

宗教 人类学

陈进国◎主编

ANTHROPOLOGY
OF RELIGION
(Vol.5)



第五辑

名家特约 Special Approximations

田野现场 Field Sites

本土眼光 Local Visions

域外视野 Overseas Perspectives

思想交谈 Thought Dialogues

学术评论 Book Reviews



社会科学文献出版社
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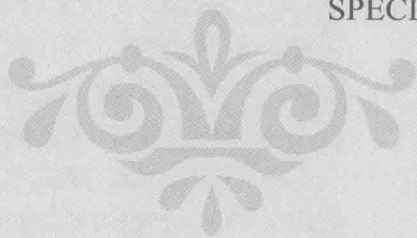
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名家特约

SPECIAL APPROXIMATIONS



Shamanism and Spirit Possession in Chinese Modernity: Some Preliminary Reflections

(美) Mayfair Yang (杨美惠)

Shamanism (巫 *wu*) in China is an archaic religious tradition tracing back to the beginning of Chinese ideographic writing on the oracle bones of the Shang dynasty (1700–1027 BCE), and probably stretching further back to the Neolithic age. I will define shamanism as a religious culture that revolves around certain gifted and respected holy men or women who have rare abilities to communicate with or be possessed by spirits or ancestors, go into trance or ecstatic states, or travel to divine realms and other worlds, whether Heaven above, or the Underworld below. Shamans also have the ability to heal the sick and dying through rituals and exorcism, and to divine or foretell the future. Although Mircea Eliade in his classic work on shamanism (1989) dismisses spirit possession and denies that it is a “true” form of shamanism, I follow other scholars who have shown that spirit possession is just as archaic and important to shamanistic practices as the spirit travel to other worlds that Eliade privileges (Teiser, 1994; Lewis 1989; Boddy,



1994).^① We will see that spirit possession and spirit mediums have important ancient legacies in China and are common features of shamanistic practice in Wenzhou today, where I have conducted fieldwork on the revival of popular religion on repeated visits since 1991.

Scholars and archaeologists of ancient China such as K.C. Chang, have suggested that shamans and diviners (巫师) were important “appendages of the archaic state”, and conducted divining rituals in the court in communication with spirits of the ancestors of the king, who was the chief shaman himself (Chang, 1983:45).^② The monopoly of shamanistic access to the ancestors and gods above, and the possession of precious bronze ritual vessels, imparted political authority to the king and his state. The Han Dynasty

① While Mircea Eliade takes Central and North Asian shamanism as the modal type of shamanism, I find troubling his tendency to dismiss all other forms of shamanic cultures around the world as derivative, corrupted, or in his words, “aberrant” and “decadent” (1989:6; 450; 499–500). Just as everywhere around the world, archaic religious techniques and cultures have been absorbed or integrated into later religious systems, it is hard to be convinced that somehow the specific features of Central and North Asian shamanism alone have somehow remained unchanged and thereby should serve as the standard against which other shamanisms are to be measured. For example, Eliade repeatedly elevates spirit travel or magical flight, which are primary in Central and North Asian shamanism, as the true form of shamanism, and downgrades spirit possession as a corrupted or “aberrant” form. Even when confronted with a key passage in the ancient Chinese historical text, the *Discourses of States* 《国语》, which explains that “gods (神) descended into” certain persons who were “upright and could concentrate”, and “settled into them”, Eliade still dismisses this testimony of the importance of spirit possession in ancient China. Instead, he writes that it only showed that “magical flight” was the cause of people incarnating the gods, and not the result (Eliade, 1989:452), so that incarnating the gods was a mere byproduct of the primacy of flight. We cannot presume that there is only one single original form of shamanism, nor ever hope to isolate it after millennia of human existence. A better way to approach the study of shamanistic cultures is to assume that shamanisms past and present always assumed multiple and diverse cultural forms, some stressing spiritual travel, others focusing on spirit possession, some seeking the assistance or sacrifice of animals, others featuring trance, dance, and speaking in tongues, and yet still others involving ritual healing or exorcism, and the use of medicinal plants and ingestion of trance-inducing substances.

② Chang Kwang-chih suggested that the animal motifs cast on Shang and Zhou dynasty bronze ritual vessels represented the animals who helped bring shamans together with the spirits in Heaven, whether through travels from earth to higher realms, or through the spirits descending from above to the living on earth (Chang K., 1983:65; 1986:365–367; 414–418). In archaeological excavations in the 1980’s and 90’s at Sanxingdui in Sichuan province, a hitherto unknown Bronze Age civilization was discovered with bronze trees with birds, very similar to the “world trees” that Eliade thought were shamanistic conduits that served to connect up three realms: Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld (Sichuan Bronze Age book).

text *The Rituals of Zhou* 《周礼》, which describes the state court of the earlier Zhou Dynasty, states that shamans belonged to the lowest class of state officials at the court, and their duties included presiding at state sacrifices, calling down the invited gods and ancestors, performing exorcisms, dancing at sacrifices for rain, averting diseases, and natural disasters (de Groot, 1910:1188–1189). The following passage in the fifth century BCE text, the *Discourses of States* 《国语》 may be the earliest and most detailed historical description of shamans in ancient China:

古者民神不杂。民之精爽不携贰者，而又能齐肃衷正，其智能上下比义，其圣能光远宣朗，其明能光照之，其聪能听彻之，如是则明神降之，在男曰覡，在女曰巫。是使制神之处位次主，而为之牲器时服，而后使先圣之后之有光烈，而能知山川之号、高祖之主、宗庙之事、昭穆之世、齐敬之勤、礼节之宜、威仪之则、容貌之崇、忠信之质、禋絜之服而敬恭明神者，以为之祝——《国语·楚语下》。^①

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

^① Sec. 10. <http://ctext.org/guo-yu/chu-yu-xia> (accessed Sept. 2, 2011).



lineage temples, and the *zhaomu* order of the generations (for rituals). (These shamans) made sure that (rulers) assiduously paid respects to the deities, and observed the authority of ritual propriety and ritual regulations. They (helped the rulers put on) solemn and lofty facial expressions and (develop) an ethos of loyalty and sincerity so that they could offer sacrifices with purity of heart and serve the deities with reverence. In these ways, (the shamans) assisted the rulers in offering sacrifices.^①

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

In medieval to late imperial times, shamanic practices continued to be found in Chinese society, especially at the local grassroots level. According to Stephen Teiser:

Shamans always maintained a following at the local level...Developing out of the state religion of Han times, shamanism became one of the major forms of “diffused religion” in medieval and modern China, a form of religious activity with its own specialists, yet one which was well integrated into ancestral religion and local cults. In these non-institutional religious settings—the family and the local temple—shamans cured illness, expelled pestilence, fought demons, became possessed by spirits, and performed divinations. (Teiser, 1988:143)

Since late imperial times to the present, these local shamans have been quite diverse in their divine abilities to heal or communicate with spirits, in the kinds of ritual forms practiced, and in the particular gods, ancestors, or animal spirits that inhabit them. Dancing and drumming in trance (Chau, 2006: 54–55) and the presence of fox spirits (狐狸精) (Kang, 2005: 97–126) tend to be found across northern

① Burton Watson's widely quoted English translation (Watson, 1961:390) of this passage in the *Guo Yu* is incomplete and not very loyal to the original Chinese text, so I am adapting and revising his translation here, with the generous help of my colleagues Ron Egan and Xiaorong Li.