religions. Patron gods sometimes give lectures on morality and well-being through their respective mediums. This phenomenon is in contrast with Kristofer Schipper’s (1993) observation in Fujian, Southeast China, that from the point of view of his Daoist priests, spirit mediums are disciples or function like puppets for gods. Part of Davis’s (2001) research on medieval Chinese mediumship also coincides with Schipper’s fieldwork in Southeast China. Yet my experience with northern Chinese mediums is similar to that of

⁵ The Kitchen God, named Zao Jun, is a Chinese domestic god that protect the hearth and family.

⁶ Third Prince, named Nezha, is a diety in Chinese mythology, Daoism and Buddhism.

DeBernardi.

These contrasting views strengthen the idea that similar practices succumbed to traits within locally dominant cultures, because the “puppet” mediums are located in places where Daoism is dominant, whereas independent mediums exist more in locales where several religious traditions are practiced relatively equally.

After clarifying the terms shamanism and mediumship, as well as comparing *chuma xian* with other closely related practices, it seems reasonable to consider *chuma xian* to be a type of shamanism. However, the term mediumship is also appropriate, for two reasons. First, since healing and the provision of advice through spirit possession are *chuma xian*’s primary functions, it squarely meets widely accepted definitions of mediumship. Second, although *chuma xian* is closer in many ways to shamanist practices of Northeast Asian than Chinese mediumship as practices Southeast China and Southeast Asia, it nonetheless shares some Han Chinese-derived practices and characteristics with the latter (such as, ritual burning of incense and paper money, and various links with Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, which will be discussed further in Chapters 2 and 4). Due to this overlap, both shamanism and mediumship will be used in reference *chuma xian*, depending on the context.

This thesis will account for this unique yet understudied religious and multi-ethnic phenomenon that combines not only different ethnicities but also Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, the cult of the fox and other local popular religions; and to situate it in the broader picture of shamanism in general. The following thesis is arranged both by theme and roughly by chronology. Chapter 2 will discuss the formation of the *chuma xian* practice by exploring its

possible sources, including Manchu Shamanism and the Cult of the Fox, and will go on to examine possible reasons for its formation, focusing upon immigration in Liaodong. Chapter 3 will describe the mediums and mediumship, thus providing a complete image of the practice, the ways in which it is performed and the ways in which people and the government are involved. Gender is discussed in this chapter, in particular, the manner in which the *chuma xian* practice is dominated by women⁷, both with regards to mediums and clients⁸. Chapter 4 will examine the *chuma xian* as alternatives to medical and psychological care, as well as providing alternatives to other religions and local cults. This chapter will discuss the ways in which such differing practices are interrelated. Chapter 5 will locate the practice of *chuma xian* within the complex realms of both Chinese religion and world shamanism, and will try to make sense of its presence within broader cultural formations.

⁷ As the *chuma xian* are almost exclusively women, I will use the feminine pronoun, she/her to describe them.

⁸ People who seek help from the mediums can be referred to as patients, worshipper, or practitioner, but the author considers client is the best term to reflect the relationship between the help seekers and the mediums.

CHAPTER 2 – THE FORMATION

The *chuma xian* practice shares some characteristics with other forms of shamanism. However, it also has some unique traits that have puzzled researchers about the relationships and links between the cult of the fox, Manchu shamanism, and the popular religions of Liaoning. *Chuma xian* is an ongoing practice in Northern China. As ideological and political pressure is more intense here than in other regions, rituals are generally performed in homes or private spaces. Few rituals are publically visible except for the paper-burning based exorcism and the (seldom used) talismans, in order to maintain privacy.

This chapter explores the driving forces for the formation of the *chuma xian* practices as well as its possible sources and origins. The current *chuma xian* practice could not have come into existence if not for the unique power relationship between immigrants to Liaodong and the local Manchu ethnic group. The unique local history facilitated interactions between the Cult of the Fox and Manchu shamanism allowing these two practices to syncretize and thus to produce the *chuma xian* practice.

LIAODONG IMMIGRANTS

In order to comprehend the Manchu-Han interaction, it is necessary to first introduce the immigration background of Liaodong. In particular, the history of immigration in Liaoning during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) explains much of the interaction between the Manchu and Han shamanic practices and the formation of the *chuma xian* tradition, given that the clearest understanding of the practice's formation is that it was derived from both the Han tradition of the

Cult of the Fox and the Manchu *yeji*.

As the majority ethnicity, the Han Chinese governed China for most of the imperial period, and the Manchu were one of only two minority ethnic groups to rule a unified China (the other being the Mongolian ethnic group). The Manchu success in utilizing the power of cavalry was the key reason for their conquering of the entire Chinese state. However, in order to govern, the Manchu, perceived by the Han Chinese as “barbarians,” had to learn the operations of the bureaucratic, educational and other administrative systems from the Han Chinese. Thus, similar to what happened after the Roman conquest of Greece over two millennia ago, the Manchu and Han established a subtle power equilibrium which forced both parties to exercise tolerance of the other's traditions in order to govern.

The Qing rulers developed a banner system⁹ to ensure effective control over the country. As the native region of the Manchus, Northeast China was treated differently from other regions. The bannermen in other parts of China were primarily military garrisons, but in the Northeast they merged into the local Manchu community and were farmers. The communal living experience overruled the distinctions between the Manchu and the Han as well as the divide between bannermen and non-bannermen. Both Campbell et al. (2002) and Ding et al. (2003) make the point that this represents an idea that practices are more important than ideologies. Although in law, the bannermen were forbidden from interacting with the non-banner Han Chinese, including intermarriage and conducting business with each other, in practice, the

⁹ The Eight Banners were administrative divisions under the Qing dynasty into which all Manchu families were placed. They provided the basic framework for the Manchu military organization. For more details see Shirokogoroff's (1973) *Social Organization of the Manchus*.

relationship between the bannermen and the Han in Northeast China was quite different from other garrison locations in China.

Some of the Han bannermen brought siblings from their hometowns after migrating to Liaodong (the eastern part of Liaoning Province). These people often had an emotional bond with non-bannerman Han who originated from the same towns as themselves. The Qing government did repatriate non-bannerman Han migrants to their home provinces periodically. The majority of these migrants were from Shandong, with some from Hebei and Shanxi. This explains why the *chuma xian* practice is mostly found in Liaoning, but is also practised to a lesser extent in these other provinces.

THE CULT OF THE FOX AND MANCHU SHAMANISM

Since there is no written record of the formation and development of the *chuma xian* practice, it is necessary to rely on the pantheon to conjecture as to how the practice was formed and subsequently transformed over time. Both Kang (2006) and Huntington (2003) draw links between the Four Great Clans and the Cult of the Fox, one of *chuma xian*'s possible origins according to their sources and argument. Another possible origin is Manchu shamanism, as the Manchu have two kinds of shamanic practices. One of them is the shaman of a clan, who is responsible for communication with that clan's ancestors — the *bolongzi* — (translated into Chinese as *jiaji* 家祭, domestic rituals). The other kind of shaman is one possessed by various animal and natural spirits who performs exorcisms and healings, termed the *wuwate* shaman, (translated into Chinese as *yeji* 野祭, meaning wild or primitive rituals) (Wu, 1989). The social

status of the former clan shamans was higher than that of the latter healer shamans. However, when the tribal clan mode of organization was replaced by the military banner system, the number of clan shamans declined while the healer shamans remained active and subsequently were more stable in their numbers. Later, the Qing emperors enacted different policies towards these two kinds of shamanic practices. The Manchu aimed to maintain their ethnic identity and thus established a uniform system of clan shamanism to represent their own culture. On the other hand, they were eager to erase the elements of their culture that rendered them liable to accusations of being “barbarian”, so the Manchu rulers proscribed the wild or primitive forms of shamanism, which involved ecstasy.

The clan-oriented shamanic ritual shares similar features with Han ancestral worship, yet it includes Manchu characteristics as well. The sacrificial shrine of the imperial clans is called the *tangzi* 堂子 (literally “hall”), identical to the *chuma xian*’s name for their shrines. The Manchu healer shamans, beyond sharing the fundamental feature of being possessed by animal spirits, have other aspects in common with *chuma xian* as well as the Great Dancing Gods in Northeast China. The animal pantheon in Manchu *yeji* is similar to that of *chuma xian*, though *yeji* has more kinds of spirits. The Manchu *jiaji* practice shares some common terminologies with *chuma xian*. Furthermore, the Manchu folk-epic *Tale of the Nisan Shaman* also has a plot similar to the *chuma xian*, and utilizes a similar style of language. Therefore, if the fox clan as recorded by the late Qing scholars Ji Yun and Zhang Tao provides information about the early form of the Four Great Clans, the Manchu wild shamanism may have added content to this practice, leading towards the development of *chuma xian*.

Geographically, it bears mention that the wild fox is more commonly seen in northern regions, which, according to Kang, is the key reason why the cult of fox is confined to the north. There are numerous stories and popular religious practices related to these fox spirits. Traditionally in pre-modern Chinese literature, the fox is associated with ideas of sensuality. They transform into human figures and seduce people into sexual relations with them so that they can obtain human energy which can be used to cultivate or attain magic powers. However, there is another kind of fox spirit which is seldom seen in literature but is more common in popular folk beliefs. These particular fox spirits are merciful gods, often appearing as white-bearded older gentlemen typically possessing a sense of good will and aiming to help people. The god-like figure of the fox spirit likely had an influence on the formation of the Four Great Clans, within which the fox ranks highest.

“Wild” religious practices like spirit animal mediumship have been considered as superstitious and deceptive by ruling classes throughout Chinese history. Thus, it is difficult and sometimes borderline impossible, to find written materials on these topics in any histories or other kinds of official literature. The only substantive materials found so far have been in *biji* 筆記 (“miscellanies” or “random notes”). According to Ji Yun’s (1724-1805) *Yuewei Caotang Biji* 閱微草堂筆記 (Yuewei Cottage Notes), there were fox gods in Ji Yun’s hometown in Shandong that were portrayed as appearing in the form of clans of foxes. Huntington notes that “this story type ... domesticates the fox by imagining foxes as families, headed by a patriarchal spokesman. The elder male fox appears as a highly articulate human male, whereas the rest of his clan, his inferiors in age and gender, may be more like animals and are often silent” (115). Zhang

Tao's 张焘 *Jinmen zaji* 津門雜記 (Notes on Tianjin), published in 1884, also contains records of mediums who treated people possessed by the *xianjia* 仙家 (divine transcendents). The names of the *xianjia* were generally familial, such as "Grandma Yellow" and "Auntie Hu".

Ji Yun and Zhang Tao's records represent earlier forms of animal clan organization, leading towards the contemporary Liaoning *chuma xian* practice which has a more complicated contemporary form. In a *chuma xian* practitioner's home shrine, each of the animal clans (groups of animal gods) has dozens of members with names following the same logic as in the Confucian lineage¹⁰ system. Normally there are three Chinese characters in these names: the first character is the family name¹¹, with the second character (also the first character of the two-character given name) acting as an indicator of where the *xianjia*'s generation lies within their lineage¹². The last character is an individual given name¹³. For example, the name Huang Tianle 黃天樂 indicates that this god is a weasel spirit; he is from the "tian" generation and his given name is "Tianle." This precisely ordered and organized animal clan system, which has been enriched and cultivated over time, could represent what Huntington refers to as the "domestication" of the fox spirit by the Chinese people.

Yang Nianqun (2004), who studied the Four Great Clans in Republican China, mentioned that each clan of deities is referred to collectively as *Hu San Taiye* 胡三太爷 (Third Great Grandfather Fox) or *Huang Er Taiye* 黃二太爷 in Hebei. However, this system becomes very specific in Northeast China (Dongbei): there are Hu Wancheng, Chengyi, Chengdou; Huang

¹⁰ The practice of keeping a genealogy book or register to record the family history of ancestors.

¹¹ Family name goes before given name in China.

¹² In most of the lineage practice people use a succession of characters from a repeated poem that people with the same family name composed together, but what the middle character of the *xianjia* based on remains unclear.

¹³ It is also unclear how it was chosen, but it most likely to be chosen by the *xianjia* themselves when they enter the xianhood.

Yuxi, Chengming; Liu Chengen, etc. Yang also states that the search for mediums to heal disease is part of the godly roles in the Four Great Clans, which is consistent with Kang and Huntington's observations on the cult of the fox.

Besides the two aforementioned main origins — the Han Chinese Cult of the Fox and Manchu shamanism — there are other practices which have impacted upon the *chuma xian* practice as well. The two major Manchu Epics — Nisan Shaman (尼山薩滿傳) and Story of the Donghai Woji Tribe (東海窩集傳) — both portray shamans with a language style similar to the *chuma xian*. These myths have been passed on through generations and have penetrated into real practices. As Hooke argues, myth and ritual are inseparable in early civilizations (Bell, 1997).

The Great Dancing Gods is another practice that relates to the *chuma xian*, although this practice has almost completely ceased. In the community, it normally plays a ritual role (ritual ceremony on the New Years, funerals, etc), leaving *chuma xian* to play a practical role (healing and advising without much ritual performance). The Great Dancing Gods were theatrical ritualized performances that used to be conducted during Chinese New Year. However, with expanding urbanization and a proliferation of diverse forms of entertainment, there is greater interest in the more practical functions offered by *chuma xian*.

The above-mentioned practices can be identified as constituting family resemblances whereby they are all inter-related, yet there is no single characteristic that can define them all and which is evident across all practices.

CHAPTER 3 – THE MEDIUMS AND MEDIUMSHIP

In the previous chapter, I examined the history surrounding the formation of the *chuma xian*, and the possible sources of their pantheon. This chapter will focus on the characteristics of this practice in a contemporary sense, specifically focusing upon mediums themselves and their relationships with gods, patients/clients, other mediums, and the government. The issue of gender is a notable area for consideration within *chuma xian* practice, as mediums and patients are almost exclusively women. As such, gender and mediumship will be addressed towards the end of this chapter. The relationships within the practice will be examined with regards to power relations, in particular, the existence of counter-intuitive factors in these relationships. It will be evident that all counter-intuitive power relationships in *chuma xian* practice can be linked to Foucault's concept of power pluralism wherein no group is constantly dominant.

MEDIUMS AND THE GODS

The mediums' relationships with the gods who "borrow" their bodies are complex and change over time. The ten mediums I interviewed told similar stories about their relationships with the gods, which typically began with confrontations with the gods, which turned into cooperation, before they finally adjusted to being able to tame the gods.

Confrontation

One cannot become a *chuma xian* through acquiring learned knowledge. Rather, the gods chose individuals for these roles. The initiation of the *chuma xian* is similar to that of

shamans from many other regions and cultures. Regardless of their educational backgrounds and personal religious views, the first thing a future *chuma xian* experiences is sickness. According to the mediums, after the gods have selected them as disciples, they need to be made to believe in the gods' power and to be made compliant with this power. The mediums have to agree to lend their bodies to the gods so that the gods can help other people through the mediums. The initial response of the *chuma xian* is heavily dependent upon their family background: some know what the illness is after a short time span, while others only become aware after longer periods of time. The typical length of the period of "suffering" is one or two years, but the longest that was mentioned to me was fourteen years. In the interviews, the mediums use the word *mo* 磨 to describe the initial actions the gods took on them, which means torture¹⁴.

The illness can be either physical or psychiatric. Most of the mediums interviewed claimed that their maladies were so severe that they sought to treat the symptoms by reverting to various forms of medical help, including both traditional and western forms. However, most of these interventions did not work. In some cases, my interviewees realized the cause of their illness and turned to other mediums for help, but this did not necessarily work. This can be due to either the capability or the morality of the senior mediums providing help. Novice mediums always need to find the right person who can set up an altar for them properly and who will not undermine them during the process of self-establishment as a medium. Medium #1's illness never fully healed and she claims that one reason for this is that there are still problems with the

¹⁴ The word *mo* itself literally means "to grind down" or "to wear away," but the "*mo*" here is closer to *zhemo* 折磨 which means torture.

shrine caused by the mediums she sought help from. This matter will be further discussed in the section entitled “Among Mediums.”

Half of the mediums interviewed reported psychiatric illnesses and two of them had particularly striking experiences. Medium #3 narrated vividly how she fought hysterically against her husband and neglected her children. Medium #7 recounted various erratic behaviours including running in the street naked. The mediums interviewed tend to relay their stories dramatically with a tone akin to complaining about a misfortune. There is also a sense of pride in their speech. The mediums and their family members consider these experiences to be the gods’ way of taming the *dizi* (disciples).

It takes differing durations of time for individual *dizi* to discover the nature of their illnesses. Typically, it is discovered when a *dizi* visits a medium after exhausting all other options for the treatment of their illnesses. It is also considered that these meeting with mediums stem from a *dizi* having the *yuanfen* 緣分 (predetermined principle that dictates a person’s encounters with someone or something, similar to “destiny”) to meet someone with access to a medium.

A process of negotiation begins between the *dizi* and the gods once the former discovers the real nature of the illness. The negotiation mainly concerns the medium agreeing to enter mediumship in exchange for the gods ending their suffering, but the mediums express many other considerations in their lives. The mediums discuss these matters with their gods throughout their careers. Though mediums kneel down at the shrine to praise and make offerings to the gods, paradoxically, they also talk to the gods in a manner similar to the way they might talk with

friends or business partners. For example, medium #5 told the gods that she agreed to enter mediumship, but requested that she defer starting for one year so that she could first complete school. Hence, she asked the gods to terminate her illness so that she could finish school smoothly. Mediums also negotiate with the gods about issues ranging from the size of their shrine to the wellbeing of their family members. Medium #2 negotiated with her god about terminating her practice as a medium. The conversation took place at the altar in hopes that the gods would understand. As children are considered vulnerable to evil spirits, she put an end to her practice after her grandson was born because she was worried that performing exorcisms would bring patients who were possessed by evil spirits, placing her grandson at risk. However, she continues to worship the gods at the altar and makes regular offerings. Figure 2 shows Medium #2's shrine and the offerings she made to the gods.

Cooperation

After agreeing to enter the mediumship—to become a *chuma xian*—the next step is to establish an altar (*litang* 立堂) in one's home, normally with the help of an experienced *chuma xian*. Registering the gods with the shrine is the first step, which serves to confirm which gods correspond to a particular medium. The senior medium will pick an auspicious day and hour (*shichen* 時辰) for the new medium to conduct the name-reporting ritual. On that day, new mediums will have helpers who normally are their family members, such as a mother, husband and daughter. The senior medium is paid for setting up the altar and generally attends the ritual to give in-person instructions.

Among the helpers, there should be someone with good calligraphy skills. This is important because the red sheet on which gods' names are inscribed is intended for worship. There can be hundreds of gods associated with an individual shrine and very few of them have physical representations, such as images and statues. Great Grand Fathers and Great Grand Mothers of Foxes, normally found in the Daoist temples in Northeast China, are the only gods to have statues and images. Small statues of these gods are sometimes found at mediums' shrines (Figure 3). Writing the gods' names in beautiful calligraphy is a sign of respect and it is also believed that the calligrapher gains merit by writing the gods' names on a shrine in a beautiful style.

The physical altar should already be built before the day of *litang*, so the remaining time is used to hang the red sheet. The medium will either burn incense sticks or smoke a cigarette to indicate preparedness and to invite the gods to reveal their identities. Normally the arrival of a god causes the medium to yawn, but there are variations, such as a medium burping or making faces. The gods do not appear in a particular order. However, the shrine is to be organized according to clans. Thus, the names are first written on a draft sheet which is used as a reference point when writing names officially on the red sheet. Another helper has the responsibility of talking to the medium. This helper will typically go on to become the medium's assistant. This assistant calls the gods *lao xianjia* which literally means "venerable transcendent/god." In his text *Chinese Spirit-medium Cults in Singapore*, Mark Elliott introduces the medium's assistant as someone responsible for translating the medium's words into language that is comprehensible for worshippers. In a multi-lingual community it is absolutely necessary to have the assistant as an

interpreter, but even in monolingual areas, the assistant is still required sometimes because not all worshippers will know how to communicate directly with the gods in cases where a medium is possessed by a god.

During the name reporting process, the assistant tries to collect other relevant information about the gods. For example, they will ask the gods who they are and where they are from. The animal gods are normally from a mountain, most commonly Qianshan Mountain in Liaoning Province or Changbaishan Mountain in Jilin Province. These mountains share two common features. Firstly, the locations of the mountains reveal the association between gods and local people — the gods tend to be from a mountain near to the region where a medium resides. Secondly, both mountains are home to a number of Buddhist and Daoist temples.

Apart from the animal gods, there are two other groups of gods: the heavenly gods (*shangfang shenxian* 上房神仙) and the underworld gods (*yinxian* 陰仙). The heavenly gods are beings in Daoism and Chinese mythology whose names are written on a different sheet generally hung to the right of the sheet displaying the animal gods' names. These heavenly gods are present to be worshipped rather than to help people through possessing mediums. Lastly are the underworld gods, who are deceased beings who became gods through cultivating themselves. Their names are written under those of the animal gods and they help people based upon their various special abilities.

All the mediums I encountered consider themselves to be Buddhists. As such, Buddha and Bodhisattva are worshipped usually to the right of the heavenly gods' shrine. Mediums will display statues of their favourite Buddha and Bodhisattva at a shrine, often including

Shakyamuni Buddha, Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva), and Amitabha Buddha.

After setting up the altar, mediums can start to take clients. In the beginning, the clients are typically acquaintances such as relatives and neighbours. These clients subsequently spread knowledge of a *chuma xian*'s effectiveness by word of mouth. Depending on how well their "business" grows, mediums will consider giving up their jobs, though many of them do not have a regular jobs in the first place. Women in rural areas will continue to be farmers if that was their prior occupation. They develop their own schedules and clients will abide by these. Urban mediums, are substantially more likely to have a job, although not necessarily a full-time, formal one. They are most commonly hard labourers or peddlers who work overtime and are underpaid for it. It is not uncommon for them to have already given up work due to the illness they have undergone in the process of becoming a medium. Some mediums choose to continue pursuing their prior occupation or career until the earnings garnered through mediumship can wholly sustain their livings.

Of course, some mediums' "businesses" never prosper sufficiently for them to rely solely upon this as a source of income. As such, they are obliged to keep their jobs indefinitely. An unavoidable conflict then arises whereby having a day job may turn away or discourage clients, yet staying home waiting for clients incurs costs from lost productivity. The medium can attempt to negotiate this situation by asking the gods to bring in more clients, which may or may not work.

Mediums whose illnesses are healed tend to have more clients than those who remain unwell in the long-term. Clearly, this means that mediums who retain their illnesses are more

likely to face sustained struggles in their lives. The differences between mediums who are cured and those who remain sick are mostly contingent upon whether the medium has executed the process of becoming a medium correctly. Whether remaining ill or not, the dozens or even hundreds of gods start to be the patrons of a medium starting from the *litang* ritual. However, the gods are not necessarily patrons to just one medium. Many mediums share gods as patrons and sometimes compete for gods.

Protection and Pride

Mediums make offerings to the gods regularly. Depending on their availability, they burn incense sticks one to three times a day. They kowtow three times at each shrine after setting up the incense sticks. On the days of a new moon and of a full moon,¹⁵ they offer food to all of their gods, including the Buddhist deities and the heavenly gods. *Mantou* 饅頭 (steamed buns) and fruit are offered in all the three shrines. Alcohol and meat such as chicken are also offered for the animal gods and heavenly gods. For the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, the mediums offer water instead.

It is worth to note that rules for offerings abide by Chinese folk customs. For instance, the word for pear (*li* 梨) is a homophone, and sounds identical to a word for "to separate" or "to take apart" (*li* 離). Since separation or deconstruction are not auspicious signs, the mediums do not offer pears at the shrine. Similar considerations also surface in other mediumship practices: DeBernardi, in her *The Way That Lives in the Heart*, introduces a female spirit medium, Datuk

¹⁵ The first and the fifteenth day of each month on the Chinese lunar calendar.

Aunt, who is possessed by Malay animist spirits known as Datuk Kong. Her mediumship is combined with a cult of Muslim saints. This is a form of syncretism which accommodates Islamic traditions within ancestral worship and the veneration of local, non-Islamic spirits. Hence within this example, when a medium makes offerings to the spirits, only food acceptable to Muslims (halal) is allowed.

As mediums grow to trust their gods, they will gradually begin asking the gods for help with their own personal difficulties as well as those of their family. The process of a mediums treating themselves is not overly distinct from treatment of their patients or clients. Just like their clients, mediums may also need exorcisms, advice and healing. Not dissimilar to doctors who can write prescriptions for themselves, mediums can perform exorcisms and healing for themselves, except in the case of something beyond their capacity. However, while exorcism and healing can be accomplished through ritual and physical action, the process of a medium seeking advice from the gods is trickier. Typically when a person asks for godly advice, the gods will borrow the mouth of disciple — the medium — to liaise with the client. As a result, there is nobody through whose mouth the gods can talk in an instance where it is their own disciple who is asking for advice.

There are two kinds of possession that the mediums experience in terms of consciousness: *quanmeng* 全蒙 (complete unconsciousness) and *banmeng* 半蒙 (semi-unconsciousness). Complete unconsciousness is the standard form, and refers to a total loss of consciousness on the part of the medium. She is not aware of what happens and what the gods have said through her mouth while being possessed and unconscious. If she finds it

necessary, she can rely on her assistant or even her client to retell the course of events.

Semi-unconsciousness, on the other hand, allows the medium to be aware of the occurrences during the possession to varying extents.

Regardless of the kind of possession and the medium's state of consciousness, it is inevitably hard for gods to advise their disciples directly. Obviously, the mediums cannot hear the gods while completely unconscious, and in a state of semi-unconsciousness, it is still unusual for the medium to communicate with the god using her own mouth. There are two approaches commonly used when mediums need personal instruction from their gods. The first is for the medium to kneel down at the shrine after setting up incense, and to ask the gods for answers to her questions in the form of smoke from incense sticks or by showing the medium a vision. Hypothetically, the medium could ask "is my son dating the right girl?" and an accumulation of smoke from three incense sticks constitutes an affirmative answer. If they were to ask "who stole our chicken?" the gods may present a vision of the thief, which could be a wolf or a neighbour.

Another way for mediums to converse with their gods is through their dreams. All of the mediums interviewed claimed to have dream visions of some of their gods, who presented themselves as either humans or animals. However, the gods do not usually talk in the dreams. Rather, the mediums are provided with signs and scenes that they need to analyze themselves. For example, Medium #1 deduced that every time she dreamt about her fourth-eldest sister, something bad would happen. She determined that this was her gods sending a message to her through use of homophones, because "four" (*si* 四) and "matter" or "trouble" (*shi* 事) are sound

alike.¹⁶

Mediums become closer to their gods over time, like friends. They tell their gods not only about major difficulties, but also minor troubles that bother them and in return, they develop a sense of protection. Medium #4 pronounced with pride that her gods are always present to protect her. More specifically, a toad god is with her when she is at home and a fox god follows her when she is out. She relayed a personal experience where an unsavoury man came and deliberately provoked her. At the time, she was home alone in the countryside, where people do not live close to one another. As a result, no one such as a neighbour could help her promptly if she encountered a dangerous situation. The man questioned her, “so you are a *chuma xian*, can you tell what I do for living?” The medium was afraid of the man, so she asked the man to wait while she burned incense sticks at the shrine to invite the gods. She entered the inner chamber, burned the incense, and asked her gods to protect her. “My gods then set up ‘nets above and snares below’ to trap the man,” the medium said dramatically, stressing how commanding and powerful the gods can be.

She returned to the living room and informed the man “we both know what you do for a living so do not make me say it out loud.” However, the man insisted that the medium state his occupation. The medium eventually said that he was a thief and he should not do this for a living. The man then fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a package, and said that it contained 40,000 RMB¹⁷. He asked her to keep the money, but the medium insisted that she would not and asked

¹⁶ The character 事 *shi* is pronounced as *si* in local dialect in the south of Liaoning.

¹⁷ Chinese currency: 40,000 yuan is equivalent to approximately \$6,666 Canadian dollars.

him to leave. In my interview, she said she suspected that the money was not clean and as the amount was so large, taking it could provoke further troubles for herself. She said she was initially scared of the man in this encounter, this fearfulness subsided after her gods came to protect her.

Once mediums start to experience a sense of self-fulfillment, health, and wealth brought to them by the gods, they tend to subsequently feel and show pride on behalf of their gods. Medium #9 talked in detail and reverence about how immensely powerful her gods are. All the mediums enjoyed telling stories about instances where they had succeeded, patients they healed, and future events they had foreseen correctly.

The relationships between mediums and their gods change over time though all mediums go through similar experiences. There are some subtleties distinguishing one set of medium-god relationships from another and such differences are likely caused by the mediums' personalities. The more personally aggressive mediums often have better business and talk in a tone that suggests they command the gods. A forthright medium such as #9 claims “I call out the gods” (*wo jiao xianjia chulai* 我叫仙家出來) whereas more gentle mediums would say “I invite the gods” (*wo qing xianjia chulai* 我請仙家出來).

MEDIUMS AND THEIR CLIENTS

In addition to the ten clients who I formally interviewed, I have casually talked to dozens of other people who have visited mediums. The profile of the mediums' clients is quite diverse and the reasons for their visits vary. Nonetheless, with regards to gender, clients can be

considered homogenous rather than diverse since the vast majority of clients are still women.

Beyond gender identity, clients can be categorized in several ways, based upon their age, socio-economic background, whether they are one-time or regular visitors and most importantly, the reasons for their visits.

As a complete naturalist/atheist would not be interested in seeking help from the mediums, those clients who visit mediums are already captive audiences who hold a certain level of faith in them. However, these people have different degrees of trust in the mediums. Some of them hold complete faith in a medium and willingly arrange their lives completely as a medium suggests, whereas others are skeptical of the abilities of the medium but not sufficiently skeptical so as to deter visiting altogether. As distinct from mediums in Southeast China and Southeast Asia, who can parade during festivals and gods' birthdays as well as hang banners advertising the services of a medium at the shrine, the *chuma xian* practice is underground. Therefore, no marketing is attempted and almost all the clients visit under recommendations from their friends and relatives.

The main services provided by the mediums are in response to the appeals of their clients. Generally speaking, there are only two kinds of service: *kanbing* 看病 (treating illness) and *kanshier* 看事 (treating or taking care of matters). The specific services provided are mainly exorcism, healing, advising or fortune-telling. Though contacting ancestors through trance is a service provided, it has diminished in popularity over time because contemporary clients are increasingly concerned with practical purposes and straightforward solutions to communicating with the deceased (such as burning paper money to satisfy and pacify ancestors). These services

will be discussed and examined in detail in Chapter 4.

The ritual of inviting gods to communicate is defined by each medium's personal style rather than by clients' needs. Some mediums do this formally and at length while others simplify the process or even skip this step. Among the ten mediums I interviewed, only one did not show clear signs of entering the stage of being possessed, what is referred to as "the coming of the *xianjia*" (*xianjia lai le* 仙家來了). Officially, after a client arrives and explains their needs, the medium lights up incense sticks at her shrine,¹⁸ which may be in a separate room. The medium will then kneel down at the shrine and talk to her gods, for example: "The lady of the Wang Clan has been experiencing stomach pain for a month, and your disciple hopes to help her. Do any of you *lao xianjia* know what her problem is? Could you come to help her?" or "The daughter of the Zhang Clan is asking about her job. Would any of you *xianjia* help her?" In the terminology used by the mediums and their gods to describe clients, they apply pre-modern Chinese terms: *menfu* 門府 to refer to clan or family, *huarong* 花蓉 for girls, *tongzi* 童子 for boys, *laoshutounü* 老梳頭女 for women, and the Buddhist term *luohan* 羅漢 (Arhat) for men. No modern medium knows the sources of the vocabulary but they uniformly apply the same terms. The use of vocabulary from the imperial period points to a common origin for the practice and links between the *chuma xian* and the Cult of the Fox in Ji Yun's and Zhang Tao's records. Upon the medium's request, one of the gods will take possession of the medium and the medium will begin to yawn or show other signs of the possession. Sometimes mediums smoke cigarettes instead of burning incense sticks which also signifies an offering to the gods. In this case, the

¹⁸ The number of the incense stick lighted is normally three per incense burning.

medium typically remains in the room where she welcomes clients. Medium #6's signs of possession are quite ecstatic: after a few inhalations of a cigarette, she first makes noises as if reciting an incantation or an otherworldly language, as well as making animal-like faces. She resides in the city of Dandong 丹东 in the east of Liaoning province and speaks the local dialect. However, after a god possesses her, she switches completely to the Henan dialect of central China. Upon the arrival of the gods, the conversation and interaction changes to become an interaction between the god and the client.

In some situations, the gods are so eager to help people that they do not wait for a medium to invite them; they come directly and unannounced to possess the medium. In mediums' daily lives, situations sometimes arise wherein a medium encounters somebody who has an illness treatable by the gods or who is possessed by an evil spirit, and the gods may be eager to help. Medium #1 recounts that she has experienced such situations many times and notes that she has to control herself to resist possession. For example, if this were to occur during a formal meeting, she might resist because she does not want to act inappropriately. In other cases, she might act similarly to avoid accidentally insulting a person with different beliefs.

It should be noted that the power relationship between the mediums and their clients is plural. On one hand, clients are effectively customers paying for the mediums' services. Thus, as "business owners", mediums try to attend primarily to clients' needs and can be dependent on clients for income. On the other hand, the mediums take on an authoritative role as they are the ones who are possessed by gods and a client may depend on the medium for information or advice. Accordingly, clients tend to pay respect to the mediums by acting especially politely and

carefully.

With regards to remuneration, all mediums stated that they never “ask for payment” (*yaoqian* 要錢) from their clients and officially, there is no price attached to their services. Rather, clients reward mediums based on their degree of satisfaction and their ability. For example, Client #1 is sixty-three years old and she is a regular visitor to the *chuma xian*. She has visited more than twenty mediums over the past forty years and she noted that the remuneration that she has paid increased rapidly over the past decade. Medium #2, who was practicing between 1981 and 1983, said she offered free help to most of her clients. Nowadays, clients generally pay one hundred *yuan*/RMB¹⁹ for a simple advising session which typically lasts twenty minutes. Yet, there is no fixed price and new clients always consult past clients to determine a suitable pay scale though they may also pay more or less depending on their income and satisfaction. Alternatively, clients sometimes express their appreciation of a medium’s help in non-monetary ways. For example, when I was lining up with about ten clients to meet Medium #7, there was a past client who arrived to give a Chinese New Year present to the medium.

RELATIONSHIPS AMONG MEDIUMS

Before one becomes a medium, she will start by having interactions with another medium. As described earlier, a new medium requires the help of a senior medium to facilitate her entrance to mediumship. The relationship between a senior medium and a novice is similar to

¹⁹ About sixteen Canadian dollars.

that of a medium and her client: the senior figure acts like a mentor or an advisor. In Li Weizu's fieldwork surveying rural Republican China, the mentor-disciple relationship was much clearer and more explicit whereas the service provider to customer relationship was rather implicit. However, when the novice starts her own business independently, she and the senior medium become competitors — this element of new competition is a constant regardless of which time period the senior and junior mediums are living in (i.e. both in contemporary and past practice of *chuma xian*). Competition is integral to the relationship amongst most mediums; they contend for clients and gods, as well as compete to prove their competence and to demonstrate who is more powerful. When competition intensifies, some mediums start to undermine each other. Differing from the power relationships between mediums and gods as well as the relationship between mediums and clients, the power pluralism among mediums manifests itself in explicit competition for dominance rather than the subtle shifts demonstrated by mediums' other relationships.

Advising

As mentioned, a medium-to-be needs a senior medium to confirm her illness as representing a gods' choice of her to as a disciple, and to help the medium-to-be with the ritual of *litang*. Like clients, the mediums-to-be visit and choose mediums based on the mediums' reputation and the extent to which they trust and get along well with a medium. The remuneration is normally five to ten times higher than other kinds of standard services like healing and advising. The mentoring process includes both instruction on the preparation of a

litang and in-person instruction on the day of *litang*, as well as some rituals, techniques and experiences for the novice's future reference. Senior mediums are sometimes considerate and thoughtful to such a level that their advising goes beyond mediumship. Medium #9 recalls that she had concerns over some mediums-to-be's husbands' rude approaches towards mediumship, and she told them assertively that some of their misfortunes were caused by their profanity.

Medium #1 once helped a new medium in another city with her *litang*. She recounts that the new medium's god thanked her by singing and acting quite hysterically while taking possession of the new medium. Medium #1 along with several other mediums all indicated that it is absolutely crucial to find a senior medium who is destined to help with a new medium's *litang*. The specific and personal nature of mediums' connections with another medium and other subtleties that cannot be described have helped form the idea that only the right medium can set up an altar properly in order for the altar and the new medium to prosper. This is reinforced by the experiences of some mediums who fail to set up their altar properly and thus must repeat the process several times.

Contending and Competing

People in the same professions can be partners and companions, but they are competitors as well, a fact that applies quite squarely to mediums. Mediums contend with each other for resources and clients, sometimes competing to prove a higher level of competence than other practitioners.²⁰

²⁰ See Szonyi (2009) "Secularization Theory and the Study of Chinese Religions" on competition between ritualists.

Gods are the most important resources that the mediums contend for. Although one god can sit on multiple shrines, it is assumed that a god can only be present at one location at a given time. While no mediums mentioned this explicitly, scholarship within the field attests to this concept. In Davis's *Society and the Supernatural in Song China*, he describes a situation in which a medium temporarily loses his power because the tutelary divinity is called away by the Emperor on High. In the *chuma xian* practice, gods have individual specialties when treating illnesses and giving advice. Thus, when they are summoned, they present themselves to a medium according to patients' individual situations. Since some gods are known to be more powerful than others certain gods are considered more desirable by mediums. Given that gods prioritize certain patients' situations and are limited in number, the nature of scarce resource causes the mediums to fight for gods in arguably immoral ways, such as by "stealing."

According to mediums, stealing a god can be done in various ways. A convenient way for senior mediums to steal gods from new mediums is to do so when helping to set up a *litang*. The senior medium can conceal some of the gods or suggest that the new medium give up some gods during the process of registering gods. The arguments for persuading a new medium to give up certain gods vary. It can be claimed that there are too many gods from one clan and therefore the new shrine is not properly balanced; or it could be suggested that certain gods have capricious characteristics or personalities and so they will not get along with other gods in the same shrine. The senior medium will then "bring" the gods she appropriated home for her own practice. Gods can also be stolen in simpler ways whereby the appropriator's physical presence is not required.

The morality of such appropriation seems potentially concerning to clients, and provokes

questions about whether this kind of behavior is acceptable to the gods. Surprisingly though, the gods do not seem to care strongly about the morality of their disciples and their actions in “stealing” gods. The mediums would explain any accusations of immoral practice by foregrounding the fact that they were chosen by these very gods on the basis of their good virtues, as well as by inevitable destiny that links mediums with their gods. The research of Li Weizu (2011) and Kang Xiaofei (2006) provides another explanation: the gods’ practices of selecting disciples, and healing or helping people through that disciple are all for personal purposes. In particular, the gods’ are focused upon an ultimate goal of achieving immortality through attaining merit for good deeds and thereby obtaining a higher rank within the immortal world. Hence, achieving these personal goals provides incentive for the gods to patronize mediums who can attract more clients. In practice, mediums claim that such instances of a god switching mediums happen frequently. Both these explanations are invoked by mediums to explain a god changing between different protégés: that the god was appropriated by mediums and that the gods change mediums on their own volition. However, the latter way is considered more morally acceptable, as it implies that the process of a god switching between mediums can be explained by a new medium demonstrating strong charisma.

Competition for clients amongst mediums is less mysterious than competing for gods. Advertising for mediums generally consists of narrating the medium’s past accomplishments (in healing and advising) to potential new clients. Such stories can subsequently attract more prospective clients when past clients disseminate them. Some mediums also attempt to distinguish themselves from other mediums and sometimes explicitly express disdain for other

mediums. For instance, Medium #5, who does not outwardly display any signs upon a god taking possession of her, explained in an interview that “I don’t do those kinds of things [yawning, burping, singing, and so forth]” and shook her head with a facial expression of disapproval. In a similar act of self-aggrandizement, medium #6 differentiates herself from others by saying that unlike some mediums who had to learn divination techniques themselves, she can rely solely on her gods’ power to serve clients.

An example of competition between mediums in reality comes from mediums #3 and #4, who assume all the exorcism, healing and advising services in their village of about three thousand people. They are each other’s only competition and they are the village inhabitants’ only reasonable options for frequent and immediate help. The woman who introduced me to the two mediums and accompanied me to interviews is a distant relative of both mediums #3 and #4. Both mediums spoke of the other’s immorality and incompetence although in different tones which stemmed from their different personalities. Medium #4 articulated her views much more explicitly, claiming to have more virtue and that her gods are more powerful in comparison to Medium #3’s. Medium #3, on the other hand, although disapproving of some behavior of Medium#4, toned down her language quite nicely and provided excuses for Medium #4.

Undermining other mediums is not always executed verbally, and can be taken to extreme lengths which invoke the use of dark magic. Medium #1 brought up an instance where she realized that her misfortune was caused by black magic from a nearby medium. She then asked her gods for a means to resolve the spell. She was instructed through a dream that she should hang a piece of red cloth over her door to block the effect of the spell. DeBernardi (2006)

explores similar instances, introducing the occult powers of Chinese mediums in Malaysia and noting how they differ from those of the Malay and Thai magicians. These local magicians can perform black magic to kill, whereas Chinese black magic creates afflictions that can be remedied or reversed.

Competing to prove individual competence is a way in which mediums fight for clients and also a means for settling quarrels between mediums. As mentioned, Mediums #3 and #4 have always competed with each other. According to Medium #4, Medium #3 once came to her house to *jiaoxiang* 叫香 (literally “calling incense sticks”), which is to call for a battle whereby mediums can prove their respective competencies in magic. Medium #4 said she did not even regard Medium #3 as her counterpart or her equal and argued that the powers of the gods who patronize her are much mightier than those of Medium #3’s gods. Such a battle can settle the immediate tensions between two mediums and ultimately result either in one party succumbing to the other or simply a period of non-communication between the two competing mediums.

MEDIUMS AND THE GOVERNMENT

The *chuma xian* practice can be traced back to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) both in literature and in oral history, but it has never taken an orthodox form. Under all regimes throughout its existence — the Qing dynasty, Republican China (1911-1949) and the People’s Republic of China (from 1949 onwards) — the practice has had tricky relationships with governments. Indeed, the Liaoning Provincial Archive contains decrees forbidding magical healing from all three periods. Different kinds of magical healing have all been accused of being

heterodox, of promoting superstition, of being fraudulent, and simply of being disturbing. These prohibitions also had two major effects which caused difficulty in my fieldwork. The first is that the previous governments seldom have official records on an “illegitimate” practice such as *chuma xian*, which makes finding any archival records nearly impossible. Secondly, because the mediums conduct their services in an underground manner and attempt to hide their practice from the government, they are very cautious in engaging with an interviewer. The mediums often suspected me of being a journalist or a government clerk (agent) when I asked questions about their experience, and they were typically hesitant in talking to me, suggesting a suspicion that such conversations would bring them trouble. Approaching mediums after being introduced by an intermediary who they knew personally generally helped with starting these conversations.

Li Weizu’s (2011) extensive fieldwork on the Four Great Clans during the republican period shows the prevalence of the *chuma xian* practice, who were then known as *xiangtou* 香頭 (literally “the head of the incense stick”). In fact, the decrees banning such kind of practices also explicitly reveal the popularity of the mediums. The following government document issued in 1929 shows the widespread nature of magical healing at the time. It is a memorandum issued by the then-Liaoning Provincial Minister of Bureau of Civil Affairs, Chen Wenxue 陳文學, and indicates the possible existence of a prohibition of magical healing, which encompassed both the *chuma xian* practice and the Great Dancing of the Gods:

民政廳里飭屬嚴禁巫醫跳大神 中華民國十八年四月十六日

...禱佛求神乃蚩泯之迷信。本省城管內外暨各縣市鎮村屯向有一種巫醫即俗所稱跳大神看火頭者。託仙佛邪說，冒濟世美名。煽誘間間為人治病，以致無知響愚奔走

乞憐或請神方或乞符籙。該巫等挾持作術誑騙金錢。其為害猶小而貽誤病人醫藥，以生命為兒戲，致死亡之相續。...各知事及公安局...應即出示嚴禁。一面派員密查嗣后。倘再有此神巫醫借治病為名詐騙錢財，無論男女立予拘禁，嚴懲不稍寬假。並將神位香火匾額及其他供犯罪所用等物悉行依法沒收以昭訓誡。...

Prohibition of Magical (Shamanic) Healing and Great Dancing of the Gods in the Area under the Jurisdictions of the Bureau of Civil Affairs. Republic of China, the eighteenth year, April 16th.²¹

... Praying to Buddhas and gods is a superstition of the barbarians. In all the administrative levels of our province — cities, towns, counties, and villages, there is a kind of magical shamanic healer, commonly known as ‘Great Dancing Gods’ or ‘those who look after the incense sticks’.²² (They) disguise themselves in Daoist and Buddhist forms²³ and pretend to save the world. (They) deceive people and treat illnesses, which cause the naïve and innocent populace to rush and pray for sympathy or pray for prescriptions or talismans. These magicians coerce people, perform magic and swindle money. The damage they caused seems insignificant yet they mislead people and delay people from getting proper medical care. They regard people’s lives as trivial and cause deaths one after another. ... Each administration and police station ... should issue the prohibition [of these activities]. In the meantime, the aftereffects (of this prohibition)

²¹ Republic China began in year 1911 and the eighteenth year is 1929.

²² In the original text, it was *huotou* 火頭 (the head of spark) rather than *xiangtou* 香頭 (the head of incense stick), however, *huo* and *xiang* are used together as a double-syllable word *xianghuo* for the spark of incense sticks. It is safe to say that *huotou* and *xiangtou* are interchangeable in this context.

²³ The literal translation is “(They) apply heretical preaching of divine transcendents and Buddhas as masquerades.”

should be closely monitored. Should such kind of magic healers emerge again, fraudulently acting under the name of offering medical service, they should be arrested regardless of their gender and should be punished harshly without sympathy. Also, divine tablets, incense sticks, inscriptions and other supplies for their criminal activities should all be confiscated according to the law so as to teach a lesson.

I did not find any specific decrees in relation to this memorandum and it is unclear whether the recommendations in this document were translated into action in the form of an official prohibition. However, we can extract valuable information from this text. In particular, public distinction between the Great Dancing Gods and the *chuma xian* was minimal at that time. They were regarded as constitutive of one kind of practice: magical healing. Healing appears to be the only service provided by practitioners of both *chuma xian* and the Great Dancing Gods. The document utilizes a rather harsh tone and it regards magical healers as criminals, who are frauds and even indirect killers, yet the purpose of the document was to bring these practices to the attention of the government and lead to their prohibition. From this, combined with the author's failure to distinguish between different forms of mediumship, it may be inferred that these practices had not gained substantial attention or detailed research from the government.

The following edict issued the same year as the previous memorandum in the Republican period archive provides further information:

民國檔案 奉天省長公署 JC10 18723

省政府訓令省會公安局查禁大西關五鬥居胡同蛇神案卷

中華民國十八年八月

“有大西關五門居...土地廟內...繞一神蛇，在該廟施藥治病...罔不奏效...趨之若鶩。車馬填塞於巷，行人熙攘於途。更有北里娼妓混跡其中，濃施粉黛...查禁，以息紛擾。勿稍延忽，切切此令。”

Republican Archive, Fengtian Provincial Administration, Provincial Government
Ordering Provincial Capital City Police Stations to Prohibit the Snake God Practice on
Wudouju Street of Daxiguan District.

Republic of China, the eighteenth year, August.

“On Wudouju “Street of Daxiguan District...inside the Earth Temple... There twists a divine snake. In this temple medicines are served and illnesses are treated....(but) none of (this is) effective... (Nonetheless, people) scramble to receive its help.... Carts and horses cluster on the street; pedestrians (headed there) are boisterous on the road. Furthermore, prostitutes lurk among the crowd wearing heavy makeup....[There needs to be a] ban to suppress these disturbances. Do not delay. Follow this order urgently.”

The relationship between the ‘divine snake’ and *chuma xian* practice should be explained. The divine snake is a godlike figure who appears to treat illnesses directly (though perhaps with the help of human assistants) whereas in *chuma xian*, the animal gods treat illnesses indirectly through possessing disciples (the mediums). Despite this distinction, these practices can be seen as a related. The interactions between the animal gods and humans have evolved over time, and the animal gods have progressively become less visible in their physical form, transforming into more mysterious and god like beings. In Ji Yun’s records from the Qing dynasty, foxes are animals from whom people kept a relatively safe distance. In Li Weizu’s

fieldwork on the Four Great Clans, it is shown that physical animals were visible and caused both prosperity and damage during the Republican period. The above decree dates from the same period wherein physical animal gods were typically considered visible.

The practice of worshipping gods in their animal form and praying for medicine lasted at least until the 1980s. Medium #2's experience shows a clear link and a path between praying for medicine and current *chuma xian* practice. She recounted that she prayed for medicine for herself and for others a few times before entering mediumship. She said there were a few locations near her village which people claimed were haunted by divine foxes around the late 1970s and early 1980s. The ways in which people prayed directly to these animal gods for medicine were fairly uniform but with minor variations. People typically bring a bowl to places where foxes or other divine animals were known to appear, and they kneel down and pray. Inside the bowl there can be alcohol, water or even nothing and over the bowl there can be a piece of red cloth. Prayers consist simply of descriptions about the worshipper's needs and wishes for the gods to help them. The first time Medium #2 prayed to these gods was for her own illness. She said she saw a divine fox come and spit a grain-shaped alchemical elixir into her bowl, which contained alcohol. She drank this liquid and her illness was healed. She returned a few times to pray for medicine for her acquaintances and the god eventually followed her home with the intention of making her into a disciple.

Medium #2 believes that there are two reasons for the conversion from praying directly to gods for medicine to the medium-based practice of *chuma xian*. One of them was the government: local police sometimes arrested people for praying for medicine in the 1980s. This

period was only a few years after the Cultural Revolution ended, when implementations of anti-religious prohibitions were harsher than the above decrees from the earlier Republican period. The second reason according to Medium #2 is that when divine animals (the gods) follow a pilgrim home and make her a medium, people can start to go to the mediums for an immediate and more guaranteed form of help instead of going to a remote place and hoping — sometimes fruitlessly — that a divine animal will appear. For people who need divine help, obtaining it through mediums is a much more convenient approach. Furthermore, government prohibitions forced believers to move shamanistic practices indoors, where they can be more easily concealed. Thus, as suggested by Medium #2, the government was likely responsible for both the rising popularity and prosperity of the *chuma xian* practice, in ways that they did not anticipate.

It is also worth noting in regard to the above decree that the reason for banning the praying for medicine from the divine snake was not primarily because this was perceived as a fraudulent practice or that it was seen to promote superstition. Rather, the main objection had to do with the crowds of people scrambling to pray and the resultant traffic congestion and boisterousness, as well as the suggestion that this attracted prostitutes who lurked amongst the crowd. These concerns about traffic congestion is not unique to the Liaodong case, as revealed by Elliott's (1955) studies of the social and political context of Chinese mediumship in Singapore. There, he notes that the British administration almost completely tolerated spirit mediumship. The only exception to this tolerance was that the British rulers restrained some processions and large gatherings in order to control traffic. The vivid depiction of the crowds in the above 1929 decree shows the immense popularity of the divine snake. The prohibition did

not erase such practices entirely as they were clearly still happening up through the 1980s.

During the periodic government anti-crime campaigns²⁴ in the 1990s, both Medium #3 and Medium #4 were visited by local government officials. Medium #3 was visited by the local police. She was obliged to explain her mediumship and what kind of services she provided. She told the police that she performed massage for people with injuries without charging money. Medium #4 was asked how she became a medium and what exactly she performed. She said she told the government clerks the truth about her practice. Neither of them was given any trouble or harassed by the government as a result of their explanations. Medium #3 was visited again two years ago (2011) by local cultural administrative clerks who were compiling accounts of local cultural activities, and the *chuma xian* practice was to be potentially treated as part of the local cultural heritage. As of the completion of this thesis, these studies have not yet been published and it is unclear whether *chuma xian* will be included in them.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I found that contemporary mediums fear journalists much more than the government. This is because they run their services indoors and there are no public gatherings or processions of any kind as part of contemporary *chuma xian* practice. They are conscious that the government generally will not bother them as long as they do not disturb social order. However, mediums make money through their services and journalists in contemporary China are charged with disclosing immoral business practices, an accusation sometimes directed at the mediums. Thus, I was mostly suspected of being a journalist by

²⁴ referred to as *yanda* 嚴打 (hard strikes).

mediums who I had not met before, and as such they tried to avoid talking about money or business in their conversations with me.

Overall, the relationship between the government and *chuma xian* practitioners has always been one of suppression and resistance. The government oversees and officially prohibits the practice while the mediums try to conduct their work underground and to be careful when dealing with the government (primarily being cautious about who they talk to and what information they provide). However, this suppression-resistance relationship is rather loose and no severe incidents or crackdowns are known to have happened. However, as Robert Weller notes in *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* (1994), there are two kinds of resistance that challenge the hegemony and dominant ideology of the Chinese government: the radical kind which can take the form of subversive armed peasant rebellions, and the other of mildly rebellious individual actions. He states that rather than interpreting these two kinds of resistance separately as has typically been done, they should be treated as part of a single continuum with distinctive approaches in their manners of rebellion, because “armed rebellion [has] clear cultural roots, and cultural resistance [has] at least the possibility of coming out of the closet as an actual political movement” (1994, p.3). Weller highlights three different instances of resistance — the Taiping Rebellion, Taiwanese ghost cults and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations — to demonstrate that these three events shared important features early, although their denouements later developed quite differently.

Weller’s theory on the reasons for resistance, especially in his analysis of Taiwanese ghost cults, can be applied to the *chuma xian* practice as well. Weller first demonstrates the

failure of (any) government's attempts to provide a unified interpretation of the messy religious system. He then notes that from the beginning of the Republic of China (now confined to Taiwan), Nationalist leaders were dedicated modernizers who tried to impose rationality and science and to eliminate "superstition." Thus, in a manner not dissimilar to the mainland, the Taiwanese government identified the "true" religions, such as Buddhism. As a result, the ghost cult became a form of resistance in response to the nationalist state's failure at providing a broad-based interpretation of what religion can or should be.

According to Weller, the similarity between the three events that he uses as examples is that they were all caused by the tensions between "a single true interpretation" on the part of the government and uncontrolled multiple interpretive possibilities on the part of the resisters. The interactions and tensions between these two opposing kinds of interpretation gave rise to resistance movements. The tension achieves saturation, becoming unbearable, which enables the potential to resist. It is here that the form of resistance may diverge and take a more radical or subdued form. The *chuma xian* mediums, when visited by the local government clerks, use strategies of rhetoric in order to present themselves as givers of help or curators of cultural remnants. They cope with state regulations, as there is no clear definition as to how they ought to behave as religious practitioners, yet they still embody resistance in the way that they continue to conduct their services according to what the clients need in possible breach of the law.

WOMEN AND MEDIUMSHIP

Both the mediums and the clients in *chuma xian* practice are almost exclusively women.

All the mediums interviewed for this thesis were women, whereas for the clients, there were only three men. Of the three male clients, only one visited the medium voluntarily, whereas the other two were brought to mediums by their mothers at a young age. These women's struggle with and negotiation for power can help us understand this phenomenon.

Lewis (1971) stresses in *Ecstatic Religion* that shamanism, including possession and “mythical flight,” is a social rather than a cultural phenomenon. By doing this, he manages to interpret the role Shamanism plays along gender and social class lines. He thus answers questions about which social categories of people are most vulnerable to spirits, and what social consequences follow from this” as well as “how the character of possessing spirits relates to the social circumstances of the possessed” (xiii). He divides shamanism into two forms: peripheral possession and central possession. Peripheral possession can be defined by social class and gender: people of lower social rank are subject to societal pressures that give rise to the phenomenon of spirit possession. He argues that in male-dominant societies, women and other people of lower or marginalized status seek to belong to their own group and thus develop their own organizations and rituals within which they will not be of such a low status.

Lewis points out that the female-dominated movements of spirit possession cannot be interpreted “as the reflection of an inherent, and biologically grounded female disposition to hysteria” (90). Hence, his argument is that these movements are not restricted to women, but rather are restricted on the grounds of social class. This implies that Lewis still interprets the movements, which he refers to as “ritualized rebellion,” as being constituted to some extent by a form of self-deception on the part of people who do not wield major social power.

Lewis' analysis is helpful for understanding reasons why women are dominant in *chuma xian* practice. However, they are problematic insofar as he takes a naturalistic perspective and makes certain assumptions. For example, he makes psychological determinations about aspects of shamanism in the preface to the third edition, wherein he relates spirit possession and trances to multiple personality disorder (MPD), a viewpoint which Eliade strongly disagrees with. Yet, this kind of psychoanalysis is embedded in Lewis's sociological interpretations. Thus, Lewis over-determines the sociological interpretation of shamanism.

However, if we look beyond the assumptions that spirit possession is a psychological or deceptive practice, there are other explanations: demands for medical treatment are one, as in Lin Fushi's *Jibing zhongjiezh: zhongguo zaoqi de Daojiao yixue* 疾病終結者：中國早期的道教醫學 (Terminators of Diseases: Daoist Medicine in Early China), for example. Female-dominated phenomena can also be explained as representative of long-running gendered labor divisions, where men engage in physical labor outside the home and women work at home.

That said, it should be noted that *chuma xian* practice, along with other practices, provides a way for the women to help and support each other and to negotiate control over their lives by taking actions that can make a difference for themselves and others. Female clients with lower income and education represent the majority of those in need of healing, who seek to change their health and living conditions by visiting a medium. Yet, clients with higher income and education were more common in this study than in the past. In contemporary China where demographic change takes place drastically and rapidly, people of differing socio-economic backgrounds frequently worry about their future. In fact, many functionalist analyses have construed divination and

fortune telling as a very prevalent way for people (mostly women) to conceive of their futures, and make aspirations for the future.

Client #9 and #10 are both wives of rich men and they consulted a medium about their husbands' businesses. Client #9's husband was selling their real estate property to the government and she asked to know what the best bid would be. Client #10's husband has a transportation business and the couple had recently invested in a kindergarten, so she asked for advice about operational strategies. She also asked whether she could trust the manager that she and her husband had hired. The medium said that the manager was fairly reliable and trustworthy after asking about her *shengxiao* 生肖²⁵ and suggested that the couple should offer special training classes in English and dance. These two clients both took notes about what the medium said to them and told me that they heard that she had a positive reputation and as such, they would do what she suggested. These women, by visiting the mediums, also sought to assist their husbands and play a more important role in decision-making within the structure of their family.

For the female mediums, as previously mentioned, they generally feel that they are protected by the gods and this subsequently endows mediums with confidence and empowers them to withstand negative occurrences without fear.

In the roles of both medium and client, *chuma xian* allows women to build up their own social, spiritual worlds or societies, worlds that exist independently of masculine forces and success as determined by the patriarchal world order and hierarchy. The practice allows women to construct their own identity and community as well as forming their own societal rules. Within

²⁵ The animal of a person's birth year in the Chinese Zodiac

this constructed community, these women support each other through the *chuma xian* practice.

Baptandier's (2008) *The Lady of Linshui: A Chinese Female Cult* also touches upon these questions of women supporting each other and issues of challenging the dominant male-centered ideology. In this work, Chen Jinggu's (ca. 767~792) vow before her death is to become a goddess who protects women and children, represents a compromise between feminism and the values of Confucian society. At the beginning of the story, Chen Jinggu flees her marriage and travels to Mount Lü where she learns her Daoist and shamanic magical repertoire. This runs contrary to the Confucian value of filial piety, which obliges her to play a role as a daughter, wife and mother, as well as fulfilling other feminine duties. Yet in the end, Chen becomes a woman tasked with protecting other women in fulfilling their roles. There are also other instances wherein Chen failed her own duty as a woman but resulted in helping other women. For example, in order to pacify demons, Chen practices the magic of "liberating her fetus in order to pray for rain" (*tuotai qiyü* 墮胎求雨) and dies from this act, but goes on to become a goddess who can protect more fetuses after her own death.

Baptandier answers her question of what it means to be 'a woman in China' in her conclusion, noting that both Chen Jinggu and her medium Xie Fuzhu are examples that the idea of women as full partners in liturgical Daoism, constituting "half the sky", exists only in an imaginary and not real sense (262). In practice, women fulfill their roles by giving birth to sons in a patrilineal system. Yet, if escape is necessary, they can choose to become mediums and shamans. This study of women and shamanism, although from a different time period and location (Fujian, Southeast China) reconciles with the gender issues put forward in *chuma xian*

practice.

CHAPTER 4 – SERVICES AND SUSTAINABILITY

The previous chapters have discussed the past formation and the present characteristics of *chuma xian* practice. This chapter focuses on explaining why and how the *chuma xian* practice can survive despite political pressure and accusations of heterodoxy. I will first discuss the main services that the mediums provide for the community, including exorcism, healing and advising, highlighting that to a great extent, these services function as alternatives to medical and psychological care for the clients. The mediums adjust these services in terms of both form and contents, to fit their customers' needs, which is one of the two key reasons for the survival of their practices. The second half of this section will explore the interactions between *chuma xian* and the dominant religions, namely Buddhism and Daoism, thus demonstrating that the close interactions with these religions within a syncretic ensemble of ritual practices is another reason for the contemporary prosperity of the *chuma xian* practice.

MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE

The use of exorcism and magical healing as an alternative form of medical care can be traced back more than a thousand years in Chinese history, and examples from my fieldwork show that this is still true in contemporary China. Lin (2001) depicts epidemics as a driving force in the development and rise of Daoism in early medieval China because they stimulated demands among the population for medical and religious treatment. According to Lin, other interrelated factors such as climatic variation, famine, war and migration were all additionally responsible for the expansion of Daoism and shamanic healing practices. Lin's theory is similar to Baptandier's

view that the demands for gynecological help gave rise to the cult of The Lady By the Side of the Water (Linshui furen), although neither of them explain how these systems have been maintained when the conditions which gave rise to religious healing have since disappeared and competitive replacements, such as modern medical care, have surfaced. The explanation for this, which I discovered in my fieldwork, was that healing and exorcism are popular in communities where medical care is insufficient and less accessible.

Client #1 was diagnosed with multiple myeloma — a cancer of plasma cells — in late March 2013, during my fieldwork. I met her three times over the course of my fieldwork and she mentioned neck pain in early January. She visited local mediums to seek advice and healing, and was advised to burn paper money for her dead relatives as well as unknown ghosts. Visiting mediums was the primary way that Client #1 treats illnesses. Her behavior and choices to pursue treatment through mediums can be understood with some contextual background information. She does not and did not have medical insurance or any other kind of social benefits, and the hospital charges were more than she could afford to examine her illness. Furthermore, she lives in a small town where locals do not often trust the hospitals and doctors. In fact, her cancer was diagnosed in a larger city where her sister lives. She would only go to the hospital in the larger city because her sister was there to provide room and board. Yet, even the best hospital in this larger city was not able to treat her cancer and she had to go further to Shenyang, the capital city of Liaoning Province, to get treatment. Thus, it is not difficult to understand that she would hope that simply burning paper money could relief her neck pain and that she could avoid all the hassles of travel and more importantly, prices she was unable to pay. As a result of her formal

medical treatment, her son and daughter are heavily in debt, and it will take years for them to pay back what was borrowed. Hence, it seems reasonable for many people in positions similar to that of Client #1 to take a chance by trying exorcism along with other simple approaches suggested by the mediums, as the alternatives are beyond what they can reasonably access.

The following section will introduce the *chuma xian* practices of exorcism, healing and advising separately, discussing their functions and implications accordingly.

Exorcism

Some clients initially approach a medium to seek an exorcism, but more often they come with requests to help cure an illness or to obtain advice and later turn out to need an exorcism. They may have been accidentally possessed by evil spirits or the ghosts of people who died unjustly, or they may be more intentionally haunted by dead ancestors or acquaintances. The symptoms experienced by possessed patients normally are said to reflect the cause of the possessor's death. For instance, if the deceased person drowned, the possessed would feel cold and have difficulty breathing.

Sometimes mediums do perform the ritual of exorcism themselves, but more often they advise their patients of the need for the procedure and ask them to have their family members carry out the exorcism. The instruction typically goes as follows: the person performing the exorcism takes a piece of paper ghost money²⁶ and encircles the patient three times clockwise and three times counterclockwise while the patient is lying down. Next, the paper must be pulled

²⁶ A kind of brown paper purposely made to burn for the dead and other spirits. People believe that the burnt paper will be delivered to the afterlife and that their ancestors can receive this paper as money.

from toe to head as if leading a spirit out of the patient. Then, the exorcist must take the piece of paper with more paper money on it, go outside, find a crossroad and burn it there. The exorcism commonly takes place in the dark and the person who goes out to burn the paper should not come back directly after the burning. They should wander around for about half an hour before returning home and should not talk to anyone during the event. The amount of paper money to be burned is decided by the ghost's needs (communicated to the patient by the medium), their relationship with the patient and the potential damage they can cause. Sometimes paper money is not sufficient and patients need to create paper *yuanbao* 元寶²⁷ (folded ingots) with gold and/or silver paper.

The rationale for the ritual is centered upon sending money to hungry ghosts and dead acquaintances so that they can live a comfortable life in the afterworld without needing to bother the living. Burning paper money for gods, ghosts and ancestors has been a long tradition in China which can be traced back to as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907).²⁸ Most commonly, the Chinese burn paper money during Chinese New Year and the ghost festival; it is not a practice initiated by *chuma xian*, and instead it represents an example of the *chuma xian* following a more widespread, popular practice in their exorcism techniques.

The *chuma xian* and people who trust and follow them believe that some people are inherently easier to possess than others. The most common reason for this is that the ghosts know that certain people are kind-hearted and are more predisposed to sending them money or

²⁷ A boat-shaped gold or silver ingot that was used as Chinese currency until the 20th century.

²⁸ Feng Yan's *Fengshi wenjian ji: zhiqian* 封氏聞見記•紙錢.

attending to their needs. Certainly, when people are informed that they are possessed by a ghost, the reasoning that this occurs because they are kind-hearted makes them more inclined to believe in the possession. I personally have had an exorcism, once in high school. I suffered from a major headache after arriving home from school, which could have been the symptom of a cold, yet a medium later identified it to be caused by possession by a spirit. The aforementioned exorcism was performed on me and my headache was relieved afterwards.

Client #8 experienced a different exorcism ritual. Eighteen years ago, at age fourteen, he could not walk for about ten days. His mother took him to a medium who explained that it was a possession by his grandfather, who missed him so much that he came from the underworld to visit his grandson. In addition to burning paper money, the medium asked Client #8's mother to burn a piece of brown paper, put the ashes in a bowl, and let the boy drink it, which is a similar practice to Daoists burning a *fu* 符 (talisman) and mixing it with water. The boy, now a thirty-two year-old scientist, recalls that his legs were better after drinking the ash-laced water.

Client #2 is a thirty-year old married woman. She did not go to the medium with an appeal for an exorcism. However, the medium she visited seemed to make speculations suggesting that an exorcism was necessary. The medium asked whether the client had a family member who had died prematurely. The client showed a blank look, so the medium commented that it might not necessarily be the death of a family member and that it could be a relative or friend. Client #2 then told the medium that she had a close friend from high school who died ten years ago. The medium then told her that the soul of that boy never left her and the presence of his soul in her life had been causing quarrels between the client and her husband. The medium

advised Client #2 to burn some paper money to send the boy away. Client #2 told me that she was convinced by the medium, because she *did* periodically quarrel with her husband and she was still sorrowful about the loss of her close friend. However, she became a little skeptical of the medium after her husband's provided an analysis indicating that the medium merely asked everything by making speculations and subsequently adjusted the story to match the client's responses. Nevertheless, she underwent the exorcism anyway and it provided relief to the client.

Besides possession by evil spirits, the under-served dead and ancestors, there is another kind of spirit contact that clients sometimes need help with. As mentioned in the introduction, Jean DeBernardi (2006) outlines two possible types of contact with a spirit: offence and collision. The solution for offending a deity or spirit is to make an offering, whereas the solution for collision with a spirit is exorcism. The above mentioned cases are all instances of collisions, but in the *chuma xian* practice, causing offence against the gods is very common, especially in rural areas where more animals can be seen in everyday life and each animal could be a god. Many husbands of the mediums interviewed had offended the gods when the mediums were sick before entering mediumship. The gods use illnesses to tame the mediums and to coerce them into mediumship, but in many cases the mediums' husbands are atheists who do not believe in the *chuma xian* practice and sometimes condemn it, which would obviously be offensive to the gods. Medium #1's husband once destroyed the shrine's incense burner after arguing with Medium #1 and was hit by a bus later that day. Fortunately, the bus just had left a stop at a low speed so that he was not injured, but he was quite shocked. The senior medium who helped Medium #1 to set up the altar told Medium #1's husband that his accident was the gods' punishment on him, but he

could not be convinced until similar incidents had befallen him a few more times.

There are also people who offend the gods accidentally by (for example) urinating on the burrow of snake or hurting a weasel, because some of these animals could be gods. Depending on the gods' tempers and the extent to which they were offended, they punish people to varying degrees. When such people seek help from mediums, mediums will tell them where their illnesses or misfortunes stem from and can advise them to apologize and to make reparative offerings to the gods.

Healing

Some people visit the mediums to treat illnesses, sometimes because they have no other accessible medical option and sometimes because no other treatment has worked out. Typically, in rural areas with fewer medical resources available, people more commonly choose to see mediums directly and earlier in an illness, whereas in larger urban areas, people typically go to the hospital first and those who face continuous or chronic problems seek help from the mediums. When meeting new patients, mediums first identify the nature of an illness: whether they suffer from *shibing* 實病 (literally “real disease”, implying an illness that should be or can be treated medically.) or *xubing* 虛病 (literally an unreal or imaginary disease, implying a malady caused by the presence of (a) spirit/s). Again, there are similarities and parallels with DeBernardi’s (2006) account of Chinese mediumship in Malaysia here. She notes that unlike some charismatic Christian healers who claim that they can heal any illness, the Chinese mediums distinguish between illnesses caused by physical problems and those stemming from spiritual means before

they will offer treatment. If the illness is not caused by an individual offending the spirits or colliding with a spirit, they will ask patients to see a doctor and seek medical treatment. Then, if the illness is *xubing*, the *chuma xian* advise the patient on how to perform an exorcism or sometimes perform it themselves, or else the medium will write a talisman for the patient.

However, the *chuma xian* differ with regards to one approach: unlike the Chinese Malaysian mediums, the *chuma xian* divide *shibing* into two categories, one of which they can treat. If the patients have cancer, heart disease, thrombosis, or other serious problems that pose a more immediate risk, *chuma xian* mediums will still ask the client to go to the hospital. However, many mediums accept clients with injuries and orthopedic cases and they often use alcohol to heal these. Medium #2 recounts that she once had a patient who experienced extreme pain in his waist and back, and arrived in a stretcher carried by others. She explained that her gods massaged him with burning alcohol²⁹ for a short while and the patient was then capable of walking home by himself in the end. Medium #1 has a similar case, where a patient who arrived with a distorted or dislocated ankle and the gods were so eager to heal the man that she became possessed as soon as she set eyes upon the patient. She reached out her hand for the patient's afflicted heel and the heel was set back in its normal place the moment she touched it. Client #7 recalls that as a child, he once fell off during a horse ride and injured his arm seriously. The wound on his left arm was about eight inches long and deep enough that he could see an exposed bone. His parents took him to see a medium immediately after the fall. The medium took a mouthful of alcohol and sprayed it on his arm a few times and then used two pieces of wood to

²⁹ Alcohol in a bowl that has been lit on fire.

stabilize and fix the arm, and then followed this up by wrapping the wound up in gauze. He returned to the medium a few times and allowed her to spray alcohol on his arm until he was fully healed. Like the drinking of paper ashes mentioned earlier, this “alcohol-spray” technique is not isolated to the *chuma xian* practice either: *qigong* masters in China as well as some charismatic Christian healers in the West also utilize this technique.

Advising

Over the past decade, the majority of the mediums' clients have shifted from seeking exorcisms and healing to asking for advice. I find advising is a more suitable term for this service than terminology with magical connotations such as divination, fortune-telling or "future foreseeing", as clients ask about matters in a very broad scope. From the progress of their children's studies to adults' careers and marriages, clients consult mediums concerning a variety of issues about which they need to make a decision or take action. The mediums ask for the Chinese astrological sign(s) of the person(s) (both the client and others who are playing a part in the issues at hand) as a basis for giving advice. Some mediums also ask for a picture of the person who the clients seek advice for if they are not present. Almost all the *chuma xian* share a procedure in common with the Manchu Nisan Shaman: they mention information about their clients from the past and present before going on to speak about their recommendations for the future. The step is apparently an attempt to convince clients of the mediums' power. Both the *chuma xian* and the Nisan Shaman say to their clients that “if what I said is right, it's right. If it's wrong, you can tell me it's wrong. You don't need to fake it.” (Zhao, 1988).

The most straightforward advice people seek is counsel for an auspicious day or major event in a client's life, such as a wedding, the laying of the foundation of a house, and moving days. These are referred to as the “ecliptic auspicious days” (*huangdao jiri* 黄道吉日) which are related to Chinese astrology. Each year, an astrological calendar is published, (in modern times, this calendar is available online). People who follow and believe in Chinese astrology consult the calendar for relatively minor events such as traveling by air, but with regards to dates for rites of passage or a risky event such as major surgery, many people trust mediums more. Mediums #3 and #4 claimed that everyone in their village has consulted one of them about the date of a wedding and for laying the foundation of a house. I observed Client #9 consulting a medium about whether her husband's heart disease was *shibing* (a true illness). The medium answered without hesitation that it was *shibing* and it required surgery. Hence, Client #9 went on to ask about the best time for this surgery, and the medium answered “this year is the year of the dragon,³⁰ it is not good. I would say the beginning of the year of the snake.” At this point in time, it was the final month of the year of the dragon, therefore the medium was suggesting sometime around the following month was an auspicious time for the surgery. However, instead of saying this explicitly, mediums generally speak in astrological/calendrical terms.

Some people visit mediums having already made their decisions, so what they seek is merely reassurance. However, mediums do not always reassure clients of what they would like to hear. Client #6 is a dermatological doctor who visited a medium ten years ago for a consultation about her daughter's upcoming marriage. The medium suggested that the couple would not be

³⁰ The Chinese Zodiac consists of a twelve-year cycle with twelve animals in a fixed order; each animal is associated with a year.

happy together, that the marriage would probably end in divorce, leaving years before the girl's remarriage. Although this instilled doubt in her mind, Client #6 did not force her daughter to cancel the wedding on the basis of the medium's advice. However, the couple went on to divorce two years later. It is presently eight years since the divorce and the girl is still unmarried. In retrospect, Client #6 said she regrets not taking the medium's advice, but recognizes that only in hindsight.

A number of young educated professional women in their twenties and early thirties make one-time visits to the mediums out of curiosity and anxiety. These young women have been taught to be naturalistic Marxists at school and most of them do not have any overt religious orientation. Thus, the *chuma xian* is mystical and mysterious to them and they come out of curiosity about a practice that they never experienced, although they are more critical than the older generations about the effectiveness and power of the mediums and their gods. Client #5 is one of these young professionals: a thirty year-old educated woman with a decent job, she has had a hard time finding a husband. She informed me that many women her age worry about becoming "spinsters" (*lao chunü* 老處女) because men of their age are typically looking for younger women. She visited a medium and asked if and when she could or would find a husband. The medium answered affirmatively but noted that she still will have to wait a while and counseled her to be more active herself. Client #5 doubted the medium's accuracy but nonetheless tried to take more initiative in the following months and had greater faith that she would succeed.

Client #4 is a Caucasian college student from North America on a one-year exchange

program in China. Similar to Client #5, she visited a medium mostly out of curiosity. She sought some reassurance regarding uncertainties and changes she was facing. She rationalized her visit by reasoning that if a stranger could tell her whether certain choices are right or wrong, believing it would allow her not to think too much about them. Client #3, who is a thirty-three year-old women with a master's degree, had a similar outlook on visiting a medium, stating that "you know what you should do, but it works better when someone authoritative tells you."

The above examples indicate a psychological consulting function of the *chuma xian* practice. In fact, *chuma xian* is not the only shamanic practice that assumes this function. Ingerman (Morris, 1987) has demonstrated new forms of psychological healing that shamanism in the contemporary world can provide when people are stressed and have minimal access to nature. Malinowski argues that shamanic rituals "gave religion a positive psychological function and implied that [this function] was universal and necessary" (Morris, 1987, p. 149). This applies to the *chuma xian* practice, as the contemporary status quo of Chinese society allows this form of mediumship the opportunity to meet the demands of psychological consultation. With the enormous population in China and the rapid development of the economy, the younger generation is experiencing pressure, stress and anxiety at levels that they have never encountered before. In spite of this, the concept of treatment for mental health and illness is lacking, therefore proper consultation or treatment for depression, anxiety, and similar disorders are either inaccessible and/or considered unacceptable to most people. Such hostile conditions for mental healthcare make *chuma xian* valuable in the context of modern Chinese society.

DAOISM AND BUDDHISM

Buddhism, Daoism and other Chinese popular religious traditions have been interacting and syncretizing since the age of early medieval China³¹. It is impossible to separate these practices completely from each other because each religion features elements that overlap with the others. Most Chinese religious practitioners tend to practice a mix of the above religions as part of a repertoire of Chinese religious customs. Thus, it is not surprising that most mediums and clients of the *chuma xian* practice claim themselves to be Buddhists.

This phenomenon of cross-religious identification is consistent with Elliott's (1955) discussion on the position of spirit mediumship within Chinese religion in his text *Chinese Spirit-medium Cults in Singapore*. To most people of Chinese descent in Singapore, sectarian differentiation is not important and thus they are often confused when asked what religion they follow (p. 35). Many claim to be Buddhists, and very few claim to be Daoists. Despite this, the gods whom a self-identified Buddhist worships are not necessarily Buddhist figures. The worshipper refers to his/her process of praying as *baishen* 拜神 (worshipping the gods). This brings to mind my own discussions with Christians in a small town in Northeast China, who also referred to God and Jesus as *shen*.

Although indigenous "shenism," shamanism and/or mediumship hold positions at the core of the Chinese belief system, Chinese people across time and geographic distance tend to choose specific titles or labels for their beliefs. These self-identifying labels can be either Buddhist, Daoist, or Christian, and are usually used to show obedience to government

³¹ See Mollier (2008): *Buddhism and Taoism face to face: Scripture, ritual, and iconographic exchange in medieval China*.

regulations and definitions surrounding religion, concerns about social class status, or other agendas they may have.

In fact, social stratification within religious practice is more important and more apparent than the schism(s) between different religions. Since syncretism is so overwhelmingly widespread in Chinese society and the types of religious practices of Chinese practitioners are not defined by discrete religious categories, it is more sensible and informative to highlight religious differences according to social and economic status. For instance, as previously discussed, clients from different social strata visit the *chuma xian*, and the reasons for their visits can be explained and interpreted with regard to their social status.

Davis (2001) thoroughly demonstrates that social stratification overrules religious schisms in his discussion of Song (960-1279) society and its interactions with religious life. Through examination primarily of the anecdotes in Hong Mai's (1123-1202) *Yijianzhi* 夷堅志 (*Record of Hearsay*), along with some Daoist canonical texts, Davis illustrates in a unique manner how the practice of spirit-possession interacted with and penetrated Buddhism, Daoism and the everyday life of all Chinese social classes, and how it reshaped society. He does not separate the religious realm into religious categories predicated upon definitive titles such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and local religious practice. Instead, he divides religious life into three groups according to social class. Confucian scholars, Daoist priests and Buddhist monks inhabit the top class. Itinerant Daoists, esoteric Buddhist monks, and the Confucian scholars who passed civil examinations yet did not hold an official post constitute the middle group. The lower group consists of village-based spirit mediums, Buddhist acolytes,

sub-bureaucratic servicemen, and so forth. Davis notes that “at times the tensions between the three hierarchically arranged groups can and will be drawn along urban and rural lines, at other times along the lines of state and local society, or along those of written and martial culture” (2001, p.7).

Davis selects one vertical strand from this religious net based upon Daoism, which consists of three elements from each one of his hierarchical groups: Daoist priests (*daoshi* 道士), itinerant Daoists (*fashi* 法師), and spirit-mediums. The link between spirit-possession and other local religious approaches including shamanistic practices with Daoism is established by Strickmann (Davis, 2011, p.11), who refers to these approaches as a “nameless” religion to which Daoism owes many of its practices. Davis demolishes the view that Daoism and Buddhism have declined and succumbed to an overarching orthodox ideology of Neo-Confucianism since the Song dynasty, highlighting how powerful grass-roots supernatural practices have been, and how influential they are within every social class.

Lin (2001) also foregrounds the interactions between shamanism and other Chinese religions. Although Confucian scholars throughout history criticized certain shamanic techniques as evil, records exist to prove that some eminent Daoist masters did not refrain from applying them. For example, Gu Huan 顧歡 (430-493) used the shaman talisman to treat disease (p.140). This is consistent with Davis’s conclusion that in Song China shamanism permeated all other aspects of Chinese religious life.

This mutual influence has lasted into the contemporary era, where the *chuma xian* practice continues to be intertwined with Buddhism and Daoism. For my research, I visited

Qianshan Mountain, the location of a dozen Daoist and Buddhist temples and monasteries, and found that the patriarch and the matriarch of the *chuma xian*'s gods — Third Great Grandfather Fox (*Hu San Taiye* 胡三太爷) and Third Great Grandmother Fox (*Hu San Tainai* 胡三太奶) — are enshrined in some of the Daoist temples (Figure 4). When enquiring about the reason why the fox gods are enshrined there, the Daoist priests explained that Third Great Grandfather Fox and Third Great Grandmother Fox are the Dhama Guards (*hufa* 護法) of Daoism in Northeast China. Interestingly, my research extended this overlap even further, as Medium #1 and Medium #2 both said that the two fox gods are the Dhama Guards of Buddhism in Northeast China.

With regards to the relationship between *chuma xian* and Buddhism, beyond the fact that mediums often claim themselves to be Buddhists, they also often suggest that non-Buddhist clients procure statues of Buddhas (most commonly Amitābha Buddha, but also Shakyamuni Buddha) and Bodhisattvas (mostly Avalokiteśvara, referred to as Guanyin in China) for their homes and worship spaces. They suggest that this will help clients to gain merit and enhance their good fortunes.

One further religious practice that is interrelated with the *chuma xian* practice is the household guard gods (*baojiaxian* 保家仙), which is the shamanistic equivalent of the *chuma xian* practice. This is mostly observed in the countryside, but there are some practitioners in cities and urban centres. The pantheon is the same, but the worship is limited to god statues and does not involve mediumship. Figure 5 shows Client #1's home shrine where she worships both the household guard gods and Buddhist and Daoist deities. The similarities and overlap in the household guard gods practice reinforces its followers' faith in the *chuma xian*. The *chuma xian*

practice can also serve as a catalyst for the expansion of the household guard gods practice, because sometime mediums will suggest that their clients worship the animal gods at home.

While interactions and overlap with other religious practices benefits the sustainability of the *chuma xian* practice, rendering it more accessible, the mediums also adjust their own services to meet the needs and traditions of their clients. As discussed earlier, contemporary mediums provide more advising services, acting as mentors or counselors. DeBernardi (2006) also illustrates that Chinese mediums in Malaysia are taking on a more diverse range of roles. She provides a detailed account of how a medium, while possessed by a god, teaches clients about Buddhist philosophy, Daoist cultivation and Confucian concepts of filial piety. DeBernardi also notes from four case studies how the spirit mediums have been progressively transforming the structure of their own religious traditions as well as their mediumship practice itself through their engagements with clients and disciples.

CHAPTER 5 – LOCATING *CHUMA XIAN* WITHIN CHINESE RELIGION AND WORLD SHAMANISM

As we have gained insight into the *chuma xian* practice from various perspectives, we can not only garner an overall understanding of its function, vitality and contingency, but also use the *chuma xian* practice as an anchor to redefine and to better understand shamanism in a broader context. This thesis will conclude with an examination of the significant role that local history and identity play in the *chuma xian* practice.

Redefining Shamanism

The criteria with which I would choose to redefine shamanism are consistent with those of Heinze (1988), which addresses not only the details of shamanic practice, but also the wider functions and roles of the shaman. Heinze states that shamans and mediums are individuals who meet three criteria: they provide services for a community that would otherwise not be available, they mediate between the spiritual and the secular worlds, and they enter alternate states of consciousness. The last criterion relates to the debate discussed in the first chapter, which questions whether shamanism is constituted purely by mythical traveling or whether it can also incorporate possession by spirits. In her research, Heinze notes that most mediums can both go on a mystical flight and call a spirit into their body. This point matches with the earlier observation that traveling to other mystical worlds is merely another technique of a medium, in the same vein as writing a talisman or expelling an evil spirit from a patient. Heinze stresses that her definitions do not include individuals who occasionally enter different states of

consciousness at certain festivals, such as firewalkers, whom she would deem to be shamanistic practitioners.

Functionalism and Structuralism

Catherine Bell (1997) is one of the scholars who studies religious rituals most extensively and the following parts of the conclusion will draw upon her theories. In illustrating ritual and its social function and structure, Bell starts the discussion by presenting Durkheim's sociological approach in contrast to the theories of Lowie, Radin and Malinowski. Durkheim did not consider ritual to be derived from mental or emotional states; rather, he perceives ritual as a "means by which individuals are brought together as a collective group" (Bell, 1997, p.25). He was followed in this viewpoint by his student Marcel Mauss who studied religion as a "total social phenomenon." His other followers, Hubert, Radcliffe Brown and Rappaport, also take this functional methodology, one of the major approaches to religion within sociological thought. Another useful approach that is widely used, structuralism — "an appreciation of social structure as a system of relationships connecting people or their social roles" (Bell, 1997, p.33) — is associated with scholars such as Evans-Pritchard, van Gennep, Gluckman, Turner, Levi-Strauss, and Douglas.

Both the approaches can be applied to explain the *chuma xian* practice as well as other forms of shamanism. Heinze (1988) notes that shamanism is a practical religion and that a shaman's reputation is based on his or her perceived effectiveness. This coincides with Dean's (2010) theory of efficacy within the worship of local deities in Southeast China. Heinze suggests

that this idea of effectiveness is what makes shamanism viable. Effectiveness indicates a natural selection system within shamanic practice. As Heinze notes, “inefficient and fraudulent practitioners are weeded out by the process of natural selection. When they do not produce satisfactory results, clients and entourage lose faith and leave” (1988, p.109).

Weber (Morris, 1987) construes sociology in relation to social action rather than social structure, as such, the individual is the object of his examination. His primary research on religion is concerned with the protestant ethic, and he promotes the notion of rationalization. He suggests that the study of religion should not “be set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct” (Morris, 1987, p.69). He links the differences in social class with the kinds of religion that a specific societal class favors, applying this theory to explain why Confucianism lacks ideas about salvation: because it is a religion of the literati. Daoism, on the other hand, is a religion of the artisan class, thus it has more animist, magical and other-worldly aspects.

The *chuma xian*, along with other shamanic practices, are flexible in terms of both their function and structure. This ensures the viability of the practice. As we have discussed, the services provided by *chuma xian* practitioners as well as the forms of these services has changed over time and continues to do so. In line with this, Bell (1997) notes that ritual is not an unchanging matter. Rather, it is a medium that maintains a sense of cultural continuity yet presents the changes those people and cultures are undergoing at the same time. The *chuma xian* practice has become less and less ritualized, which indicates that clients are visiting the mediums for more practical reasons. Ritual aims to inspire awe or to generate particular perceptions around a practice, so the lack of ritual (or the demise of ritual) signifies the lack of desire for

such rituals. This phenomenon can also be explained by Morris, who applies Durkheim's evolutionary approach in relation to questions of the nature of social cohesion, and refers to the Chinese *Book of Rites* as an early social interpretation of religion: "Ceremonies are the bond that hold the multitudes together, and if the bond be removed, those multitudes fall into confusion" (Morris, 1987, p.111). Thus, as the social bonds change, the practice of the *chuma xian* change.

Yang (2004) also notes that followers of the Four Great Clans prefer to define it in physical rather than spiritual terms. The process of animals becoming gods is through physical contact with humans, and the human worship of these gods stems from physical demands on the part of humans. As urbanization takes place and more medical resources become available, these "physical demands" change over time. This is evidenced by the *chuma xian*'s services changing from pure healing to a combination of healing and advising, and in modern times to predominantly providing advice rather than healing. Heinze (1988) stresses that the need for shamans, mediums and healers still exists, and this need will continue to sustain such folk practices, which are the most elementary forms of all religions.

Localization and Locality

The *chuma xian* practice is highly localized. The local features of its pantheon and various other characteristics are key factors that separate it from other forms of shamanism. Bell interprets ritual as an embodied practice, which should be analyzed and understood in the "full spectrum of ways of acting within any given culture" (1997, p.80) — in short, it is important to consider the broader context.

The sense of strong localization and locality is not merely about modifying religious practices according to local culture. In the case of *chuma xian*, the practice represents the locale as being opposed to centralized authorities. The *chuma xian* practice has been prevalent at the grassroots level and never achieved legitimacy on the state level. Hence, it represents a way through which the locals can express and exercise their power as individuals. Yang (2004) states his disagreement with Robert Redfield's theory that traditions of local and lower classes are dominated by the "great traditions" (Confucianism mostly, but also Buddhism and Daoism). Yang uses the Four Great Clans as an example to show worshippers on a local level define their own religious structures based upon their own perception of the world, without following or adhering to religious practices of the national elite regime. He aims to interpret the tension between social orders and classes and gain insight into the cult from the perspective of the practitioners themselves.

Bell (1997) points out that each ritual does not have just one symbolic meaning or function. Rather, it is an integrated way for followers and practitioners to respond to the world. The *chuma xian* practice integrates and represents the people's demands collectively in its way of addressing and responding to the world. As Heinze (1988) notes, one of the strengths of shamanism is to accommodate other religions and she shows that shamanistic practices wield a certain flexibility to absorb other thoughts and needs. She discusses how shamans accommodate other religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Daoism. She suggests that unlike the case of other religions which hesitate to make concessions to each other, this kind of accommodation does not weaken the shamanic system, because shamanic systems are not built

on a religious structure, but on social demand. Thus, shamanism is practiced both at the bottom and the top of societies where it is present. This conclusion resonates with Davis's (2001) research on medieval China as well.

This ability for shamanism to adapt and accommodate (including the *chuma xian* practice) makes it both local and global. In his article "From Cosmology to Environmentalism: Shamanism as Local Knowledge in a Global Setting," Piers Vitebsky examines the modern globalization of shamanism in both a temporal and spatial sense. He presents a juxtaposed model of a shamanism for an increasingly globalized world, which is tending to unify into a global society, and discusses the roles that removing specific cosmographical, regional knowledge plays in this process (Harvey, 2003). The senses of local and global are not contradictory but compatible in his vision of the future role of shamanism. It is such flexibility that makes shamanism globally viable and sustainable because it can accommodate other religious practices. Accommodation with other traditions helps to domesticate shamanism, tailoring it to local traditions. In this view, the *chuma xian* tradition will continue to respond to and transform in relation to globalization as well as to changes at the local level in Northeast China, while continuing to accommodate with more mainstream religious traditions.

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Figures

Figure 1: The relationships and overlaps of the characteristics shared between Siberian shamanic practice, the *chuma xian*, and shamanism in other parts of the world.

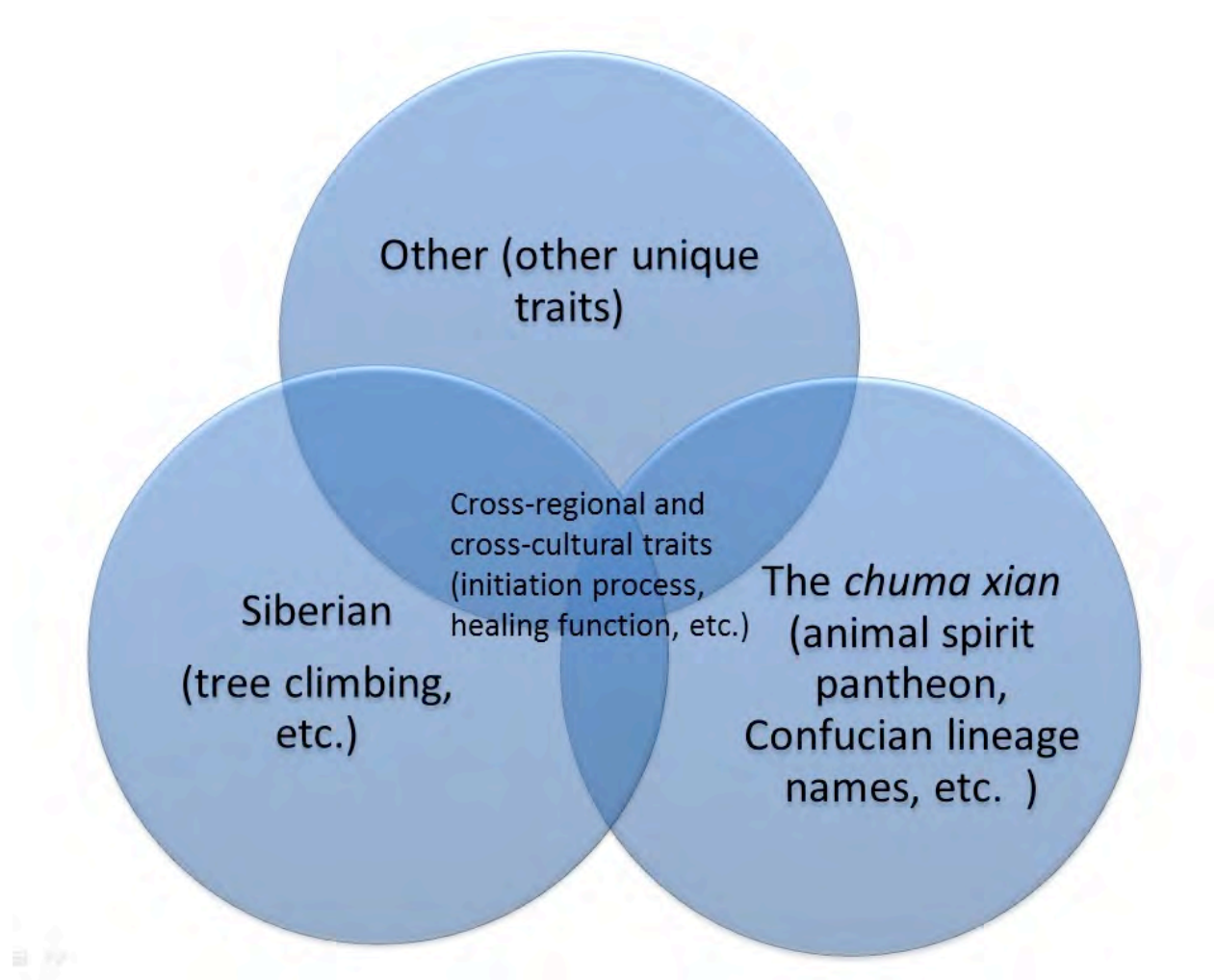


Figure 2: Mediums' food offering to their gods.



Figure 3: Small statues of Great Grand Fathers (No. 2 from the left) and Great Grand Mothers (No.1 from the left) of Foxes are sometimes found at mediums' shrines.



Figure 4: Third Great Grandfather Fox (*Hu San Taiye* 胡三太爷) and Third Great Grandmother Fox (*Hu San Tainai* 胡三太奶) enshrined in a Daoist temple in the Qianshan Mountain.



Figure 5: Client #1's home shrine where she worships both the household guard gods and Buddhist and Daoist deities.

