A Time of Lost Gods: Madness, Cosmology, and Psychiatry in China

By

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Abstract

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_A Time of Lost Gods_ explores madness, haunting, and mediumship in a rural county of China's Henan province. Drawing on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork, I find that given the economic and symbolic dispossession accompanying post-Reform rural outmigration, spirit mediums register psychiatric symptoms as signs of moral-cosmological collapse. I consider this in light of a precarious cosmology, wherein the very world of human and nonhuman persons and relationships are experienced as deeply destabilized. This sense of precarity is linked to the loss of Mao as a divine anti-colonial figure, evoking questions of socialist sovereignty alongside those of heavenly mandate. According to the spirit mediums, the Chairman’s death inaugurated the return of demons and deities, none of whom can be fully trusted, as they now mirror the duplicity of the human realm after market reforms. Mediums must work to discern between the true and false, the virtuous and malicious, amid a proliferation of madness-inducing spirits.

This contemporary cosmology, I suggest, simultaneously registers the national imaginary of Henan as a quintessential land-locked agricultural province “left behind” in a post-Reform regime of value, and opens up an inverted figuring of the rural as a potential ethico-spiritual center, awaiting apocalyptic renewal. To think with the mediums is to dwell on a historical present of hesitant horizons, at once beneath and beyond discourses of global mental health and religious revival. Across the psychiatric ward of the county hospital, local temples, and home altars of spirit mediums, betrayals of economy and kinship are transmitted through multiple genres of time. In mediumship, the progressive time of the socialist promise merges with a cyclical mode of dynastic anticipation, together carried in a spectral temporality of returns. In the clinic, symptomatic fragments of intergenerational impasse intermingle with the prognostic temporality of diagnostic modernity. After a long century of exasperated responses to the threat of colonial seizure, I approach patients, spirit mediums, and psychiatrists as figures caught in a shared dilemma, in a time when gods have lost their way.
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Introduction: The China of China

Despite their quarrels over divine detail, spirit mediums who frequented the temple square agreed: it was upon the Chairman’s death that the ghosts returned to haunt. Just across the road, in the psychiatric unit of the People’s Hospital, patients lament accursed lives, tracing etiological paths through tales of dispossession, kinship, and betrayal. South from the hospital, a Sinopec gas station sits atop the ‘ten-thousand-man pit,’ where bodies of the poor and the treacherous were once flung, across decades of famine and revolution. This is a story of stories, a story after too many stories have been told. A story at a time when no one believes in stories anymore.

The story is set in a time; a time, I was told, when villagers feast day-to-day beyond the wildest imaginations of cadres past, a time when money can buy anything and everything. Yet, in spite of the general sense that rural living conditions in He County have vastly improved since the economic Reform era, it is also a time when the village is ‘still’ the village, and the future is yet again elsewhere. As I was advised by an elderly man on the street, without provocation: “Young one, hurry up and leave this place. There is nothing for you here. There is nothing here. This place is poor, and poor places are amoral. All our young people go to the South. You’d better head south too. Hurry.” The South he evoked was that of southern China, particularly the cities of Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Guangzhou, where many youth from He County and Henan province in general migrate for work. What was it about this time that makes this place a space of impossibility, a place from which future generations must so urgently flee? What is it, in turn, to remain?

Once part of the ‘cradle of Chinese civilization,’ the traditionally agricultural Henan is now more evocative of poverty, backwardness, charlatans, thieves, famine, and the HIV scandal of the 1990s, where villagers contracted the virus after selling their blood plasma for cash. Drawing on Marx’s account of capital’s ghostly, vampiric qualities, Ann Anagnost (2006) writes this blood economy as an effect of the “spectralization of the rural” post-Reform, in which value is drained from the bodies of peasants by state discourse and policy, rendering the rural an evacuated space. In this text, I approach the cosmological accounts of spirit mediums in He County to provide another rendering of this spectralization, in which ghostly presences swirl amidst the hollow of an emptied center, where the rural inhabitant is haunted by a world saturated with uncertainty, linked in a different sense to the ‘post-Mao.’

At the same time, while potent depictions of abjection color Henan province from without, and to a different extent from within, those from He County speak with pride of their hometown and home province, of the significance of its lengthy history and the

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1 He County is a pseudonym for a largely agricultural county in Henan province.
2 Anagnost employs this phrase from Yan Hairong’s (2003) discussion of rural labor migration in China. Yan in turn borrows it from Spivak’s (2000) work on the spectralization of “the so-called rural,” in an urbanist teleology partly inherited from Marx’s accounts of land and labor, and the subsequent invisibility of ‘the rural’ despite its centrality to global capitalism.
sense of divine regional protection. They were the loyal, proud soldiers of the revolution, capable of enduring the bitterness of war and famine in service of the nation. Those who return from distant cities reminisce upon sight of the soft, yellow soil—soil of their childhood foods, soil of China’s breadbasket. Wedding feasts abound week after week, with heaping tables lining alleyways and filling restaurants. Expansive two- and three-story houses multiply in village after village. Paved roads increasingly cut across fields of wheat.

In the center of the county seat, a large, gleaming mall and hotel, myriad businesses, and new high-rise apartments which together at night creates the sense of a small urban skyline. He County thus also partakes in the widespread increase of rural urbanization, in which distinctions between city and village are mutually blurring (Guldin 1997; Kipnis 2016). Yet, despite the growing abundance residents have felt since the 1990s and 2000s, there was still a sense of scarcity in local employment opportunity and of underemployment for those with particular forms of ambition or higher educational attainment. Amid a “politics of destination” in which power is marked by upward and outward mobility, departure seems ever the horizon in such ‘small places’ as He County, particularly for the working age (Chu 2010; Liu 1997). The question of madness as addressed below thus must be understood in this scene of rural outmigration, and what it means to stay (Scheper-Hughes 2001).

The chapters that follow pivot around a set of tensions, between a pained tradition and a strained modernity, a reconstituted rurality and an ambivalent urbanity, a mournful psychiatry and a shaken cosmology. They come in a time marked by a certain afterwardsness,3 with relation to what those in He County called “the time that Chairman Mao reigned.” The phrase will take on a doubled character across the text. It is a commonplace saying, the setting for wistful tales of a more fair and virtuous time, and, among those who engage in spirit mediumship, it also speaks of an otherworldly temporality, an exceptional interval of divine sovereignty, after which the cosmos collapsed into chaos. This account is an attempt to convey what it is to experience the present as coming after such an interval. At the same time, there is a sense that the world—the promised world of the socialist vision—has yet to arrive, across waves of policies that pledged to improve the rural lot. Out of this, there emerges a matter-of-fact sensibility of self-preserving cynicism, in parallel with obstinate if fragile visions of a pristine era to come. The present in He County thus feels caught, at once relentlessly materialistic, and deeply troubled by the spectral dimensions of history and economy.

The centrality of Mao in day to day conversation and in the local cosmology also point to a longer struggle with the predicament of sovereignty and symbolic elaboration in the wake of what early twentieth century intellectuals termed China’s semicolonial or hypocolonial status, to which Maoism was one response. Faced with escalating threats of foreign military aggression and peppered with occupied concessions, China as a political

3 Here I am thinking with Laplanche (1999), on psychoanalytic notions of deferred action, and his reformulation of afterwardsness in terms of the desire and demand of the third, re-encountered across lapses of time. When thought alongside mediumship, afterwardsness points to nonhuman desires and temporalities that precede human knowing, and thus also carry a prophetic quality of what is yet to come.
and cultural entity seemed to be gasping for survival with the turn of the century. What it would take to claim a place in world-history, rather than be demolished by it, came to be an inescapable question. Entrapped by unequal treaties and tormented by a sense of national and cultural humiliation, a range of exasperated answers emerged—iconoclastic denouncements of tradition, chauvinistic defenses of nationalism, urgent assertions of cultural essence.

Of course, the very claim to the unity of China and of Han ethnicity by the Chinese state was (and continues to be) founded on imperial (and now neocolonial) pursuits of its own, through often violent demands for submission and varying degrees of assimilation, as well as civilizational discourses against barbaric others. To evoke themes of coloniality and subjugation is thus not simply to corroborate state discourses and the brutalities they are deployed to justify. Rather, it is to traverse the vicissitudes of aggression and its after-effects, which give force to renewed productions of internal exile—of repeated exclusions of such figures as the spirit medium and the rural inhabitant, for instance. The scenes and stories below, in my vision, inherit and offer their own responses to the stakes of this ongoing history.

While this text is often elaborated in terms of conversations and debates on China, the questions it raises, I hope, are also recognizable to those whose concerns do not necessarily dwell on the specificities of this or perhaps any other given geopolitical entity. They are concerns of the contemporary, of disparate worlds that nonetheless share certain dilemmas in their infinite manifestations. They are reverberations across concentric circles of violence, the resulting timbre of which carries both expectable and surprising qualities. They are dealings with the tired yet nagging problem of modernity, against whose image the (mis)recognition of many continue to be posited, the only grid through which many can appear, through their very disappearance. They are, by extension, the oddities of representation, of the structuring force of language and other mediums to be grappled with through the myriad ways things fall into and out of it. They are disappointments and horrors toward grand plans of the twentieth century. They are the enigmas of madness, a gloss for both the impossibility of being and its very condition.

The Sovereign, The Ghost, The Medium

In December 2015, a 120-foot tall golden statue of Mao was built in a village in Tongxu County, not far from He County. Its appearance led to a wave of amusement and ridicule across Chinese social media, regarding the poor degree of resemblance to the Chairman, and the splurge of financial resources—reportedly around 3 million RMB, over 450 thousand USD—resources that could have been better spent for social purposes such as local education. Chinese online commentators also offered angry reminders that Henan province was one of the hardest hit during the famines of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, considered an effect of catastrophic Maoist policies. While the statue also received some bemused international media attention to the curious juxtaposition of the figurehead of Chinese communism funded mainly by ‘private entrepreneurs,’ it was what occurred next that propelled its full circulation: The statue was demolished at the instruction of local government soon after it was built, in a visually violent manner.
reminiscent of the destruction of religious icons during the Cultural Revolution. The Chairman’s hands, legs, and feet were severed, and black fabric was draped over his head by crane. State officials cited the lack of compliance with formal approval processes as reason for removal. Bemusement quickly turned to implicit critiques of government suppression and overreaction.

The subtexts of the range of media and social media reactions ring familiar. They invoke Confucian and anti-superstition exhortations against the superfluity of ritual expenditure. Their distaste echoes Chinese intellectual discourse of the 1980s, which accused the peasantry of proneness to mob action and the blind following of a cult of personality, culminating in their blame for the violence of the Cultural Revolution. They also posit a certain irony, of a rural oblivion to the origins of the very historical catastrophes that struck them. Less frequently mentioned across the accounts, perhaps due to its dissonance with the paired motifs of rural irrationality and authoritarian terror, was the potential moral (not to mention cosmological) significance of the icon that may have brought it into existence. An exception was Liu Jianwu, dean of the Mao Zedong Research Center, who commented to The Guardian, “In the hearts of ordinary people, Mao represents fairness and justice.” Careful to bracket further implications, Liu denied any political significance to the statue: “This doesn’t exist.” Yet a degree of nervousness and forewarning was appended—“There is no need to build such a big statue and I do not suggest people imitate this” (Phillips 2016).

The incident brings to surface a set of tensions central to this dissertation. In the party-state’s ritual displacement of an unauthorized monument to its own founding figure, it seems that Mao has come to stand for a certain excess, triggering the nervous system to eliminate its own surplus, despite its own continued, if now hesitant, tributes to the former Chairman (see Taussig 1991, 1997). In continuation of more overtly violent destructions of local temples and icons during the Maoist era, the post-Reform state wavers between support of popular religious renewal and intermittent sweeps against so-called feudal superstition. It is a “politics of ritual displacement” through which the state repeatedly enacts its self-representation in a struggle of symbolic orders, while attempting to usurp a certain surplus value produced in community ritual practice (Anagnost 1994). Yet in this instance, the symbol is no longer so easily considered a localized externality to the state, and the state engulfs its own former image in its demonstration of power. Of course, since the Reform era, Mao and Maoist policies have undergone waves of official denunciation, and the state today no longer relies so strongly on his image for legitimacy. And although the precise reasoning and chain of events that led to the dismantling of the statue have yet to surface in full form, the commentaries speak to contemporary tensions clustering around the figure of the Chairman.

Since post-Mao Reform era, a sweeping appearance of ‘religious revival’ has come to the attention of China scholars and commentators. In conversation with the anthropology of the secular (Asad 2003), some China scholars have emphasized the irreversible effects of the violent and totalizing process of secularization, engineered to capacitate the birth and expansion of the modern state (Yang 2008). Others have suggested that precisely in their attempts to condemn ‘the religious’—which did not exist as an autonomous conceptual category prior to missionary encounter and the modernizing impetus—such secularizing efforts have in fact acted as foil for new forms of
religiosity (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). In the past, debates on Chinese religion have sprung up around its (desirable) relationship to secularist rationality, its holism versus multiplicity, and its role in kinship and lineage organization. In contradistinction, a central strand linking recent approaches to Chinese popular religion involves the nature of its relation to global capitalism and modern governance, whether in resistance or collusion.

Engaging both the irreversibility of violence and its production of new forms, I consider emergent forms of ritual and mediumship in the wake of semicoloniality and modernizing campaigns, in which local cosmology constitutes not direct opposition to or complicity with the state, but a subtle yet profound practice of time (Mueggler 2001).

Reference to the local here is inherently troubled. It is meant to conjure the significance of place in grasping the particular histories marking the cosmology, both from within and without. Yet, the cosmological engagements I encountered involve matters of regional, national, global, and cosmic proportions far beyond the local, in an era of rural-urban and transnational migration (see Chu 2010). Thus the question of place must be suspended to disturb assumptions of rural localization and urban cosmopolitanism that incessantly leave the former in their place.

And, while many of the engagements I describe across this text would fall squarely into the domain of what is often termed popular religion, the insufficiency of such designations must be reiterated. Despite repeated insistence of absolute distinction from ‘popular’ practices by more orthodox, institutionalized strands of the “three teachings” (sanjiao 三教) of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—and state reinforcement of such distinctions across various purges—much more blurring and overlap exist historically between the official and unofficial, the literati and illiterati than such gestures of denial admit (see Lopez 1996). The cosmological accounts and their often oral transmissions in He County draw variously on officially recognized textual lineages, as well as those of modern nationalism and Maoism. I thus consider how cosmological accounts encounter and incorporate times of the socialist state, one transforming the other through a new, wounded rendering. Approaching contemporary rural China through the problematic of haunting, this text asks alongside Derrida (1994): What ghostly forms remain of the socialist vision(s) after the ‘collapse’?

In contrast to the irreverence toward Mao and other Communist Party figures found in some accounts of post-Mao “failed ritual” (Chao 1999), in He County, as I will elaborate in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the Chairman is central to the spirit mediums’

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5 See, e.g., Anagnost 1994, Chau 2006, Dean 2003, Duara 1991, Feuchtwang 2010, and Yang 2000. The arguments of each of these authors are complex and beyond quick summary, but as Weller (1994) has noted, the terms of such debates often rely on the notion of empirical demonstrability of resistance. And, of course, Weber’s (1951) work is also inspired by the puzzle of modern capitalism, but there, the analytical relation between religion and economy leaned instead toward spiritual-religious conditions for the development of capitalism.
6 In this text, I am inspired by Mueggler (2001), who thinks with de Certeau (1992) to consider ritual in Southwest China as temporal practice, transforming chronologies of the state.
accounts of the present. There, the contemporary cosmology is elaborated around a mournful relation to the lost Chairman, who looks on from afar, watching over the dissolution of the world. Rather than the triad of gods, ghosts, and ancestors more common in approaches to Chinese popular religion (e.g., Jordan 1972; Wolf 1974), my thinking across the chapters pivots more often around the cast of the sovereign (the Chairman), the ghost, and the medium. This is not to say that gods and ancestors do not enter the picture, but it seems that in a time experienced as one devoid of divine guarantee, gods and ancestors become dangerously ghost-like, in their duplicity and corruptibility.

I turn to the figure of the sovereign, first, since Maoist articulations of revolution through an anti-imperialist principle of territorial sovereignty figured centrally in the cosmological accounts of spirit mediums. Alongside the acute sensitivity and knack for tactical evasions cultivated in the violent legacy of sovereign power (Farquhar and Zhang 2005), there also prevailed ritual enunciations of longing for the return of the sovereign, as a cosmopolitical figure. For the mediums, the Communist Revolution was not a secular affair, and the desire to occupy driving the imperialist enterprise could not be understood without the demonic dimension of evil. In his unwitting divine descent (xiafan 下凡) into earthly form, they say, the Chairman’s revolution was an act of salvation in the face of crisis, in a moment when China was under threat of foreign occupation.

While Mao’s theory of sovereignty might be fraught with contradiction alongside other articulations of the Chinese socialist state (Howland 2010), what interests me here is less the legitimacy of such formulations than the spectral reappearance of a cosmocratic mythologic (Apter and Saich 1998), which might be thought on the order of the sovereign presence as miracle—“impossible, yet there it is” (Bataille 1993, 206). Between spatial claims to sovereignty modeled on the nation-state and temporal claims to sovereignty in class struggle across dreamworlds and catastrophes of the twentieth century (Buck-Morss 2000), the impossible presence and promise of the sovereign have made way for new horizons of anticipation in their collapse, both driven and afflicted by the very sense of impossibility. Thus, I turn to the notion of sovereignty to consider not the illegitimacy of autocratic rule as portrayed from the stance of liberalist (or non-liberalist) critique, but the curious position of the sovereign, who stands at once outside and within the normative order, awakening under exceptional conditions of urgent necessity, in a secularized theological rendition of the miracle (Schmitt 2006), which, in this case, is redoubled cosmologically amid a spectralized rurality.

As noted above, central to the spirit mediums’ accounts in He County was the event of the Chairman’s death, after which ghosts and other demonic entities came swirling back, in the absence of the sovereign’s earthly incarnation. As in the problem of the king’s two bodies, a tension grows between the question of the body natural and the

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7 Accounts of the reemergence of spirits post-Reform has been mentioned elsewhere in China, but for an engagement with the role of Mao, see in particular Dorfman 1996.
8 I take inspiration from Hoon Song (2013) on this point, as well as his work on magico-theological temporality in North Korea and beyond.
body politic. In Kantorowicz’s readings of medieval European theology and political thought, the mortal time of the living king is accompanied by the timeless eternity of the crown, between heaven and earth, and eventually a *persona mystica* of a plurality capable of constituting a collective across time, rather than simply simultaneously across space:

Briefly, as opposed to the pure *physis* of the king and to the pure *physis* of the territory, the word ‘Crown,’ when added, indicated the political *metaphysis* in which both *rex* and *regnum* shared, or the body politic (to which both belonged) in its sovereign rights… For the Crown, by its perpetuity, was superior to the physical *rex* as it was superior to the geographical *regnum* while, at the same time, it was on a par with the continuity of the dynasty and the sempiternity of the body politic. (1957, 341–342)

The figure of the King “who never dies” thus proceeds in tandem with the People “which never dies,” one moving the other into perpetuity, informing not only the unfoldings in medieval theology and law on which Kantorowicz draws, but—he notes in passing—philosophies of unlimited progress in the generations leading up to the two World Wars (Ibid., 274, 312–314).

Yet, what of a Chairman who is considered not a mere ruler among rulers, but an exceptional ruler in exceptional times? The title of the Chairman (*zhuxi*), as mediums in He County pointed out, was more than a title among others—more than the formal titles of President of the People’s Republic and General Secretary of the Party held by later successors, or even the “Paramount Leader” (*zuigao lindaoren*) as taken up by Deng Xiaoping; it was more akin to the title of Emperor, which had not been taken up since the collapse of the dynastic system. On the temple square in He County, unofficial rituals erupt into calls of “ten thousand years” to Chairman Mao, best translated as “long live;” the king is dead, long live the king. There was, the mediums say, only one Chairman, whose reign and very corporeal existence marked a miraculous act of what might be called divine sovereignty, or, in the classical language of Chinese rulership, the mandate of heaven.

Tension surrounding divine allocation of earthly rule is by no means novel to the post-dynastic era, when notions of sovereignty came to comingle with those of emperorship. Early Confucian and Mencian writings on the mandates of heaven (*tianming* 天命) point precisely to the at times punishing simultaneity of moral and arbitrary power. Heavenly command stood, akin to formulations of the sovereign, at the limit of normative moral rule, constituting the very origin and potential continuation of the norm while reserving the absolute power to operate beyond it. To accept the mandate of heaven, then, is not only to live in accordance with moral rule and action as patterned by Heaven, but to accept also its destructive, transgressive dimension—the breaching of its own moral terms for purposes unavailable to human knowing. Cosmological

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9 See Ryang (2012) on the distinction between Kim Il Sung’s title of Great Leader (*suryeong*), which Kim Jong Il, the son, the Dear Leader (*chidoja* or *ryeongdoja*) will never hold, as there is only one possible *suryeong*. 
alignment of past and present requires the true sage to endure the seemingly amoral effects of Heaven’s acts—the reign of wrongful rulers, the exceeding of normative dynastic cycles, the premature arrival of one’s own death—all the while carrying on in moral cultivation without resentment. In contrast to later accounts and interpretations of unity between moral heavenly ordination and its rightful earthly recipient in the sage-king, a constitutive ambivalence is thus central to early depictions of the ruler, between heaven and earth (Puett 2005).

The question of rightful rule by divine ordination, and the call to virtuously remain and remain virtuous in its absence, are central to the mediums’ rendering of the contemporary cosmology. What is it that lives on in the wake of a ruler deemed exceptional in his righteousness? What of the (covert) recipient of heavenly mandate whose succession—and with it the living-on of the body politic at large—might not be guaranteed in the physis of the world that follows? What is the status of the cosmos in this interval? With the Chairman’s death, the time of the People teetered with him, in a time of ghosts.

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Historically, the figure of the ghost has sat uneasy across writings of the Chinese elite and ruling classes. While the ghost, as the continued presence of the soul of the deceased, implicitly forms the very basis of ancestor worship at the core of orthodox paternal filiation, the heterodox dimensions potentiated by engagements with the supernatural and proliferation of ritual forms have provoked a range of responses: the abstraction of spirits into intangibility, the suggestion of respectful distance from ghosts and spirits, and official disapproval of excess in popular practices of mortuary ritual (Poo 1998). Regardless, ghosts and spirits variously enter imperial politics across accounts:

When a state is about to flourish, gods and spirits descend in it, to survey its virtue. When it is going to perish, spirits descend again, to behold its wickedness. Thus there have been instances of states flourishing from spirits appearing, and also of states perishing.  

Beyond the ruler’s realm, ghosts and spirits of various strains abound in Daoist, Buddhist, medical, and historical texts, as well as genres of the ghost story and anomaly tale; these will be addressed across the chapters below. Here, I draw a link between these imperial-era concerns and the post-Cold War present by pairing the anthropological sentiment of spirits as hypothesis and the philosophical-political sentiment of communism as hypothesis, to turn to the place of the ghost in post-Mao cosmologies.  

10 From the Zuozhuan, completed circa fourth century BCE as a commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals, a classic of the Confucian canon (cited in Ibid., 56).

11 With regard to the former, I refer to Shirokogoroff’s comment “Spirits are hypotheses, some of which are admitted by the European complex as well, hypotheses which formulate observations of the psychic life of the people and particularly that of the shaman” (1935, 370), keeping in mind also Crapanzano’s comment that spirits are “concepts” (1980, 22), and Favret-Saada’s (2015) suggestion of turning to the “what if…?”
Well known in recent years for revisiting the question of communism via the figure of the ghost is Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, which will return throughout this text as a site of dialogue. For Derrida, to consider place and time “since Marx,” following pronouncements of the triumph of global capitalism, is to consider “what remains to be,” in the “non-advent of an event” that carries on in forms secret and ghostly, that in its very deferral affirms a sense of “the coming of the event, its future-to-come itself” (1994,19). This anticipation is accompanied by a today, in which *time is out of joint*, at once out of order and mad; *haunted*, as it were (Ibid., 20). Here, what is striking is the resonance of links between the ghost, the work of mourning, and the meaning of the ‘after’ or ‘since’ of communism to the situation in He County. It is also the question of being *heir to* Marxism: “inheritance is never a given, it is always a task… we are heirs of Marxism, even before wanting or refusing to be, and, like all inheritors, we are in mourning” (Ibid., 67).

The ghosts that have returned to He County, upon the loss of the Chairman—himself an heir of Marx—signal for the spirit mediums a time out of joint, a time of madness which also speaks to the cosmo-political significance of psychiatric disorders. Ghosts thus mark a certain mourning of the absent sovereign. Or, in Freud’s (2006) distinction between mourning and melancholia, in which melancholia points to a loss beyond that of a known object which can be consciously metabolized through the work of mourning, the ghost might also be said to resemble a melancholic entity. For, to borrow Abraham and Torok’s (1994) formulation, the phantom stands in the place of mourning, in a nonrepresentational transmission of encrypted loss across generations, without access to or the working through of what is transmitted. Not simply the unconscious incorporation of one’s own loss or loss at the level of the individual, the phantom is a gap left by “the secret of others”—secrets of the dead who were shamed during their lifetime, and cannot live authentically even in death, thus have come back to haunt (Ibid., 171).12

The ghost, then, stands in the place of a passing on, an otherworldly inheritance of painful histories that then, in accordance with Chinese cosmological renderings of spirits, return with vengeance, at once transforming the present and putting the present at risk. Whereas Derrida’s ghost makes way for a notion of spectrality as an open

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12 Yet, as they note of particular ritual forms that may appear to parallel such nonrepresentational passages, the fundamentally social nature of such forms inverts the relation once again, though not simply back to the domain of representation. I am referring to their passing note that necrophagia is not a form of melancholic incorporation despite the literal eating of lost ones due to its social form. They term this *anti*-incorporation. The addition of the negative, rather than a return to introjection as the representational counterpart to incorporation, is telling. Since the phantom, as an extension of the process of incorporation, operates through what they term an antimetaphor, necrophagia might be pondered, awkwardly, as an *anti*-antimetaphor. That is, rather than simply retrieving loss back into the domain of representational mourning, mourning ritual might be thought to provide a double shield, a social coding that does not simply render the lost object apparent, but recirculates the phantom in the domain of symbolization, *as* phantom. This would require a revisiting of the ritual form, and a revisiting of Obeyesekere’s (1990) formulation of the work of culture.
anticipation of futures to come, I take heed of Abraham and Torok’s attention to transmission, as well as the more demonic dimension in the mediums’ accounts, which lend ghosts not merely an air of openness, but one of danger and urgency wrought by pasts that can never fully be known—ghosts demand, ghosts afflict, ghosts corrupt, ghosts drive one to kill without knowing why.

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It is at this juncture that the spirit medium enters as the third figure, between the (lost) sovereign and the ghost. The spirit medium, in both their own accounts and in my rendering, is a receptacle and receiver, medium and mediator of forces and entities. Stigmatized for their nonscholarly professionalism and feared for their potential threat to imperial legitimacy throughout much of Chinese dynastic history, mediums nonetheless shared the orthodox cosmology for the most part, and were consulted by elites even while at times being decried by them. Reflecting on Qing era practitioners, prior to their full modern denunciation, Smith suggests that precisely due to their uneasy position of internal externality, such figures become “cultural middlemen par excellence, mediating not only between the client and the cosmos, and between Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist versions of reality, but also between contending elements within their own local communities” (1993, 166).

Here, I would add that spirit mediums in He County are medium-to not only difference on a synchronic plane, but also to ghosts and forces of history and deferred futurity, including the history of an eclipsed socialist promise, as well as an aftermath of culture (see below). Written out of official state-sanctioned versions of Chinese religion and medicine across Republican and Maoist eras, demonic medicine was marked out as superstition in the twentieth century, and came to represent not only a rural, premodern backwardness, but its practitioners also came to resemble the quintessential charlatan (Unschuld 1985). In the Maoist era, mediums and other religious figures faced struggle sessions and imprisonment, if not worse. Yet, in face of such violence, the Chairman returns as an ethical—spiritual figure in the mediums’ cosmological accounts in He County, whose distant gaze from the heavens can no longer assure the banishment of malevolent ghosts. In such a moment, the mediums work to grapple with the disjunctures of past and future, transforming the present through their daily work. To think with the mediums, then, is to consider both their constitutive otherness and their contemporary registers of displacement (Morris 2000, Pedersen 2011), as well as the role their incarnation plays in the mediation of their own inheritance of this ongoing history, between the sovereign and the ghost, of time out of joint, awaiting apocalyptic renewal of a promised world to come.

With this in mind, I turn to another dimension to be addressed in this text, in parallel with that of mediumship—that of madness, the historical and conceptual links between which will become apparent below.

13 I will discuss in Chapter 2 my reasoning for using spirit medium as the translated term for those who engage variously with possession in He County.
The Language of Madness

2010. A large conference hall in Pudong, the glistening New Area and Special Economic Zone on the eastern edge of Shanghai, facing the Old City and former foreign concessions across the Huangpu River. It was the first major international conference held in China dedicated explicitly to addressing cultural change and mental health in post-Reform China, co-sponsored by the World Psychiatric Association and the Chinese Society of Psychiatry. I sat amid hundreds of Chinese mental health professionals, academics, and students, as well as foreign clinicians and scholars, mainly those invited as presenters. The many workshops and panels of the conference pivoted around a central question: What would it mean to offer a ‘Chinese’ approach to Western mental health theory and method, in an ever-changing China?

In a set of opening remarks, a Chinese psychiatrist known domestically and internationally for his work on cultural psychiatry, spoke of living through Nationalist, Communist, and Reform eras across the eighty-one years of his life, across the pains and mistakes of the nation. Now, he declared, it is time at last for the Chinese people to live in dignity and happiness, and to reclaim certain Confucian values. Despite the overwhelming majority of Chinese attendees, he insisted on speaking in English—it was an address intended for an international audience, to be heard by the world, not just the Chinese world. Much of the audience thus listened through wireless headsets, broadcasting his speech in real-time translation. Next, another prominent figure in the field of cultural psychiatry, who spent much of his career in Taiwan and the United States, insisted in English that he would be conducting his speech in Mandarin, and noted his enthusiasm for hearing discussions on Chinese mental health, for once, in the Chinese language, allowing for what could not be expressed in foreign terms. Lastly, an American-born Chinese cultural psychiatrist, an expert in the field of cultural competency, expressed regret for not offering his presentation in Mandarin. It was a conundrum of tongues and histories, a question of the very language in which such problems should or could be articulated, and in what language they would be received.

Between anti-superstition campaigns triggered by the ‘century of humiliation,’ transmutations in kinship accompanying the search for a ‘new culture,’ and the influx of global pharmaceutical influence found at ‘the end of history,’ the question ofmadness sits at the brink of what anthropologists have recently called the divided self in China today (Kleinman et al. 2011). A nineteenth century import of missionizing and modernizing efforts, the psy-disciplines (Rose 1996) have long occupied a foreign yet intimate space in China, not only displacing spirit mediumship and ritual as modes of healing for possession and madness, but offering concepts for reimagining personhood in the aftermath of cultural devastation. From the influence of psychoanalytic texts on twentieth century craftings of cosmopolitan revolutionary subjects (Larson 2009), to attempts in cross-cultural psychiatry to articulate culturally appropriate treatment modalities (Tseng and Wu 1985), through contemporary movements to indigenize psychotherapy (Zhang 2014), the psy-disciplines are home to uneasy projects of translation (Liu 1995). As with other nations wrought by dilemmas of revolution and post-revolutionary medicine, the struggle for health was poised at the junction of national and international politics,
shifting tensely across ideals of political neutrality and calls for a politicized medicine (Adams 1998).

While American media has become increasingly engrossed with the export of the Western psyche via the adoption of psychotherapeutic techniques in China (Osnos 2011, Watters 2010), the recent urban ‘psycho-boom’ must be considered in context (Huang 2013). In this, medical anthropology as a field has not only investigated such contexts, but through its very investigative efforts has become participant to the translations and transformations of the Chinese mental health scene, particularly since the 1980s. As Kleinman (1986) has shown, during the Cultural Revolution, neurasthenia provided a somatized, medically legitimized, and politically tolerable idiom through which to articulate otherwise punishable laments. Meanwhile, the publication of Kleinman’s (1982) related finding that a large majority of patients diagnosed with neurasthenia qualified for DSM-III criteria for Major Depressive Disorder, and were responsive to antidepressant pharmacotherapy, led to a scramble in the Chinese psychiatric world to account for their “misdiagnosis,” and were in turn utilized in pharmaceutical marketing (Lee 1999).

Alongside the permission of entry for foreign pharmaceutical companies in the Reform era, the diagnosis and treatment of depression came to symbolize modern scientific universalism. Despite ongoing contention regarding its relevance for Chinese patients (see, e.g., Young 1989), neurasthenia was soon phased out as a legitimate diagnostic category in the subsequent edition of the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders. In the writing of ethnography, there is no neutral ground (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and every text risks a production of effects at once overdetermined and unforeseen. Here, an encounter that would lead to reflections on the social and political origins of suffering concurrently produced evidence deployed in the crafting of a pharmaceutical self (Jenkins 2011), amidst historical forces of political and economic interest (Lee 2002). For better or for worse, medical and psychological anthropology have been and will continue to be one (if usually minor) site in struggles over the psyche, in China and beyond.

Alongside the politics of diagnostic translation and pharmaceuticalization, the psy-disciplines also raise questions of modern governance with more explicit ties to the state. At the most overt level, the political deployment of psychiatry as a means to suppress political dissonance highlights the potential judicial deployment of the psychiatric apparatus across Maoist and post-Mao eras (Munro 2002a).14 In the 1990s, psychiatry entered the state’s search for order, in response to the widespread practice of qigong in public space, which at times was accompanied by the loss of control of bodily and perceptual functions, or the heights of ecstatic mania. Qigong-induced psychosis thus emerged as a diagnostic category between attempts by the state to parse ‘scientific’ (officially sanctioned) and ‘pseudoscientific’ qigong, and anti-cult campaigns to quell potential disorder (Chen 2003). More recently, state-sponsored psychotherapy programs in urban areas have been implemented in the form of employment counseling, in an

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attempt to encourage entrepreneurial spirit and mitigate potential threats of unrest accompanying mass unemployment among the new working class. Yang calls this a political (mis)use of psychology, combining personal desire with state interest (2015). Yet, even considering the potential power of the asylum as a total institution (Goffman 1961), non-biomedical terms are deployed by patients and family members, in what Ma (2012) terms a cultural resistance to psychiatry.

Rather than focusing on diagnosis and clinical efficacy, the critique of or resistance to psychiatry and psychology as practiced in China, or the urban proliferation of psychotherapeutic practices, the chapters below set in the rural psychiatric ward approaches the psychiatrist, the patient, and the family as figures caught in a shared dilemma—that of life in a symbolic field of death amid outmigration (H. Yan 2003), where madness spins out from the suspicion that the familial can no longer be trusted as the site of the familiar, where the qin was no longer qin.15

In He County, illness was often traced to the collapse of kinship and moral economies amid post-Mao out-migration. Although their concerns were far from resolved by the language and methods of mental health, my interlocutors treated the ward, at best, as a space of negotiation and temporary respite from the entanglements and occlusions of economy and kinship—a space to breathe, to borrow a phrase from Chen (2003).

This is not to suggest that rural psychiatry is without its disciplinary dimensions, nor to minimize the violence of modern and colonial discourse inherited through diagnostic conceptualizations (see Chapter 5). It is rather to take seriously the predicaments and ethical impasse being grappled within the fraught space of the clinic, in which an elsewhere is at times sought in the form of a hospital bed (Pandolfo in press; see also Garcia 2010 on the sense of impossibility of an elsewhere). Moreover, in He County, far from hegemonic reign, psychological and psychiatric terms were co-present with—and often peripheral to—vocabularies inherited from spirit mediumship and Chinese medicine, both within and beyond the ward. Despite expectation and uptake of psychopharmaceutical treatment, patients, family, and psychiatrists alike conveyed skepticism toward the primary status of neurobiological causation, and rarely spoke of symptoms as the individual affair of a psychologized self.

Moreover, the hospital is not the sole site of care, but one amid a constellation, in which other forms of healing are repeatedly sought, both sequentially and concurrently. In the latter, women of the family often visit spirit mediums on behalf of the afflicted, during the patient’s hospitalization. The spatial and symbolic reach of the clinic is thus not simply what meets the eye. As the yin realm of spirits invisibly doubles any given geography, the agency of effects cannot be presumed on the grounds of physical place or material substance. Even from within the walls of the ward, transformations in symptom presentation can constitute evidence of otherworldly intervention from afar, and pharmaceutical efficacy might hinge on the condition of divine benevolence or demonic

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15 It was often said that ‘the qin is no longer qin’—pointing to the double meaning of the character qin 亲, which denotes ‘kin/family’ as well as ‘intimacy/familiarity.’
expulsion enacted in another locality. The symptom maintains a polysemic density not exhausted by a single clinical hermeneutic (Good and Good 1981). I thus approach the clinical space as one of simultaneity and hesitation, a space that might intensify the terms of engagement and mutual displacement, but by no means dictates them. As we will see, psychiatric symptoms do not merely operate as verification of psychobiological truth, but also proffer signs of cosmological disarray and omens of coming catastrophe.

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Back at the conference in Shanghai, formulations of a psychology and psychiatry befitting of contemporary China were multiplicitous. There was the employment of the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean (zhongyong 中庸) as the foundation for a Chinese psychological model. There were family systems approaches to the shifting configurations of the Chinese family, vis-à-vis the One-Child Policy, as well as internal and transnational migration. Daoism was put into dialogue with cognitive therapy and the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Methods were sought for operationalizing Chinese medicine for mental health practitioners. Biopsychosocial approaches were evoked in the provision of post-earthquake trauma recovery. Infrastructure for mental health care through social work was discussed as a new site for intervention. There were self-assured propositions for new approaches; there were pensive reflections on the complexity of changes taking place.

One moment in particular, though, stayed with me. In a workshop on the implications of Chinese medicine for mental health, the presenter—a professor and practitioner from the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, offered a provocation: “There is nothing I can teach you in these twenty minutes. If you wish to learn something that can immediately be applied, you’d better leave now and find another workshop.” Several, in fact, did. Any such learning, he suggested, would require the effort of years, not minutes. He expressed his lack of optimism toward the notion of reconciling mental health and Chinese medicine, and whether Chinese medicine could be “applied” to mental health, standing on divergent epistemological and ontological grounds. The only lesson he can offer given the setting, he suggested, was a basic meditative breathing technique, as an attempt to convey what it is that Chinese medicine “teaches,” in mode rather than in content, if only to rouse curiosity in a few of us to pursue further learning.

Having been inculcated in the contemporary mode and temporality of knowledge seeking, he ventured, even this small taste might prove difficult—the group may be incapable of a mere five minutes of silence, ravaged as we were for knowledge in the form of informational output.

“Five minutes,” he repeated, “is all I ask.” The roomful of attendees grew quiet, following instruction for a technique known as reverse breathing. Inhalation, exhalation. Inhalation, exhalation. No more than a minute later, an unease began filling the room—eyes glancing, bodies shifting. At last, a middle-aged man burst out: “What is the purpose of this?” He challenged the presenter’s critique of attempts to combine technological innovation with Chinese medicine, and began listing evidence of successful projects. Soon, factions of the audience broke into heated debate. The
presenter’s prediction prevailed. Five minutes, an infinitesimal portion of the time it would take simply to begin considering the differential mode of knowledge posited by Chinese medicine, was an unbearable stretch for the crowd, attesting to the impasse faced by what it would mean to translate such teachings today. Beyond the issue of indigenization as it was more commonly posed, it revealed a disjuncture in worlds and temporalities, one that pointed to a breach in the possibility of transmission.

I recall this scene, and this conference more generally, as they offer another frame for how I was brought to the present project in He County. This project was, in a sense, a departure from and sequel to my previous work in the central psychiatric hospital of the southern coastal city of Shenzhen, the first major Special Economic Zone under Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms. That work focused on the intergenerational shifts in experiences of mania and depression in patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder, in which the post-Mao generation increasingly individualized and psychologized their complaints, with a heavy sense of self-blame for their illness, in contrast to sociomoral and situational accounts by those in the Maoist generation (Ng 2009). In Shenzhen, I also spent time with a group of young artists and musicians. They felt lost, caught between the burden of tradition in what they perceived to be their parents’ world (ironic, since the Maoist generation was highly iconoclastic), and the world they were thrown into. The question of tradition often seemed uncanny, to be posed as if from without, or at least from a sense of displacement, while questions of possible healing for their own exasperations were often posed to Western psychology and psychiatry.

As I considered their struggles, I found myself haunted by the conundrum posed by Foucault (2006) in History of Madness, wherein the discourse of scientific psychology and psychiatry itself marks a certain incapacity to engage with madness as experience and madness as a question of truth seeking. Across the hospital and the community of youth, it felt as if international mental health was unfurling with determination, and my imaginations failed me as to what an attempt to address madness would resemble otherwise. In spite of the histories of exclusion, governance, and philosophical closure archived in and reenacted by the psy-disciplines, they seemed still among the more intimate sites for engaging with fundamental concerns of the times. Psychology—even if embedded in highly atomized conceptions of the self and the person in their particular enunciations by the youth—seemed an increasingly central language for addressing the sense of despair and urgency of a generation, even in its alienated quality. Or, precisely in its alienated quality, it posited a structure of feeling (Williams 1961) resonant with the present as experienced by them. Nonetheless, the Foucauldian conundrum of listening to madness in a time when madness can no longer be heard would not release me from its paradoxical call to an impossible task—to seek out another language of madness beyond

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16 Here, I use international mental health rather than global mental health, as there remained a strong sense of the politics of national health and the production of national health statistics at the time. See Adams (2016) on the shift from postwar, postcolonial international health development to global health. Whereas the former centered on the unit of the nation-state as a critical response to imperial reach of colonial medicine, the latter imagines a new transcendence of national, bilateral, and multilateral politics altogether, through new ways of counting—through truly global metrics.
that of mental health, an absented language, so as to encounter madness once again, anew.¹⁷

This call to re-encounter madness, amid dilemmas of cultural transmission, is, in part, what brought me to consider spirit mediumship in parallel with psychiatry in rural Henan, since prior to campaigns to modernize medicine in China, spirit mediums would have been, and still are, among the most common healers visited, particularly in rural regions. And while others have juxtaposed Western-style psychiatric practice with Chinese folk healing (e.g., Kleinman 1980, in Taiwan), I approach the same theme holding in mind the problematic of healers in the aftermath of culture, in which the symbolic order can no longer be taken for granted in the wake of historical wounds. I turn to this question of fractured transmission below.

I also sensed from my work in Shenzhen that I was missing half the story in the bifurcated symbolic cartography, as many of the young hospital patients had come from rural areas for work, and I wanted to get a sense of that other side of migration. To turn to mediumship in He County was thus another way of asking another version of the question posed by those at the conference: What would it mean to consider madness, in an ever-changing China? What are the impossibilities facing such a question, under contemporary conditions?

**Culture Petrified**

Since the 1990s, anthropologists rethinking China and Chinese transnationalism have pointed to the need to unground essentialist notions of Chinese culture, approaching such invocations instead as chronotopes situated amid alternative modernities and strategies of late capitalist accumulation (Ong and Nonini 1997). Taking up Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the “time-lag” of cultural difference posited by colonialism, Rofel (1999) considers articulations of other modernities as formative outsides of universalizing approaches to modernity, existing through a sense of repeated deferral from the reaching of parity with the West. And, even as discourses of modernity and movements of transnationality might create a sense of delay and displacement, they also constitute worldings—of “multiple and effervescent worlds in the making” (Zhan 2009, 24).

Meanwhile, ethnographies of post-Reform China also register a sense of moral collapse, accompanied by a shifting moral landscape. In his work on rural Shaanxi, Xin Liu finds the lack of a coherent moral economy, a common ground upon which social action or cultural meaning could take place. In the midst of this absence, between state retreat from local affairs and rise of marketization, came an “immoral politics” of arbitrary punishment (2000, 168). In rural Heilongjiang, Yunxiang Yan finds a “moral and ideological vacuum” following decollectivization, across the rise of youth autonomy and decline of filial piety, leading in some cases to the suicide of elders, shamed by unfilial children (2003, 234). More than a shift in material relations of care, the rise of the

¹⁷ And, to be sure, language not simply as such, but as a symbolic constellation that buttresses a world.
individual throughout and after collectivization also marked the collapse of the symbolic world, a sense that previous modes of organizing life were “once again (and probably forever this time) dying out” (Ibid., 186).

I draw on the former set of works on rethinking modernity and locality in considering the sense of contingency, externality, and emergence conditioning any reference to Chinese cultural repertoires, both my interlocutors’ and my own. I brood on the latter accounts of moral-symbolic collapse because they arrest me—they at once speak to the sense of evacuation accompanying profound Reform era transformations, and evoke for me a sense of differential repetition, of a new return of a sense of interruption and decay from earlier times.

In his devastating trilogy, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, historian Joseph Levenson traces tectonic shifts in the Chinese intellectual world across two moments of encounter: engagements with Jesuit missions of the seventeenth century, and those with various strands of Western thought at the end of the nineteenth century. Earlier Jesuits approached the Confucian literati in the manner of civilizational encounter, an exchange of intellectual magnitude. By the late nineteenth century, with the rise of Western military and economic power and the onslaught of colonial intrusion, Chinese intellectuals were forced instead to face west, and with this turn, Levenson argues, claims to Chinese tradition came to mark an agonized rupture despite apparent continuity.

If earlier references to Confucian classics were primary and “philosophical” in status, meant to approach questions of knowledge and truth with universal implication, later invocations came to be secondary and “romantic,” a clinging to a tradition no longer vital and operational, but a “petrifaction of tradition by traditionalists” (1968: V1, xxx):

The Confucian Classics were the repositories of value in the abstract, absolute for everyone, not just Chinese values relevant to China alone. When the Classics make China particular instead of universal, it is a China in the world—still China, but really new, even as it invokes (indeed, precisely as it invokes) what connects it to the old. (Ibid., xvii)

The grounds for claims—whether iconoclastic or traditionalistic in guise—could no longer rest on Chinese thought as *thought*, but rather on Chinese thought only insofar as equivalence could be drawn with the Western corpus, or, on Chinese thought as *Chinese*. To put in the phrasing of more recent critiques of naturalist multiculturalism, it became fraught to take indigenous thought seriously, to take indigenous thought as philosophy, rather than mere empirical exemplifications of cultural instances (de Castro 2014). This culturalization appears from within after colonial threat, as the national-cultural phantasm emerges through repeated inscriptions of external difference from the West, accompanied by disavowals of internal difference (Ivy 1995). Assertions of a Chinese tradition intensified, rendering tradition paralyzed through these very pronouncements, after previously dynamic intramural debates were “shocked into a semblance of unity” (Levenson 1968: V1, 50).
In spite of critiques of Levenson’s approach, I return to Levenson’s text as an effort to render visible what Fanon described as the agonized state of culture following colonial legacy, in which the colonial system does not result in the disappearance of the pre-existing culture, but rather transforms it into a tormenting caricature of its former manifestation. In this “mummified” form of presence, “it testifies against its members” (1967, 34). In the same vein, to dwell on a sense of rupture facing evocations of Chinese tradition is not to posit a static cultural prior and a modern acultural posterior, but to attend to the devastation carried within the cultural after colonial encounter, even if the formal political outcome was not that of full colonialism in the case of China.

Yet, as Pandolfo’s (in press) work on contemporary Quranic cures reminds us, such an acknowledgment of fracture also summons its attendants to the task of reimagining and reactivating the work of culture, precisely from the ruins of its aftermath. In the case of spiritual traditions, acknowledgment of the impasse facing the reception of the divine message is a “necessary shock, towards the re-instantiation of a life of the soul.” In times of cosmic and political crisis, it is from the very site of agony that an encounter with the divine may be recapacitated. In the chapters to follow, I thus approach evocations of culture—including rituals and repertoires of spirit mediumship—not as a straightforward continuation, but as painful enunciations and wounded reworkings after the cultural as such has become petrified and petrifying.

In early twentieth century literature of New Culture and May Fourth movements, the petrifying dimension of the imagined origin can be seen in the cannibalistic visions of Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” (2010). I have reason for my fear. Murderous gazes from those in the old hometown. The neighbors. The landlord. All those green-faced, long-toothed people began to laugh derisively. The tenant. The brother. Only today have I realized that they had exactly the same look in their eyes as those people outside. Just to think of it sets me shivering from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. They eat human beings, so they may eat me. One by one, civilizational claims of history and intimate claims of kinship are ravaged from within. My history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words: ‘Virtue and Morality’… until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book

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18 Levenson’s account has faced critiques of the dichotomization of tradition and modernity, and a tendency towards the so-called impact-response approach to Chinese history, in which the West and the “initial collision” are afforded excessive attention and explanatory priority (Cohen 2010, 55; Hart 1999). While I take heed of such critiques, what Levenson’s text importantly registers, in my reading, moves beyond historiographical debates on periodization and causality. Levenson himself repeatedly emphasizes the constructedness of the dichotomies he conjures—pairing and paradox are used across his text not simply with presumption of the static existence of objective entities.

As Lydia Liu notes, despite Levenson’s tendency toward totalizing statements, “the question of how to explain the ‘traumatic choices’ made by the Chinese since their violent encounters with Western imperialism does not easily go away” (1995, 30). I would add that perhaps rather than a preference for totalization as an intellectually defensible position, Levenson’s deployment of language marked a struggle to convey the pain facing a generation of thinkers, thinkers who were, precisely, shocked into a façade of unity. It is not the claim of previous unity, but of a paroxysm that struck prior forms of multiplicity, in which all that comes after lives in the wake of that seizure.
being filled with the two words—‘Eat people.’ The protagonist is not exempt. The ‘I’ of the story is unwittingly fed the flesh of his dead sister at the hands of his elder brother. Now it is my turn.\textsuperscript{19}

Amid the cohort of those who fled the mainland to Taiwan in the 1940s, it can be seen in Bo Yang’s *The Ugly Chinaman* (1992)—Chinese culture is infected with a virus which has been transmitted from generation to generation and which today still resists cure… Can an entire nation of moral degenerates be saved? It can be seen differently in Tu Weiming’s exhortations to a “cultural China” beyond national boundaries, in which the affordance of dignity to diasporic identity (“the peripheries as the center”) takes distance from a declining, humiliated center—a homeland that is not lost, but precisely in its persistent, impotent presence, haunts the émigré as an abyss of misery (1991; 1995). It can be seen in recent calls for ‘post-Confucianism,’ returning to Confucian classics in search of the origins of corruption, debating whether and how to extract poisonous roots, to reformulate a tainted corpus that failed to lay claim to a universal ethics.\textsuperscript{20} In the language itself, it is also the difficulty of discerning indigenous and exogenous elements in modern Chinese. In the scramble for neologisms with which to counter defeat and occupation, translational circuits interrupted classical etymons, transforming their meaning and world of reference despite appearances, despite usage of the same characters (Liu 1995).

To attend to the sense of rupture and humiliation, of corruption and petrification is not to deny tie between a now and a then or the concurrent existence of more vitalistic or optimistic accounts. It is rather to acknowledge a violent cut and an unshakable sense of infestation, out of which new enunciations and worlds emerge, bearing its traces.

Repudiations of tradition inherited from missionary and colonial discourse continues to torment new forms. This is not to say that such forms are immobile or carry no force. To the contrary, they carry what might be pondered as a spectral force—akin to the spectral nationality of postcolonial liberation literatures (Cheah 2003), or the shamanic redeployment of colonial violence that draws its healing power from the space of death (Taussig 1987). Yet, even as such spectrality carries within it transformative potential, it also haunts the postcolonial subject, and manifest through disorders both social and subjective (Good et al. 2008). They are symptoms of history that mark its intolerable weight, as well as the truth of existing within it. They sit “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth 1996, 7).

My impetus for returning to Levenson, and placing him in dialogue with Fanon, grows from a felt need to reckon with the many-faced (and faceless) inheritances of traumatic rupture that, in my work in He County, also bespeak the creation of new, if haunted, worlds. In the case of He County and Henan Province, to consider this caughtness is to dwell on what it means to geographically and allegorically embody the humiliated and humiliating center, the petrified and petrifying core—conveyed by its

\textsuperscript{19} Here and the following paragraph, italicized portions are directly from the translated text.

\textsuperscript{20} See, e.g., debates between Liu 2007 and Guo 2007, on a themed journal section entitled “Filial Piety: The Root of Morality or the Source of Corruption?”}
epithet “the China of China,” a China that scares itself in its intimate exteriority, in its very imagined provincial intensification of its “Chinese characteristics.”

**Orbiting the Hollow**

Prior to departing for Henan Province, I was told by many urban friends and colleagues that such characters as spirit madams (shenpo 神婆) and witchdoctors (wuyi 巫医) were no longer present in today’s China. I had arrived, they would say, too late. Moreover, even if there remained traces of such superstitions (mixin 迷信) and folk customs (minjianfengsu 民间风俗), they would not be found in Henan or among the Han majority—I would be better off in Yunnan and the Southwest. Whereas Yunnan Province evoke culturalized images of China’s ‘ethnic minorities’ advanced by state discourse and a robust tourism industry, Henan signified an unsightly manifestation of rural poverty—no place to seek any semblance of what one might call cultural.

Conversing at an arts district in Shenzhen one evening with Wu, a middle-aged artist and entrepreneur, after an open lecture on European improvisational jazz, he inquired about the fieldwork I was preparing to undertake. Part of a foreign-educated returnee generation of the early Reform years, he often spoke with pride and nostalgia of his years in Germany. Upon hearing my plans, he nodded with concern. To study this, he replied with graveness, I must relocate my project to Germany. He knew of a German library with a collection of Chinese shamanistic costume and implements. No such thing remained in China. Not unlike others of the intellectual classes in China, Wu relayed the sense that much of Chinese cultural tradition, both in the form of knowledge and material objects, existed only in shambles on the mainland after the Maoist era. Rather, they were to be found in the repositories of Taiwan and Hong Kong, or in this case, Europe. In the case of ‘folk’ traditions in the vein of shamanism and mediumship, he like many others pointed to the Southwest. He himself encountered some old ritualistic animal hides at a small shop in Yunnan Province in the 1990s, he said, and even then, such items were scarce. It was, again, too late.

“You might as well treat this visit to China as a vacation, and purchase a flight to Germany for your research instead,” he concluded.

An orbit of impossibility formed around my anticipatory imaginations of the journey—impossibilities that began sketching shape of a hollow. Not only did mention of Henan evoke the sense of cultural evacuation facing China at large, a profound sense of revulsion and fear haunted more philanthropic accounts of rural dispossession. It was a ‘bad’ place, my urban interlocutors would divulge after some moments of discomfort.

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21 Here, I am invoking American missionary Arthur Smith’s damning diagnostic in *Chinese Characteristics*, in which he argues that China, and the Chinese village in particular, lacks in rationality, conscience, and character, and that its “manifest needs” can be summarized by a “single imperative need”—that of Christian purification (1894, 168). Many of Smith’s condemnations are inherited in the texts discussed here.

thinking they were the first to break news of its infamous reputation. I was offered cautionary tales of fraud and swindling, and gory tales of abduction, poisoning, and murder, detailing the many ways in which I may not make it back out in one piece. Despite a trained skepticism toward such tropes, I grew more petrified by the day—I was starting to scare myself. These stories carried force.

In an analysis of what he calls the demonization of Henan, Ma Shuo (2002) tellingly names Henan “the China of China,” and the Henanese “the Chinese of the Chinese.” Home to the capitals of dynasty after dynasty, birthplace of ancient philosophers, present-day Henan once constituted a powerful political, geographic, and cosmological center—“the center of the world”—and continues to compete with Shaanxi province for title as “cradle of Chinese civilization.” Yet, while its physical centrality remains in the contemporary cartographic imaginary, Henan has come to epitomize China in another sense. With the burgeoning of international trade since Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, the coastal metropolis has come to the fore in a geography of value, rendering the inland (neidi 内地, lit. interior-land) a conceptual periphery and symbolic space of stagnation. Reread through developmentalist and post-Reform discourses, it is rather the tropes of rurality, poverty, backwardness, and overpopulation that mark Henan’s Chinese characteristics. By contrast, classical dynastic histories depicted the Henanese, variously, as gentlemanlike, elegant, luxury loving, and ceremonially extravagant (Eberhard 1965). Now, neither the poorest nor the wealthiest province, Henan, like China, appears trapped in the inertia of an ever-developing stage. Not east or west, not north or south, it seems to have lost itself; yet, writes Ma, if anything is left, it is that Henan, like China, remains doggedly agricultural, doggedly from the soil, to borrow Fei Xiaotong’s (1992) notorious characterization. Ma relays a joke heard in Beijing labor service markets:

A high-end hotel is recruiting service staff, but declares that they don’t accept Henan applicants. A labor migrant from Henan who doesn’t know what’s good for him approaches to inquire, and the boss replies: if a Henan bellboy stands in the hotel lobby, then this place will become impossible to keep clean—dirt never stops dropping from Henanese bodies. (Ibid., 26)

It is not surprising that the joke appears at the scene of the labor market, a scene staging the fraught encounter between urban and rural, poverty and wealth; between the allure and the risk of marketization’s promises. Paralleling the intensified circulation of jokes and rumors during Reform era labor migration—rumors that also incorporated themes of a clannish rural tendency toward horde violence—businesses across Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, were known to adopt in their hiring policy, and at times in explicit signage at the factory entrance: “Henanese may not enter.”

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23 This nominal contention can be seen in domestic and international tourism literature. From the 2011 edition of *Lonely Planet, China*: “Unassuming and poor, agricultural Henan lets its western provincial neighbor take credit as the ‘cradle’ of Chinese civilization, yet here, Henanese could argue, is where it truly all began” (Harper et al. 2011). “Center of the world” is drawn from Eberhard 1965.
Beyond rurality, which might otherwise conjure a notion of naiveté, there is another motif borne by the figure of the Henanese: that of the imposter and deceiver. Before leaving for Henan, a friend relayed another joke: when the train approaches Henan, the sound that emerges is *piansini*... *piansini*... cheat you to death... cheat you to death...

Between the tragic inflation of reported wheat production during the Great Leap Forward that led to mass starvation across 1958 and 1959, the blood plasma sales that resulted in HIV infections across villages in the 1990s, and a smattering of scandals in the 2000s (business fraud, product fraud, dogs posing as lions in the zoo), Ma suggests, Henan’s reputation as land of braggarts and cheats was formed.

At the end of the text, Ma considers three levels of analysis for the vilification of the Henanese. First, what he calls a surface-level explication, is one that hinges on the notion of population: as the most populous province in China yet one with underdeveloped industry and insufficient employment opportunities, there is an increased chance of encounter with rural Henanese migrant laborers, thus increased chance of negative incident. With the additional impact of media attention, such incidents come to flood popular imagination. Second, what Ma terms an inner-level explication, involves Henan’s intermediary status in the narrative of development. No longer evoking abjection as in the decades of famine and warfare, post-Reform Henan—“poor but not hungry”—is newly potentiated as object of humor, while the poorest provinces—Guizhou, Gansu, Yunnan—tend to remain off-limits to the violence of mass ridicule.

Finally, Ma offers what he deems a deeper level explication. Under conditions of radical transformation and economic growth, those in contemporary China know only that from whence they came, and that it is a past to which they must never return. Yet, in the flash of transition, they know not where they are headed. With a smattering of western concepts at hand, the Chinese have yet to resolve the gap between the tradition to which they cannot seem to return, and the foreign which has yet to be assimilated. In the words of Fanon, “Not yet white, no longer completely black, I was damned” (2008, 117). Under such conditions, Ma writes, the Chinese entered a state of absolute negation of the self and the past. Ma’s rendering is thus useful here, as a post-Reform manifestation of the dilemma of culture petrified.

Contrasting Lu Xun’s *True Story of Ah Q* and Bo Yang’s *The Ugly Chinaman*, Ma suggests that whereas Lu’s radical critique of Chinese tradition was driven by a sense of hope and transformation, Bo’s was a total repudiation that has created contemporary echoes. Yet, along with the depth of entry of western thought, there came the sense there was something ‘unchristian’ about the manner in which the Chinese insulted their own at every turn, hence eventually found a substitute: the Henanese. Due to the intimate affinities between the figure of Henan and the figure of China, both historical and

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24 嘖死你.

25 In Eberhard’s (1965) survey of Chinese regional stereotypes taken in 1964, Henanese were described as straight, honest, sincere, mannered, frugal, gentle, though with a violent temper. The survey was conducted mostly among college students in Taiwan with parents from various regions of the mainland, implying the generation that departed the mainland around the time of the Communist Revolution. This points to the possibility that the caricatures described here are indeed collected effects of Maoist and Reform histories.
contemporary, favorable and deplorable—a fallen cradle of civilization—a certain satisfaction arises from the attack of the externalized self. By critiquing, vilifying, and discriminating against the figure of the Henanese, an abreaction of the deep resentment toward Chinese tradition is made possible—a resentment too painful if directed toward the figure of China itself, as it is impossible for one to dodge its effects while residing in a Chinese body.26

Much of Ma’s rendering rings true to my encounters, particularly in major cities, where practices of regional distinction heighten in new forms with the exigencies of labor migration (see Zhang 2002). To journey to Henan, then, is to enter the geographic-imaginary embodiment of a petrified and petrifying image of the nation’s past, through figures of the peasant, the charlatan, and the unruly masses. And, it is to consider how those inhabiting such a space invert this rendering from within, rewriting and reliving this history cosmologically.

In the next chapter, I trace a series of literary and political figurations of the peasant across the twentieth century, as a sort of ‘setting’ by detour. It is to gain perspective by means of distance, to render perceptible implicit contours of the here-and-now by first training our gaze across time and space. It is an attempt to make palpable the weight and intensity carried in the figure of the rural inhabitant and the figure of Mao in contemporary in He County, by contemplating the successive burdens and contradictions condensed into what Berlant (2011) calls the historical present.

26 This is not to say the Henanese is the only such bête noir—provincial caricatures abound across Chinese history recent and distant. Yet, in the wake of Reform, Henan does seem to evoke a particularly powerful response. For instance, a recent journalistic account drawing on online search data found that “Seven inland regions are associated with terms like ‘poor,’ ‘backward,’ and ‘undeveloped,’ with none coming off worse than Henan” (Brown 2014). Moreover, what interests me about national imaginations of Henan in particular is the coinciding of civilizational fall and rise of a seemingly despicable figure in its place, and the notion of self-substitution via a geographic-imaginary circumscription of the China’s otherness of self.
Chapter 1. After the Storm

In a very short time... several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back.

—Mao Zedong

Every revolution creates new words. The Chinese Revolution created a whole new vocabulary.

—William Hinton

“Would you like to know how a person of my era feels when riding on this train?” Yang Shaoliu’s eyes sparked with no uncertain mischief.

We were hours in on a twenty-some hour train ride, northward from the coast, away from the sprawl of factory dorms, through deep green fields of rice paddies and banana trees, past hillsides peppered with homes and tombs. Traversing nearly 2000 kilometers between the rolling landscape of South China and the vast planar expanses of the Central Plain, the K1040 linked my departure point in Shenzhen, booming ‘factory of the world’ in Guangdong Province, with one of the more emblematic sources of its ‘floating population’ (piaoliu renkou) of migrant laborers, Henan Province. A native of Henan who had been working in Shenzhen for over twenty years, Yang Shaoliu was heading to his hometown for a visit, and had agreed to introduce me to the area.

Aboard the train carts, migrant workers and families returning to the laojia, the old home, from the South. Young mothers and grandparents—the former bringing grandchildren to their grandparents ‘left behind’ in the hometown, the latter bringing grandchildren to their parents ‘floating’ in the city. Entrepreneurs navigating potential markets in so-called second-tier cities across central China—although those who have the means often prefer plane or bullet train. Older passengers chatting in local dialects, younger riders swapping stories and advice, often in standard Mandarin, the language of the nation, the language of cities and strangers. Children running up and down the aisle finding new playmates. The rolling sound of the train, the murmur of voices, the crackle of sunflower seeds. There were no empty seats or bunks.

“Let me tell you how a person of my era, a person of the ‘60s and ‘70s, feels when riding on this train,” Yang Shaoliu repeated emphatically after I answered his initial question with a smirk. Yang was born in the 1950s, thus the reference to the 1960s and

70s marked the time of his youth across the Maoist era, which he spent in his hometown in Henan when not travelling with the People’s Liberation Army.

He begins slowly, in a grandiose oratory:

_Zuozai feikuai de lieche shang_
Aboard the train of soaring speed
坐在飞快的列车上

_Touguo mingliang de chechuang_
Through the brilliant windows of the cart
透过明亮的车窗

“Is this a poem?” I interrupted.

He laughs and turns to his wife—“She thinks I’m reciting a poem.” Mrs. Yang gave a slight nod, but continued busying herself cracking sunflower seeds, showing little interest in endorsing his theatrires. A loyal and jaded public administrator, Yang rarely missed an opportunity for lessons in jest. Mouthing his words with sardonic deliberateness, he retorted:

“No, it’s not a poem. I’m just telling you my feelings (ganshou) about riding this train. Did you get those two lines down?”

“Memorize it or document it?” We had entered a full didactic staging.

“ Either.” He starts over.

_Zuozai feikuai de lieche shang_
Aboard the train of soaring speed
坐在飞快的列车上

_Touguo mingliang de chechuang_
Through the brilliant windows of the cart
透过明亮的车窗

_Kankan zuguo de dahao heshan_
See the great, grand rivers and mountains of the homeland
看看祖国的大好河山

_Daochu chongman le shengqibobo de yingxiang_
All around are scenes filled with flourishing vitality
到处充满了生气勃勃的影像

He bursts into laughter.

“That’s what a person of my generation feels riding on a train.” He glanced at Mrs. Yang, who was now listening. He continued.

“In fact, trains of that era weren’t fast at all, to say nothing of ‘soaring’ speed. The windows weren’t clear either—there was a metal frame barring the view. Since there was no heat or air conditioning like there is now, the windows had to be opened, so the view
was never ‘clear,’ always disrupted by a window frame. Perhaps the rivers and mountains were truly more decent though.”

“There was no pollution and environmental destruction back then,” a neighboring passenger pitched in, a young migrant worker who shifted his attention from his cell phone to join our conversation for a moment. Yang Shaoliu ignored him. A stage, not a forum.

I raised an eyebrow. “Those verses—that’s how people in fact felt about the train back then?”

“People of that era didn’t really feel much at all. They weren’t very internal, everything was external. But they did say this a lot. Everyone said this. If you were going to say anything at all while sitting on the train, it’d better be this. If you want to say something else—for instance, that the train is not soaringly speedy—then you’re better off keeping your mouth shut. In that era, people were very good at speaking. They spoke very precisely, very carefully. Because if you didn’t speak carefully, you’d never get to your stop on the train, understand?”

Mrs. Yang pitched in, in disagreement. “The verses simply express how joyous we are while riding the train, looking at the pretty scenery.” She breaks into a wide smile, tilting her head side to side, a motion associated with the singing of children’s songs. Yang Shaoliu and I sneak each other a sidelong glance.

Making History Speak

In *Illuminations from the Past* (2004), Wang Ban writes that the trauma encountered by China, first manifest through the May Fourth Movement (1919) as response to imperial and colonial threat following the Opium Wars, then in escalations of the Maoist era culminating in the Cultural Revolution, instituted a shift from history to memory. History, for Wang in this sense, refers to the possibility of generating meaningful narrative linkage between past and present—a present capable of making sense of the past via available symbolic resources. While modern historiography came to the fore as a challenge and an aim during the May Fourth era, what finally rendered the coherence of historical narrative an impossibility (albeit an impossibility that in turn occasioned a proliferation of new genres—what he terms memory), for Wang, were the decades of Maoist revolutionary campaigns.

The campaigns’ traumatic disruption of historical narrativity stemmed from their infliction of world-shattering experiences on the one hand, from public humiliation to corporeal violence, and the political aesthetics of Maoist newspeak on the other hand,

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28 Due to Wang’s attempt to traverse the ongoing tensions surrounding the translation of terms across authors on the one hand and his own concepts of history and memory on the other, multiple and at times contradictory usages of the term ‘history’ are employed across his text. Here, I am referring specifically to his suggestion that “The question of trauma… has a significant role to play in the memory-history nexus… Trauma underlies the crisis of history writing” (8-9). With regard to the 1980s, Wang writes: “Trauma constitutes the biggest stumbling block and the greatest challenge to rewriting and making sense of the past in modern China. It is also a powerful cataclysm for the shift from history to memory” (114).
which pushed language to its limits—to a codedness so heightened that language could no longer operate as a means of expression. In Yang Shaoliu’s words, if you were going to say anything at all while sitting on the train, it’d better be this. One had best remain within the authorized genre of coded speech, in a regime of language reinforced by the threat of violence that rendered its usage *precise*—an external precision marking the split between feeling and saying, a precision that delinks speech from interiority.

If the violence encountered across the May Fourth and Maoist eras inflicted a rupture of narrative coherence for Wang Ban, Ann Anagnost provides another reading of these two moments: narrativity—realist narrativity specifically—itself constituted a genre imported during May Fourth, one that provided the very conditions for the later manifestation of corporeal violence in the Maoist era. Drawing on Marston Anderson’s work on Chinese literary realism of the 1920s and 1930s, Anagnost writes that the figure of the subaltern29 shifted in this period from a passive object of pity (*tongqing* 同情) to a subject of speech. This “‘coming into voice’ of the subaltern subject” in literature, for Anagnost, was then “eerily doubled” in later Maoist campaigns—realism moved from the text of intellectuals to the body of the peasant, as the peasant body was *made to speak* the truth of history through the revolutionary practice of “speaking bitterness” (*suku* 诉苦)(1997, 19).

Moreover, the corporeal emphasis of this realist “myth of presence,” she suggests, eventually led to the physical violence of the Cultural Revolution, and still echoes in post-Mao narrative practices (17). Through an enacted “localization of the sign,”30 abstract notions of world historical forces (imperialism, capitalism) were transposed onto a “highly embodied form identifiable within a local cast of characters,” resulting in bursts of mass violence (35). In short, literary realism provided the discursive precondition for the corporeal literalization of a politics of representation. Narrativity acquired a style that claimed direct access to the real, and hence a particular political valence could subsequently be assigned to spoken narration, predicated on this claim.

Across Wang and Anagnost are two approaches to narrativity and the Maoist era. In Wang, narrativity constitutes the precondition for what he calls history, grounded in the coherent temporalization of experience (linking the past and present meaningfully), interrupted by the traumatic rupture of corporeal violence and the rigidification of language—an official “newspeak.”31 In Anagnost, narrativity constitutes a party-state apparatus that offered the basis for both subjectivation and the apparent (but in fact discursively consistent) excess of corporeal violence. The formation of the national subject is thus continuous with the formation of violence for Anagnost; both are premised on a realist conception of language. Drawing on trauma studies, particular the work of Caruth (1996), Wang’s concern pivots around the state-impinged threat to the possibility of a narrative-based subjectivity, in which the state is distinct from and external to the

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29 Anderson uses terms such as disenfranchised, disadvantaged, and underclass, rather than the subaltern.
30 Here Anagnost is citing Tani Barlow’s (1991) usage.
31 The term newspeak was coined in Orwell’s *1984* (published in 1949, the year of CCP Liberation) as the controlled language of the fictional totalitarian state.
subject.\textsuperscript{32} Engaging Foucault, Anagnost tasks the state apparatus with the production of subjectivity, closing the gap between state and subject.

To these two accounts, let us add a third: Arthur Kleinman’s (1982) work on depression and neurasthenia. In 1980, Kleinman conducted interviews with Chinese patients in a psychiatric outpatient clinic in Hunan province diagnosed with neurasthenia, discovering that a vast majority of them met the criteria for diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder, most of whom showed symptom improvement when treated with tricyclic antidepressants. Rather than Major Depressive Disorder—which Kleinman considered a universally valid disease category—Chinese patients somatized their culturally particular illness experience of suffering while Chinese clinicians diagnosed such symptoms as neurasthenia, an outmoded and thus invalid disease category according to contemporary psychiatry as practiced in the US and Western Europe.

Addressing the Cultural Revolution through the cases he encountered, Kleinman (1986) suggests that the risk of complaints about depression and other mental illnesses would have been dangerous, taken as a sign of skewed political thinking. In contrast, neurasthenia (shenjing shuairuo 神经衰弱) was exempt from such politically fraught associations during this period, thus provided a bodily, medically legitimized, and politically tolerable idiom through which to articulate otherwise punishable laments.\textsuperscript{33} In light of the present discussion, Kleinman’s account thus adds another dimension: during the Cultural Revolution, at least in the case of some patients diagnosed with neurasthenia, the body became a shelter for speech, and a sheltered object of speech, in a time when the narrativization of individual suffering may otherwise be persecuted. While the prominence of bodily complaint is common across earlier Chinese medical thought, its magnified centrality in contradistinction to the emotional and psychological gains new political significance during the Maoist era. Neurasthenia offered a “hard exoskeleton congealing key meanings in the popular culture,” an indirect reference to potential disaffection and dissent, with historical antecedents in the deployment of chronic illness by Confucian literati as a mode of withdrawal from dangerous political situations (159-160).

Across Wang, Anagnost, and Kleinman’s writings, and Yang Shaoliu’s staging on
the train, arises variations on a theme: Something happened to language during the Maoist era, and the Cultural Revolution in particular. And this something transmuted the

\textsuperscript{32} Wang himself tends to use the pairing and distinction between ‘history’ and ‘memory’ rather than the term ‘subjectivity’ in his own analytic. Nonetheless, the question of subjectivity remains relevant, as he writes of the 1980s “root search” (xungen 寻根) literature: “In the ruins of communist ideology and collectivism, the mere programmatic assertion of a humanistic subjectivity and sensibility would not recover the experience of romantic individuality… The past no longer provided intelligible clues to the present; the sense of history was not available for making affective and ethical links between members of a community” (105-106). Here, rather than taking subjectivity as a humanistic given, I take subjectivity precisely as the site of conundrum, of the question rather than the answer posed by history, memory, and trauma.

\textsuperscript{33} Kleinman notes that the lack of association between wrong political thinking and neurasthenia during the Cultural Revolution was surprising, given the previous campaign against neurasthenia during the Great Leap Forward, as an epidemic among ‘mind workers’—intellectuals, including office workers, teachers, and students (155).
functioning of language, or at least the site of speech. While this moment may inflict aphasia at one site, it produces—in simultaneity or in deferral—other forms of ciphered, shattered, or proliferating signification: in Yang’s coded speech, in Anagnost’s violent body, in Kleinman’s neurasthenia, in Wang’s fragmentation and proliferation of new genres. Each account speaks to a dimension of the elusive object, never entirely discrete, yet never fully co-present. Or, they are co-present in the form of paradox: language hides, language makes-present; the body conceals, the body materializes. Something happened to language, yet the temporality and locality of this something, as well as that of its effects, seems at once precise and opaque.

While the four share the Cultural Revolution as a reference point, they gesture toward a broader dilemma of language and violence. Something sent ripples across the symbolic order, after which it had to be accounted for. This chapter, and this dissertation, is another attempt to give an account of the after-effect of this something, in both its apparently articulable particularities as well as its ever-elusive refusal to be fully accounted for. Across these previous accounts, this something is made visible and stable through the figure of Mao and Maoism, and specifically, Mao as distilled and encapsulated in the language-shattering violence of the Cultural Revolution. Yet, what of a scene in which the Maoist state was figured differently, not as an autocracy that disfigured the signifying capacity of language, but a moral and cosmo-political reassertion of sovereignty, out of which a new, viable language was also born?

Where is the Now

In retrospect, perhaps it was not entirely incidental that the rhythmic shuttling of the train evoked Yang Shaoliu’s performative commentary. Once an emblem of a modernity out of reach, the figure of the train now seems caught between its ever-deferred arrival and its bittersweet nostalgia, a reminder of the very process of modern time-making. By the time of my visit in 2012, the honorific “K” in the K-series train—K for kuai 伙, fast—had come to be increasingly teased for its anachronism in the ever-accelerating race for more speed. Since the 2000s, the new Harmony Line bullet trains had become darlings of the Chinese transportation world, overshadowing the K series’ once-revolutionary 120 kilometers per hour with more than double the speed. Yet, the now comparatively sluggish ‘fast’ train remained the most popular mode of long-distance transportation for labor migrants, for its relative economy, reliability, and geographic reach.

34 Born of British desire for improved trade routes amidst the Opium Wars (1839-1860), railway construction was once the site of fierce contestation, viewed as infrastructure provision for foreign imperial expansion. Whilst initial opposition led to the Chinese destruction of the first British-built railway less than a year after its completion in 1876, Qing-era policy shifted by 1889, resulting in 9,600km of tracks by the end of the dynasty. Offered today in the Shanghai Railway Museum as evidence of Qing “fatuity and blindness” to the merits of modernization, the history of initial refusal now seems to ring obsolete (See Wu 2009).
Besides speed and its postponed perfectibility, the to and fro of the train also offers a blurring passage between landscapes, a manifest yet surreal link between city and country, retracing a spatialization of time that maps a here and there to a then and now. An imagined past tethered to the rural hometown, an imagined future affixed to the urban metropolis—a denial of coevalness, to use Fabian’s words (1983). As Yang Shaoliu would ask me half-jokingly toward the end of our journey, peering out the window at the vast expanses of wheat fields emblematic of his Henan hometown:

“See, isn’t it backwards (luobou 落后)?” Between the purportedly forward-looking metropolis and apparently backward glance toward the home village, the back-and-froth of the train offers a moving glimpse of the conundrum of the “now.”

To consider Yang Shaoliu’s didactic oratory, alongside the writings discussed above, is to ponder the juxtaposition of language and experience, on a moving stage of time and space, between city and village. If a person of “his era” pronounces to the ethnographer a transformed relationship between feeling and speech across the Maoist and post-Mao, en route to his “old home” (laojia 老家), how might we approach such a pronouncement, not to mention such a transformation? What disjunctions of time are conjured amid the distance traversed by the train? In this chapter, I will trace a history of relations between rurality, speech, and sovereignty that condition the “now” of the historical present. The very to and fro of the train begins to stir up a world produced by this movement, the world of the so-called rural, of the so-called peasant (nongmin 农民).

The notion of the Maoist revolutionary peasant, and to some extent the Maoist People, seem a distant, outmoded past in many contemporary urban and intellectual circles, in China and beyond. They ring of ideology, of impossibly lofty ideals, of political opportunism, of satire and kitsch. Propaganda posters, slogans, relentless campaigns. Their significance colored scornfully by the “ten-year calamity” of the Cultural Revolution, seen as an ineluctable outcome of the Maoist project. Such figures seemed by most urban and intellectual accounts, in other words, a bygone era, and as such, a bygone question.

I was forced to rethink this when I arrived in He County. For those old enough to recall, Mao and the People seemed indeed of the past, but of a past at once near and far—irrevocable, yet still palpable, as if they had come and gone just yesterday, despite the three decades that have passed since. For the younger generation, this past was but an image, but one infused with no little sense of admiration. For many I met in He County, some of whom self-referentially adopt the term peasant even if they no longer actively participate in agricultural work, Mao signified a time in which contemplations of a revolutionary virtue was still possible and still had a point of symbolic reference—a mode of virtue that carries not only local moral significance, but world-historical significance. Groups of middle-aged men and retired cadres gather in their morning exercises and noontime drinking, chatting about local and national politics, lamenting the present for its corruption and immorality with a swift phrase, “If Chairman Mao were still alive” (yaoshi Mao Zhuxi hai huozhe).35

35 要是毛主席还活着.
The Cultural Revolution almost never came up spontaneously, even in discussions of the Maoist era; instead, wubanian 五八年, “'58,” referring to the Great Leap famine—was more often evoked than any other campaign. In some sense, this is unsurprising, as the former targeted intellectuals and urban elites, and has been said to be a mere “sideshow” in some rural regions, whereas the latter had much broader and deeper impacts on the countryside than the cities (Huang 1995, Watson 2010). Nonetheless, the distinction is worth noting, as it gives reminder of a bifurcation of history, in which intellectuals and writers who tend to draft post-Mao texts of remembrance and adjudication likely lived a Maoism distinct from those with comparatively less representational reach. In the time I have spent across Chinese cities—Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and elsewhere—not to mention in US conversations, the Cultural Revolution not only constituted a particularly piercing moment of Maoism, but appeared as a condensed image of the Maoist era in its entirety. As Rebecca Karl (2006) argues, across vast expanses of the popular imagination and in much of academic discourse, the Cultural Revolution often comes to be conflated with the much longer history of the Chinese revolution. To conjure Maoist time was to conjure the horrors experienced by those falling on the wrong side of the Cultural Revolution.

Instead, for many I met in He County, the Cultural Revolution seemed but a blip amidst a longer ebb and flow of similarly promising if troubling—and eventually blasé if dicey—state campaigns. In one instance, as a small group of friends and neighbors gathered to discuss a potential gray area in taking advantage of a new local government compensation campaign, one woman noted: “It’s just like the Cultural Revolution, you have to snatch the opportunity when you see it, or it’s gone.” A curiously neoliberal and breezy framing of the “ten-year calamity.”

All this is not to say the Cultural Revolution did not take a toll on He County. Many agreed that it was a chaotic (luan 乱) period. Rather, the divergent remembrances at two ends of a coastal-inland train route pose a question: What would it be to ponder the Maoist era without the Cultural Revolution as the perceived dénouement? What might it mean to consider trauma at the threshold of the Maoist and post-Mao, bracketing presumptions of traumatic origin? Using the historical reviews traced in this chapter as backdrop, I will suggest through the following chapters that another version of the story of history and speech, violence and aphasia might be considered through the figure of the peasant, and of Henan as contemporary emblem of the rural. In some sense, my consideration is inspired by Anagnost, in tracing the emergence of the peasant as a world historical figure of speech across the May Fourth and Maoist eras. But departing from her focus, I do not consider the “actually speaking peasant” in terms of the mere doubling of official language, but as the subject, to borrow from Lacan (2007), who falls out of the signifying chain of language—has no place in it, yet is constituted through its delimitations.

Following Wang, I wish to consider the question of trauma alongside that of narrativity. Yet, parts of Wang’s text seem to hold narrativity as the preferential mode of experiential transmission (in his words, history). Thus, reading Kleinman, albeit somewhat sideways (as his approach is more concerned with adaptive and maladaptive illness behavior), I also
consider the significance of symptomatic modes of transmission that depart from coherent narrativization.

In order to grasp the paradoxical significance of the symptoms, rituals, and utterances in the later chapters, in the remainder of this chapter, I retrace the travails of the figure of the peasant and the People across the twentieth century. This detour, I hope, will offer us equipment for returning to the affectivities of the present, as the present is always-already historical, in indirect ways and through surprising rehabituations (Berlant 2008).

Peasant speech and the peasant body became central in May Fourth era literature, when realism came to represent the most viable genre for self-diagnosis and self-determination amid imperial and colonial threat. Revolutionary rearticulations of the peasant as political subject in early Chinese Communist writings and in the Maoist era gave the rural national and world-historical significance. The end of the Maoist era and dawn of Reform reversed these terms, devaluing and rendering abject the peasant body, as a temporalized impediment to national progress in a world of transnational capital. These three moments offer a tentative setting—a spatio-temporal imaginary—for the chapters to follow.

Writing about Others

In *The Limits of Realism* (1990), Marston Anderson ponders Lu Xun’s satirization of the Chinese Revolutionary Literature debate in his 1928 essay “The Tablet”:

> The fearful thing about the Chinese literary scene is that everyone keeps introducing new terms without defining them.

> And everyone interprets these terms as he pleases. To write a good deal about yourself is expressionism. To write largely about others (*bieren 別人*) is realism. To write poems on a girl’s leg is romanticism. To ban poems on a girl’s leg is classicism.

Although placed here on equal satirical platform, realism more than any other genre came to carry the burden of hope in China, writes Anderson, after a “frankly traumatic” series of shocks to the very possibility of national sovereignty (1990, 3). Generating the largest body of literary works since Lu Xun’s remark (although not without detractors), realism was credited with a powerful social efficacy by Chinese reformers. The notion of social efficacy through literature was not new; what was new was the turn to Western models rather than extending well-established Chinese approaches. Rather than an origin in the realm of literary discourse as such, those who promulgated realism attempted to reach toward that which is “intimately connected with life,” of a fiction that would “speak with the voice of living individuals” (39). That is, individuals aside from the writer, whose intellectual class status was now taken as an index of a distance from “real” life.

In contrast to the romanticists in the literary debate, the realists deemed the voice of the author and the intellectual literate class an insufficient ground for claims. Instead,
the moral and emotional force of writing must “first be mediated through concern for others” via pity (tongqing 同情) and sincerity (cheng 诚)(44). These “others” through whom writers were now to mediate their concern included a new range of figures—among them women and peasants—who had been passed over historically in literature and politics. Such previously peripheral figures came to center stage in debates of the time on social reform. It would be, in the words of Zheng Zhenduo, Mao Dun, and others, a “literature of blood and tears,” which would give voice to “silent China” (44, 90).

Moreover, realism imported a new wedge between the world and the work in Chinese aesthetics and literature. Noting the deployment of authorial disavowals in early realist fiction, in which authors opened their texts with claims to their origin in documentary or journalistic reports, Anderson points to the ambivalence fundamental to any notion of a “realist fiction.” Whereas much has been made of the problem of mimesis and imitation in Western aesthetic debates, in which the arts held an imperfect representational relationship to the world, Chinese discussions of literature and the arts had rested on different epistemological and ontological assumptions:

For the Chinese a work of literature was not a copy of the natural world but one of the many manifestations of the fundamental patterns that underlie both the natural and social worlds… The writer, instead of ‘re-presenting’ the outer world, is in fact only the medium for this last phase of the world’s coming-to-be. (12-13).36

This issue will return below, as well as in the ensuing chapters, in the form of a question: What is it to be medium-to the world’s coming-to-be, much after a certain wedge insinuated itself between work and world, between medium and world? Relatedly, what is it to engage in mediumship while occupying the position of the peasant, a position that has differentially—at times contradictorily—stood in for the very embodiment of the figurative real? This question is not only one of genre, but of the relationship between genre and violence, between genre and trauma.

Before moving forward, it’s important to emphasize that the reception of realism and its associated epistemology and ontology was by no means total. As Anderson notes, most major Chinese writers who experimented with realism concocted their own “deformations” of the genre, eluding its perceived determinism by employing “elaborate parodic or ironical contrivances to make the work its own self-criticism” (180). Thus, heterogeneity emerged from within the genre, marking a dissonance that was never fully absorbed. But for the purposes of the present discussion, what is significant in the rise of realism is the merging of the figure of the peasant and the figure of reality in a moment of perceived crisis, a threat to sovereignty in which the speech of an Other previously

36 Compare to Anagnost “The physical body itself became the medium for registering the collision of material forces in history” (18-19). Thus technically (though this would depend on the relationship between art/literature and the body in Chinese thought), the body newly becomes medium (yet again) for registering the world, via new notions of peasantry and world-history.
marginal to literature comes to occupy not only a central place, but becomes the very mediator and liminal shifter between reality and representation.

Suffering of the Nation

While realists of the 1920s pursued a nearness to non-elite life, this very scrutiny and effort to rewrite social relations began to make apparent the distance between the literate authors and their subjects, “the now visible but still mute bieren [other]” (26). By the early 1930s, alongside the establishment of the League of Left-Wing Writers, Chinese intellectuals began raising the question of audience, and how literature was to affect the lives of its readers. Beyond the educated class, the imagined audience began shifting to proletarian and peasant classes. Moreover, the protagonist of realist literature shifted from the object of humanist concern to a freshly awakened, heroic subject, and the persecutory crowds characterizing earlier realist fiction came to be replaced by unified, purposive masses. In 1933, the notion of Socialist Realism was introduced to China by literary theorist Zhou Yang, following the officially sanctioned Soviet model, in which literature was to “constitute the author’s objective observation of and research into reality but only from the perspective of a correct worldview, specifically that of the workers and peasants” (57).

Meanwhile, the figure of the peasant was coming to the fore in early Chinese Communist articulations of revolutionary class, as one strand in the literary debates. With the formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921, a problem soon presented itself: Marxist texts rendered the revolution in terms of the overthrow of capitalist relations and a seizing of state power by the urban proletariat. Yet, at that time, China was largely agrarian, with a much smaller urban industrial sector, with rule divided amongst warlords, Western and Japanese powers, and a relative lack of a centralized state. On what front was the revolution to take place, and against whom?

Several tentative responses were posited, including a two-prong articulation by Li Dazhao, cofounder of the CCP and mentor to Mao: First, given the exploitative relations of foreign imperialism, China as a whole could be considered a “proletarian nation,” as “the whole country has gradually been transformed into part of the world proletariat” (1920, cited in Spence 1990, 308). Second, in what Spence termed a “bold intellectual leap,” Li Dazhao suggested:

Our China is a rural nation and most of the laboring class is made up of peasants. If they are not liberated, then our whole nation will not be liberated; their sufferings are the sufferings of our whole nation; their ignorance is the ignorance of our whole nation; the advantages and defects of their lives are the advantages

37 In a 1906 translation of the Communist Manifesto, the term “proletarian” (“The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains”) was translated into pingmin 平民, “common people,” following the Japanese neologism for proletariat. The Chinese translator noted that the Chinese word for worker would not include laboring peasants, unlike pingmin. (Spence 1990, 260).
and defects of all of our politics. Go out and develop them and cause them to know [that they should] demand liberation, speak out about their sufferings, throw off their ignorance and be people who will themselves plan their own lives. (1921, cited in Spence 1990, 308)

The rural was thus metonymic of the nation, and the nation metonymic of the world proletariat as a global class. Inspired by his writings, a group of Li’s students from Peking University established a “Mass Education Speech Corps,” traveling to nearby villages to examine rural living conditions. Moreover, a series of peasant movements soon lent palpable link between the rural and the revolution. In 1925, when Mao Zedong was spending time in his hometown in Hunan Province, spontaneous peasant unions were springing up there and in nearby provinces. Without much explicit interest in the peasantry previously, Mao began to turn his attention toward its revolutionary potential, departing from the largely urban emphasis of both the Communists and Nationalists at the time. Writing against then CCP chairman Chen Duxiu and others, who still advocated an urban-centered revolution in line with orthodox Marxism and the Moscow-directed Comintern agents in China, Mao increasingly advocated the radicalization and mobilization of peasants.

In his March 1926 essay Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society, Mao (1967) attempts to rearticulate the Chinese social along the lines of revolutionary alliance and enmity, and vice versa. Here, the question of peasantry is subsumed under the question of class, yet begins to emerge as a significant figure in the incitement of revolution. While Mao deemed a small portion of “owner peasants” (those who for the most part needn’t rent land from others to provide for their own subsistence, yet are not 'big landlords’) “suspicious” and “a little afraid” of revolution, as their “mouths water copiously” upon seeing the small fortunes amassed by the middle bourgeoisie, he designated the vast majority of peasants supporters or potential supporters of the revolution:

The overwhelming majority of the semi-owner peasants together with the poor peasants constitute a very large part of the rural masses. The peasant problem is essentially their problem. The semi-owner peasants are... more revolutionary than the owner-peasants, but less revolutionary than the poor peasants. (1967: 16-17)

The assumption of alignment between class and psychological-political inclination has been critiqued by many, and is not my concern here. Rather, it’s to trace the coalescence of value and signification in the figure of the peasant. If the peasant became a site for the Other of attentive pity in May Fourth realist literature (a

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38 This came after a bout of despondency, when Mao seemed to be withdrawing from political participation. After the death of Sun Yatsen in 1924 and his own dispiritedness toward the prospects of CCP-GMD cooperation, Mao pleaded illness and returned to his Hunan hometown with his wife and children, missing meeting after meeting; “his previously prolific pen fell silent” (Karl 2010, 27).

39 This comes after a period of Nationalist (GMD) and Communist cooperation, in which CCP agents were sent to peasant organizations ahead of the army, assisting them in weakening warlord-supporting landlords, followed by a military sweep by GMD troops (Karl 2010, 30).
simultaneous disdain and concern as representation of a stagnant, hapless old China), the peasant in this well-known essay begins gathering a revolutionary potential, particularly in face of a conundrum in localizing the sign of the proletariat, so central to Marxist and Soviet writings from which Mao and others were drawing at the time. Yet, here, the figure of the peasant remains one to be led, an ally to the revolution rather than its propelling force. Following Soviet lines, the industrial proletariat constituted the core and force of the revolution:

The modern industrial proletariat numbers about two million. It is not large because China is economically backward… Though not very numerous, the industrial proletariat… is the most progressive class in modern China and has become the leading force in the revolutionary movement… Our closest friends are the entire semi-proletariat [including semi-owner and poor peasants] and petty bourgeoisie [including the owner peasants]. (18-19)

Similarly, in his September 1, 1926 essay “National Revolution and the Peasant Movement,” Mao opens the essay: “The peasant problem is the central problem of the national revolution, if the peasants don’t rise up to participate and assist in the national revolution, the national revolution will not succeed.” He then urges comrades to “ask them whence their bitterness… [and] from their bitterness and need, lead them to organize, lead them to struggle/battle the gentry.” Even as they became the rhetorical center of the revolutionary problem, the figure of the peasant remained a relatively passive one, an embittered Other from whom complaints must be elicited, and who would be lead by their urban comrades.

Yet, Mao’s rendering of the peasant would soon change after a month-long investigatory visit in 1927 to a series of rural sites in Hunan Province, said to be an epicenter of the peasant movement, then debated and much critiqued by the Left. From his “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan” (1927):

All talk directed against the peasant movement must be speedily set right… For the present upsurge of the peasant movement is a colossal event. In a very short time, in China’s central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation.

They will sweep all the imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local tyrants and evil gentry into their graves. Every revolutionary party and every revolutionary comrade will be put to the test, to be accepted or rejected as they decide. There are three alternatives. To march at their head and lead them? To trail behind them, gesticulating and criticizing? Or to stand in their way and oppose them? Every Chinese is free to choose, but events will force you to make the choice quickly. (23-24)
...In a few months the peasants have accomplished what Dr. Sun Yat-sen wanted, but failed, to accomplish in the forty years he devoted to the national revolution. This is a marvelous feat never before achieved, not just in forty, but in thousands of years.

In contrast to his earlier essays, not to mention existing Communist and Nationalist literature, the peasant rushes to the forefront of the revolution, threatening for the first time to leave the Party and the nation “behind,” reversing the terms of their previous condemnation as the quintessential backwards hindrance to a progressive history. While the “peasant problem” elicited concern across political and literary writings of the time, Mao’s radical reformulation and subsequent campaigns (land reform in particular) would transform the figure of the peasant from a loathsome Chinese problem to a historic force to be reckoned with. In other words, the “Chinese peasant” would become a world-historical subject of a coming international communism.

**Mao and the Cosmocratic Mythologic**

Tracing a history of the peasant (*nongmin* 农民) as vocabulary and as political-administrative category in late nineteenth and twentieth century China, Myron Cohen suggests that the Chinese Communist state imposed a deeply inaccurate term for what he calls China’s economic culture, as subsistence farming was rarely the sole livelihood of rural inhabitants, both before and after the Maoist era. Rather than a descriptive term, he writes, the notion of the peasant made way for the legitimation of administrative acts, alongside inventions of an “old” society against a “new” liberated one—a New China. While the category held “staying power” due partly to the labeling of poor, middle, and rich peasants and landlords during Land Reform campaigns, Cohen argues that such an approach proved “culturally impotent” and foreclosed “viable cultural expression,” as the “economic liberation of the peasantry required its cultural destruction” (1993, 152-157).

Instead of entering the debate on what a more accurate description of Chinese economic culture might look like, Cohen’s comments point to several issues: First, that of Maoist language as a speech act, second, the role of Land Reform campaigns in concretizing the notion of the peasant.

Drawing on their 1986-1989 interviews with a range of surviving participants and local residents of the Yan’an period of the 1930s-1940s, David Apter and Tony Saich (1998) describe the centrality of spoken word and text in the creation of what they call a cosmology of power, with a *cosmocratic center* condensed and intensified in the image of Mao. Through the establishment of a “special discourse community,” they suggest, Mao drew from Chinese traditions and Marxist lineages to transform stories of world history, Chinese history, and individual histories into a *mythologic*:

Indeed, word and text themselves came to have iconographic significance. They not only embodied the new meaning but also represented it as artifacts, as things
in themselves, with the same force as the portrait of Buddha imprinted on a tanka. (35–36)

Historical sequences of various scalar proportions “telescoped” into one another until the particularities of each began to vanish with repetition:

> There is a long story of the decline and fall of China and the loss of the patrimony; an intermediate one, the struggle with the GMD; and a short one, which covers the bitter internecine conflicts between lines and factions within the CCP. The shorter the story, the more closed down the optic, the bigger the image, and the smaller the field until Mao virtually fills the entire field of vision. (71)

Through the craft of oral storytelling, they suggest, Mao reenacted and unified history and experience. Drawing on the life stories of those who travelled to join Yan’an, Mao came to articulate prototypes that would be turned into text (144). These texts brought together the immediacies of life histories with the history of China, and the history of China with the history of the world—“China as history becoming China in history (172). Stories of poverty, debt, avaricious landlords, the rupturing of lineages, betrayal, and natural catastrophe were linked to larger forces of foreign imperialism and complicities of Chinese comprador capitalism. While Apter and Saich write with an air of cynicism toward the Maoist project, they find that for many of the survivors they interviewed, the submission to an authority of interpretation, were regarded as acts of realization—“For them word and text, far from being oppressive, became a form of unique knowledge and understanding” (21). Such texts were then read collectively in study groups, and this practice of reading, Apter and Saich suggest, “produced a certain jouissance, what Barthes has referred to as the pleasure in the text” (114). In the interviews, participants recalled the journey to Yan’an as a “going home”—a psychic and physical crossing that first required a severing from one’s previous family and community.

Mao’s narratives reached across an immense divide marking previous Chinese tales—that between the orality of storytelling and literacy of texts, between the largely illiterate and powerless populace and the literate elite. Combining elements from myths, folktales, and literary texts, alongside a Communist line of descent, “punctuated with barnyard humor and classical allusion,” Mao deployed techniques as well as existing tales that transgressed hierarchies or turned them upside down, including the figure of the peasant—the peasant warrior who became emperor, the Taiping rebellion as exemplary for peasant revolution (88).

Finally, through their focus on Yan’an, the question of violence takes on different appearance from the authors discussed earlier in the chapter, who had linked the theme of violence with the Cultural Revolution, thus as emblem and demise of Maoism. Apter and Saich also discuss the violence of the Cultural Revolution as recounted by Yan’an survivors, many of whom were later targeted. Yet, in their rendering, violence also constituted a genesis of storytelling in the Yan’an period. Tales arose from a scene of despair and yearning, and in such a moment, “Mao’s storytelling became an act in itself, an assertion of control over violence” amid the sense of loss and chaos (73). Violence was ever-present, and storied the generalized condition of China; the storied victims would in
turn use it to reestablish order. Violence was also the “constant testing ground” in the context of Yan’an, whether it be against the Japanese, the Nationalists, or factions within the Communist Party (35). Here, violence is thus placed in formative and recursive relation to narrative—that against and through which Maoist storytelling emerged and continuously transformed. It is amid these redeployments of aggression that Maoism came to create its own symbolic order, through which a revolutionary subjectivity could be articulated.

Existential Politics of Land Reform

If Yan’an constituted a “miniature” (Ibid.) of the broader Maoist project, it provided a microcosm for experiments in language and praxis, in language as praxis. This language, arguably, gained macrocosmic reach through the process of Liberation and Land Reform, as well as the many campaigns that came after.

In a call to account for and distinguish between what he calls representational realities and objective realities of rural class struggle, Philip Huang cautions against taking 1949 as the decisive marker of the Communist Revolution’s arrival. Rather, he turns to the full-scale Land Revolution, which abolished rent and redistributed 43 percent of cultivated land to around 300 million poor peasants—over half of China’s population at the time.40 Huang suggests that in the process of effectively ending landlords and rich peasants as material classes, land reform as a process simultaneously produced class as a symbolic and moral category:

By the end of Land Reform, millions of intellectuals had participated in actions and thoughts that turned class from its material meaning in Marxist-Leninist theory into a symbolic-moral meaning in the dramatic struggle of good against evil within every village. It was in the Land Revolution that the practice of manufacturing class struggle where there was no material basis for such became widespread… class took over not only the material but the symbolic realm. (Huang 125, emphasis in original)

Huang outlines three stages of land reform, each marking a distinct relation between what he calls representation and reality. In the old liberated areas (1937-1945), he suggests, techniques were less drastic, and theory and action were often most congruent. Rents were decreased, taxes were increased, and “poor peasant” landholdings rose, bringing them into a “new middle.” During the Civil War period (1946-1949), class struggle became a weapon in the struggle between the CCP and GMD, and became increasingly arbitrary and violent. After Liberation (1949-1952), the intensity of arbitrariness and violence decreased overall, yet conundrums still arose. Many of the most highly propertied rural landlords in North China were in fact absentee landlords, thus escaped class struggle. Many villages lacked any person who met the criteria for landlord

40 See also Cheng (1982: 66).
or even rich peasant. Yet, cadres were at times pressed to identify class enemies, thus middle peasants who allegedly concealed property were targeted for struggle.

Extending the question of representation to the Cultural Revolution, Huang suggests that these earlier moments of disjuncture between land and class widened the gap between the material and the representational. While class labels were still linked (even if thinly) to material property during Land Reform, by the time of the Cultural Revolution, “connections between representation and objective realities were severed,” and “class [became] almost exclusively a matter of political attitude… a matter of representation alone” (133-134).

Such campaigns as land reform also generated a new relationality between the one and the collective: the suffering of each and every poor peasant came to be linked to a national whole, and beyond that, to world history. Reflecting on Fang Huirong’s sociological work with the Oral History Project on rural remembrances of the Maoist years, Xin Liu (2009) writes that the performative repetition of narratives of suffering amplified the particular into the general, and brought the general into the particular, through what Fang calls a “narrative transfer” between the two. Not unlike the “telescoping” of Yan’an narratives described above, the “I” was fastened to the “we;” the pain of the each Chinese peasant was rendered “a symptom of a universal illness, diagnosed by Marx as the capitalistic-imperialistic oppression of the working-class people of the world” (144). But this time, rather than a small, select group, such practices became forms of life across Chinese villages, guided and habituated by the political technologies of the work team.

Through the “interiorization” a phantasmal unity of “the people,” Liu suggests, a powerful existential politics was created through waves of campaigns, through which the peasant, as a Maoist ethical subject, “saw themselves for the first time as a living force” in history (169). In day-to-day praxis, this involved mass campaigns of pouring out grievance or speaking bitterness, through which discrete memories were condensed into “impressionistic images,” conjoined by the repeated induction of particular narrative plots (149-153). Rather than chains of causal relation mapped onto linear time, memory became “anti-calendrical,” reorganizing the interior experience of time to a nationalist time (151). Decades later, Fang’s interviewees could not seem to recall the years of particular occurrences, but rather placed occurrences in relation to national temporal markers, e.g., before or after collectivization. This temporality was also pointed toward a future of perpetual struggle, and of a “promised utopian tomorrow that would perhaps never arrive” (161). Liu calls the intense mythical power and energy generated by such practices a Maoist shamanism, which will resonate beyond the domain of official campaigns in the chapters below.

Waves of political campaigns major and minor passed between Land Reform and the Cultural Revolution, including the Great Leap Forward, which figured prominently in the recollections of those in He County, which I will not detail at this moment. Rather, I turn to Huang and Liu for their considerations of the shifting linkages and ruptures between language and world, which simultaneously produced a new symbolic order, in which the peasant figures centrally in the question of the ethical, by way of class. Through distinctions broad and minute, instantiated through localized practice, notions of the peasant as world historical subject articulated in earlier Maoist and Communist
writings became part of daily life, the basis on which material relations were reorganized, the basis on which recognition was sought.

Through the very campaigns that were later seen to have ruptured the function of language, a new language was born. This new language, needless to say, did not go uncontested. Nonetheless, as I will try to show in the chapters that follow, what Apter and Saich termed Mao’s political cosmology, and what I consider here as a new, if deeply fraught symbolic order, will come to regain cosmological significance post-Reform, in spectral form. Specifically, He County and Henan province, which would experience an inversion of valence after Mao’s death through the very figure of the peasant and of the rural, would return to Maoism as a foregone world, an older language that returns in fragments of speech, ritual, and psychiatric symptoms to illuminate the conundrum of the “now.” To grasp this inversion of valence between the Maoist and post-Mao eras, I turn lastly to radical reformulations of the peasant post-Reform.

**Wither the People**

If the peasant was figured as a force of revolutionary potential during the Maoist era, with Mao’s death in 1976, this vision was quickly dismantled by intellectuals and officials in the search for a new technocratic and purportedly apolitical approach to modernization. By the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, the refutation of Maoism gained strength with the start of Deng Xiaoping’s rise. The intellectual class targeted during the Cultural Revolution relegated Maoism to an anachronism alongside the feudalism it was once posited against, and with it the focus on history and class struggle. The future, instead, was to be found in the concepts of rights and democracy, against what came to be framed as a feudal totalitarianism. Although intellectuals first relied on early Maoist notions of economic determination in peasant class consciousness, the peasant’s relationship to time and history were soon reversed:

Contrary to the stress on the revolutionary nature of the peasantry in the 1960s and 1970s, intellectuals stressed the conservative nature of the peasantry’s egalitarian tendencies during the early reform era. This conservative peasantry, in turn, was seen as the social foundation for an autocratic state, for dictatorship, and the cult of personality... As the reform era developed, peasant historical and political agency was increasingly denied, and the two poles of the peasantry’s dual nature were reversed: egalitarian and revolutionary tendencies were redefined as conservative, while the petty-bourgeois tendencies of the small property owner were now seen as progressive and entrepreneurial. (Day 2013, 28-29)

The forward-moving potential of the peasantry as a rebellious exploited class transmuted to an image of a dispersed, unruly mass in need of an autocratic ruler, thus linking the peasantry with the political errors of the Maoist era. From a speech at a party conference by the deputy editor-in-chief of the People’s Daily: “Due to their [small farmers’] dispersed, self-sufficient and mutually isolated nature, they were unable to form a
‘national bond.’ … This kind of socio-economic condition nurtures monarchical thinking and produces the personality cult” (cited in Brugger and Kelly 1990, 143).

Mao and the peasants were together sent back in time, in a periodization of monarchy and feudalism set against democracy and modernization. Peasant populism entered discussions of the so-called Asiatic mode of production, in which an agrarian society with a dominant state would hinder any possibility of historical dynamism. The peasantry came to stand in as the root cause of stagnation.

In the conceptual and discursive effort to delink the peasant from the state and relink the peasant question with those of entrepreneurship, the language of peasant “quality,” suzhi, came to the fore. Paralleling notions of population quality amid the One-Child Policy, the notion of labor quality came to explain and justify the “differential value produced by equal quantities of labor power,” reinstating the difference between mental and manual labor Maoist era policy attempted to eliminate (Day 2013: 37). The difference of value coded in the language of suzhi, in which the rural populace and rural labor is seen as excessive in quantity while lacking in quality, at once facilitates the extraction of surplus value from rural migrant labor and renders invisible this very process of difference production (H. Yan 2003). This new coding of value was elaborated in particular through the paired contrast between the body of the rural migrant, a corporeal sign of the absence of quality, and that of the urban, middle-class only child, “fetishized as a site for the accumulation of the very dimensions of suzhi wanting in its ‘other’… a play of plentitude and lack” (Anagnost 2004, 190). Suzhi was defined by a sense of entrepreneurial spirit, openness to ideas, sense of efficiency, initiative and drive, and risk taking, in contrast to the defensive, inward-looking, despotic, and authoritarian tendencies of the agrarian society (Day 2013). Their status of the peasant as embodiment of the revolutionary People was reversed into signs of dependency and backwardness, ever in lack of urban bourgeois “quality.” Through these and other post-Reform recodings, the sense of rural historical and political agency articulated in the Maoist era were lost.

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In this detoured ‘setting’ across the twentieth century, the figure of the peasant has been taken up as mediated access to the real in modern literature, as metonymy of the global proletariat in early Chinese Communist writings, as uncontainable revolutionary force and world-historical subject in Maoist writings and campaigns, and finally, as sign of backwards conservatism and cultural-corporeal lack post-Reform. While some have addressed the disturbance to language and narrativity as an effect of the violence of the Maoist era, rifts were also left by the collapse of Maoist era modes of collective life and its socialist discursive surface; these cleavages were in turn filled with the language and value of money amid the new market economy (Liu 2002). Even when modes of deliberate precision and deterritorialized relation to official ideology gave rise to implicit tension beneath such discursive surfaces, they precisely sustained the sense of an eternal state, in which everything was forever—until it was no more (Yurchak 2005). The following

41 Here, I would also add the ethnic minority population to those of the rural inhabitant and migrant.
chapters turn to what forms of history, utterance, and presence return to the scene of the rural, after the Maoist symbolic order was no more.
Chapter 2. Spectral Collision

Cai Huiqing sat in the tangwu 堂屋, the central room, picking up her worn cell phone, gazing at the screen, then putting it down again. “Sister should be calling soon, I haven’t told her yet.” Cai was my host, and she was speaking of her daughter, the second of her three children and older sister to me in our fictive kinship, who lives and works in Shanghai. But as many times before, she held herself back, waiting instead for her daughter to initiate the call.

Several days prior, before the break of dawn, the demands of the spectral yin world resounded in a loud pounding at my door. It was Cai, yelling my name. I snapped awake and leapt out of bed, alarmed, and stumbled to the Southwest corner of the yard, the lowest cardinal direction in the cosmic geography of the house. I see a meter-deep pit in the soil. She had just spent hours in the night digging, and was drenched in sweat. Beaming, she handed me a rusted metal semi-circle, no more than twenty centimeters wide—an old defunct pipe clamp. The excavated object in question was named by the spirit medium we had visited, and it posed no less than a threat to the lives of her family members.

This chapter follows the story of this excavation and the ghosts released into Cai Huiqing’s life and dreamscape, to consider the multiple registers of time that come together through the juncture of spirit mediumship, as well as the distant intimacy mediumship capacitates in an era of labor migration. In He County, mediumship might be said to be not quite old or new. Rather, it beckons those who come into contact with it to wrestle with the status of the present. To begin with a homonymic abstraction, a link was drawn in the Han dynasty between the word demon/ghost 鬼 gui and 归 gui, “to return,” addressing the transformation and return of the human body into its essential spirit, into its ghostly form (Csikszentmihalyi 2006). Here, I hold this link open to consider the ghost as a form of return, more broadly writ—not only the transformation from fleshy human form into an unbodied form, but the return of histories through ghostly entities, prying open the meaning of the present, refiguring its potentiality.

To raise the theme of the ghost and history also raises the question of the event. In anthropological writings, two sets of tensions have been put forth: that between event and everyday, and that between event and structure. These two contrastive definitions point to two dimensions of the event, respectively. On the one hand, its extra-ordinary quality, whether in terms of scale and universality, violence and traumatic effect, or the transcendental and otherworldly. On the other hand, its simultaneously contingent and rupturing quality, in its disruption of existing systems (and what is nameable and legible within them) and the emergence of new forms, of new names.

The event and everyday pairing seems a transmuted echo of a sociological distinction between the sacred and profane, in which the extraordinary is set apart or

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42 All names in this text are pseudonyms, except authors and public figures.

43 I will use both ‘ghost’ and ‘demon’ to refer to the Chinese term gui 鬼, pending context, to convey the connotation evoked in its usage.
forbidden from mundane concerns (through, for example, the figure of taboo). The event and system pairing extends the linguistic question of synchrony and diachrony, mapping onto the historian’s perennial dilemma of continuity and change. What might thinking with the ghost and the dream offer to thinking on the event? In the effort to consider history, mediumship, and ghosts in He County, what constitutes the evental?

Left Behind, Liushou

“Let’s go!” Cai Huiqing announced abruptly as we finished a quiet lunch of homemade noodles with sesame leaves. I asked her where to. “To see a shenpo”—a spirit lady, or in usual English translation, a witch. She was deploying a generic term I had brought to the scene, a term at once intelligible to her and yet marked my externality to the local articulation of such matters. It was a term more common to anti-superstition literature that often disregarded local terminologies, thus carried an air of modern accusation, and was rarely spoken without some manner of recursive acknowledgment. Cai had known of my interest in spirit mediumship, but had not mentioned her own plans for a visit until that moment.

Boarding a county bus, she tells me that the medium had warned her during a previous visit several months earlier that this lunar month would be of risk to her family, in particular to her husband. As the days wore on, she grew increasingly anxious. Living at the edge of the rural county seat without formal employment, Cai Huiqing was a women ‘left behind’ in rural regions, an identity called forth in nationalist discourses of progress. Particularly since the mid-2000s, the term liushou liwo has been used in Chinese academic and policy literature as translational equivalent of “left behind.” Yet, this neologistic usage of liushou sits atop other meanings. Taken separately, liu is to stay, to remain, to concentrate on something; to keep, to leave something behind for the next generation; shou is to guard, to defend, to observe. In classical Chinese, liushou referred an emperor’s order to a minister to act on his behalf during his absence from the capital; or, when a small number of troops remain for garrison to defend an area after the emperor and his entourage have departed. As a translingual double to the left behind, what does it mean to liushou, if we also take a hint from its older usage? What is it to stay, to guard, to leave something behind for the next generation; to wait for a phone call, to excavate for the remnants of a shadowed past? How might mediumship offer a site for engaging what remains?

With this in mind, I return to He County, where two of Cai Huiqing’s three children had long moved away to distant cities for employment. The youngest was expected to follow suit after she completes her secondary education. Her husband, after

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44 The two pairings, of course, are not unrelated. The everyday and the systemic come together in elaborations of hegemony, habitus, and ideology, of techne and episteme. Rather than reviewing these approaches here, I turn instead to the theme of ghosts as an attempt to draw out a conceptual thread from the ethnographic scene.
diving into the seas of the privatized economy (xiabai 下海), worked as an oil truck driver who spends most of the year on the road and can’t always make it back for the holidays. Cai remained at home in He county, with her 92-year-old adoptive mother, a paternal aunt to whom she was “given” at a young age due to the aunt’s infertility, for whom she continued to look after.

In the mid-1980s, when Deng Xiaoping’s administration loosened restriction on private ownership and entrepreneurship, her husband was one of the first among neighboring villages to purchase an oil truck, loaning money from several close kin. While this led to an initial surge of wealth, the profits never fully caught up to the cost of driving and the cost of living, and the family remained in debt for the initial truck purchase, living month to month with little saving.

The Ten-Thousand-Man Pit

We arrived at a village ten kilometers or so from Cai Huiqing’s home. Although there were several spirit mediums closer in distance, it was common to visit mediums away from one’s village, as a matter of inclination and perceived spiritual efficacy, as well as a degree of removal from the intimate perils of village rumor, since details of one’s earthly and otherworldly circumstances are often revealed during the visits, and may be used for ill in either yin or yang worlds. Once off the bus, Cai navigated the dirt roads of the medium’s village with a swift familiarity. The medium’s home appeared no different than any other in the village; no markings or architectural divergence told of its cosmic significance. Across waves of state campaigns against both official and unofficial institutions and practices designated as feudal superstition, elaborate temples were replaced by secret home altars and petite icons, long chants with bells and drums quieted to shortened muffled murmurs (Dubois 2005)—what Chau calls a minimalist mode of religiosity (2006 7). The only visible distinction of this home, and it had nothing to do with secrecy, was that the tall metal front gate leading to the yard was left ajar unlike others, a sign that her altar was open to supplicants.

Like many other home altars I visited in He County, the altar had its own dedicated wing in the house-complex, with its own entrance. In this case, it was a western wing directly adjacent to the central building of the house where the family lived, both built of brick with curved gray clay tile roofs. It was an architectural style common to rural houses of the region, particularly those constructed two decades prior. In the 1980s and 1990s, such brick houses (zhuanfang 砖房)—often single-level with multiple wings and an enclosed yard—signaled an upward economic shift from smaller mud-based houses reinforced with hay (tufang 土方). But by the time of my visit in 2012-2013, they were seen as a step or two behind the times, to be replaced by yangfang 洋房—a “foreign”-style house, usually a single two- or three-story cement-covered building, with higher ceilings and larger interiors, reducing the former space of the yard, more imposing
and blockish in stature. Indeed, to the east of the older brick-based altar wing and central wing, a three-story “foreign”-style house towered above, casting a shadow on the others. This was the home recently built for the medium’s elder son—a sign that the medium indeed draws many supplicants and was economically well-off, Cai commented, which in turn signaled that she indeed knew how to “see” well, hui kan, kan de hao, referring to spiritual capacity and efficacy.

At the altar, we took a seat across from the medium on the west side of the square ritual table—the spiritually and symbolically less powerful side of the arrangement in contrast to the east. In front of the altar, sitting between the medium and us, was a large metal wash bin filled with incense ash from previous sessions. She unwrapped a new batch of rusty-gold incense, lighting it slowly, attentively, squinting to determine when the batch was properly lit, and finally planted it into the large metal bin. As with any medium who has lit batches of incense day after day, year after year, her walls and ceiling were covered in a thick black crust of soot.

The flaming incense, as I learned through conversations with her and other mediums, constitutes the beginning of an invitation, an opening up of a portal between the human world and spirit world, between the living and the dead. After seeing many of these sessions, I began to sense the tension between presence and absence offered by the flame: a transient mode of communicability and affective passage, an openness dancing precariously during the transitional phase of absenting: the burning away of the body of the incense, paralleling the absenting of the medium’s full conscious presence. An emptying of the medium’s body in order to make room, so to speak, for the co-presence of ancestors, deities, and demons.

The medium closed her eyes, and began yawning. Yawning, in many northern regions of China, is a sign that the spirits have arrived and are entering the medium’s body.

“What is the name?” She asked.

Cai responded with her husband’s name, on whose behalf she was consulting the gods. The medium inquired of his whereabouts. Cai responded that he was away, on the road, driving an oil truck, delivering gas to gas stations.

“Where does he drive?”

“From Shan city to Xinyang, at times much further. Via the highway, to deliver to gas stations.” The medium contemplates this, then her right hand begins shaking as she whispers rapidly under her breath, conversing with her tutelary spirit. Suddenly a yawn hits her, and her eyes snap open.

“He hit someone while he was driving.”

45 More recently, the bieshu, ‘villa,’ has begun to contend with the yangfang for contemporary desirability.

46 会看，看得好.

47 In contrast to South China who often use 3 sticks of incense, most mediums I met in He County use a whole bundle, between 20-30 sticks. No clear explanation was offered for this distinction, except from one medium who adopted the southern method and simply deemed the batch approach incorrect and wasteful.

48 Feuchtwang (2010) and Chau (2006) have also discussed this invitational aspect of incense.

49 Otherworldly presence and efficacy are referred to as lingqi, ‘spiritual airs,’ which can descend upon or invade human bodies or earthly objects.
“An insider or outsider?” Cai asked, meaning someone in the community versus a stranger. It was neither: It was in fact a xian 仙. In literature on Daoist texts, xian is often translated as the immortal, transcendent, or perfected—Daoist adepts who stretch the limits of the human lifespan and, through a range of practices, reach various modes of deathlessness and in some cases, liberation from the usual limits of the human body (Kohn 2000). Yet, spiritual engagements and oral traditions external to or at the edges of what has come to be considered “Daoism” proper evoke the term xian beyond the ideal figure of the transcendent, to such contemptuous or ambivalent figures as fox and other animal spirits, (at times divinely or demonically) erotic women, and in certain cases, spirit mediums themselves (Kang 2006). In He County, xian was often invoked to describe an old ghost. Xian was differentiated from gui 鬼, gui being the more generic name for ghosts, while xian were said to be gui who have passed the threshold of death for more than 30 years, to upwards of thousands of years. Such “old ghosts” grow increasingly powerful with time and cultivation, and may direct their powers toward benevolent or evil aims, though more emphasis is placed on the dimension of evil.

After inquiring about her husband’s local truck route, the medium scoffs knowingly. “That corner—don’t you know that’s the ten-thousand-man pit, the wanrenkeng 万人坑?” She was speaking of a major intersection, which for decades prior to the Reform Era was known locally as the site of a mass grave. During the famines of the 1940s and 50s, it was said that those who simply collapsed of cold and hunger and died in the street, or those whose families did not have the means to bury them, were simply tossed into the pit. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, it also served as resting place to those accused of political dissent—they were killed point-blank at the edge.

Today, the ten-thousand-man pit lies beneath a Sinopec gas station. It’s no longer so actively feared as it once was, yet still houses countless hungry, wandering ghosts from decades past. Without proper burial and identity, these are abandoned ghosts, those not taken in by the heavens, nor kept by the earth, tian bu shou, di bu liu. Those stuck between two realms, at times filled with vengeance, at times drifting aimlessly, colliding into unfortunate human bodies. As Heonik Kwon (2008) argues in his work on post-war ghosts in Vietnam, we must trouble the Durkheimian neglect of ghosts who fall outside of the logic of genealogical kinship, particularly after modern modes of mass death, and take these abandoned ghosts seriously in our theorizations of social relation and reciprocity. And as Arthur Wolf once put it, one man’s ghost is another man’s ancestor.

Here, it is important to clarify that the ten-thousand-man pit was by no means the sole, or even most frequent site for spectral collision. Ghosts are also common at intersections where their souls had been released during mortuary ritual, their personal gravesites, bodies of women who recently miscarried, sites of past wrongs, sites of reminiscence, sites of ghostly sociality (in one village, a group of ghosts were said to enjoy spending their time chatting on a particular tree), and simply arbitrary sites along their otherworldly driftings. And, the history addressed below—that of the 1940s and Old Society—is but one amid many histories that return. There are also ghosts of the more
recently deceased, and ghosts stretching from Reform to imperial times. One female ghost returned to haunt a woman in her village. When the woman visited a local medium to decipher her affliction, the ghost revealed the names of neighboring villagers who allegedly sexually assaulted her during the Cultural Revolution. While the assault incident, from those I spoke to, was an open secret in the village, the haunting precipitated reinvestigation and redress of an event that had been neglected in the zone of half-remembrance. Thus, I turn to the site of the ten-thousand-man pit and the history of the 1940s in this chapter not because this is the sole geographic or temporal origin of ghosts in He County, but as a particular encounter through which to consider how histories may be carried by ghosts, and how we might follow the ghost in an attempt to trace the histories they act as reminders of.

No Man’s Land

My notes tell me that I am reporting only what I saw or verified; yet even to me it seems unreal: dogs eating human bodies by the roads, peasants seeking dead human flesh under the cover of darkness, endless deserted villages, beggars swarming at every city gate, babies abandoned to cry and die on every highway. Nothing can transmit the horror of the entire great famine in Honan [Henan] Province, or the irony of the green spring wheat with a promise of a bumper crop which is not ripe for harvesting for two more months. Most terrible of all is the knowledge that the famine might have been averted.

Theodore White (1943)

The travels and eyewitness accounts of U.S. journalist Theodore White, newly heroicized in the 2012 Chinese film Back to 1942, brought international attention, not to mention national embarrassment, to the then Nationalist (KMT) government’s neglect of Henan province during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945).

Nobody knows or cares how many refugees die on this road. They say two million people have moved out along this route since fall, by now probably 10,000 a day are drifting along westward. Of [Henan’s] 34 millions we estimated that there have been three million refugees. In addition, five million will have died by the time the new harvest is gathered. (Ibid.)

During the war, Henan was treated as a no man’s land, a buffer zone between Nationalist and Japanese fronts. On May 11, 1938, an order was sent for the Nationalist Army to demolish the dikes of the grand Yellow River in eastern Henan, to form a barrier against the rapidly encroaching Japanese forces. The original plan was to sever a smaller section of the dike in Zhoukou, a town less than thirty kilometers from He County; but the silt refused to cooperate and the section resealed within a matter of hours. Anxious to halt Japanese forces from taking the central railroad junction in Henan as they had already done in nearby Jiangsu province, the army switched plans, bombarding the

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51 Honan is the old Wade-Giles romanization of Henan.
dike at Garden Opening. In what has been called the largest act of environmental warfare in history, the Yellow River rushed to overflow the Huai River. The resulting flood succeeded in delaying Japanese troops, but took with it almost 900,000 of those living in villages and towns of the region, who were not forewarned of the scheme, and left over four million seeking refuge (Wou 1994, 218-219). By the time White reported on Henan several years later, the combination of drought and Japanese destruction of crops had brought on mass starvation, compounding the effects of one disaster after the next.

*When we arrived in Chengchow [Zhengzhou] the snow-covered, rubble-ruined streets seemed full of ghosts in fluttering grey-blue rags. They darted from every alley to screech at us with their hands tucked in their gowns to keep warm. When they die they just lie down in the slush or gutters and give up. We prodded one or two of them gently to see whether they were still alive… That afternoon we heard of a cannibalism trial. A Mrs. Ma was being tried for eating her little girl. Parts of the baby’s flesh were brought in as evidence. The state charged she killed the child and ate it. Her plea was that the baby had died from hunger first and then was eaten. (Ibid.)*

Despite such wrenching accounts, Liu Zhenyun, author of the book off of which *Back to 1942* was based, tellingly notes in a reflection on his research process:

> My grandmother lived through the famine. When I ask her about 1942 she responds:
> “1942? What about it?” I tell her it was the year many people died of starvation.
> “People died of starvation all the time,” she replies. “What’s so special about that year?”

In the same vein, 1942 did not constitute a signifier of pain around which memories were spun for those in He County who lived through it. When I inquired about 1942, the response often came: “Do you mean the Old Society?” Used in parallel with “feudal society,” the Old Society, *jiushehui* (旧社會), was the term employed for all that came before Mao’s New China. And indeed, it was not uncommon to hear in response to my U.S. nationality that one cannot compare China with the U.S., as China has been a country for merely sixty years.” Upon noting my surprise, my interlocutors would respond that of course, there were the thousands of years of history (*lishi* 历史), but when Chairman Mao founded New China, that’s when China truly emerged as a nation (*guojia* 国家). The imagination of national belonging thus centered around the moment of Liberation, around Mao and the CCP. Mao not only marked one regime among others, but the very possibility of China as a national entity.

In contrast to New China, Old Society was characterized, among those in He County who still carry memories from that era, as a time when corpses scattered across

52 Dutch 2009.
53 Liu 2012.
54 In contrast to the famine of 1958.
village roads. The main temple square was filled with those seeking refuge and salvation, but many—including the great grandparents of the friend who introduced me to He County—died of cold and hunger while begging on the square. Young men hid from the Nationalist army in fear of being snatched for involuntary service; young women covered their faces in ash to appear less attractive, in fear of “bad” soldiers, both Nationalist and Japanese. In contrast to Nationalist troops, who demanded entry into villagers’ homes and dined on their scarce grain, the People’s Liberation Army of the CCP was recalled with fondness, at least with relation to the period leading up to Liberation. Camping outside of villagers’ homes rather than intruding, the People’s Liberation Army, they said, offered assistance and supplies rather than seizing them.

Such accounts of Old China and of Liberation, of course, must be considered alongside the narratives formulated by the Maoist state in the act of state building and the quelling of political opposition (Cohen 1993). Indeed, such re-periodization has the capacity to powerfully transform the language available to memory and narrative articulation, augmenting the very experience of time. Yet it would be off-mark to simply read the narrative renderings of my interlocutors as mere ideology, or better yet, as an effect of rural naiveté on susceptibility to ideological manipulation. Reflecting on an older debate surrounding “peasant nationalism,” Wou (1994) writes that during the years of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the CCP mobilized the rural movement through localized defense, united front, and class struggle, building solidarity with peasants in face of flood, drought, famine, warfare, as well as the “boisterous” behavior of Nationalist-commissioned bandits and warlords. Whilst the Reform and Maoist eras may constitute more recent moments from which considerations of Mao’s symbolic significance may be drawn, the transmission of memory, both through oral history and national media, offer reminder of a time before Mao, a time in which He County, and with it Henan and China, was on the brink of collapse and occupation.

For those I met in He County, the rise of Mao and the founding of New China, built on the distinction from Old Society, seemed indeed to constitute an event by the contrastive definitions set out above, both in its extraordinary dimension and its rupturing of a previous order of things. A recognizable event. A revolutionary event. In

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55 It was precisely at this juncture of the CCP, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the question of the nation that an entire generation of scholarly debate arose around the notion of peasant nationalism, partly triggered by American obsession at the time over why China ‘fell’ to communism. In a now infamous work, Chalmers Johnson (1962) posited that rather than “totalitarian instruments of mass manipulation that originally led the Chinese masses into their pact with the Communist elite; it was, rather, the effects of the war and the national awakening that the war induced” (1962, 11). Framing the peasantry as a previously politically illiterate mass, Johnson argued that the CCP’s success in rural China is inextricably linked to wartime mobilization in context of Japanese invasion and occupation, which generated a new political sensibility among the rural population: a desire to defense the fatherland. Against Johnson, Gillin (1967) responded, based particularly on pre-war data, that the CCP’s revolutionary aims and programs were central to their success, rather than the sole impact of anti-Japanese sentiments. The debate was never entirely settled by the data—as if data can ever offer final word on such a question—and the aim here is not to re-enter this debate as such, but rather to reflect on both the centrality and complexity of this period, which appears significant to grasping the political and symbolic significance of Mao and the CCP which would later return to haunt.
contradistinction, what appears to external observers as the extraordinary violence and event-like quality of the 1942 famine are described with a timbre of the ordinary: “People died all the time of starvation, what’s so special about that year?” To sustain inquiry toward the event is thus to follow the disjointed gazes that search for it, from here and from there, from now and from then. Moreover, it is to attend to the forward and backward motions of event-making, the anticipatory and retroactive forces that invoke questions of deferred action. The event, as I will discuss below, unfolds through various moments of reactivation, which also complicates and puts into question the site and temporality of the event proper. What is it, for instance, to hit an old ghost, amid present concerns seemingly distant from this past?

Borrowed Mouths

In He County, there are several terms for referring to those I am translating as spirit mediums. For those who see supplicants regularly at their altars, the most common term is kanxiangde 看香的, “those who see/observe incense.”56 In contrast to the translated term spirit medium, the otherworldly entities being engaged with go unnamed. Those who engage in spirit possession but do not see supplicants regularly are said to zougong 走功, literally to “walk (for) spiritual power,” or shougong 守功, to “stay guard (for) spiritual power,” referring respectively to pilgrimage to and cultivation at temples and other sites. Relatedly, yougong 有功, “to have spiritual power,” suggests a spiritual capacity that can potentially be cultivated through engagement with temples and deities, and connotes an existing relationship (whether known or unknown to oneself) with at least one tutelary spirit. In the case of those who become temporarily possessed by ghosts or other demonic entities, the common phrase is zhuangdao dongxi 確到東西 or you dongxi 有东西, “colliding into something” or “have something.” Across this text, I use “spirit medium” to refer to the first two—those who regularly receive supplicants at an altar, and those who engage in spirit possession without necessarily receiving supplicants. Yet, the more general theme of the human body as medium to otherworldly forces is pertinent beyond these two, as the extent of engagement remains an open question across one’s life, and even those who think themselves untouched may be affected without their own knowing. To engage with temple visitation and the consultation of mediums, without necessarily involving the experience of possession, is referred to as burning incense, shaoxiang 燃香.

In conversation, when a visit to a medium is being suggested, the object “incense” is dropped in “those who see incense,” and one is simply advised to “go find one who knows how to see.” Or, simply, “go see,” qukankan 去看看, softening the “see” (kan)

56 Kanxiang is also used in Zhao County in Hebei province to refer to the practice of spirit mediums at in the Water Goddess temple. There, three sticks of incense are held in the hand of the medium, in contrast to a full batch of approximately thirty sticks placed in the censer in He County (Overmyer 2009, 85, citing the work of Yue Yongyi).

57 Qu zhao ge hui kan de 去找个会看的.
with a linguistic reduplication, truncating both the subject and object, leaving only the acts of visitation and viewing, leaving unsaid just what is to be seen, and who is doing the seeing. The power of perception, according to mediums in He County, is gifted or borrowed from one’s tutelary spirit(s), and the power to affect a given situation, including the power to heal, emanates from the possessing deity, not from the medium. The medium lends (jie 借) a material body through which nonbodied entities can more easily create effects in the material world—they “borrow your body” to act and “borrow your mouth to speak.”

I use the term spirit medium across this text for several reasons. First and most simply, it is the term most often employed in the literature on parallel figures, such as the tang-ki of south and southeast China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia (Chan 2006; Jordan 1972; Kleinman 1980) and variously, the xiangdao, xiangtou, wupo, shenhan, mapi and other figures in north China (Chau 2006; DuBois 2005; Overmyer 2009); though there are also others who use “shaman,” at times interchangeably with spirit medium (Chao 1999; Wolf 1990). Second, in the now classic accounts and debates of Eliade (1964) and Lewis (2003), the (contended) distinction between the shaman and the medium pivoted around the theme of mastery over the spirits. The shaman, for Eliade, ascended in a movement of pride to join the ranks of the gods in celestial journey, whereas the medium received the descent and incarnation of gods upon the human. Lewis considered this typological bifurcation untenable, suggesting that the shaman can also act as receptacle for possessing spirits. The contrast, for him, is not categorical, but one of degree of mastery—the shaman is a medium who has mastered the capacity for controlled spirit possession, whereas a medium is one who might be regularly possessed, but do not always control their possessions. Thus, for Lewis, “all shamans are thus mediums… It does not follow, of course, that all mediums are necessarily shamans… not all such mediums are likely to graduate in time to become controllers of spirits” (49-50).

In He County, it is rare to suggest mastery of the medium over their possessing spirits. Moreover, to claim equality with or identity as the deity is seen as a dangerous sign of falsity, in the sense of feigned possession or of possession by demonic entities masquerading as deities. This is not to say that mediumship, particularly in the case of those who receive supplicants, does not require some command over the timing and conditions of possession—there is of course a “shamanistic” dimension of mastery involved, so to speak. Yet, since the language for the capacity to contain possession comes in the form of lending on the part of the deity, the human gift of otherworldly perception and action is considered temporarily granted, and may always be revoked at the displeasure of the deity or the breaching of the pact. Thus, I use spirit medium to connote the sense and language of non-mastery central to those I encountered in He County, in which the human does not reign, budangjia 不当家.

Third, the spirit mediumship is distinguished here from the fortunetelling and divining, even though there are some mediums who also engage in the latter two. The latter two, particularly in the form of suangua 算卦, those who “calculate hexagrams,” did not usually engage in possession, and tended to accuse spirit mediumship as a false and baseless form, in contrast to trigram reading and divination techniques (such as qian 签 oracle slips) which ground their authority on textual traditions drawing on the Book of
Changes. Conversely, many spirit mediums dismiss fortunetellers as merely memorizing passages from a text they do not have the capacity to understand, particularly without direct relationship with and assistance from the spirit world. Perhaps not incidentally, spirit mediums in He County are more likely to be women, while fortunetellers tend to be men, marking a gendered tendency (but not absolute division) between oral and textual traditions. Finally, as discussed in the introduction, the translated term mediumship evokes the question of mediation, and what it might mean to be medium and mediator to inherited histories.

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In He County, demonic entities tended to be euphemized into a most generic noun in conversation when one is affected: thing. Given suspicion that an illness or happening may be linked to an otherworldly entity, the hushed phrase arises, as mentioned above: “there is a thing/to have a thing.” In the case of possession or other direct contact with ghosts, the most common phrase is “colliding into (some)thing.” To be a medium, then, is to be one who is capable of perceiving and rendering perceptible the unspeakable thing spectrally driving a given situation.

Such a spectral collision is considered a form of calamity, zai 災, and distinguished from another form: benming zai 本命災, natal calamity. Whereas natal calamity is linked to the cosmic–numeric alignment of one’s birth, according to one’s eight-character birth date and time in the lunar calendar, spectral collision involves questions of contingency and historical returns in the encounter with an other. On the one hand, ghosts evoke the motif of accident. Tending to travel in a straight line, ghosts inadvertently collide into humans who happen upon the same spatio-temporal location, on a shared landscape hosting both yin and yang realms (in this delineation, the yin world is that of the spirits, and the yang that of humans). On the other hand, ghosts are driven by desire and spite—longing for the humans they have departed, hurt and anger for their neglect, desire for goods and riches in the afterlife, indignation and vengefulness for the wrongs from their former life yet to be set right.

The ghosts hovering about the ten-thousand-man pit, as the one hit by Cai’s husband’s truck, thus bring with them wishes and woes of times past, of futures past. Even if not pursuing revenge, their very aimless drifting poses a risk to those who unwittingly cross their paths. Their era, their time, their pain, their yearning, carried in their ethereal existence, invisible amid a shared landscape. Stretching across human lifespans, their spectral presence brings multiple histories into the contemporary, making the past an effective force in the present. A spectral collision, in this sense, re-eventilizes temporalities past. Cai’s family is put at risk on account of a bad death from another era, reactivating the force of a prior moment by putting the present at stake. Such an encounter can be thought not only as a present reference to the past, but as the reanimation of desires and pains coming from another time, with its own set of temporal horizons, transported into a given present. To think with ghosts, then, is also to revisit the status and temporality of the human persons living among them.
The mood of the room grew tense as the medium revealed the collision with the ghost. Cai Huiqing looked worried.

“We hit the ghost? We can’t see them on the road, *an kan bu jian.*” In contrast to the standard Mandarin “I/me,” *wo*, “I/me” in the Henanese dialect, *an*, doesn’t distinguish between first person singular, third person singular, and first person plural—in this case, the ‘he’ of her husband, who was the only one in the truck, the ‘we’ of the family, and the ‘I’ of Cai herself. She was thus apologizing as and for the whole family. The ghost, said the medium, was smashed to a pulp, and was very angry. Cai rushed to the kneeling mat south of the altar, and began to kowtow in the direction of the incense and icons.

“Let us kowtow to you, we collided into you, we’re sorry,” she continues as her head begins hitting the floor. “We’re sorry, we couldn’t see you.” The Henanese “you,” *nen*, as counterpart to *an*, signifies a pluralized or pluralizable second person—the you of your relational being.

This gesture of kowtowing seemed insufficient.

“He is furious,” the medium relayed as she squinted into the flame, referring to the ghost.

“You see?” She points to a single dark, scorched stick of incense, towering above the rest. “You see how angry he is! He wants your husband’s life!”

Cai Huiqing began tearing up. “That won’t do! Tell him to leave! Whatever he wants, we’ll give. If he wants money, we’ll give him money. Keep talking to him!” She runs over to the mat and begins to kowtow again.

Here, we’re brought to the significance of burning incense—what might be considered a hermeneutics of incense. In this case, the single blackened stick that stood above the rest was a manifestation of anger arising from a history of bad deaths, paved over by a gas station, directed toward Cai’s family, through her husband as an oil truck driver in an era of rising product exportation and traffic accidents. The medium’s exegesis is spoken or at times sung during the blazing transformation between the two states of incense: from solid, undifferentiated stems into the fine, almost liquid grey powder of ash. It’s as if the singularity of the situation—the particularity of life histories, human and ghost, articulated with layers of collective history and geography—together manifest in an encounter, made visible momentarily through the ephemeral dynamism of flames, before crumbling into a pile of ash, atop the ashes left by previous dialogues and pleas. (This ash, embodying a history of engagements, can then be used for further ritual purposes.)

“Have you dreamt of this person?” The medium asked. Cai had not. “You will, then.”

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58 俺看不见.
Dream of a Dying Hen

That night, after receiving a list from the medium of desired offerings to placate the ghost and keep her husband’s life, Cai Huqing indeed had a dream. In fact, she had several. The first involved her two mothers: Her birth mother, who she calls Ma (mother), who had passed away three years prior, and her adoptive mother, who she calls Niang (another term for mother, and for the maternal natal home, niangjia 娘家), a paternal aunt she was given to at a young age due to the aunt’s infertility, with whom she still lives with and cares for. The second dream was brief, involving an old hen. Upon our next visit to the medium several days later, accompanied this time both by me and by her mother-in-law, Cai recounted her dream to the medium.

On the road, I saw a man. A tall man, southward, with a face not quite square and not quite round. Then I saw my Ma. The two of them, my Ma is walking on the west side, he’s walking on the east side. And I thought, yeee! How could I be seeing my mother?

They approached, right in front of me. I called out, “Ma!” Our Ma (birth mother) said, “Yeee! I have been searching for you. I missed you so much.” Our Ma cried and cried, and I cried too. I said, “Why did you leave?” She said, “I did not leave, I am here at home.” Then someone came to pull her away, pulling her hand, it was our little sister, and they left.

This man, this man stiffly stood there. Our Ma... she is crying, crying, crying, toward the south, near the wall where there was a water pipe. Crying, crying, I hear our mom cry. I run toward the pipe, to let the water out.

Our Niang (adoptive mother) said, where did you go? You have been gone for years and have not returned. Our Ma said, mmmh! You are here? Our Niang said to my Ma, “Here is a hundred dollars. Here is a hundred dollars, you go buy something to eat. We haven’t seen each other for so long.” Yeee! I thought, our Niang has eased up (xiang kai le). In the past, she always harassed (nao) our Ma.

Our Ma said, I don’t want your money! You stay here, and take care of our daughter (an guinü). Our Niang kept insisting and nudging the money toward her. Our Ma said (yelling), I do not want your money!

Yeee, this dream was so clear.

Then... our Ma wanted to eat our Niang! An Niang asked, “Why eat me?” I yelled to my son, our Ma is going to eat our Niang! Hurry! You cannot eat that, you cannot eat a live person!

She said, I will drink her blood. I will drink her blood.

Our Ma blew a breath of air. With this breath, yeee! It blew our Niang into the distance. Our Niang’s face turned sallow. Our Ma was on the north side, facing south, and began inhaling. Inhaling, inhaling, and our Niang began floating into the air. I faced south, with my back to our Ma, facing our Niang.

I said, this is not acceptable. I have to stand in the middle. I have to keep both of these two mothers. It’s not acceptable. Even now, my back is chilly. I can feel the whoooo of the chilly air. Then I suddenly awoke.
I said, yeee, the Old Mother (laoniang, referring to the medium's tutelary spirit) said [I would] dream (tuomeng). [Mediumistic] dreams must be conveyed (tuo) by one's family, must tuo the family. This dream must have been tuo'ed out, right?

Tuomeng 托梦 was a term common in He County, indicating what might be called a mediumistic dream—a dream used by deities, ancestors, and other spirits to convey a message or plea from the other world.59 Tuo, to entrust, to hold in one’s palm, to plead, to rely, to serve as a foil to. Meng, a dream, to dream. Together, to entrust a message in the palm of a dream. Across historical moments and across textual and oral traditions in China, the dream has been a site of engagement between human and spirit realms. And, as Brown (1988) muses, the dream seems to take on inverted temporal significance across Western psychoanalytic approaches and pre-twentieth century Chinese approaches to dream interpretation. Amid the centrality of future-facing visions of progress at the dawn of the twentieth century, she notes, Freudian approaches to the dream yielded attention to questions of the past. Amid a broader tendency to cite the foregone golden age of sage kings, various strands of Chinese dream interpretation strongly emphasized futurity and prognostication.

In early Chinese texts as the Book of Songs (Shijing, c. 600 BCE), Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu, covering 722 to 481 BCE), and the Commentary of Zuo (Zuozhuan, covering 722 to 468 BCE), diviners were involved in the explication of dreams (Hegel 1988). Heavenly entities guided rulers through imperial dreams, portending auspicious and inauspicious political decisions and world events. Records of such dreams were detailed even if their immediate implication was unclear, as the significance of some may only be realized with the passage of time, when the relevant occasion eventually arises. Yet, the potential significance of dreams was treated with strong ambivalence, as their divine status was by no means guaranteed—“There are [also] yemeng, wild dreams, and kuangmeng, freak dreams, both caused by demons who seize the soul while one is asleep and lead it astray, or perhaps abscond with it altogether,” thus “Danger lies in only retaining those parts [of the dream] one can understand and interpret” given their true divine origin (Wagner 1988, 16, 19). With the general increase of written texts during the Warring States period (475 to 221 BCE), dream narratives were increasingly recorded at length, invoking documentation and interpretation by various advisors, military strategists, historian-astrologers, and spirit mediums (Strassberg 2008).

Demonic entities were also cited in medical treatises as a cause of nightmares, either through their physical lodging in the human body or encounters with humans in dreams, given the tendency for the human’s hun-soul to wander during sleep. In Chen

59 In The Customs of Taiwan, Wu (1970) describes tuomeng as “dream messages’… in which spirits and Buddhas utilize dreams to make revelations either overtly or covertly” (cited in Thompson 1988, 75). Writing of rural Shanxi, Zavidovskaya describes tuomeng as one method through which a deity first reveals their presence to a human: “In many cases, [the deity] speaks to people when they are asleep (tuomeng 托梦) and they recognize him (2012, 184). In He County, tuomeng is used both to describe dreams conveyed by deities and by ancestors. Here, though, as we will see below, its potentially deceptive and demonic dimensions come to the fore.
Shiyuan’s 1562 *Lofty Principles of Dream Interpretation* (*Mengzhang yizhi* 夢占逸旨)—a heterogeneous compendium drawing on Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist texts, philosophical essays, dynastic histories, medical texts, anomaly accounts, poems, dramas, and popular dream manuals—an excerpt struck resonance with a common rendering of ghostly intrusion by mediums I met in He County:

What is meant by ‘demonic presences’? Death–dealing demons attach themselves to people as disastrous influences. Ghosts of people with grievances will seek revenge against those responsible. They appear in dreams because the thoughts of the dreamer are filled with doubts and his spirit and qi-energy are in a state of confusion. Then, demons take advantage of these weaknesses to let loose their strange forms of retribution. Thus do calamities and disasters arise, and it becomes difficult to pray for blessings and well-being. (Trans. Strassberg 2008, 94)

Combining themes of retribution and cosmological correlation with the state of human qi and emotional state, demonic entities both induce and exploit sites of vulnerability. Due to the uncertain and potentially multivalent status of the dream, a range of techniques were deployed to verify the status of the dream, including imperial and popular forms of divination, as well as corroborations with waking occurrences (see Wagner 1988).

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After Cai’s recollection of her two dreams, the medium proceeded to request some clarifications—that it was Cai’s birth mother in the dream who wished to extract her adoptive mother’s blood, who wished to take her adoptive mother’s life. The birth mother in the dream, the medium said, is hateful, spiteful. Cai gave her own interpretation—her birth mother must have meant that after all these years, her adoptive mother is still tormenting (zhemo 折磨) her. Throughout Cai’s childhood, her adoptive mother had been verbally and at times physically abusive, and remains demanding and temperamental in her old age. When her birth mother was still alive, she often conveyed remorse for ‘giving’ Cai to her adoptive mother, for subjecting her to a deeply fraught relationship. Despite Cai’s own sorrow toward her separation from her birth mother, she tried to stay firm in her sense of filial duty, cooking three meals a day for her adoptive mother, a finicky eater who often pushes her bowl aside in staunch dissatisfaction, even while Cai attentively customizes her every meal.

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60 Chen Shiyuan cautions in his text: “Ever since the ancient methods disappeared, there has been no definite way to fully interpret dreams… Alas, the ancient methods of interpretation have not been transmitted. Later generations of people have been unable to govern their emotions and natures. Their conduct during the day is muddled, deluded, ignorant, and confused. They are lacking in self-awareness. Thus, what appears in their dreams is chaotic, perverse, and evil—by no means that which flows in accordance with the qi-energy of heaven and earth. Even if there were omens that could be used for confirmation, they would be incongruent and barely intelligible, so that one must wait for the consequences to appear before realizing what the dream meant” (Trans. Strassberg 2008, 85).
The medium asked further about the tall man in the dream. The man stood to the side, Cai said, and did not take action in the remainder of the dream.

“He just stood there. Very tall. His face… to say it’s round, it’s not quite round; to say it’s square, it’s not quite square. His skin was quite white. Eyes not big, not small.”

Cai then relayed a second dream.

The next day in the morning, I began dreaming again. I felt muddled, muddled and dreaming, early in the morning. I dreamt of an old hen (laomuji). It laid an egg. The egg comes out, the egg sits to the side of her. The old hen dies. The old hen dies, and her mouth even spat out liquids. Yeee! When I went to grab the egg, yeee! The egg was cracked and spoiled (tangle).

Upon hearing the two dreams, the medium revealed the true identities of those in the dream. The birth mother in the dream, it turned out, was a female ghost disguised as Cai’s birth mother, here to trick the dreamer and enact vengeance upon Cai’s family, in order to save her own son—the tall, pale man in the dream. It was left somewhat ambiguous whether this tall, pale man was the same ghost as the one hit by the truck. Regardless, this ghost has been hovering around Cai’s home for 70-some years—that is, since the time of famine and warfare in the 1940s. The tall, pale ghost’s mother had travelled a long way to find her son, who is now trapped and choked by a certain arc-shaped object, stuck beneath Cai’s home, in the southwest corner. Cai would have to unearth and rid of this object in order to free the ghost son, and avert revenge from the ghost mother. This was the rusted pipe clamp Cai excavated, when she came pounding at my door several days after.

As for the old hen and the egg, this was a message from the ghost mother, an ominous threat to the boudai后代, to the future generations. The hen stood for Cai’s mother-in-law, the medium explained, thus the egg at once gestured to Cai’s husband and her children—a threat to both the patriline and the conjugal family, through the figure of the paternal grandmother. The story of supplication and appeasement sat uneasy, as one ghost’s woes linked to another’s, and the family’s fate remained uncertain. Cai later lamented in tears that indeed, her children are failing. Her eldest son, who lives in the provincial capital, is in his mid-thirties, divorced, and his divorcee had taken away their only son, refusing to let him see his father. The tales of two mothers and two sons, human and ghost, thus grow entangled. Moreover, Cai’s older daughter, who lives and works in Shanghai, was reaching thirty, and appears to have no prospects for marriage despite her intelligence and beauty. A curse on future generations.

Distant Intimacy

Between the ghost from the mass grave beneath the Sinopec gas station demanding her husband’s life and the famine-era mother-son ghosts threatening her children and adoptive mother, histories of the twentieth century, of ghosts abandoned by heaven and earth, become co-present with the temporality of Cai Huiqing’s life and that of her family, through the work of the medium. As with other women I met in H
County (women tend to be more involved in such matters than men), whereas her husband and at times her children reprimand her visits to the medium as a superstitious squandering of time and money, for Cai, it is precisely her insistent engagement and negotiation with the spirits that constitutes her ethical labor for her family, for the next generation, and for the self—a distant intimacy of the I and the we in an era of labor migration.

Here, I use distant intimacy to ponder forms of life available to those occupying regions of the map figured as “left behind” in the age of transnational markets and labor mobility. Given this dislocation of geographies and lifeworlds, spirit mediumship provides one mode through which closeness is engaged from afar. It opens up an intimate zone of effectivity not by direct proximity, but from a distance; Cai stakes a claim on the ‘we’ of her family through a parallel world, with the medium as proxy. In an era of uncertainty, she works to ensure the safety of her husband on the road and the marriage prospects of her children partly through her engagements with the medium, work that may go unrecognized and reprimanded in the wake of anti-superstition campaigns. Moreover, the ‘we’ of her family is entangled with the ‘we’ of specters to China’s long twentieth century, of tending to the desires of the ghosts. To release the ghost mother’s son is to save her own son; to ask forgiveness from the abandoned ghost is to reckon with the violent histories paved over by the roads and gas stations so applauded as signs of rural development. In the language of the mediums, it is to let nonhuman entities to “borrow your mouth” to speak; to lend one’s body to histories that have, like the ghost mother in search of her son, traveled a long way.

Distant intimacy also raises the question of mediation beyond the particularities of contemporary migration, even if newly instantiated. The very institution of mediumship is marked by some degree of anxiety, of being positioned as the very vessel and voice of magical efficacy while artfully staying out of the way: “Total mediation appears to be no mediation… To speak and not be the subject of speech, to know and not be the subject of knowledge: this is the medium’s predicament” (Morris 2000, 101-102). The ideal medium conveys the speech and desire of the spirits without intervention, passing the other’s story without contamination, in a dream of pure transmission. Mediumship effaces its own traces through a movement of forgetting during possession, in a passage of knowledge and action that also marks a deferral of origin. It might also be considered a technique of indirection, of access through detour, in which detour need not represent constraint, but is employed for heightened effect. The act of borrowing opens up a space for maneuver and allows for a mobilization of energies through its partial anonymity (Jullien 2004).

In contrast to the full tendency to name spirits in Morris’s work in northern Thailand or the generic spirits of unknown biography she cites of James Siegel’s work in Sumatra, there tends to be an intermediate degree of specificity in the ghosts conjured in He County. Certain dimensions or qualities are named without others, nudging the supplicant toward verification of historical truth of a localized death. A ghost might be said to be from within or without one’s village, along with the method of death—drowning, hanging, hunger, cancer. A surname, as in the case of the ghost named Liu, might be posited, but rarely the full name. Facial and bodily features might be described,
but the full personage is partially left to corroboration in the supplicant’s searchful imagination.

The mediumship session, then, opens up a search for partially occluded histories, of the dead that have been partially but not entirely forgotten. It is a second (or third or fourth) encounter with the ghost, who has already encountered the supplicant through singular or multiple encounters of collision or affliction, an engagement known through its symptoms but not its cause. The ghost, then, is summoned and put on trial at the authoritative beckoning of the medium’s tutelary spirit. The medium acts through the distant intimacy of mediation, which is also a detour of historical return, in which the bad deaths of bygone times stake their claims after dwelling in a purgatorial interval.

With relation to the Chairman as a withdrawn figure of guarantee and exemplarity, distant intimacy also finds its counterpart in imaginations of a former mode of intimate mediation, of a certain sense of direct relation between the sovereign and the self, of what Ryang calls a “sovereign self” in the context of North Korea—“The Great Leader’s endless love is not the reason why North Koreans love him, but his love is the reason for them to love themselves” (83). For those in He County, the Chairman figured as a lost exemplar of virtue (de 德) and benevolence (in the new language of serving the People), through which the People once experienced their own virtue. To pose in terms of the Confucian formulation, if the virtue of the gentleman offers the movement of the wind, and the virtue of the people, like grass, sway with it, what of a sense that the air now stands still? In the return of ghosts amid moral doldrums, the medium works through a series of detours, traversing with their tutelary spirits to the hells and back, through geographies far and near, conjuring a new sense of cosmic potentiality amid anxieties that virtue and guarantee no longer emerges from within the sovereign self, but requires reckoning with a multiplicity of demonic entities that now swarm the landscape.

The distant intimacy occasioned by mediumship, then, might be said to engage three simultaneous dimensions: dispersed kinship and community conditioned by post-Reform rural outmigration, the problem of mediation in knowledge and efficacy at once old and new, and an implicitly loss of direct relation to a sovereign self once secured by the earthly presence of the Chairman. If mediumship, in this sense, posits at once a mark of loss and the condition of possibility for a certain mode of relation, how might we return to the question of the event, as problem of rupture and continuity?

Spectral Collision

In Islands of History, which produced its own historical debate, Sahlins writes against the social scientific tendency to discuss stability and change as antithetical. Unable to overcome such thinking, he suggests, anthropology fails to consider the significance of events, between culture and history:

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61 The problem of the modern as posed to the medium via the language of fakery will be discussed later, in Chapter 4.
Every actual use of cultural ideas is some reproduction of them, but every such reference is also a difference... we isolate some changes as strikingly distinctive and call them 'events,' in opposition to 'structure.' This is really a pernicious distinction, structure and event. If only for the relatively trivial reason that all structure or system is, phenomenally, evenemential... Event is the empirical form of system... An event is indeed a happening of significance, and as significance it is dependent on the structure for its existence and effect. (153)

References to this text tend to emphasize and critique Sahlins's focus on structural reproduction and his seemingly rigid characterization of the event as manifestation of system. Given this, it seems worthy to note that at least in its articulation (if not application), the event is not merely reproductive in this text. For Sahlins, an event is also a “risk,” a “gamble” enacted between the symbolic and the empirical, leaving the domain of meaning doubly unstable, between “unforeseen effects” upon the sign left by both the subject and the world (145, 149). In other words, the event is the risk of transformation posed to the symbol every time it is deployed.

Thus, the question is not merely whether contingency is at play in this rendering of the event. Rather, it is whether a structure—symbolic or otherwise—exists, to which a given event could be usefully or properly said to be 'in relation to.' Whereas Sahlins's formulation of risk seems to suggest potential shifts departing or slipping from relations to a symbolic system, critics of his formulation call into question the stable locatability of any such system. For instance, Malkki suggests that certain sites and situations, the refugee camp for instance, might be better considered through the notion of historical accident and the traces they leave on those who lived through them—of “accidental communities of memory,” rather than notions of the familial, communal, or culturally ‘representative’ (1997, 91-92).

With reference to debates around French genetics, Rabinow writes, “there is no stable system to be included or disrupted... new forms emerge... A form/event makes many other things more or less suddenly conceivable,” and thus conceptually speaking, “The problematization of classifications, practices, things, is an event” (1999, 180-181). The event, in other words, is more than the habitual jeopardy posed to purportedly existing structures, but the emergence of new forms and entities that may carry no tie to previous structures. Such events require new acts of naming that make new forms legible, which previous symbolic systems did not yet have the capacity to perceive. Given the disruptions facing spirit mediumship and other cosmological configurations across China’s long twentieth century, to what symbolic systems, accidental communities, or new forms should otherworldly entities be rendered in terms of?

On the theme of history and rupture, Das considers what it would mean to write about the violence of major historical events, in her case, the Partition of India and the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The event in this sense, she suggests, descends and folds itself into the ordinary, in such a manner that the ordinary may also be considered eventful. If a boundary is to be drawn between the two, it would be at the “failure of the grammar of the ordinary,” the “end of criteria” accompanying the “experience of world-annihilating violence” (2007, 7). In such instances, one has the sense of being betrayed by
the everyday, with no assurance found regardless of the apparent presence of a shared language.

Here, then, I return to the question of the ghost and the event in He County. The rise of Mao and Maoism—involving the traumatic cut of violence, the rupture of existing structure, the emergence of new forms (see Chapter 1)—seems to offer one site of the event to be thought alongside the situation at hand: the demands of ghosts from the Old Society and across other times. But this event is bookended by a second one—the end of Maoism. I turn to these two moments in particular not due to their externally recognized historical significance, but because their evental status is found in the contemporary local cosmology: Again, for the spirit mediums in He County, the presence of ghosts and other spirits today is an effect of the Chairman’s absence. Demons and deities, they say, vanished during Mao’s reign, and returned upon his death (see Chapter 4). Famine ghosts from the 1940s, then, as the ghost trapped under Cai’s home, or those hovering about the ten-thousand-man pit, resurfaced in the Reform Era, setting previous histories back into motion as they collide into unsuspecting human bodies.

While the dawn of the Reform Era might map onto what Zizek (2014) terms the “undoing of an event” with respect to Maoism, the troubled return of spirits also posits the uncanny presence of specters of Marx. What might be called a spectral event here is characterized by emergent repetitions, renewing the ambivalence of previous moments through the singularity of ghost encounters. If ghosts were momentarily banished by the apparent arrival of the revolutionary event of Mao’s reign, their return does not simply undo the initial event in this case, but offers the very spectral presencing of the absent event—an event that was, an event that could have been, an event to come. In He County, ghosts and mediumship of the post-Mao era are not simply a revival of tradition, but a grappling with the passage across worlds, in the ruins of lost promises, both of traditionalism and of Maoism.

Not merely drawing on what Sahlins (1999) may call a “living tradition” of demonology from Buddhist, Daoist, and popular religious strands, the ghosts also bear witness to waves of violent ruptures, including the denunciation and persecution of that very tradition. While the ghost, in this sense, can be considered an emergent form with relation to a reconfigured landscape, where the stability of the everyday is felt to be collapsing (see Allison 2013), the figure of the ghost has been present in the Chinese world across disparate moments of historical catastrophe, as well as ordinary spans unmarked by the spectacular. Thus, while evocations of historical markers such as the Old Society or the death of the Chairman offer punctuations of specificity in the experience of haunting in the contemporary, my doubling of such specificity in this text is not an argument for the actual lack or diminishment of ghosts across other moments, but rather to attend closely to the historicity of the moments conjured by those I encountered, to grapple with their significance in the present.

Neither a mere reproduction of Chinese cultural forms, nor a wholly novel form with no relation to a previously existing structure, the ghost carries the very sense of violence and rupture felt across the ripples of history, repeating their force through the spectral event of collision—an event at once everyday and yet interrupts the ordinary,
simultaneously marking an ordinary that is constituted by the sense of interruption. In He County, the spectral collision, its mediated accounting at the altar, and its reference to the contemporary cosmology, I suggest, renders visible a sense of loss and failure of the symbolic law, and in this acknowledgment, also begins to carve out new styles of doing from within a sense of void, of possibility at the site of agony (Pandolfo, in press). It is the reencounter with a ruptured tradition, whose new evocations through classic heterodox figures as the medium and the ghost also attest to disruptions of the former orthodoxy. It is an evental reanimation of older forms through their very witness to and account of their own destruction.

Fidelity, Suspension

In contemporary philosophical discussions of the event, Saint Paul and the Pauline subject has provided the central figure around which concepts and debates have pivoted. The exemplary event, across these writings, is that of revelation, an encounter with the otherworldly that breaches both the everyday and the structural. The post-evental subject—the Pauline subject—lives on in fidelity to this event, serving a truth beyond the subject, searching for its divine signs. While the theme of fidelity and the post-evental will become central in the discussion of apocalyptic anticipation in He County (see Chapter 5), with respect with the ghosts considered in this chapter, I turn to certain dimensions of spirit mediumship that beckon a different consideration of the evental than those drawing on biblical and millenarian traditions.

If we posit the ghost encounter as a spectral event, the theme of fidelity must also be rethought. For the ghost, often times, does not ask for loyalty; the ghost asks for reckoning. Moreover, in Cai’s case and cases like it, in contrast to some we will encounter in later chapters, the encounter with ghosts by no means marks a professed fidelity to the events of Maoism or its end, regardless of the mediums’ accounts of the contemporary cosmological significance of Mao’s death. Cai herself rarely spoke of Mao, and showed little interest in Mao’s place in the contemporary cosmology. Nor do engagements with ghosts and mediumship necessitate a professed fidelity via the thorough ‘belief’ in ghosts. What characterizes ghosts, particularly in the aftermath of anti-superstition campaigns, is precisely the radical uncertainty they pose.

When referring to the realm of ghosts, those in He County often posit that one “cannot not believe, and cannot believe fully,” or a variant, one “cannot not believe, and cannot believe excessively.” The ghost here implicates a peculiar suspension of belief, and with it a suspension of the believing subject. The ghost also complicates questions of cause and effect, traversing time and space to draw linkages and deploy bodies, usurping

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63 The everyday yet interruptive of the ordinary is how Das characterizes of Azande witchcraft accusations.
64 See Kerekes 2015 for discussion on the figure of Paul across Heidegger, Badiou, Agamben, Zizek, and others, and Robbins 2010 for reflections its implications for anthropology.
65 Bu neng bu xin, ye bu neng quan xin 不能不信，也不能全信, and bu neng bu xin, ye bu neng tai xin 不能不信，也不能太信.
and affecting human persons beyond the presence of faith. While ghosts may seek reckoning through the recognition of their plight and desire, they may also seek gain precisely through their intangibility and unrecognizability. The spectral event thus troubles, or perhaps doubles fidelity as the central motif of the post-evental subject. To believe fully or excessively is to risk falling prey both to the trickery of the ghost and to the delusion of over-interpretation. Yet, not to believe is to bypass a powerfully effective force in the world, the neglect of which constitutes a gamble with life. Haunting, then, might be thought as the obverse of fidelity, as another mode of being subject-to the event.

The being-haunted of the subject, caught in the injunction of a double negative between the impossibility of both belief and disbelief, might be considered a mode of animated suspension amid the situation of the historical present:

A situation is a disturbance, a sense genre of animated suspension—not suspended animation. It has a punctum, like a photograph; it forces one to take notice, to become interested in potential changes to ordinariness. When a situation unfolds, people try to maintain themselves in it until they figure out how to adjust. (Berlant 2011, 195)

In a rural scene spectralized amid post-Reform transformations and outmigration, those like Cai struggle to maintain themselves through hesitant yet animated engagements, forced to take notice of immanent risks posed to life in the present. It is a living-on beyond fidelity, in the presence of the deadliness passed on across historical times, which reemerge through the spectral event of collisions with ghosts after the loss of the sovereign. Mediumship offers one site for acknowledging and reckoning with the murky operations of the spectral, not only through tactics for evading the ghastly return of violence, but also through confrontations with demonic aggression that form the basis for a distant intimacy.

Coda: The I, the We, the Ghost

A while after our visits to the medium, Cai’s childhood friend, who grew up in He County but spent much of her adult life in the urban South of Guangzhou and Shenzhen, came to visit. Upon hearing about Cai’s worries over her husband and children, and about her visits to the medium, the friend tried to convince her that she must learn to be independent, to stop uselessly troubling herself with her family’s business, to tend to her own desires: “Make yourself happy, find your own hobbies,” the emphatically singular ‘you’ of standard Mandarin. Cai retorts: “What would I want?” switching to the register of the singular standard Mandarin ‘I’ of we, rather than the ‘I/we’ of the Henanese an.

The question of the ‘I’ was central to an earlier moment, a moment when mediumship and Chinese medicine were in the midst of being variously demarcated into zones of medicine and superstition, of legitimacy and illegality. Part of the broader search for and lure of the modern in early twentieth century China, the ‘I’ of we constituted both a contentious site in the struggle for a newly imagined body politic, and a linguistic sign capacitating rising modes of mass communication. New Culture and May Fourth debates
on modernity and tradition pivoted around discourses of individualism through what Lydia Liu (1995) calls “return graphic loans” of individual (geren 个人) and self (ziwo 自我), classical Chinese terms that re-entered modern Chinese by way of a borrowing and radical reconfiguration of meaning elsewhere, particularly Meiji Japan.

Meanwhile, movements to nationalize and vernacularize language—between the literary emergence of vernacular Chinese and educational reforms toward a unified written and spoken national language—struggled to move away from the multiplicity of regional dialects in the service of communicability. In this shift, first-person pronouns such as the Henanese ‘I/we’ were considered overly localized, thus to be subsumed by the standard national ‘I’ that was to rearticulate the citizen self vis-à-vis the nation state (Kaske 2008). Yet, in spite of such efforts in official and pedagogical domains, dialects still reign regionally, in co-existence and mutual influence with standard Mandarin. Thus, even as Henanese dialects are ridiculed in popular films as anachronistic residues of rural backwardness, in He County, the general usage of standard Mandarin in daily life immediately marks one as an outsider, while its selective usage creates a sense of an uncanny deliberateness—an emphatic seriousness in gratitude or in apology, a wink to the strictures of officialdom, or simply an ironic pointedness.

“I don’t want anything,” Cai continued, “what is there to want?” Her friend responds: “So then, you have to learn how to want for yourself.”

Between the I and the we,66 between the demands of the ghosts, the work of mediumship, and accusations of superstitious squandering, sits Cai’s dilemma of how to

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66 The question of the “I” also conjures classic anthropological discussions of personhood (see Carrithers et al. 1985). In his 1938 lecture on the notion of the person, Marcel Mauss points to the historical contingency of the rational, reflective, self-contained notion of the self, across a genealogy of Roman law, Christianity, and modern psychology, in contradistinction with yet linked to notions of the personage, the latter of which gestures toward the significance of the role, the mask, and the name as relational determinants. In the case of China, Mauss calls the name a “collective noun,” in its elaborations of birth order, rank, and social class, and the individual as a composite of and correspondence to ancestral transmissions, of “something springing from elsewhere” (Mauss 1985: 13).

While Mauss to an extent valorized the capacity of the Western tradition to generate an individuated concept of the self, the work of Maurice Leenhardt in New Caledonia, among those who the colonials glossed as the Kanaks/Canaques, registers a much more ambivalent relationship to the question of the “I.” Leenhardt writes of the Kanak notion of the personage, which knows the self through relationships. The body, for the Kanak, is merely a vessel, a support for a set of relationalities collected throughout a life. It is not a self, Leenhardt writes, that affirms itself through the “I am.”

Leenhardt offers a visualization of the two notions of the person: the Kanak notion, and the Christian notion. Whereas the individuated Christian self might be imagined as a solid dot from which thought and action emerges, Leenhardt provides a diagram for the Kanak personage, five lines of relationality, with a hollow at the center. What is named, Leenhardt writes, is the empty space in the center, surrounded by a multiplication of relational names, in which the notion of ‘relation’ constitutes not merely the external connection between one individuated self and another, but in fact scaffolds the very structure of the person, the transient bodies that carry the relational something from elsewhere. Yet, upon colonial encounter and Christian conversion, he writes, this very structure of the person begins to fatally disintegrate.

Leenhardt provides several examples of this, but of particular interest to our case here, he writes, “The Canaque ceases to mix first and third persons when he speaks. He says ‘I’ and he recognizes ‘one’” (1979: 169). Such subtle yet profound avenues of linguistic conversion, in conjunction with more literalized forms of military and political violence, tears the Kanak notion of personage apart with the newly
imagine a life, a life in which the ‘I’ once again contends with the first person plural of the ‘I/we,’ this time mapped onto an uneven post-Reform landscape, in which places like He County, dialect and all, are drained of symbolic and economic value, ripe for departure. And it is in this scene, between the oil trucks and abandoned ghosts, that those like Cai Huiqing must navigate a splintered world, in which she can only hope that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren might continue burning batches of incense after she becomes an ancestor, not forgetting the desires of another old ghost.

individuated self, resulting in a sense of arbitrariness, loss, and anomie. Here, then, I raise the conundrum of the ‘I’ as another site for addressing new reverberations of earlier encounters. In He County, the standard Mandarin ‘I’ is rarely used in casual or home settings (versus, for instance, school settings) without some degree of emphasis, ironic or otherwise, marking its difference.
Chapter 3. A Soul Adrift

“China’s problem is the peasants’ problem. The peasants’ problem is that there is no land”—it was the last century’s old saying, utilized by both [Chinese Nationalist Party] and Chinese Communist Party (CPC) to mobilize peasants… Now the catch-phrase has been changed to: “China’s problem is the peasants’ problem. The peasants’ problem is unemployment.” Who can overcome this problem and gain the upper-hand this time?

—Wen Tiejun

How does it feel to be a problem?

—W. E. B. Du Bois

Mrs. Tan’s daughters do not know just how their mother lost her soul. But ever since the four sisters moved off to the city a decade ago—first to the Southern factories of Dongguan, then to those of Beijing—she seems to have been looking for it. She wanders the dirt paths of their home village, at times for short jaunts, at times for hours on end. Her daughters brought her to the psychiatric ward, hoping the doctors can help bring her back, in one sense or another.

In Guangzhou, Mr. Liang saw a ghost on the stairway of his factory dorm. Overcome with fright, he returned to He County, no longer able to carry on with his night shifts. His mother and father brought him to several village elders to call back his soul, to no avail. They came to the psychiatric ward seeking his recovery, but soon began planning for his discharge. Schizophrenia, they sensed, was not the true problem. They would find another path to save their son, outside the hospital.

Ms. Xie sulks in bed in the open ward, exhausted in the wake of her near-collapse. Her test scores had been dropping. She withdrew from high school. Family finances are teetering. Her father is a migrant laborer, a construction worker in Shanghai; he returns home just once a year. He does not know how to speak to her, how to comfort her, how to convey his affection as she wants him to. He does not know how to sustain a sense of safety in her. All he talks about is money, she says. He cannot grasp what it means to have an ideal, to have a dream.

In the locked ward, Mr. Wang lies tense in his bed, facing the ceiling, eyes wide with terror, darting side to side. He has been seeing ghosts. He is a man of few words, never one to complain. In his quietude, he had been filling with anger and fear. He injured his back working in the coalmine. His father taunts him, chastising him for failing to earn a decent living. He feels the whole village looks down on him. He does not

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know how he will support his family. He does not know how he will build a house for his elder son; a man without a house is not a marriageable man. Acute psychosis, his wife repeats after the doctor. She asks him to let go of the New Countryside dream. When he talks, he talks about money.

Down the hall, Mr. Guo cannot sleep, mired in anxiety. He built a two-story house for his eldest son, but something went wrong with the design. The stairs were built on the outside, with no correlate on the inside. Bearable in the summer, perhaps, but laughable in the winter. A retired bureaucrat, he had sufficient funds to build the house, yet it seemed a waste to rebuild. His wife tells him the house is fine, that he need not be gripped by minor imperfections. He shakes his head, bitter that no one—himself included—caught the mistake on the blueprint. All the while, his son has shown little intent in moving back to the hometown, back to the village.

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This chapter traces a constellation of stories I encountered in the psychiatric ward in He County, of gaps and fissures between geographies and generations. They are tales of dreams just out of reach, all the while stretching crosswise, widening the breach with each inch forward. Tragic yet too minute to cross the threshold of tragedy, comical yet too crestfallen to sustain the wisdom of comedy, the situations sit at the brink of a chuckle and a sigh, without culmination or resolution. In his work on post-Reform renderings of the Chinese peasant, Alexander Day points to a thread of unresolved tension underlying disparate conceptual and policy accounts: “How do we understand history, Chinese intellectuals asked, if the peasant is not viewed as on the path to disappearance?” (2013, 6). The stories below, drawn from conversations I had with patients and their attendant family members at the psychiatric ward of the county People’s Hospital, pivot in one way or another around the paradoxes posed by the impossibility of this question.

With low selling prices of agricultural products and rising costs of agricultural production—not to mention the rising cost of living—most I met in He County considered a life of small-scale farming unsustainable. Many attempt instead to pursue slightly larger scale agricultural projects or rely on various forms of non-agricultural income, at home or afar. Thus, rather than the issue of agricultural labor per se, this chapter lingers on the fallout of inhabiting or returning to a rural hometown now experienced as unviable, in more ways than one. Many of those I met depart from He County for work, some returning seasonally to tend to their family plot, others commissioning neighbors and kin to work their land. The stories thus consider a world in some sense post-agrarian, yet with peculiar, if troubled ties with land and place in a heavily agricultural region, rendering imaginations of rurality central to their constitution.

The hospital, among other institutions, offers a tentative site of retreat from the entanglements of economy and kinship, experienced as an unbearably tense present. It also becomes a repository for symptoms of history, archived in the institutional grammar of the medical record. The cases I encountered there form a constellation of intergenerational gaps and impasses, carrying with them the contradictions posited by the legacies of the Maoist and post-Reform eras. The fractured co-presence of disparate
worlds and times, I suggest, flare up anew amid shifting geographies of value, presenting themselves as fragments in the psychiatric ward. Here, I approach psychiatric symptoms as the edges of experience, not external to questions of time and place (Jenkins and Barrett 2004), even while gesturing beyond them (Corin 2007; Pandolfo in press).

A New Socialist Countryside

During the fifth plenary session of the sixteenth Central Committee of the CCP in 2005, the policy framework of “building a New Socialist Countryside” was announced by the administration of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. A broad-reaching proposition, the New Socialist Countryside renewed existing calls for combating the so-called Three Rural Problems: agriculture, the countryside, and the peasant. Undergirded by visions of impoverished villages slowly vanishing, and rural surplus labor gradually absorbed into urban industrial and service sectors, the New Socialist Countryside conjures once again the spectral dimension of the rural, in which the problem of rurality can only be resolved, in the call to modernization, by its imagined disappearance.

At the level of policy, the framework introduced a new fiscal system to an otherwise old set of issues: rural regions became entitled to receive transfer payments at the county level from central government subsidies. This comes as a partial response to previous Tax-for-Fee Reform implemented in the early 2000s, which aimed to relieve farmers of previous tax burdens. With the decrease of local-level levies, the new transfer system offered allocation of central government funds for rural development and public goods, rather than relying on local levies for such projects. The framework remains “intentionally vague but holistic” at the national level, while the content, design, and implementation of specific projects are formulated at the county level; steps toward a ‘new countryside’ bears the tempo and flow of bureaucracy:

This process tends to be quite time-consuming. It is steered by the county’s Development and Reform Commission and finally decided by the County Party Committee. It is then up to the villages and townships to decide on specific projects that correspond to the county blueprint and apply for project funding… The application process, including the period of preliminary project design at the village and township levels, usually takes three months (from January to early March). Following this period, the county government’s Reform and Development Commission screens the proposals and, following intensive bargaining and coordination (xietiao) between all bureaus concerned, which are later required to administer the project funds according to their formal competencies, submits an allocation proposal to the Leading Small Group. This body decides which projects will be implemented. Afterwards, the selection results are passed on to the city… or provincial… government’s own Reform and Development Commission and XNCJS Leading Small Group, the latter of which has the final say on the project list and disburses the funds to the responsible county departments. (Ahlers and Schubert 2009, 44-45)
Official figures detailing such transfer payments are unavailable—“Since there exists no transparent regulation on how these funds should be calculated, much depends on negotiation and, quite probably, personal relations (guanxi) between officials, making it advisable for local governments not to include them in their local budget statistics” (Ibid., 48). Regardless, Ahlers and Schubert found that both township and county level cadres cited the increase in fund transfers as a major determinant of recent increases in average rural per capita household income, alongside cash transfers from migrant workers and funds from non-agricultural work. Formulated as a twenty-character objective, the policy aimed for advanced production, rich life, civilized (local) atmosphere, clean and tidy villages, and democratic management.68

If this is the official rendition of the New Countryside, the stories presented in this chapter dwell on the hesitations and ordeals facing what Mrs. Wang called the New Countryside dream. Echoing a similar phrase used in the media, it sits between the grand China Dream—which implicitly distances itself from rurality—and strained visions of a modernized countryside. Slated to vanish amid developmentalist temporalizations of the present, yet quietly driving China’s very claim to global economic power through the provision of low-wage migrant labor, those who call the rural home are suspended in dilemma, put out of joint with the present. Implicated in the rural problem also are questions of equity and economic sustainability, and with them the possibility of China’s continued rise in the global scene. Moving from the Marxist analysis of class (jieji 阶级) to the language of social strata (shehui jieceng 社会阶层), the problem of inequality shifted from the notion of antagonism and revolution in the Maoist era to one of developmental time in the Reform era—“Those who prosper before others must not become the targets of class resentment but models for others to emulate; they are the avant garde of a more generalised prosperity to come” (Anagnost 2008, 502). New social engineering projects aimed at expanding the middle class through consumption practices and a sense of middle-class identity.

Promises of a prosperity to come also permeated post-Reform media and state discourse in the language of xiaokang 小康, variously translated as a ‘relatively well off,’ ‘moderately prosperous,’ or the more literal ‘small well-being.’ The question of the rural re-entered notions of moderate prosperity in calls for a ‘comprehensive moderate prosperity’ (quanmian xiaokang 全面小康) in the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996–2000), pointing to the theme of economic disparity; the phrase has been retained in subsequent five-year plans, and evoked in particular the problem of the urban-rural rift. More recently, in 2013, President Xi Jinping offered a rhyming couplet reiterating the ‘comprehensive’ dimension of prosperity: xiaokang bu xiaokang, guanjian kan laoxiang,69 which might be glossed unpoetically as, “whether or not moderate prosperity is reached, look to those from the old hometown.” The lynchpin to the national vision of a social order buttressed by the sense of a materially adequate life, by this line of reasoning, is whether one could say the same of rural conditions.

68 Shengchan fazhan, shenghuo kuanyu, xiangfeng wenming, nongcun zhengjie, guanli minzhu 生产发展，生活宽裕、乡风文明、村容整洁、管理民主.
69 小康不小康，关键看老乡.
Whereas the return to family farming after decollectivization through the household responsibility system was first lauded in the 1980s, a sense of failing development and rising rural dissatisfaction took hold across the 1990s and 2000s, despite apparent progress by economic measures. It was a moment in which wealth accumulation began pointing to new forms of rent-seeking and bureaucratic corruption rather than simply peasant entrepreneurship.

After a loosening of media censorship in 1992, alongside announcements of staggering Gini coefficient growths, a wave of publications and public debates arose on themes of social stratification and inequality (Anagnost 2008). In 2000, Li Changping, a rural cadre from Hubei Province sparked further discussion in open letter to Premier Zhu Rongji: “The peasants’ lot is really bitter, the countryside is really poor, and agriculture is in crisis” (cited in Day 2013). By 2003 and 2004, the rural ‘problem’ came to be framed as the greatest obstacle to China’s continued development, and discourse around the peasant shifted from the early Reform language of success to one of crisis. And as with earlier figurations across the twentieth century, each shift in state and intellectual discourse came with its own ambivalent renderings of the peasant (see Chapter 1). “At its heart,” Day writes, “the troubled attempt to construct historical and political narratives [of the peasant] during the reform era lies in the question—and maybe even the impossibility—of integrating a society with a predominantly peasant population into a global capitalist economy that devalues agricultural labor.” (Ibid., 11).

The Crisis of Filial Piety

Aside from the sense of rural-urban fracture, the waves of change in the decades following decollectivization also reverberates across those who live its effects differently, sliced by time. In the literature on post-Reform transformations in intergenerational relations, this often pivots around the theme of continuity, change, and reformulations of filial piety, xiao 孝. A contemporary iteration of what Tu Weiming (1998) called an anthropocosmic vision of Confucian moral education, filial piety points to one among ten modes of relation in articulations of the five cardinal relations (wulun 五伦): ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and that between friends. It marks here the proper stance of the child toward the parent, particularly the son toward the father. The written character places the graph of the elder above the graph of the son.

Shaken by pained iconoclastic intellectual confrontations of the early twentieth century, the question of filial piety, along with that of Chinese tradition as such, came to occupy a space of ambivalence, of petrified origin. Against classical formulations of the filial relation as one’s earliest encounter with moral understanding, thus source of all cultivation of virtue, amid New Culture and May Fourth movements of the 1910s and 1920s, duty and reverence toward the parent came to be condemned instead as origin of all evil, as that which promises to leave China’s new generations in exile from the modern world (Schwarcz 1986). Yet, renewals of filial piety, in the name of traditionalism and modern national consciousness abound (Chan and Tan 2004, Hsu 1971). Social scientific
studies in the past several decades have combined surveys of filial attitudes with considerations of resource flow in their discussions of intergenerationality.

In her review of ethnographic and survey studies across East, Southeast, and South Asia, Elisabeth Croll finds that in contrast to modernization theories of gerontology (e.g., Caldwell 1976), which predicted unidirectional paths toward an increase of nuclear families and flow of resources away from the older generation, “the intergenerational contract, albeit renegotiated and reinterpreted, is no inherited relic but remains resilient” (2006, 484). High rates of intergenerational co-residence remain in both urban and rural regions across Asia, despite the rise of nuclear households. Even among generationally split living situations, elderly parents are often incorporated into the households of adult children once widowed or incapable of self-care. And, against models that rely on the household as economic unit, high resource flow between generations residing in separate households has been found across numerous studies.

Extended families often live in close proximity within the same city or village, providing mutual support despite split residence, creating what has been called “embedded” nuclear families (Ibid.), “networked” urban families (Whyte 2003, Unger 1993), and “aggregate” families (Croll 1994). In terms of explicit stance toward filial relations, Martin Whyte found in his survey studies in a medium-sized city in the northern province of Hebei that parents and children generally shared a sense of support for notions of family obligation. In some cases, the younger generation was significantly more likely to disagree with the notion of prioritizing their own children or careers over their own parents. While some minor differences exist, Whyte concludes that within his study, there is “little sign that parents and children are separated by a ‘generation gap’ when it comes to these attitudes” (2003, 89).

A stark contrast is found in Yunxiang Yan’s study of rural China. Tracing transformations of private life from the Communist Revolution in 1949 through the late 1990s in a village in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang, Yan finds a “crisis of filial piety” accompanying a rise of the individual and of conjugality (2003, 162). An increasing sense of entitlement and individual rights with relation to family property along with a desire for privacy of the conjugal family is marked by earlier family division and the shortening or abolishment of patrilocal residence. And, whereas parental co-residence with an adult married son was an expected manifestation of family cohesion and reciprocity in old age both before and since 1949, Yan finds increasing rates of what he calls empty nest families among elderly parents across the late 1980s and 1990s.

While early family division would have been considered a sign of failure to raise filial sons previously, alongside other sweeping changes of the Reform era, prolonged co-residence came to be regarded as evidence of the incapacity of parents to assist married sons in establishing independent households. Building a new house for one’s son soon after marriage, or even prior to marriage, became an increasing expectation. And while an empty nest was once considered a form of misfortune in old age, it had become a new norm by the late 1990s. Nonetheless, the new norm is not without a sense of mourning. One of Yan’s interlocutors, a father of four married sons, worked with his wife to finance the marriages of each son, before every couple moved out into the newly built houses, leaving the parents alone to their old, small, original house, without rights to enjoy the new homes they built:
All the gold and silver have been taken away by my sons. What is left is only a shaky, empty storehouse, guarded by an old man and an old woman. It has been like a dream, a bad dream. (Ibid., 144-145)

Lone living among the elderly tends to change only when they grow very old, when they might then move in with one of their married sons. Beyond changes in co-residence, over 80 percent of parents Yan surveyed considered their married sons and daughters-in-law unfilial. Across materialistic and non-materialistic gestures—from petty cash, quality of food, clothing, and shelter to other gestures of respect and care from conversation to cooking—many found their situations to be unsatisfactory, even if they did not yet constitute more severe cases of parent abuse. When not residing with their children, parents often find that they are only visited when there appeared a concrete need, for instance, for the childcare of grandchildren.

Rather than Whyte’s sense of continuity in the endorsement of filial obligation across parents and children, Yan finds a deep shift in notions of intergenerational reciprocity. The parental generation (considered those generally above age 45) spoke of filial piety and elderly support as a manifestation of *enqing* 恩情, the most heightened manifestation of *renqing* 人情 ethics (see Y. Yan 1996 and Yang 1994). *Renqing*, which might be glossed (inadequately) as human feeling or affection, was considered the moral dimension that distinguished humans from animals for the parental generation. It is a moral obligation as well as emotional bond, one that conveys a sense of limitless indebtedness, in which full repayment is indeed impossible. In contrast to the ordinary exchange of favors, the child is indebted to the parent for a lifetime, for the gift of life and the effort of raising the child to adulthood. Filial piety and *enqing* are thus immersed in a sense of vastness, an inexhaustible gratitude based on which respect and obedience toward the parental generation is expected. The deferential sense of infinite asymmetrical return is marked by a cyclicity that repeats the pact of limitless giving on the part of the parent and impossible gesture of return by the child in the next generation. Filial piety is “unconditional and consistent,” and “can never be fully repaid in money or material goods” (Y. Yan 1996, 174).

Among the younger generation (married adult children), Yan found that a different vision of care and reciprocity emerges. While no one denied the moral legitimacy of elderly support, the notion of infinite indebtedness was rejected. Rather than a gift of life that propelled a uniquely human form of moral-affective relation, the younger generation saw human birth and childrearing as no different than animal reproduction, and reasoned that the child has no choice but to be born. The fact of giving life, according to this new logic, does not constitute a gift, and care of the child is merely an expectable parental duty. Intergenerational reciprocity was equated with other forms of interchange, “to be balanced and maintained through consistent exchange” (Ibid., 178). Whereas the child was, ideally, to demonstrate unconditional giving and deference regardless of the particularities of their parental relation in the formulation of filial piety, the sense of unsatisfactory parental care or relation on the part of the child now justifies the subsequent match of inadequate care. In anthropological terms, it is a shift, as Yan
puts it, from a generalized reciprocity of the gift that expects no immediate or equal return, to a ruthlessly rational and self-interested notion of conditional exchange amid the shift to a market economy. In a more optimistic tenor, Croll terms this a shift from filial piety to filial care, in which the latter consists of “more practical expressions of mutual need, mutual gratitude and mutual support for two-way exchanges of support and care” (2006, 483). For Yan, though, the crisis of filial piety is not merely the turn to a new form of care, but also signals the very collapse of the former symbolic world.

Regardless of one’s assessment, it seems that the filial relation is increasingly articulated in terms of care and support rather than obedience and obligation. Thus, while the theme of reciprocation remains, those of hierarchy and asymmetry have transformed, along both age and gender lines. Daughters (as we will see in the case of Mrs. Tan) have been found to be more heavily involved in their parents’ lives, financially and otherwise, and their care is often viewed and appreciated as optional rather than obligatory due to classically patrilineal constructions of filial piety (Ikels 2006). Moreover, and not unrelated to notions of symmetry and voluntary mutual benefit, filial care is afforded new forms of value in an era of increasing monetarization. For instance, in urban contexts in which the younger parental generation would otherwise seek the paid assistance of domestic workers, care by grandmothers is reassessed as a financially sound resource in the absence or stead of such hired service (Croll 2006). In the rural context, the rise of power in the daughter-in-law in family life is accompanied by the increasing tendency for daughters to increasingly visit and care for their natal families, rather than prioritizing the husband’s family according to more classic articulations of filial expectation (Y. Yan 1996).

In all, Yan considers the transformation of intergenerational relations and the rise of the individual an ironic and unintended effect of the socialist era. With the condemnation of ‘feudalistic ideas’ such as filial piety, the redistribution of land, and the halting of land inheritance, the family estate no longer held the sense of patriarchal power it once did. Further, with the implementation of the work-point system, in which each individual’s contribution to family resources became publicly posted for all to see, all members of the family began coming to awareness of their own discrete contributions, in contrast to previous tendencies for patriarchs to claim the primacy of their own contribution.

With decollectivization and the advent of Reform-era changes, land usage rights were granted per individual rather than per family, and almost all valuable property was acquired anew with the joint efforts of parents and adult children. The individualized perception of property paradoxically cultivated during the collectivist era was then unleashed in the new economy, leaving aging parents with little claim over their children symbolically or materially. The effects of these shifts on the older generation are felt

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70 Interestingly, studies conducted in rural areas in the initial years of the Reform era, in contrast to Yan’s (who resided in the village in the 1970s, then returned after 1989), offer quite a distinct portrait:

The family remains the basic unit of village society. The relationships between family members are still very close; parents are responsible for the upbringing of their children, and children are in turn responsible for their aged parents... The commune system has not undermined the family
more intensely in the rural region due to the bifurcated approach to policy across Maoist and Reform eras, in which systematic state provision of elder support has been instituted mainly among urban residents, leaving support of the rural elderly to the family for the most part, with exception of the childless. This might explain, at least in part, the seeming difference between urban and rural accounts of the state of filial piety (Chow 1991, Ikels 2006, Whyte 2003).

The sense of fractured kinship—and thus a fractured self—comes to the fore as a symptom of what it means to live out the ‘problem’ of rural China, between a collapsing symbolic order exemplified by the crisis of filial piety, an uneven geography of value awaiting the disappearance of the agricultural, and the bifurcated provision of state welfare rendering precarious those who remain. The cases below attempt to register the contours and textures of this fracture, through their encounters with the site of the hospital and the language of psychiatry. Rather than attempting to secure judgment of the legitimacy of diagnosis, I consider the situation of each patient as cases brought to the auspices of psychiatry, in the search for a cure to symptoms at once personal and historical in their singularity. Through this, I hope to consider the larger forces meeting at the site of a life, and what such lives might help us think otherwise about grand projects of global health (Das 2015; Stevenson 2014).

The People’s Psychiatric Unit

According to the 1985 He County Health Gazetteer, the first Western-style clinic was established in He County in 1908 by Wen Fenggang, a Christian physician from the nearby city of Xiangcheng. In 1925, the Nationalist Party established the first public hospital in the county—the Civilian Hospital (pingmin yiyuan), with six staff members. In 1927, the Civilian Hospital was relocated and transformed into the Prefectural Hospital, with an increased staff of seventeen. In 1938, on the eve of Japanese occupation during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the staff evacuated the hospital. The Japanese puppet government set up the Prefectural Hospital at a new location across from the Fire Deity Temple, later to be moved into the Fire Deity Temple itself. This is the first mention of a hospital locale with relation to a temple—the previous facilities were described by the street on which they were built. In 1945, with the end of the war, the puppet-government-run hospital switched hands to the Nationalist Party, and relocated several more times. After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, several health
clinics were combined into the Division Public Hospital, forerunner to the People’s Hospital, with a staff of approximately thirty. In 1952, the He County Division People’s Hospital, combining the previous public hospital with a military clinic, was constructed across from the Fuxi temple, where it remained until the time of my fieldwork in 2012-2013, now referred to as the ‘old People’s Hospital’ due to its expansion into a second location.

The psychiatric unit of the People’s Hospital was established relatively recently, in 2010, by the training and transfer of staff from neurology, and is housed in the old People’s Hospital. Operated by three psychiatrists and a staff of nurses, the ward consists of two long narrow hallways, in the shape of an ‘L,’ turning at the heavy opaque metal door separating the open and locked wards. In both sections of the ward, patients are often accompanied by visiting family members, as there was a sense that the patient needed to be attended to beyond the basic care provided by the staff—to communicate with doctors and arrange payment and insurance, to bring them fresh clothing and desired food (in addition or in place of the meals served at the ward), to keep them company and tend to their requests.

The psychiatrists made several rounds in the day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. In between, the ward fluctuates across the murmur of conversation, the quiet of afternoon naps, and occasional outbursts of argument. Near the entry of the ward sat the psychiatrists’ office. Unlike some urban psychiatric wards I have visited, in which psychiatrists each worked in individual offices—doors closed—with individual patients (often accompanied by family members), the two psychiatrists on staff during the day shared the office, and patients and families crowd into the room, at times listening to one another’s accounts to the psychiatrists, at times chatting among themselves or simply waiting with an air of urgency.

Dr. Yuan, the psychiatrist who helped introduce me to patients during my time at the hospital, often spoke of the ward as a place of repose for the patients. “Come take a rest here,” ge zhe’er xiexie 捱这儿歇歇, he would say, to those with eyes glazed as if in another world, to those glaring in fury, to those trembling in fear. A common if euphemistic way of referring to a hospital stay, the notion of rest hints at one dimension of the significance of the ward amid the tensions of life outside. While contemporary psychiatric rationale at large relies much on neurobiology as site of apprehension and intervention for madness, and while psychopharmaceutical prescription constitutes the primary mode of treatment at the ward, Dr. Yuan rarely emphasized biological causation in our conversations or in his conversations with patients and their families.

When I asked him about his thoughts on this, he replied that he did not consider biology to be the central issue in most cases. Rather, he reflected on the difficulties facing many patients who arrive at the ward—patients who after all share his world. He spoke of the young people who leave for the cities for work, and fall ill and return to the hometown after confronting various trials and tribulations of the labor market. He spoke of those who wind up at the ward due to anger, which he considered most common. Facing in the myriad complexities of family matters (jiawushi 家务事), it is often the ones sparsest in words, he said, the ones who do not argue or complain, who at last collapse into illness. In such cases, he considers hospitalization itself a form of healing—a
temporary retreat from the situation facing the patient outside, a moment of quiet and clarity, an extrication from the unbearable entanglements of shifting familial tensions and obligations, amid the decline of agricultural life and precarity of wage labor. It is with this in mind that I turn to the stories of some of the patients and families I encountered.

A Soul Adrift

Mrs. Tan has been searching for her soul ever since her four daughters migrated to distant cities for work a decade ago. She traverses the village in search of it, muttering to herself; other villagers, while not hostile, have stopped speaking to her. For the most part, Mrs. Tan doesn’t stray far from the perimeter of the village, less than a mile crosswise. Although at first troublesome, her daughters no longer worry too much about her journeys. She doesn’t wander into other families’ houses, and thus far has returned home unharmed. The strolls vary, and the sisters do not see a pattern or logic to her destinations. Yet each time, she moves with conviction, knowing precisely where she needs to go—not to local temples or spirit mediums where others might seek healing, but this patch of shrubbery today, that turn of path tomorrow. In spite of her arduous hunt, the task appears ceaseless, and her soul seems to succeed in escaping again and again. Inside her house, where she now lives alone after her husband left years ago, she places objects here and there, a lump of soil, a chunk of bark, or more recently, a handful of feces, in effort to ya hun’y 压魂儿, to ‘press’ her soul beneath the objects to keep it from floating away. Soul loss, shibun 失魂, is an old term, found in texts dating back at least to the first century BCE, in medical, ethical, as well as political contexts. But, according to spirit mediums I spoke to in He County, such disturbances of soul and spirit did not always exist. When Chairman Mao was still alive, they said, ghosts and spirits did not dare make trouble (see Chapter 4). It is amid the return of post-Reform ghosts that Mrs. Tan has lost her soul.

While her daughters do not agree with Mrs. Tan’s own assessment of soul loss and consider her idiosyncratic rituals part of her diagnosis of schizophrenia, they had not sought hospitalization for their mother until their recent concerns over hygiene (in the involvement of fecal matter in her rituals). After more than a decade of illness ebbing and flowing in severity, it is only in the past five or six years that the four sisters had begun taking turns, stepping away from their work, husbands, and children in Beijing to return to rural Henan and tend to their mother.

But Mrs. Tan no longer wishes to be bothered. She does not allow her daughters to live in her house, and strikes in anger if they move any of her meticulously placed objects. So when the sisters come to He County, they stay in a house across the road, bringing her three meals a day, and surreptitiously attempt to clean the house bit by bit, when she’s not looking. As An Mei, Mrs. Tan’s third daughter, said with a tinge of regret, “Maybe if we were around, to respond to her words, to chitchat with her, she would’ve been better. But now, she can’t even respond when you say something... She no longer communicates with the external world, and only speaks to matters in her own thoughts.”
The humdrum practice of everyday chitchat, *shuoshuohua* （literally ‘speak-speak-words’), was considered fundamental to care and wellbeing, a staple of existence alongside that of a shared meal. Speech and food, words and grain, both sustenance for maintaining a life, a life necessarily mutual. And in an era of labor migration and individualization, they are at once the most simple and most difficult of gestures for sons and daughters, many of whom have ‘left’ the older generation ‘behind’ in the village to seek work in the city.

While some parents join their adult children in the city, it is not always seen as a desirable option, since for many such as Mrs. Tan, home is deeply tied to place, while the city is often linked not just with alienation, but boredom. While public health concerns over those left behind by Reform and urbanization often focus on access to health services in rural regions, Mrs. Tan’s daughters offer another way of contemplating a life well-lived among those who remain, and what’s at stake in the disintegration and reconfiguration of local moral worlds under broader conditions of lopsided economies.

So the sisters remained in the inpatient ward with their mother from morning to night, bringing food and chitchat, even if unsolicited. Not entirely uncommunicative, and by no means quiet, Mrs. Tan engaged at times with the conversation in the room, but more often with another world, a world of characters past.

An Mei sat with me on the metal-framed hospital bed, as we watched her mother pace back and forth in the room.

“Bring this *mò* to your elder aunt!” Mrs. Tan walked toward us with a bag of steamed buns, gesturing toward the ward hall. Their aunt—her older sister—had long passed. Aside from her husband and children, Mrs. Tan had no immediate living relatives.

“Our aunt? Where’s our aunt?” An Mei retorted. Mrs. Tan stared at her without response, then continued pacing.

I tried numerous times to speak with Mrs. Tan, but for the most part, my mode of questioning was disregarded. The subject of psychosis, as those who have worked in such settings know, does not always cooperate with the genre of the interview, or the researcher’s desire for knowing. At times Mrs. Tan approached me, asking of my age, my hometown, my family; but then she would wander off once again, back to her own conversation.

“Why did you come to the hospital?” I tried asking at one point.

“Old representative, ‘struggle the landlords,’ did you participate?” Mrs. Tan asked in return. I shook my head. She was referring to struggle sessions of the Maoist era, when those suspected of bad class politics were publicly examined, humiliated, and at times violently tortured to the point of death.

“Ma! Why did you come to the hospital?” An Mei tried to assist with my banal line of questioning.

“Manage the trains. Manage the cars. Traffic policy. Draw the lines where? How many people are there now? How many?”

“Ma!” An Mei scolded. “She’s speaking of fixing the public roads now. She’s always going off on tangents. She thinks she’s still a leader,” she shook her head.
Prior to marriage, during the Maoist era, Mrs. Tan headed a local brigade, and organized youth in their daily work. Although she seemed to speak often of these times as she paced back and forth, her daughters were uncertain which elements were of her own life, and which were, as they called it, of her imagination.

“We’ve never experienced that kind of society, so we’ve only heard her speak like that, that’s she’s the head of the brigade and so on. We don’t really understand either,” An Ling, the youngest of the four sisters pitched in.

A gap between the two generations presented itself, signaling the disintegration of a prior kind of world and a prior kind of promise—in this case, a Maoist promise of political significance, where the village constituted the future of New China, and women held up half the sky. Yet, the two worlds also cohabit in the contemporary. As Mrs. Tan dialogues with kin and cadres past, old dreams of socialist utopia waft into the room, joining our conversation.

Mrs. Tan grew up in a farming family, one that was considered ‘middle peasantry,’ *zhongnong*. Under Maoist era categorization, middle peasants were those with more land than the ‘poor’ and ‘landless’ peasants. But unlike the ‘rich peasants’ and ‘landlords’ targeted by numerous punitive campaigns, middle peasants tilled their own land without employing labor. The second of three sisters, Mrs. Tan married into a landlord family. Mrs. Tan’s daughters did not know much about the circumstances of the marriage, but did know that it was not a peaceable one. After marriage, Mrs. Tan never returned to her position as brigade leader, and focused on raising her children. The family situation worsened after she gave birth to four daughters, and no son. Society those days, the sisters quipped, valued men more than women. Those who gave birth to no sons were not well regarded by the husband’s family. Moreover, their father did not bother taking their mother’s side, thus she was bullied by her in-laws—*shouqi* 受气, literally the receiving or bearing of anger. Anger begets anger, and Mrs. Tan’s own fury at the situation gradually led to her illness, her daughters posited.

But lest this begins resembling a clichéd narrative of Chinese patriarchal traditionalism, I turn now to another dimension. During the Maoist era, families from ‘bad’ class backgrounds (such as Mrs. Tan’s ‘landlord’ in-laws) strategically arranged marriages with those from ‘good’ class backgrounds (such as Mrs. Tan’s natal family) in order to minimize potential political punishment (see Croll 1984). These political marriages often lead to complications and disruptions in kin relations, whose impacts are also received by the next generation—those like An Mei and An Ling.

As Li Zhang has shown, practitioners in China indeed ‘culture’ psychotherapy, rather than simply importing western psy-disciplines, although here, ‘culture’ is troubled by fragmented transmission across generations. The past returns in fits and spurts, never entirely available, yet in other ways, ever-present.

Between a ‘bad class’ marriage, the scorn of in-laws, the short-lived promise of socialist leadership, and the departure of her four daughters in an era of factory work, it is as if Mrs. Tan’s soul was dislodged at the collision between multiple symbolic and economic systems. Indeed, she often says that her soul was ‘struck’ out of her, though she doesn’t say by what or by whom.
“Look look look… can’t find it… My next generation… I… I lost my soul… Four mouths… Four mouths…” Mrs. Tan mumbled what her daughter took as an accusation.

“Ma! But aren’t we good to you? Aren’t we good to you?” An Mei’s eyes moistened, though she laughed it off and continued.

“She’s always saying that she had four mouths to feed, but that ‘one person can raise ten, yet ten people cannot raise one’”—an allegation of failure in filial duty.

Although the four sisters maintained a constant rotation between Beijing and Henan, their mother did not appear satisfied. It is a dilemma shared by many of Mrs. Tan’s generation, one that views itself as short-shrifted by the transformations of the times. Bounded by respect for filial piety to the elderly before them, yet becoming elders in a generation without such regard, aging parents in He County often lament their position as one of unreciprocated care, as a generation that tended to both the young and the old, yet will receive nothing in return. Yet, for their children, who have learned that their economic future—and with it the future of China—lies necessarily outside of the village, there remains no easy resolve.

To Speak, To Love

Ms. Xie was diagnosed with depression after her mother brought her to the hospital. A third year high school student, she was slated to prepare for the national college entry examination, but withdrew from school amid preparations several months before her hospitalization. For most secondary school students in China, the three-day exam marks the culmination of their educational endeavors, a pivotal moment considered determinative of one’s very horizon of possibility. For those in rural regions and small towns, it is seen as the path up and out, toward an economically and symbolically more viable life. Ms. Xie said that her mood grew low (xinqing diluo 心情低落) after she switched to a more advanced level course at school, when her test scores began dropping. She felt a mounting pressure, given the cost of education and her family’s difficult economic situation.

“I felt I could not bear it anymore, the pressure was high, I was about to collapse.” Her voice was soft, tired, worn out. Her sense of collapse was accompanied by a sense of fear, which from time to time deepened into dread and panic (kongju 恐惧). She linked this dread and panic to her father’s physical and affective absence. What makes her ill, she says, is the escalating pressure from school alongside her lack of paternal love (quefujai 缺乏父爱). Her father is a construction worker in Shanghai, and returns home only once a year, often during the agricultural busy season to tend to the family plot. She feels he has been away from home ever since she was young, and that every reunion is fleeting. She can’t seem to find a sense of safety (anquangan 安全感), always steeped in fear.

“My father is the ‘honest’ type. He doesn’t know how to express his love, so I feel I have no support.” The term ‘honest,’ laoshi 老实, marks an emblematic shift of the post-Reform era. Until the early 1980s, honesty connoted a good person, a hardworking and trustworthy person, the type of person ideally sought for marriage (particularly in
describing men). With the turn toward market competition and growing disparity in the Reform era, the same term began morphing in connotation, pointing to a naïveté vulnerable to exploitation and duping, which would not fare well in the new moment, and risk falling short of supporting a family amid the social games of the privatized world. Honesty also came to mark a stereotyped image of the rural, of peasants too simple-minded for complicated times. As Yan writes of young rural women he encountered in the 1990s: “A number of them maintained that laoshi young men had difficulty expressing themselves emotionally (buhui shuohua) and lacked attractive manners (meiyou fengdu)” (2003, 78). In contrast, articulate speech, emotional expression, ambition, and a capacity for advancing one’s social and economic position have come to be valued, reversing the previous connotations of similar traits as unsavory signs of empty words, lasciviousness, and aggression.

Ms. Xia says that her father does not know how to console and coax her (hong 哄). She describes him as an old peasant type, one who has never had ‘cultural quality’ (wenhua suzhi 文化素质). Entering state discourse on population quality in the 1980s, in the same moment that the ‘honest’ man grew undesirable for marriage, the language of suzhi came to account for China’s failure to modernize, particularly vis-à-vis the theme of rural poverty. Accusations of a lack of ‘quality’ pointed to a corporeal politics of bodies deprived of value from which surplus value were extracted, particularly in the denigration of rural migrant bodies in contrast to images of the urban, educated, middle-class only child (Anagnost 2004, see Chapter 1).

I ask Ms. Xia what it would mean to express one’s love. She says that it would mean to buy some things for your child, to ask how things were going, to call and ask how your grades were, to encourage you, to speak you often, to comfort you. Instead, when her father does speak, all he speaks of is money.

“When he calls, he only talks about money. ‘I earned this—or—that much money for you, I will send this this—or—that much money home.’ Incessantly: money, money. Earning money to the point that he forgot his family. All you have is money, no familial intimacy—‘Money cannot buy familial affection.’” Ms. Xia’s phrase echoes an elementary school essay circulated online of the same title, writing of children ‘left behind’ by migrant parents:

“In our class, there are so many people waiting… In this world, there are yet how many people waiting… Please don’t let them endure the waiting, your love is the best nourishment. So-called money, your children do not even heed. They only heed your love.”

The essay’s and Ms. Xia’s condemnation of their parents marks a painful split between a generation of migrants who depart from their hometowns in hopes for more economically sustainable futures for their families, and a generation of children and youth educated in the language of emotional expression. The youth learn, both formally and informally through school and media, to pursue visions of tender love and affective communication indicative of a modern, urban, middle-class ‘quality,’ even as their families may embody the position of the peasant or rural migrant, the very image of low quality from which they were taught to distance themselves. In fear their families will not survive in the new era if they fail to be among those who ‘get rich first,’ the parents of those like
Ms. Xia are caught between their own visions of what it would take to gift their children with an adequate life, and their children’s lament and resentment at their incapacity for modes of care other than that of cash remittances.

Ms. Xia says she no longer speaks on the phone with her father much, as there seems to be nothing to say between them; speaking only provokes both of their tempers. Even when he returns home on those rare occasions, they don’t speak much.

“I feel he does not like what I say,” she commented, “for instance, I tell him what I’ve done, what I think, what my ideals are. He says, ‘don’t think about some ideal. Reality is reality. Ideals are too unreachably perfect.’ He says, ‘don’t dream and fantasize all day.’”

Ms. Xia’s father’s words are reminiscent of Reform era rhetoric of returning from heaven to earth, of trading the ethereal futuristic distance of the Maoist gaze for the immediacy of reality, economy, and pragmatics (Croll 1994). Yet the initial emphasis on reality has yet again been displaced by a new language of dreams. Other young students I met in He County also spoke in the language of pursuing ideals (zhuiqiu lixiang 追求理想), and like Ms. Xia, accused their parents of not comprehending what it is to live for one’s ideals. As one junior high student explained to me, she wanted to pursue her goals and live a life with waves, not the cautious, conservative life her parents lived. Across Mrs. Tan, Ms. Xia’s father (and Mr. Wang below), and Ms. Xia, we can see three historical horizons of feeling—the Maoist promise of socialist modernity, the early Reform promise of pragmatism and wealth, and the post-Reform promise of individual ideals and bourgeois affectivity. Yet each of these promises threatens to remain out of reach, both in the broader scene of ongoing disparity, and in the fragmentations of kinship their very difference produces. Confrontations between these three visions of the future emerge in the clinic, as those left behind and those aspiring to depart are haunted by obverse sides of these fractures.

Ms. Xia speaks about her mother quite differently than her father. She feels her mother cares for her, knows how to speak to her, knows what questions to ask. Her mother, she says, does not feel like a peasant woman. Her father, on the other hand, feels to her the very prototype of a peasant—“just like those described in books.” Despite the fact that her mother did not receive much more schooling than her father (neither completed elementary school), her parents were of divergent class backgrounds in the past. In the Maoist era, her mother’s maternal family was considered variously a rich peasant or landlord family, while her father’s parents were considered poor peasants. Her maternal grandmother’s family faced class struggle campaigns frequently, and in a reversal of Mrs. Tan’s case above, decided to betroth her mother to the son of a poor peasant family in hopes that it would improve their political lot.

Her paternal and maternal grandparents, Ms. Xia observed, differ in their thinking. Whereas her paternal grandparents—those once labeled as poor peasant—are more “feudal” and “superstitious,” her maternal grandparents are more “modern.” And whereas her father does not hold the completion of her education in high regard, and rather hoped that she would eventually be able to earn money and put food on the table, her mother and maternal grandparents had always been supportive of her educational pursuits. Indeed, several studies have found that despite the disruption of prior class and
educational divergence during the Maoist era, there remains an intergenerational transmission of educational attainment, due at least partially to a transmitted family orientation toward education, regardless of the parent's own level of received education. The children of previous landlord and rich peasant families, thus, are more likely to move further along their educational path than those of previous poor peasant families in the post-Reform era, despite the temporary equalization of parental education and wealth across class backgrounds (Deng and Treiman 1997, Sato and Shi 2007).

Despite the bifurcation of the modern and superstitious in Ms. Xia's perception of the matriline and patriline, she mentions that her mother has visited various “superstitious” guides since her illness, “those who inquire about the path for you,” gei ni wenwenlu nazhong,71 who offer other modes of navigation. She has visited spirit mediums and fortunetellers (“those who see incense” and “those who calculate hexagrams”) multiple times already. She is uncertain just how many or just where her mother goes for these consultations, and has never gone with her. All she knows is that a spirit medium informed her mother that she is a tongzi 童子, a divine ‘child’ sent to earth by a deity, who is wont to illness. Like Cai (Chapter 2), Ms. Xia's mother engages with the spirit world on her daughter's behalf, in search of otherworldly forces shaping the predicaments of the present.

Ms. Xia appeared indifferent for the most part about these engagements. But she also felt that medication would not be sufficient for resolving her long, moody days; it would require some psychological adjustment (xinli tiaojie 心理调解) on her own part, or better yet, some psychological counseling (xinli fudao 心理辅导) that she does not know where to seek, as she did not feel such a thing would be available either in the ward or in the county in general, but rather in major cities as Shanghai and Beijing. In the previous month, she had been prescribed olanzapine (an atypical anti-psychotic usually prescribed for schizophrenia and bipolar disorder), which she felt to be ineffective. After requesting a change of medication, she was prescribed alprazolam (a benzodiazepine used for anxiety and panic disorders, as well as depression-induced anxiety), followed by paroxetine (a serotonin reuptake inhibitor used to treat depression and a range of other disorders). There seemed to be some degree of effect, she noted, but appeared unimpressed, indifferent as she was toward her mother's visits to the spirit medium and fortuneteller. Instead, within the purview of hospitalization, what she found most comforting was the presence of the IV—“there wasn’t much of a reaction (with the medication), but I felt that once the needle was hung, my heart was no longer panicked.” As with many other patients I met, young and old, to “hang the needle,” guazhen 挂针, referring to an IV injection and the hanging of the IV bag at the bedside, was accompanied by a sense of healing, a sense of being cared for, regardless of the precise substance injected, which the patients often did not inquire about.

With plans to return to school in the following school year, Ms. Xia tells me that she hopes to move to Shenzhen one day, where she can live her own life, chasing after her own dreams. Yet, it is not an easy image to hold in mind; she feels like she is weak,
that others look down on her, that she is incapable. She yearns for college, for what she imagines to be a new situation, to be surrounded by those with life experience and education, with whom she can communicate. She wishes that she could do better at school, at testing, so that she can gain a sense of safety—the sense of safety she cannot seem to receive from her father, the migrant worker who cannot but appear to her in the image of a textbook peasant.

House of Dreams

“Acute psychosis,” Dr. Yuan noted as he left the room, leaving me with Mr. Wang and his wife sitting at his bedside.

“Since the start (of the illness), he has been sweating. His hands, his neck, his shoulders. He doesn’t like to speak. He has never liked to speak,” Mrs. Wang looked worried, and dabbed her husband’s forehead and neck with a small towel. He was forty-six, she was forty-two, but in his condition, I would have guessed he was much older. Thin, dark, shaking, with the blanket pulled up to his chest, Mr. Wang’s eyes were filled with terror. He stared at the ceiling, his gaze snapping left and right.

“His illness came at night. In the middle of the night, I woke up and heard him crying. He kept saying ‘stop hitting, stop hitting,’ and would not stop crying… He said he saw ghosts. I asked him where. He just kept saying he saw ghosts.” The bout of sleeplessness and tears came a week prior, and since then, he has continued in his insanity (fāfēng 发疯) day and night, Mrs. Wang explained. She herself does not believe in ghosts, and by extension has not consulted any spirit mediums. In her natal village, most residents have converted to Christianity, including herself, which requires disengagement and disbelief in such matters. But a female relative on Mr. Wang’s side of the family consulted a medium on his behalf. According to the medium, Mr. Wang had collided into a ghost, a woman from outside his village who had committed suicide, either by hanging or drowning. Suggesting that perhaps his soul was frightened away by the ghost, the medium came to their house and attempted to call back his soul, but his condition did not seem to improve. His elder son then suggested hospitalization.

Mr. Wang had worked as a coal miner for over a decade, spending most of the year away from the village, returning for a stretch of time only during the New Year holiday. Throughout the year, it was just Mrs. Wang and her aging father-in-law living under the same roof, for whom she cooked and looked after (though he was in relatively good health, thus not much care was yet required). Due to eye problems affecting her since a young age, Mrs. Wang did not participate in formal employment or intensive farm labor, thus the family relied for the most part on Mr. Wang’s earnings. His salary had been quite good, she said with a tinge of pride, rising from 30 RMB per day in the past to up to 100 RMB per day in recent years (approximately 16 USD at the time). But two years ago, he injured his back in the mine. After undergoing spinal surgery, he recuperated at home for half a year, and attempted to return to the work. But the pain in his back grew unbearable, and he could not continue.
The couple now lives in Mr. Wang’s home village with his father—known for his bad temper—who reprimands him for failing to earn a decent living. While his father’s family had been of poor peasant (pinnong 贫农) background during the Maoist era, upon Reform, his father assisted with various construction projects locally, helping build roads and other people’s houses, managing to save 10,000 RMB over the span of a decade, to use in support of his children. Yet he feels Mr. Wang has failed in reciprocating now that he has grown older.

“His father scoffs at him of not making money, for laboring all day for other people and not making any money. He says he is incompetent (bunenggan 不能干),” her voice is lowered, to avoid provoking Mr. Wang with reminders of his father’s discontents. The language of competence, nenggan (and in He County often simply neng), has come to replace the humble, hardworking ‘honesty’ of the past (see above). He does not attempt to dispute his father’s verbal denigrations, holding it all in.

“He does not say a word. Whether you say he is good or he is bad, he does not make a sound, but he listens, and deposits it in his heart (gezai xinli 忍在心里).” This gradual depositing and accumulation of anger, according to Mrs. Wang—in parallel with Dr. Yuan’s description of many patients who are sparse in speech but filled with anger—led to his illness today. Indeed, Mr. Wang was not unaffected by his father’s words, and throughout my conversation with his wife, he pitched in periodically, “no money. No money.” Not only are Mr. Wang’s earnings needed for supporting himself, his wife, and his father, they must sustain the cost of education and living for their two sons. Their younger son is in his second year of high school (boarding at a nearby school, a common practice in He County), and their elder son did well in the national college examination, and was accepted to a high-ranking university in Beijing. More than tuition and living expenses, though, Mr. Wang was most tormented by the problem of building his elder son a house.

In He County, the notion of house building was central to visions of patrilineal masculinity. To maintain respect of both fellow villagers and of one’s sons, the family—and the father in particular—is expected to build a new house for his son(s) as a central portion of bridewealth. During conversations with matchmakers, the question inevitably arises, “is there a house?” Writing also of rural Henan Province, Cao Jinqing notes: “Almost all the surplus product of the villagers, even that which they anticipate earning, went into house-building” (2005, 59). Cao reasons that the centrality of house building arises from both the relative lack of other avenues of investment in rural regions, and the intense competitiveness of village social life, in which the house constitutes a signal of wealth and status of the family. Rachel Murphy similarly observes of rural Jiangxi, “the front of the house corresponds with the face of the family,” and creates visible evidence in the home village of earnings gained from work in the city; some migrant sons remit more of their earnings than migrant daughters in order to contribute to the parents’ building of their own future house, to “improve their own eligibility in the marriage market” (2002, 103). The house thus creates a link between the urban and rural faces of life, and constitutes an intergenerational thread between father and son. It was not uncommon to hear of quarrels between father and son, as well as between brothers (who might fight over a house built) with relation to house-related demands and dissatisfactions. As
discussed above, adult children in rural regions carry an increasing sense of entitlement to family property along with that to conjugal privacy. Thus, while the betrothal house becomes a sign of family dignity for the parents, it becomes the material manifestation of the son and daughter-in-law's sense of right to property and privacy, no longer accompanied by a sense of filial obligation to care for their parents within that same house.

Her husband, Mrs. Wang says, feels that everyone in the village looks down upon him for being poor. Every other household is buttressed by an entire family of laborers, he would complain, while he is the sole laborer in their family. The neighbors have larger, multi-storied houses (loufang 楼房); they wear better clothes, eat better food. The house they now lived in was built over thirty years ago. It is made of brick, but Mrs. Wang calls it a straw house (caofangzi 草房子), indicating an older and smaller style of architecture now deemed outdated. Most of their fellow villagers have built newer houses, more in line with the ever-changing styles favored as signal of status, unlike their old straw house, with cracking roof tiles. During the sleepless nights of his illness, Mrs. Wang found her husband out in the yard in the middle of the night, standing, squatting, pacing, hands now outstretched, now in a lifting motion. He was building an invisible house.

“…Make money… The children… need to build a house, take in a daughter-in-law…” Hearing our conversation, Mr. Wang pitched in, voice trembling, halting, cracking. His son had told him not to worry about the house, to focus on getting well. But it was too late.

“No money… No money to build the house… What's to do if it can't be built?” He continued, no longer in sync with our conversation, drifting into the repetition of his panic.

Mrs. Wang said that their children will soon be able to work, and earn their own money. Since their elder son was accepted to the university, things will be fine; everything is fine now. Everything is fine now. The brothers will eventually find work and finance their own houses, even buying a house for their father in the future, she said buoyantly. But her mustered optimism drops into a quiet grumble when I ask if the two of them ever quarreled. She said that a while ago, he came up with the idea that he wanted to make new blankets—nice, wide blankets for their sons, rather than the old small blankets they use now. At the time of my stay in He County, the large, wide comforter and duvet cover she spoke of would cost approximately 200 RMB, thus two would cost around 400 RMB, which, while not an unthinkable expense, is still seen as an investment, particularly for those like Mr. Wang, for whom it constitutes at least four days worth of earnings.

“I said, why? Why have this New Countryside dream? We all have blankets to cover ourselves with right now. The two kids are still young, they can be covered for now with the blankets we have. There is no need for making new blankets. The kids are still in school, we have no money, stop thinking about making blankets.” Aside from Mr. Wang’s wages from the coalmine, their other source of income is the wheat and corn grown on their family plot, approximately five mu 亩, or a bit less than one acre. In the case of a good harvest, the crops can be sold for upwards of 7000 to 8000 RMB for a given year. Mr. Wang’s hospitalization costs for the month, which they paid in advance, is 7000 RMB. Fortunately, the New Cooperative System (referred to in Chinese by its
abbreviation, *xinnonghe* 新农合, “new rural cooperative”) had just recently been fully implemented in He County, promising to cover around 80 percent of qualified rural medical costs. The system operates by reimbursement, thus the finances must be fronted by the patient and family in order to receive treatment. Mrs. Wang did not know the details regarding insurance coverage, aside from rumors that 70 to 80 percent of costs was indeed being reimbursed despite other hospital goers’ initial skepticism, and awaits her son’s visit to the hospital to manage the paperwork. Amid our conversation, her younger son arrived. I asked him if he felt the hospital stay would be affordable. He said that there is some difficulty, and that they had to borrow money from relatives. Then there is tuition—his is 1,750 RMB a semester, his older brother’s will be over 6,000 per year. I asked him what he thought they would do to in face of these costs. He shook his head, and simply said he does not know.

### Worlds Apart

Alongside literary and political figurings of the peasant in Chapter 1, returns of the ghost as received by the medium in Chapter 2, and cosmological and messianic formulations in the following two chapters, the cases here offer another way of considering registers of experience amid disjunctures of time. Here, phenomenological psychiatry provides a link between psychopathology and questions of mediumship and temporality. If the body acts as “a medium revealing the world to a subject,” modes of madness present various disorientations and reorientations toward time and space (Fuchs 2005a, 96). The Maoist world, lived as the present in the case of Mrs. Tan, is reminiscent of the temporal disturbance central in descriptions of schizophrenia, in which a socially shared sense of time begins to disintegrate, and past, present, and future narrow into a “now, now, now” (Lovell 1997; Fuchs 2005c). It is to “inhabit the synchronic” (Jameson 1991, 16), but here, rather than an exclusion of historicity complicit with the cultural logic of late capitalism, I consider the insistent present-ing of the past a symptomatic reminder, which at once inherits and disturbs contemporary sensibilities of the smooth fading of socialist dreamworlds.

While the language and rituals of spirit possession—or soul loss as a form of spirit dis-possession—can offer a manner of reconfiguring a world, through the re-alienation and re-instantiation of the position of the person (Corin 1998), in psychosis, “the *koinós kósmos*, the common world,” also “gives way to the *ídios kósmos*, the ego-centric and self-referential world” (Fuchs 2005b, 139). But here, rather than containing the *ídios*

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72 See Ratigan 2015 for a discussion of the New Cooperative System, which was first rolled out in the form of pilot projects beginning in 2003. After the collapse of Maoist era rural healthcare, and prior to 2003, 90 percent of rural residents were uninsured, and at times avoided medical care due to prohibitively high costs. Two new idioms also arose in relation, Ratigan writes—‘poverty due to illness’ and ‘poverty due to catastrophic illness.’

73 For a recent phenomenological exploration of bodies and surfaces as affective mediums in ethnography, see Collu (n.d.).

74 This connective insight is from Lovell.
within the egocentric as such, I think with Lacan (2007) on the fundamentally collective and largely unconscious dimension of the symbolic out of and against which the subject emerges. Thus, even seemingly idiosyncratic manifestations of delusion speak to a collective dimension, both in the repertoires they draw on and the histories they register—including histories of disruption to those repertoires.

In Mrs. Tan’s ‘pressing’ of the soul beneath collected objects and her strolls tracing the perimeters of her village in search of the soul ‘struck’ out of her by unnamed forces amid movements of outmigration, ritual draws idiosyncratically from Chinese cosmological renderings of soul loss, but without effective healing from soul callers or spirit mediums. Instead, a parallel world has been carved out of her loss, a world no longer fully available to those around her, yet in its own fragmented way, insistently insinuates unresolved dilemmas of time into the conventionally shared world, without a full narration of loss or what is to be made of such worlds out of joint.

Mr. Wang’s terrified utterances of money and house building magnify post-Reform predicaments of the rural inhabitant in staccato repetition. Once part of the politically lauded ‘poor peasant’ class of Maoist revolution, those like Mr. Wang (and similarly if differently gendered, Mrs. Tan’s daughters) are caught in the impossibility of being a good father and filial son, as the decline of peasantry and devaluation of agricultural labor render tenuous the status of the ‘honest’ peasant turned migrant laborer. His pained verbal repetitions disfigure and render uncanny linear imaginations of continuous progress in the New Countryside dream, making perceptible their haunting quality for those abandoned by its promises. The same might be said for Mrs. Tan, lost in the dissolution of an earlier revolutionary promise, unable to care or be cared for between worlds.

Inheriting these disjunctures of geography, class, and history yet again is Ms. Xia, whose desire for an exit from the scene of rurality is experienced as hindered by her ‘old peasant’ father—a figure not unlike Mr. Wang—whose incapacity for an urban bourgeois mode of affective communication hollows her of a sense of safety and competence. Like Mrs. Tan, Ms. Xia lives at the crossroads of Maoist designations of peasant and landlord, but through subjective contours of the subsequent generation. Through tactics of cross-class marriage for evading political persecution, the failure of class struggle to truly erase the etchings of difference from pre-revolutionary times is literally and figuratively inherited by the children of such marriages, in whom this history of difference is reinscribed at the heart of a divided, collapsing self. In the case of Ms. Xia, a transient sense of comfort and protection is gained from the IV bag hanging by her hospital bed, while she imagines healing in the form of urban psychological counseling.

Across all this, the language of psychiatry is present, but to an extent, sidelined. For each of the cases discussed at length or in brief in the opening of the chapter, the psychiatric ward is but one stop in the broader search for healing, and psychopharmaceutical cure is but a hope among many, doubt toward which is posited even by the younger generation. The hospital, in a sense, offers but a site of transient respite (and at times de-escalation) for patients and family members exhausted by the

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75 On the search for exit, see the case of Reda, in Pandolfo (in press).
conditions of the times, collapsed into their own fury. Its walls and records archive tales of historical disjuncture, here in encounter with the always-already inadequate attempt of ethnographic listening. Madness spins out from the fissures of kinship and economy, from troubled forms of life and care, burdened by disappointments and debts toward pasts and futures—irredeemable rifts that eject one from the sense of a livable present. It is with this in mind, of the sense of impossibility facing the post-Mao economic and symbolic geography and temporality of the rural, that I turn in the following chapters to the cosmological rendering of the same problem of space and time in He County. But as we will see, madness returns to spirit mediums’ accounts of the present, signaling a cosmic time out of joint, between heaven and earth.
Chapter 4. Ten Thousand Years

Read these tales properly, and they will make you strong and brave; read them in the wrong way, and they will possess you. Cling to the details, and they will possess you; grasp the spirit, and you will be strong… A man eager to climb famous mountains must have the patience to follow a winding path… A man eager to watch the moonlight must have the patience to wait until midnight.

–Feng Zhenluan

Marx has not yet been received… He belongs to a time of disjunction, to that ‘time out of joint’… Between earth and sky. One should not rush to make of the clandestine immigrant an illegal alien or, what always risks coming down to the same thing, to domesticate him… To assimilate him so as to stop frightening oneself (making oneself fear) with him… Can one, in order to question it, address oneself to a ghost?… Could one address oneself in general if already some ghost did not come back?76

–Jacques Derrida

“Scenes of the north country:” bellows a voice in oratory, “A hundred leagues locked in ice, a thousand leagues of whirling snow.” In the darkness of night, I drift across the temple square, toward the voice. “Both sides of the Great Wall, one single white immensity…” An old man, in the shadows of the temple gate, in a verbatim recitation of Mao’s poem “Snow,” to no one in particular.77 “This land so rich in beauty, has made countless heroes bow in homage. But alas! Qin Shihuang and Han Wudi, were lacking in literary grace…”78 Several passersby gather around, myself included, listening. “All are past and gone! For truly great men, look to this age alone.” The voice, the passersby whisper, is not his own. It is, as they put it, from above—from the heavens.

Three stout elderly women wearing cotton mian’ao coats, speaking quietly amongst themselves in response to the old man’s recitation. A middle-aged man showing only his eyes through a black scarf, peering at the orator, pupils dark as fire. A pale bookish young man in his twenties—glasses, small briefcase, button-up shirt—seemingly an outsider to the temple scene like myself, less due to his attire than the subtle difference

76 The first excerpt is drawn from Feng’s nineteenth-century commentary on how to read Pu Songling’s ghost-filled eighteenth-century text Strange Tales (Cited in Minford’s introduction in Pu 2006: xxvi-xxvii). The second is drawn from Derrida’s twentieth-century commentary on how to read Marx’s specter-filled nineteenth-century text Capital (1994).

77 “Snow” is a poem composed by Mao Zedong in 1936, often cited as his most well known poem, as a grandiose gesture of his intent to rule.

78 Qin Shi Huang was the first emperor of the state of Qin (246-221 BCE), who unified the then Warring States under his rule. Han Wudi was the seventh emperor of the Han dynasty.
in his comportment and manner of listening. Then again, the in and the out, the affected and unaffected, were hard to distinguish on the temple square, particularly when night falls.

“December twenty-sixth, eighteen ninety three, born to a family of farmers. After the Xinhai Revolution erupted, a soldier for half a year, in service to the new military of the uprising... He encountered and accepted Marxism around the time of the May Fourth Movement, and in 1920, founded a Communist organization...” The old man was now reading from a tattered red booklet he pulled from his satchel—an unofficial biography of Mao Zedong.

“Do you understand what he’s saying?” the young man, my companion in age bracket and alien status, asks under his breath.

“Half,” I replied. He shook his head.

“I don’t understand. I feel mi—disoriented, confused, lost. The more I listen, the more disoriented I feel.” Indeed, from the subtle tremble of disturbance on his face, I worried that the scene might take him too far. He spent some time as a student here in He County, he said, but now lives in the South, and had not been back for years. Now on a business trip nearby, he decided to stop through the temple after work, and found himself seized by the recitation, leading to a slight sense of bewilderment. As I would come to learn, the temple square was known for luring in the mad, and in the case of those vulnerable to possession by spirits, driving the sane insane.

A man with thinning gray hair walked up to the growing crowd. He was of similar age to the orator, and began shaking his head in skepticism and disdain.

“Prattling on about these things? These are all matters of the past,” he mumbled. The orator glanced toward the interruption, but continued without pause. The skeptic lingered at the edge of the crowd, half-listening. Now and again, he repeated his interjection: These are all matters of the past. The orator’s eyes began to grow defensive, his voice louder, wrestling to keep the attention and confidence of the crowd. At last, after several interjections, the skeptic stepped forward and blurted out:

“These are all matters of the past! Why don’t you speak of some matters of the present?”

“The present?” Reluctant to engage the detractor yet clearly agitated, the orator retorted, “The present is chaos! The present is: You give me ten thousand, I give you twenty thousand! The present is selling political seats and buying political seats, without decent politicians to go around!”

“Ay! That’s right!” The skeptic retreated, nodding in satisfaction.

79 In early medieval Chinese Buddhist scripture, mi is also discussed in the form of midao, to stray, deviate, or “lose one’s way” from the proper path (Campany 2003, 304-305).

80 This is not to say that madness is associated with all forms of engagement with the temple. Thousands visit the temple on widely observed ritual days—the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, the eve of Chinese New Year, and birthdays of certain deities. The question of madness arises particularly those who frequent the temple square beyond these more normative ritual days. Nonetheless, according to the mediums, due to the chaotic density of gods and ghosts drawn to such a spiritually potent place, there is always the risk of colliding into a demonic entity, of something pu dao ni shen shang—of something to hurl itself upon your body.
“But”—now the orator was dissatisfied—“they are one and the same! The past is the present, the present is the past, and history cannot be neglected!”

“History is history,” scoffed the skeptic, “the present is the present.”

The orator seemed to have exhausted his supply of ripostes. “But... You cannot forget history,” he sputtered, and turned back to the booklet. “Nineteen twenty one...”

After some moments of peaceful recitation, the skeptic returned to the scene. Moving intensely close to the orator, facing him in a gesture of confrontation, the skeptic spat: “Then tell me, in the end, is it the living that reigns, or the dead?” 81

The orator appeared defensive once again, fumbling for words. Another spectator pitched in laughingly: “Does such a thing even need to be discussed? Of course it’s the living!” The skeptic shushed him, and turned back to the orator: “This is the last question I’ll pose to you. There’s no need to discuss anything else!” 82

Cornered into the binary question, the orator mustered up his conviction and hollered: “The dead!”

“Then there’s nothing left to say!” And with that, the skeptic smugly stepped back once again.

“And you?” I asked of the skeptic, “Who do you think reigns, the living or the dead?”

“The living and the dead both reign!” An evasive answer, seemingly. “We Chinese have this tradition, always looking toward the dead, even in reading we have to read texts by the dead. And the living? Isn’t it still the living who are reading the books?”

One of the spectators began to snicker at the orator. “Are you ill?”

“Indeed I am! I’m a madman (shenjingbing 神经病)! The crowd burst out in laughter, including the orator. This seemed to relieve some of the tension built up by the debate.

“Elder uncle, how is it that you believe in gods (shen 神)? Invisible and intangible, where do you find them?” 83 Addressing the orator, a woman perhaps in her late twenties danced into the crowd, miming sweepingly with her hands, as if blind. The crowd begins to chuckle. The orator again fumbled for words—debate was not his forte.

“Well, gods are people, and people are gods!”

“Why do you not believe in gods?” I asked the woman. 84

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81 What I’m glossing as ‘reign’ here, dangjia 当家, is literally to be in charge of the house/home (akin to the term ‘head of the household’), but lacks the connotation of power merely confined to the privacy of the home. Rather, it denotes a more broad sense of holding the true power, command, or rule in a given situation, including all realms of politics.

82 Biede jiu buyong shuole, 别的就不用说了‘all else is unnecessary to discuss,’ meaning that in the last instance, his response to this central question resolves all other questions.

83 Dashu 大叔, elder uncle, is an address of respect in this case, not a claim to kin relation.

84 At first, I believed the woman’s question to be a challenge in the spirit of skepticism, and the orator’s response as an evasion of her question. But I came to learn through conversations at the temple square and beyond, such debates edge on what temple regulars call duigong 对功, the ‘facing off’ of spiritual power, and was not merely the re-staging of modern rift between the religious and areligious. Rather, it is a mode of searching, a genre for discovering spiritual affinity and kinship, identifying guides and disciples, and discerning between friend and foe—between those carrying with them virtuous spirits and those housing
“Of course I believe in them! I merely wish to seek consul from elder uncle as to how to find them! How do you find them if you cannot see them, and cannot touch them?”

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The scene at the temple square that night staged the conundrum facing the contemporary cosmology across multiple registers. The problem of relevance of the past and of the dead, as raised by the skeptic, could not but call to mind the efforts of twentieth century reformers and revolutionaries, of the pained desire and fraught attempt to “shake off the ancient ghosts” carried on one’s back, to quote Lu Xun, in the movement toward a “progressive, ever ascending” future. Yet, the skeptic’s satisfaction at the orator’s indictment of the present also suggests that to leave history behind by no means guarantees a splendid future. Rather, we’ve reached a present that leaves us mi, like the young businessman returning to a place he once knew—lost, confused, bewildered. Under such conditions, what is it to be sought, and how is one to seek it? As the dancing disciple asks, how are we to find the invisible and intangible? And is such a search, as the crowd’s laughter raised in both discomfort and relief, simply mad? Then, there is the orator’s voicing of Mao, which signaled for some that his speech was an address emanating from beyond this world.

In this chapter and the next, I turn to the presence of Mao at the temple and in the contemporary cosmology in He County—what I call a precarious cosmology, in which spirit mediumship is situated. This precarious cosmology, I suggest, simultaneously registers the historical present of those ‘left behind’ in a post-Reform regime of value, and as we will see in the following chapter, opens up an inverted figuring of Henan, and He County, as a potential ethico-spiritual center, awaiting apocalyptic renewal.

Temple of Ancestry

The Fuxi temple, near the center of He County, it is considered the primary temple in the county both in terms of scale and spiritual potency. Known in Chinese mythology as the first among the Three Sovereigns, Fuxi is referred to colloquially as renzu ye 人祖爷, deity (lit. grandfather) of human ancestry. Numerous renderings of the Fuxi mythology have circulated historically and regionally, but most have pivoted around his role in the rebirth of humanity some thousands of years ago (Birrell 1993). Following demonic entities. Yet, these dialogues often incorporate apparently secular vocabulary—belief and superstition; the nation, the People, and Mao—in a pursuit radically different than what the words initially seem to suggest to outside ears.

85 In fact, Lu Xun’s comment on the ghosts points precisely to the conundrum at hand, coming six years after his triumphal announcement that “the road of life is progressive, ever ascending the infinite hypotenuse of a spiritual triangle; nothing can obstruct it,” and reads: “I cannot shake off the ancient ghosts that I carry on my back.” Cited in Julia Lovell’s introduction to her translation (Lu 2009).
a great deluge, Fuxi and his sister Nüwa—depicted as half-human, half-serpent entities in Han and Tang dynasty murals—wished to marry one another in order to repopulate the earth. The two were uncertain whether marriage was proper among siblings, and sought divinatory confirmation atop Kunlun Mountain. Upon receiving heavenly sanction, they created what we now know as humanity; in He County, Nüwa was often said to have kneaded human figurines out of mud, from which new human life sprung.

Beyond his image as ancestral progenitor, Fuxi marks the founding of humanity as civilizational entity. Credited variously with the invention of fishing and hunting implements, animal domestication, culinary technique, the eight trigrams,\(^{86}\) and the founding of the marriage system, Fuxi is said to have distanced humanity from conditions of chaos and matriarchy:

In the beginning there was as yet no moral or social order. Men knew their mothers only, not their fathers. When hungry, they searched for food; when satisfied, they threw away the remnants. They devoured their food hide and hair, drank the blood, and clad themselves in skins and rushes. Then came Fu Hsi [Fuxi] and looked upward and contemplated the images in the heavens, and looked downward and contemplated the occurrences on earth. He united man and wife, regulated the five stages of change, and laid down the laws of humanity. He devised the eight trigrams, in order to gain mastery over the world. (Cited in Wilhelm and Baynes 1967, 329)

In He County, the presence of the Fuxi temple evokes a sense of regional protection. While known for presiding over the worldly human realm at large, Fuxi watches over those in the vicinity of his temple in particular, preventing calamity in the region. The temple has been built and rebuilt, from one dynasty to the next, before and since it came into ritual prominence in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Aside from mythologies of Fuxi, one of the more commonly circulated temple legends during my time in He County was that of Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), first emperor of the Ming dynasty. Born to a destitute peasant family, Zhu was known historically for leading an intermittent life of a wandering beggar, before joining the Red Turban rebellion, whose originators drew on the eschatology of so-called White Lotus groups, announcing a coming end of an empire in chaos and the anticipated reincarnation of the Maitreya Buddha and a new order (Chan 2008).\(^{87}\)

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\(^{86}\) The Eight Trigrams, *bagua 八卦*, is a hexagram-based divinatory technique for mapping cosmological correspondences between elements, cardinal direction, season, kin relation, and other attributes, subsequent versions of which were later employed in the Book of Changes (*Yijing*).

\(^{87}\) See Naquin’s discussion of the White Lotus Society, in which she argues was not a monolithic organization but rather smaller scattered groups (1976). In the case of Zhu Yuanzhang, despite the initial centrality of the Maitreyan tradition to the legitimacy of the new dynasty, Zhu harshly suppressed so-called White Lotus groups after his rise to power. Nonetheless, the groups continued underground and raised provocations during Zhu’s own reign and beyond (Shek 1990). And, while the Maitreyan dimension of Zhu’s political history is not elaborated in oral accounts of the legend I encountered, its quiet significance will become apparent below.
According to local legend, prior to the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty and before his rise as emperor, Zhu once sought refuge in the Fuxi temple while fleeing Yuan dynasty troops. Upon entering the temple, dense layers of spider webs miraculously formed outside the temple gate. Fooled by the abandoned appearance of the temple, the soldiers rushed on, leaving Zhu unharmed. In gratitude for his life, once Zhu took reign as emperor, he rebuilt the temple in the image of the capital in Nanjing, which continues to influence the architectural style of the temple today.

During the Cultural Revolution, portions of the temple and its icons were desecrated. According to the county gazetteer, in August of 1966, under the slogan of “Destroy the Four Olds and Establish the Four News” (posiji lixisin 破除迷信), “the Fuxi icon was destroyed, the temple was bombarded, the guardian lions were smashed, [and] numerous historical sites were brutally damaged” by the Red Guards. In the 1990s, the county government began discussing plans for establishing the temple as a cultural and touristic site. Drawn to the massive “consumptive potential” of such temples, the state co-opted the local term “ancestral fair” chaozuhui 朝祖会 (a month-long temple fair spanning the second day of the second lunar month to the third day of the third lunar month), transforming the ancestral fair into a matter of state management, with leadership selected by the county head and county-level Party committee members.

Given this state-sponsored platform, private sector entrepreneurs were also drawn in, in hopes of profit from the hundreds of thousands that attend the fair (Chen 2013, 197).88

From his survey of the region Chen concludes that there is an area with a circumference of approximately 544.5 kilometers within which the observance of Fuxi is strongest, including those who visit on the first and fifteenth of the lunar calendar, as well as some who establish smaller local temples dedicated to Fuxi. Of those who have visited this or another temple dedicated to Fuxi, women constituted almost twice as many as men. Farther beyond this perimeter, the sense of familiarity and engagement with Fuxi diminishes, some only vaguely aware with his mythology from history class or from television, others having heard of the temple but know of few in their vicinity who visits, and still others who had not heard of Fuxi or the temple at all (Ibid., 112-113).

Here, rather than focus on Fuxi per se, or the more commonly discussed dimensions of the temple such as the annual fair or the song, dance, and crafts associated with the temple, I turn to another dimension: the place of Mao in unofficial ritual and local cosmology.

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88 In 2005, annual ticket revenue reached over 10 million RMB, doubling in 2008, quadrupling in 2009 (with an estimated average of 400,000 daily entries during the month-long fair). The total annual tourism-related revenue grew from 110 million RMB in 2005 to 1.39 billion RMB in 2008 (760 million of which was earned during the month-long temple fair). In 2010, the He County “Cultural Development Investment Co., Ltd” was established, with 20 million RMB of registered funds and 560 million RMB of investment. In 2011, an official closing ceremony was added to the existing official opening ceremony, and tourism-related revenue reached 2.65 billion RMB simply from the month-long fair, including revenue from ritual goods, accommodation, dining, entertainment, and transportation; eight trucks loads of incense ash were hauled from the temple mid-fair (Chen 2013, 198-203).
Ten Thousand Years

“Most here at the square are those who have undergone bitterness, those who have undergone hardship,” an old man, sitting on a short wooden mazha stool, speaking into his crackling clip-on microphone. It was the same man who recited Mao’s “Snow” the night prior, the orator. He would introduce himself as Wang, a farmer from a county toward the north. This morning, despite his attempt to amplify his message with the small microphone, his voice was nearly drowned out by the song and drum reverberating from the proliferation of rituals across the temple square. It was the first day of the twelfth lunar month, and thousands of men, women, and children from nearby towns and villages gathered both inside and outside the temple.¹⁸⁹

“This society is chaotic. What I heed is not money, what I heed is the person. Gods are humans, humans are gods. Humans are living Buddhas, living immortals.”

I inquire about the small red booklets by his side—the same one he was reading from in the night, the unofficial biography of Mao.⁹⁰ He hands me a copy. “The Great Thought of Mao Zedong Radiates Eternally,” it reads in bold yellow lettering above a portrait of Mao in his gray suit. Beneath the portrait, “The heroically sagacious shakes all under heaven, mighty feats shall be lauded generation after generation.”⁹¹ Inside the front and back covers, iconic color photos of Mao, greeting families and workers, addressing troops, fishing, reading the newspaper, or simply smiling warmly. He once met a man, Wang said, who could tell that he had lingqi, spiritual airs. The man handed him a book and told him to head to a certain temple. Upon reading the book, he immediately felt ling, felt the sense of spiritual potency; when he visited the temple, he discovered the deity that would guide him. He then decided to publish and spread this book. Whoever is meant to read it will experience ling upon reading. Not everyone will feel ling—if someone receives a copy of the book, reads it, and feels nothing, they will simply discard it. Someone else might then pluck it from the refuse, bring it home, read it, and experience the ling. It’s simply so. I would see him at the square regularly, speaking of social ills, reciting Mao’s poetry and biography. As those who frequent the square would say, Chairman Mao’s rays shine upon him.

In He County, “heading to the square, shang guangchang,” was a common term for visiting the main temple, referring to the vast square outside its front gate.⁹² On major ritual days such as this one, some come to burn incense, appealing to the gods for health and fortune. Some come to peruse the market, from ritual implements and handicrafts to discounted clothing and household supplies. And still some, as was often

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¹⁸⁹ Guangchang, the same word used in Tiananmen Square.
⁹⁰ At the end of the booklet, the name of a print shop, from a county around 180 kilometers north of the temple, dated December 2011, with the name of several county residents listed as donors, four who donated fifty RMB, two who donated one hundred. It seemed, thus, to be a relatively local undertaking, which nonetheless circulated several hundred kilometers.
⁹¹ 伟大的毛泽东思想永放光芒; 雄才大略震天下，丰功伟绩世代颂.
⁹² The square had been expanded in 2004 to cover a total span of 55,000 square meters, just in time to receive a flurry of outside officials for an organized Chinese Surname Cultural Festival.
joked, come to swindle and steal—as one man prays for promotion, another man prays to steal his wallet. As the final lunar first in the year of the dragon, a dense anticipation saturated the air. Those who did not frequent the temple often seem in a rush, jostling their way through the crowds toward the temple gate—"burning the last batch of incense" for the year.

Making my way across the square, I was drawn toward a rumbling drum beat, steady and declarative, in sets of three. Following the sound, I found a large circle gathered around a group of six women and two men, middle aged, dressed in matching green Maoist era army coats and brown soviet-style military fur hats with a red star emblem in the center, preparing for ritual. One woman held a tall pole, topped with a large yellow flag with the word ling—divine command—etched in red. "Ayahao!" Another woman, in a red embroidered dress reminiscent of old Shanghai and a red parka, traces the edges of the encirclement with her steps, pausing at its northernmost point. Facing the heavens, she slowly lifted her arms, palms open, toward the sky. She was receiving not only lingqi, spiritual airs, but also ling, divine command, for the opening of the ritual. "Ayahao!" she cried again—an interjection confirming divine presence and possession. "Ayahao! Ayahao! Ayahao!" echoed several spectators in the crowd—a sign that they too acknowledge and experience the presence of the spirits. While some rituals on the square involve particular divine appeals, rituals such as this one are a mode of acknowledgment and oblation for the gods, as well as a means of gathering spiritual power.

Inside the circle, eighteen sheets of yellow fabric—used commonly in ritual locally—laid out in the shape of a fan, flanked by a head of cabbage and two large stalks of scallion. North of the fan, more of the fabric, this time in a row of five, every other topped with a bamboo platter (a regional kitchen implement used for drying grains and vegetables) and covered by paper cuttings of four concentric red stars, one embedded within another. On the center bamboo platter, three cigarettes pointing northward, an offering to the gods. Above that, four sticks of incense in a golden urn—three for humans, four for ghosts, as the saying goes—aside a row of plastic-wrapped sausages—"because gods like to eat too." Lastly, at the very top, furthest north thus highest in symbolic position, a large poster of Mao in a red collared shirt, seated and surround by

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93 Chuyi 初一, lit. "initial first," refers to the first day of any Chinese lunar month, akin perhaps to calends in the ancient Roman calendar. When I spoke of my interest in the mausoleum at the start of my fieldwork, I was told to visit on chuyi shiwu 初一十五, 'the lunar first [and] fifteenth.' These constitute proper ritual days for burning incense and making offerings to the deities, either in the form of icons in one’s home or at the local temple. A tradition that dates back to imperial China, the ritual observation of the lunar first and fifteenth is found across much of rural China post-Reform, as well as regions in which traces of Chinese ritual influence is found (e.g., Vietnam).

94 In He County, cardinal directions are used to refer to all forms of spatial relation. Not only are travel routes given according to them, the location of everyday objects, including the body, rely on designations of north, south, east, and west.

95 Cigarettes, as well as alcohol, are common ritual offerings. Furthermore, cigarettes are at times used in place of incense on the temple square. I was told that this is a carryover from the Cultural Revolution, when cigarettes were used during secret ritual and healing sessions in the home since the sale and usage of incense was illegal.
his generals in blue uniform. Placed on the poster, three mandarin oranges and three slices of metallic gold ritual paper—two covered in spirit writing and the third with the words de de tianxia 德得天下: through virtue, one gains all under heaven.

Around fifty people have gathered around the circle: men smoking cigarettes, women bundled in scarves, and several in their teens and twenties peering on, fascinated and perplexed. A man, perhaps in his late thirties, cigarette dangling from his lips, begins swinging a meter-long necklace of Buddhist meditation beads above his head, then meticulously lowers the beads atop the poster of Mao and the generals. The two men in Mao coats begin striking a gong and cymbals, tracing deliberate steps across the spread of ritual offerings. Others—mostly those I had seen frequenting the square previously—join to walk the perimeter of the encirclement, some singing, some dancing, some plucking offerings off the spread, brandishing them toward the heavens. The percussion gains speed. The cries intensify. “Ayahao! Ayahao! Ayahao!” A woman walks to the center and closes her eyes. Another twirls, palms up high to collect spiritual airs, lingqi 灵气, from the heavens. A voice bellows amidst the drum and song.

“Wansui! Wansui! Mao Zhuxi wansui!”

Ten thousand years! Ten thousand years! Ten thousand years for Chairman Mao!” a woman, standing beneath the ling flag, howls at the top of her lungs. “Wansui! Wansui!” she repeated again and again, until her voice grew hoarse. In an adjacent ritual circle, the drumming also reaches its peak. “Shenglileeee! Victory! Dajiasengtibile! Victory to all! Shijie daping le! The world has reached supreme peace! Zhongguo shengli le! China has reached victory!”

The group broke into laughter, at once joyous and jesting, tugging at one another teasingly and slapping one another on the back. “Wansui! Wansui! Wanwansui! Ten thousand years! Ten thousand years! Tens of thousands of years!”

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An address reserved for emperors for much of China’s imperial history, wansui, literally ‘ten thousand years’—commonly translated as ‘long live’—exploded in usage during the Cultural Revolution, particularly after Mao’s first public mass reception in August 1966, in which he took the crowd—as well as his security guards—by surprise with an early morning appearance on Tiananmen Square:

This morning at 5 a.m., as the sun had just spread its first beams of light from the Eastern horizon, Chairman Mao informally appeared on Tiananmen Square… Chairman Mao wore a grass-green army uniform. On the Chairman’s military cap glistened a single red star. Chairman Mao… walked directly among the masses… At that moment, the Square boiled over, everyone raised their hands over their heads and jumped in the direction of the Chairman… Many people clapped their palms until they turned red; many people shed tears of excitement…

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96 万岁！万岁！毛主席万岁！
97 大家胜利了，世界大平了，中国胜利了.
98 Particularly after the Tang Dynasty.
On the Square, tens of thousands of people loudly called: “Long live Chairman Mao! Long live! Long, long live!” One wave of hurrahs surpassed the other, shaking the sky above the capital.99

After this appearance and its press coverage, ‘long live,’ *wansui* 万岁 and its variant, *wanshou* 万寿, were soon incorporated and codified into official CCP discourse and propaganda. By 1968, texts, meetings, speeches, and even phone calls opened with a formal wishing of eternal life and eternal health for the Chairman, and badges and images of Mao—not unlike those now saturating the temple square—also came into mass production and circulation during this period. While Mao himself was cognizant of his symbolic power and purportedly curbed unofficial duplication and distribution of his words and images in initial post-Liberation years, by the late sixties, amid the Cultural Revolution, unauthorized media began multiplying at unprecedented speed, launching their circulation and signifying capacities far beyond the grip of the state (Leese 2011).

With the death of Mao and the rise of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, a series of official denouncements of Mao, particularly with relation to the violence of the Cultural Revolution, seemed momentarily to diminish the reproduction of such tokens. Yet, another decade later, in the late 1980s, a new “search for Mao Zedong” began—one that would come to include the now well-known satirical renderings of the Chairman in (mostly urban) Chinese contemporary art and pop culture.

Cultural historian Geremie Barmé (1996) notes that in contrast to the Cultural Revolution, the posthumous ‘Mao Cult’ moved in inverse relation to official state promotion, documenting the drop of popular sentiment and paraphernalia sales during periods of government-orchestrated commemorations of the Chairman, and rise across other periods.100 Yet, while Barmé suggests that the “new Mao Cult” is “[d]ivested nearly entirely of its original class, ethical, and political dimensions,” as well as any sense of “moral revival, sanctity, and the general religiosity and fervor that characterized the earlier Cult” (Ibid., 5, 13), invocations of Mao in He County, in ritual context and otherwise, pointed precisely to his status as ethico-political, and for some, cosmological figure.

**When the Chairman Reigned**

““When Chairman Mao was still alive,” Li Hanwei pointed to the thick rusty padlock on the wooden front gate of his house, “we didn’t even need locks on the doors.” Not an uncommon way of phrasing things, yet one that struck me nonetheless—something about the weight in his voice, the distance in his gaze. Li, Cai Huiqing’s husband, was on an extended stay home from the road.

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100 And if the tongue-in-cheek reappropriations of Mao’s words and image in urban pop culture rings distinct from his appearance in the temple square, Taussig reminds us that there is a certain “confluence of the official with the comic that makes kitsch an appropriate aesthetic for the magic of the state” (1997, 94).
“These walls?” he gestured toward the tall brick enclosure that marked the boundary of their yard. These walls used to be dried sorghum stalks, barely a meter high,” he lowered his hand to approximate. “There was no ‘wall.’ Just a few stalks loosely strung together. You could see everything inside, and no one ever worried about it.”

Standard yard enclosures in He County now stood over two meters high, a kiln-fired opacity between the home and passers by. As someone who preferred to keep a distance from neighborly gossip, Li normally seemed far from nostalgic toward the visibility and engagement implied by sorghum fencing. Yet even for him, it seemed that something shifts as the art of chuanmen—the informal and largely unannounced visits to one another’s homes—dampens with the rise of the brick wall, both producing and signifying a transformation in social life.

“It’s the sense of safety!” Li snapped. “Nowadays, there’s no sense of safety anymore,” no anquangan—the same term used by Ms. Xia in the last chapter. “When Chairman Mao reigned, there was a sense of safety.” He shook his head and grimaced. Concern with theft heightened with the advent of the Reform era, when, Li said, everyone had to find their own path. Privatization and labor migration intensified both the sense of opportunity and disparity, and with it, desire and envy of one’s neighbors. Moreover, many I met in He County lamented that with the death of Mao came the return of corruption. During the Maoist era, it was often said, if a single RMB was gained by means of corruption, it would eventually be returned. The Chairman would not allow otherwise. But with the Reform era, alongside Deng Xiaoping’s exhortation “It doesn’t matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice,” state officials began losing fear and gaining courage (danzi), siphoning increasing amounts in their dealings, to the injury of commoners (laobaixing).

Yet the so-called commoners did not always fare better. Beyond formal politics, a deep sense of distrust permeated the most intimate and mundane dimensions of everyday life—the forgery of electricity bills by village collectors, the injection of water by butchers into their meat for weight inflation, the nonfulfillment of promised reciprocations after receiving gift or bribe, the unpaid debt of once-trusted kin. It is a logic of practice too weary to bank on returns, yet does not afford the luxury of refraining from wagers. Greed (tan) and corruption (tanwu) saturated imaginations of the social, and there was a sense that most of those living in this era would exploit any opportunity that arose, whether black or white. There was a sense of uncertainty and moral collapse, a sense of loss that gestures toward the Chairman as a figure of former guarantee.

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101 The ‘yard’ refers to yuanzi, which carries a significance well captured in Xin Liu’s work in rural Shaanxi, the westerly neighbor of Henan: “Yuanzi is what one possesses. As an old man, whose brother had left the community, once said: ‘I do not know what I should do. I cannot leave this place, because my yuanzi is here. My brother has asked me several times to move to the city where he lives, but I cannot simply leave. What about my yuanzi?’” (2000, 39)

102 Literally, to string through the door(s).

103 The brick wall, of course, did not guarantee the fending of intruders. During my stay, a farmer in the village was robbed of fourteen goats in the night from within his yard, after the thieves poisoned his two guard dogs.
“This is why many people treat him as a deity,” Li commented. While Li was staunchly against what he calls superstition and couched his laments in this-worldly terms, he acknowledged that there was another understanding of the Chairman in He County.

For those in He county who engage with the yin world of spirits, “the time when Chairman Mao reigned” (mao zhuxi dangjia shihou) marked not only his earthly rule, but a cosmic punctuation and rectification. According to spirit mediums such as Wang on the temple square, the medium visited by Cai Huiqing (Chapter 2), Xu Liying (Chapter 5), and others, ghosts and spirits did not dare appear when the Chairman was still alive. With his pronouncement “Sweep away all cow-ghosts and snake-spirits” (hengsao yiqie niuguisheshen), all the spirits vanished. Some say they hid in remote mountain caves, some say they disappeared altogether. It was only upon Mao’s death that the ghosts returned to haunt. His reign was, in other words, one of divine sovereignty. In striking contrast to post-Reform secularization narratives, in which the Party’s violent anti-superstition campaigns drained the nation of religiosity, the local cosmology posited Mao himself as a figure in the pantheon.

Among many mediums in He County, Mao is said to belong to the Western Heavenly Gate, xitianmen, referring to Buddhism, as Buddhism arrived from the west, from India—“Mao and the Buddha, the Buddha and Mao, they’re all one family.” Beyond the metaphoric relationship between local religion and national or imperial bureaucracy (Feuchtwang 1992), Chairman Mao, they say, was a red fish spirit sent down from the heavens in human form to spark the Communist Revolution in China. He was sent, many whispered, by none other than the Maitreya, milefo— the ‘future Buddha,’ figure of Buddhist eschatology inspiring the movement of Zhu Yuanzhang, the Ming dynasty emperor who once took refuge in the Fuxi temple. Indeed, some said he was the very manifestation of Maitreya. As Wang put it:

“Mao is Maitreya, Maitreya is Mao, they are the same person. The Eternal Mother is their mother; they are the same.”

Overmyer mentions possession by Mao, among other deities, in Henan’s Xihua County, but does not elaborate (2009, 116). Chau notes the presence of temple-like structures dedicated to Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De in Shaanbei, but writes that he “did not get the feeling that these were established and popular cults, but rather an effort to lend legitimacy to other popular religious temples (2003, 50-51). Wellens describes a situation in Yunnan perhaps closest to what I am considering here, from a Premi interlocuter who responded to the question of ritual during the Cultural Revolution: “They told us there were no evil ghosts, so performing [this ritual] was not necessary, and, anyway, we thought that if there were evil ghosts, chairman Mao would protect us” (2010, 11). Wellens suggests that “The relative speed and intensity of the post-Maoist revival of traditional practices at least suggests that the underlying beliefs and cosmological understandings... never really disappeared... It might be safer to propose that Mao, as a mythical figure, managed to forcefully claim a space in local cosmology rather than to conclude that his ideology destroyed and replaced it” (Ibid., 161).

Mao he fo, fo he Mao, doushi yijiaren 毛和佛，佛和毛，都是一家人. Under Maoist era policies, Buddhism, like other religious practices, faced a “state of terror,” in which monasteries were destroyed, monks were beaten or killed, sacred texts were burned, and sacred icons were melted for metal (Welch 1972). To consider the mediums’ accounts is to dwell on another rendering of this history of violence.
In the invocation of a divine figure that carries a regional history, the mediums’ accounts mark not a religious revival in any straightforward sense, but engagements with the cosmological repertoire precisely after religiosities’ multiple transmutations in the aftermath of culture. Drawing on mythologies of divine mourning, earthly wickedness, and repeated calamity associated with Maitreya and the Eternal Mother, the mediums reach for a reencounter with the divine through a spiritual-political address that points precisely to the crisis facing the cosmic realm. Amid the loss of stable cultural signifiers, they turn to these figures—both of whom have been evoked in past moments of warfare and intrusion—to approach that very loss from the site of destruction (see Pandolfo, in press). The devastation posed to tradition is engaged from the ruins of tradition’s shaken grammars of devastation. Here, the loss of the Chairman as a former guarantor of sovereignty is folded into a cosmic temporality of losses, along with the messianic promise of return.

Historically, the Eternal Mother (also translatable as Unborn Mother), wushenglaomu 无生老母, and the Maitreya Buddha are central figures in the tradition known in the literature as White Lotus Society (bailian 白莲会). However, across the time of its first usage in the fourth century, its borrowing in the eleventh century, and the emergence of a more distinctive tradition in the middle of the sixteenth century, “White Lotus” was rarely a term of self-reference, and rather pointed to small, scattered groups across time and space, whose resemblance centered more on their cosmology than name or systematic organization (Naquin 1976). Similarly, those I met in He County who evoked the Eternal Mother or Maitreya did not refer to a particular school of teaching or organizational entity in their accounts, but often on their singular experiences of revelation, marked often by an air of the unexpected. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, this tendency, Naquin suggests, is partly due to the branding and purging of White Lotus groups as heterodoxy. Indeed, so-called sectarian scripture enter archival availability often due to such imperial efforts. Thus, the Eternal Mother draws on a strand of Chinese Buddhism that occupies the space of rift and periphery, and whose mythology is seen to speak dangerously to this very rift. The literature discussed here draws particularly on scriptures drafted in the late sixteenth century, and later collected in the 1830s by a Qing dynasty county magistrate for the purpose of persecuting such “heretical doctrines” (Övermyer 1972).

In such collections of scripture, the Eternal Mother is described as giving birth to a son and daughter who married and became ancestors to all humankind. In some versions, her son and daughter were no other than Fuxì and Nüwa. Yet, the Mother soon grew anguished as she observed the growing decadence and confusion (mi 迷) of humans:

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108 From a scripture cited in Ma and Meng (2011, 316): “After the emergence of the Ancient Buddha, heaven and earth were established; after the rise of the Eternal Venerable Mother, Former Heaven was established. The Eternal Venerable Mother conceives from herself and begets yin and yang. The yin is the daughter and the yang is the son. Their names are Fuxì and Nüwa respectively.”

109 The same term used by the bookish young man at the opening of the chapter.
She had sent mankind, her children, to the ‘Eastern world’ to live on earth. To the Eternal Mother’s great distress, her children soon ‘indulged in vanity and lost their original nature.’ ‘All living beings were confused and lost in the red dust world; they had fallen and knew not how to return to their origin’… ‘[She] weeps as she thinks of her children. She has sent them many messages and letters [urging them] to return home and to stop devoting themselves solely to avarice in the sea of bitterness’… The Eternal Mother wanted her children to return to their ‘primordial native land,’ their ‘original home in the world of true emptiness’… where their mother still resided. On one level this Original Home was the place where one’s ancestors had lived and where one’s roots were, symbolizing for all believers what the ancestral village meant to every Chinese family. On another level, this home meant the womb from which all were expelled at birth… ‘When the child meets his mother… he confirms that he is unborn and will not again turn in the wheel of transmigration.’

To return her children to her side,

She would send down to earth gods and buddhas who would teach a new system of values by means of which men could find salvation and thus ‘come home.’ Because mankind was ‘steeped in wickedness’ the Eternal Mother had been compelled to make repeated efforts to open this road to salvation. She had first sent down the Lamp-lighting Buddha to save the world; then she had sent down the Sakyamuni Buddha to try again. Each had been able to save some of her children, but most of mankind remained lost. Therefore, the Eternal Mother had promised that she would send down yet another god to lead men to salvation, the Buddha Maitreya. (Naquin 1976, 9-10).

When salvation finally arrives, calamity would strike the earth, marking the turn to a new era after the apocalypse. (I will discuss this eschatological dimension in the next chapter.) Meanwhile, the period (kalpa) in which the humans lived would see a steady degeneration. In He County, I encountered references to Maitreya and the Eternal Mother more through oral transmission of speech and song than through text. While scripture surely circulated among some, illiteracy and claims to illiteracy were common among those at the temple square, thus the transformations I discuss here are not necessarily transmitted textually.

In the accounts of the mediums in He County, the arrival of Mao is linked with the arrival of Maitreya, in a moment when China had reached the brink of ruin and calamity. Unaware of his own other-worldly origin during his human lifespan, the

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110 An earlier double of this account existed in the official realm. In 1955, during the launching of the first Five-Year Plan, leaders of the Chinese Buddhist Association announced that “the successful fulfillment of the plan ‘would mean realization here on earth of the Western Paradise that is spoken of in the sutras’… There were, indeed, occasional attempts to identify Mao with a Buddhist divinity, but they were made mostly by Tibetans” (Welch 1971, 290-291). In Burma, Marxist concepts began to be equated with Buddhist ones among Burmese Marxists. Bhava—liberation in the sense of nirvana—was applied to social
Chairman was armed with the divine task of destroying temples and icons—including Fuxi’s icon in He County—clearing existing decay in order to establish his position as Chairman and true deity, and prevent China from full colonial domination by Japanese and Western forces. It was only when he returned to the heavens that he learned of his true identity. Yet, according to the mediums, saviors such as Mao are only sent in moments of crisis, of absolute threat to China’s sovereign existence. It is as if, to borrow from Benjamin (2007), the Messiah arrives when tradition is on the verge of being overwhelmed. In a flash of danger, a vision of the ruinous past crystallizes in the here-and-now, shattering illusions of a homogenous, progressive time, and opens up attempts to deliver tradition anew.

The threat of foreign imperialism was central to debates around religion and superstition during both Maoist and Republican eras. Yet, for the mediums, Mao’s anti-religious rhetoric cannot be taken at face value. Rather, his promulgation of atheism was an effect of purposive divine misguidance, a tactical language for rectifying the widespread idolatry of corrupted gods, who only put the Chinese populous at further risk of subjugation. The so-called ‘Mao cult’ was thus never truly devoid of religious significance, in the accounts of the mediums, even given its purported atheistic foundation. To put in Chakraborty’s words, “the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of so-called ‘superstition’ have never died anywhere” (2009, 16). With his assignment as Chairman—a simultaneously political and cosmological position—Mao contributed unwittingly to an act of divine intervention. In these accounts, the Chinese Communist Party’s ostensible campaigns against religion and superstition during Mao’s rule were not against religiosity per se, but a covert ethico-spiritual struggle against foreign nations, nations that themselves embody demonic entities, hence their desire to invade and occupy.

The title of Chairman (zhuxi 主席), for many mediums, was a barely veiled cue that Mao had received the mandate of heaven granted to emperors past; otherwise, why, as several noted pointedly, would he be the only leader who dared name himself Chairman, and why have no leaders dared so since? The Chairman is Emperor. While historians have commented on the usage of imperial metaphors in the formation of the ‘Mao cult’ (Leese 2011), the mediums offer a counterpoint to the secular historiography of political manipulation. For the mediums, “the time when Mao reigned” marked a temporary cosmological alignment between heavenly and earthly realms—a transient securing of the cosmos in a moment of China’s near-destruction.

liberation through revolutionary struggle. Lokka Nibban—nirvana on earth—was used to describe the paradise that would be created by socialism in Burma… The Buddhist concept of causally governed cyclical history was equated with dialectical materialism… The Burmese Association of Marxist Monks welcomed the advent of socialism as the dawn of the age of Maitreya, the next Buddha, when nirvana would again be easy to attain” (Ibid., 294).


This is not to say the mediums were naïve to the notion of political manipulation. The figure of the Chairman offers precisely a critical contradistinction to a scene saturated with what they see as political artifice.
The mandate of heaven, in early Chinese writings, refers to the divine granting of sagehood, an order that must be submitted to if the patterns of all under heaven are to continue—the foundational potentiality of the cosmos, human culture, and virtue that emerged from heaven to begin with. This was accompanied by the notion of a cyclical rise and fall of rightful dynasties, of moral-political timeliness. Across a wide range of contending Confucian, Daoist, Mohist, and Legalist dealings with ming—variously translated as mandate, fate, or lifespan—the mandate of heaven, tianming, is a central expression of morality, “link[ing] macro-destiny with virtue” (Raphals 2003). In their descriptions of Mao’s position as Chairman and emperor, the mediums echo the centrality of virtue to the divine guarantee of the cosmos, as well as a Chinese Buddhist vision that posits the emperor as a disciple of the Buddha (Welter 1996). To return to the ritual writing from the temple square, “with virtue, one gains all under heaven.” The mandate of heaven may be conjured as grounds for both dynastic continuity and rebellion. In the latter case, heaven offers hints of dynastic change through widespread illness, famine, drought, and other portents (Teiser 1996).

Among the mediums, invocations of Mao conjure an ethical mode of life that now seems out of reach given conditions of market competition and moral decay today. Under such circumstances, what some mediums refer to as “walking Chairman Mao’s path” (zou mao zhuxi luxian) marks a fraught effort of ethical gesture. To cite Agamben, in gesture, “nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something being endured and supported… The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality… It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them” (2000, 56-7). Yet, Agamben comes to this rendering through an attentiveness to its erosion: “By the end of the nineteenth century, the Western bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures” (Ibid, 48, italics in original). In He County, rather than the loss of gesture upon hesitations posed to the bourgeoisie, there is an attempt to reanimate the gestures of mediumship in face of the rise of a bourgeois world. In the mediums’ accounts of a precarious cosmology, the very access to the ethical dimension of being-in-medium is at risk of dissipation, upon the betrayal of a revolution in the new idealization of bourgeois modernity post-Reform, from which the rural is repeatedly ejected.

Duplicity, Discernment

Back at the temple square, I hear rumors of a pantheon in duress. According to some mediums, despite the thousands that visit the temple every lunar first and fifteenth, their prayers have gone unheard—Fuxi is no longer present in his own mausoleum. Some say he left some time around the Cultural Revolution, when the Red Guards destroyed his icon. Some say he left when the local government greedily raised the entrance fee after the Reform era—from mere change to five RMB, from five to ten, from ten to twenty,

133 See also Throop’s (2014) discussion of moral moods as the diffuse and temporally extended sense of moral breakdown and existential uncertainty, poised between and potentiating both explicit ethical reflection and habituated embodiment.
and in 2008, to a staggering sixty RMB (almost $10 USD).\footnote{On the firsts and fifteenths of the lunar year, as well as officially recognized holidays such as Chinese New Year, the price is discounted back to 20RMB. Nonetheless, many who frequent the temple decide to simply remain in the square, outside the gates. In a survey of Fuxi observances in surrounding regions, Chen (2013) found that 48 percent reported an annual household income below 10,000RMB; those who had lower income, Chen notes, were ‘sensitive’ (mingan 敏感) toward the high temple entry fees. Similar to accounts I heard, Chen’s respondents described an increase from 2 or 3 RMB up to 5, then 10, then 20, then 40, then most recently, 60 RMB.} Beyond the place of origins (Morris 2000), Fuxi comes to stand also in the place of growing political and economic dilemma. In an act of self-exile, according to some, Fuxi now drifts from place to place, assisting only those who truly deserve his care. According to others, he is simply in hiding in a mountain cave, furious with the moral failures of humans today. Fuxi, after all, is the deity assigned to human affairs—how could he but be disappointed by the outcome.

Still others gave a more alarming assessment: It is not that Fuxi departed in a spatialized sense. Rather, Fuxi himself has grown corrupt (fubai), and could no longer be trusted. The rising ticket prices and the demands for increasing amounts of offerings in exchange for divine favor were signs that he was no longer acting as a benevolent protector. Moreover, some mediums contended, Fuxi is not the only one—almost all deities have grown corrupt, overcome with desire and greed, mirroring politicians and other humans today.\footnote{See Feuchtwang (1992) on the Chinese pantheon as a metaphor and mirroring of the imperial state bureaucracy.} Whether the humans or the gods grew compromised first, it was hard to say. They act in tandem, one leading the other astray. Among deities accused of corruption were those no less than the ranks of the Goddess of Mercy (guanyin pusa 观音菩萨) and the God of the Heavens himself (laotianye 老天爷). Which gods remain virtuous, it is difficult, if not impossible to discern, hence the heightened danger of possession today.

Yet, across variations of this tale, Mao remained an exception. Even those who dare accuse central figures of the Chinese pantheon still held the Chairman in highest esteem, as the supreme ethical exemplar, one who differs from the rest precisely in his incorruptibility.\footnote{In contrast to regulars at the temple square, most of who channel spirits, those who treat spirit mediumship as profession almost ubiquitously deny this taboo claim of divine corruption, often irate when I raise such an inauspicious question, accusing those in the temple square of being mad.}

“When Mao Zedong conquered all under heaven (datianxia 打天下), people did not have to worry about such things. But nowadays, charlatans (pianzi 骗子) are everywhere,” one woman told me while waiting for a session with a medium, speaking of a fraudulent medium she had once visited. Mao’s death thus marked not only the return of ghosts, but also the impossibility of distinguishing between the true and the false, between divine and demonic entities. Since someone like Mao is only sent in moments of crisis, his withdrawal in the heavens has unleashed an epidemic of brazen charlatanism across heavenly and earthly realms. Those who are capable of or vulnerable to possession must thus remain cautious, to distinguish between true, righteous deities, zhengshen 正神 and false deities, jiashen 假神, that might usurp one’s body and lead one to evil deeds.
Perhaps a sign of this dangerously hazy zone, the customarily positive term xian (commonly translated as immortal, transcendent, or celestial being; see Chapter 2), is instead used to describe aged, powerful ghosts, ghosts masquerading as gods, as well as deities who have grown corrupt, who are thus themselves ‘false.’ Of course, mediums themselves are far from immune, standing as suspect figure par excellence, both in modern anti-superstition discourse, and among one another. Little trust existed among mediums, both those who establish their own altars for visitation and those who do not. In a time when the cosmos itself is saturated with falsity and uncertainty, those who convey its messages are susceptible to its risks and whims.

Precarious Cosmology

The accounts of the mediums bring me to what I call a precarious cosmology. Here, precarious signals the affective structure and experience accompanying a diffuse yet potent sense of betrayal and loss of guarantee, situated in the epistemological murk between singularity and repetition, between historicity and the very condition of existence. On the one hand, the very presence of the yin realm, stretching far beyond questions of Maoism and Reform, poses a vulnerability to the human world, in which things are not always what they seem. As the woman quipped to the orator at the beginning of the chapter, how is one to know the invisible and intangible? Traversing a shared landscape yet operating in a time and space partially external to human history, the very presence of demons and deities posit a fundamental lack of total human sovereignty. The human is subject to the desires and whims of their otherworldly counterparts. On the other hand, the life and death of the Chairman constitutes a historically peculiar punctuation in the cosmos for mediums in He County—a rare moment of total and righteous sovereignty which prevailed over the spiritual forces of all other demons and deities combined. If humans are subject to the gods and ghosts, the gods and ghosts were subject to the Chairman in his living incarnation.

The time of Mao’s reign, for those living amid a sense of post-Reform flux and moral collapse, marked a transient moment of exception, in which heavenly and earthly realms reached alignment through the figure of the rightful ruler, a time of safety in which the caprice and corruptibility both human and nonhuman were momentarily tamed. It was a momentary halt to conditions of precarity. The death of Mao, in the contemporary cosmology, lifted the ban, so to speak, on the demonic dimension of life. It inaugurated not only a return of myriad spirits, but an intensification of vulnerability. Yet, as discussed in the Introduction, the gentleman must heed the caprice of Heaven’s

Campany cites a case in Pu Songling’s Strange Tales, in which an extorting sacrifices from a human was referred to as both god (shen) and ghost (gui) across the narrative: “This item’s change in nomenclature, from shen to gui, reinforces the sense that this spirit-being has crossed the fine line dividing the ‘normal’ relationship of reciprocal exchange on which local cults are based from the making of excessive demands backed by threats. Other items document similarly greedy, excessive demands by local spirits for particular goods and services… some do so with impunity, others are eventually punished for their violations of the implicit code of reciprocity” (1996, 374-375).
commands, which acts from the very limit of moral and arbitrary rule, at once establishing the moral norm and reserving the right to exceed it. If the Chairman held sovereignty over the realms during his temporary earthly incarnation, absolute sovereignty belonged still to the heavens, which remain beyond the particularities of human history and time, or even the temporary chaos of the cosmos and corruption of particular deities. The unwitting dimension of Mao’s divine role, as well as what is seen as his premature death prior to the full completion of revolution, points to the darker dimension of a divine time that watches over history with a tormenting patience, in which the observant must endure intervals of precarity without resentment—spans that might outlast one’s lifetime regardless of one’s devotion to moral cultivation.

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In evoking the term precarity, I am thinking with notions in mediumship as well as psychoanalysis. This is by no means to collapse the two, not the least since there often remains an ipso-centrism in the language of psychoanalysis that mediumship does not presume (Crapanzano and Garrison 1977). It is rather to clarify strands of thought contributing to my own considerations of how an affective mode is situated in its historical specificity as well as its beyond, not in the opposition of generality and particularity, but an open series of returns that live on through their manifestations, in difference and in resemblance.

For Freud, psychical and affective structures do not lend themselves easily to conscious experience, but provide configurations for affective attachment and movements of desire (see, e.g., Freud 2006). Such structures and experiences are not entirely unique to or exhausted by the single instance, either historical or biographical; yet, it is through the singularity of particular manifestations of experience that affective structures—what one might call precarity, for instance—can be grappled with. In mediumship, as I encountered it in He County, the operations of the cosmos, within and without the human body, are partially opaque to human knowing, yet drive human desire and action. Present persons might be a conduit for the remembrances and acting out (to borrow from Freud) of different entities and temporalities, thus cannot be assumed to be entirely self-present. The deferral of certain origin does not diminish the significance of these transmitted words, experiences, and symptoms in either psychoanalysis or mediumship (Morris 2000). It rather opens up to an ongoing process of inquiry, an ongoing passage of transmissions, in which history, as de Certeau writes (2000), is never sure.

Pecarity at once raises questions of fundamental mutual dependency, and those of a dissolving social contract around the figure of work in late capitalism—in this case, post-Mao market reforms—but work not as a bounded domain, as the Maoist work-unit (danwei 单位) previously structured nearly all dimensions of life. It signals a collapse of the ease and predictability of a mundane everydayness; death stalks life across various scenes (Allison 2013). This is not to suggest a lack of turbulence in the Maoist era, but rather to convey the experiential register of the present I encountered in He County.

[118 See Hollan 2014, for instance, on thinking between ghosts and psychoanalysis.]
which was often posited as a loss of safety and security after Mao. Precarity is also a mode of wandering that dwells on the question-marked historical present, what I discussed earlier as a mode of animated suspension, which both demands attention and inaugurates a pause (Berlant 2011).

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, when referring to the realm of ghosts, those in He County often posit that one “cannot not believe, and cannot believe fully.” It is a language of double suspension—a simultaneous suspension of disbelief and belief, and with it a suspension of both the skeptical and the believing subject. An injunction against both faith and doubt, which concurrently animates ongoing if hesitant engagements with the contemporary world. I consider this sense of suspension through the mediums’ accounts, which suggest both a shift and a plateau.

In this instance, for many mediums in He County, what has reached a moment of threatening yet ongoing precarity is the very cosmology—that is, the very world of human and nonhuman persons and relationships in which mediumship is situated. Cosmology, as many have emphasized, is not a closed system (cf. Horton 1970), but a mode of knowing and being in the world, even amid shades of global capitalism (Chu 2010, Kopenawa 2013, Sahlins 1994, Taussig 1980). For many mediums in He County, a sense of precarity troubles the cosmology—precarity not merely as an object of apprehension, but a situation that simultaneously destabilizes cosmological knowing from within. It is a knowledge of uncertainty that in turn renders the possibility of knowledge uncertain; a doubt that opens up the risk of madness.

For the mediums, the loss of Mao as a figure of guarantee sent a shudder through the fleeting stability of the cosmos, as wayward spirits swirl back into the scene.

Moreover, even the pantheon of gods to which local temples are formally dedicated have grown corrupt, implicated in the broader scene of uncertainty and duplicity. It is a cosmos that registers a sense of moral collapse, while simultaneously evoking gestures-in-waiting, anticipating the possibility of an otherwise, gestures that themselves lack felicitous guarantee.

In order to navigate and inhabit a community saturated by uncertainty, those in He County must take painstaking care to discern between the genuine and the disingenuous, both human and nonhuman, even if absolute clarity is more than one can hope for. From the whirling circulation of suspicion, between officials, deities, and ordinary residents, conditioned by ever-deferred promises of reform, a hollow is

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119 Cosmology, from its Greek root *kosmos*, etymologically refers to the order of the world, marking a passage from the chasm and void of chaos. While lacking a direct counterpart and arguably severed by an unbreachable gulf (Mote 1972), one figure that offers a Chinese double to the notion of the cosmos has been that of *tianxia*, glossed as “all under heaven” (Wang 2012). Strictly speaking, tianxia would not be a Chinese cosmology, but cosmology would be a different mode of addressing tianxia. Yet, in encounter with military threat and missionary and colonial translation, particularly in the 19th Century, it was precisely the challenge posed to thinking from within the onto-epistemological world of tianxia that marked a certain petrification of its symbolic efficacy (Levenson 1969). Thus, here, I turn to the always-already-translated anthropological usage of cosmology, and build it back out in ethnographic terms, in its contemporary precarity.
created—a moral vacuum (Y. Yan 2003), an immoral economy (X. Liu 2000) permeated by demonic presences.

Rather than treating the relationship between religion and the modern state as problems of secularization, resistance, or collusion (Chau 2006; Feuchtwang 2010; Yang 2008), it is more useful here to consider the magic of the state itself, in which the “Liberator himself,” even in the guise of officialese, appear to speak from the other side of the grave or, should we say, from the National Pantheon. It’s like having the world reduced to a little voice perched inside your ear, the voice of God, the voice of your conscience, a flea biting in human words right where your sensate inside meets the big world outside rolling one into the other in a burst of spirit possession as the Liberator speaks inside you becoming you in a confessional tone, baring his soul, releasing it for other destinies. (Taussig 1997, 96)

Amid the precarious cosmology of He County, the Chairman speak through those on the temple square, transmitting spiritual airs from within a shifting pantheon. Between a history of devastation and an era of uncertainty, the Chairman’s specter haunts with his absent presence, he who gave birth to the nation but now gazes from afar. Thinking again alongside Derrida (1994), what remains of socialist visions after announcements of its collapse may return in ghostly form, a ’living-on’ of spirits that must be reckoned with in a time of mourning and undecidability. Not a return to party politics per se, but a return to questions of ethics and responsibility, of the possibility that 德 might still 得天下—that virtue might still be the path through which the world may be gained. Questioning a future-to-come from within a spectral moment that “no longer belongs to time” (ibid, xix), those on the temple square conjure Mao in his ten thousand years, in the eternity granted to him and of which he acts as a reminder and remainder.

A Time of Lost Gods

As the sun moves past the bright of noon, and things wind down on the temple square, I wander here and there, peering at what remains. Pausing near a discussion on the symbolic significance of spinach, I begin chatting with a male medium. I ask for his thoughts on the problem of divine corruption. “These days, humans are gods, and gods are humans,” he said, echoing the words of Wang earlier.

“The gods are not ‘up there’ anymore. You see how the world is in chaos right now? That means the heavens are in chaos also.” Amidst this disarray, he explained, the gods have fallen from the sky, and have lost track of one another. Although some have indeed grown corrupt, virtuous deities also descended, and mingle amid the false spirits.

Spinach in Chinese is bocai, lit. ‘bo vegetable,’ and a passer by suggests to an elderly woman that the spinach on her ritual display signified botianxia—to seize all under heaven—a play on homophones. She seemed pleased with his answer and gifted him an apple.

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120 Spinach in Chinese is bocai, lit. ‘bo vegetable,’ and a passer by suggests to an elderly woman that the spinach on her ritual display signified botianxia—to seize all under heaven—a play on homophones. She seemed pleased with his answer and gifted him an apple.
They borrow human mouths for song and speech, seeking one another through the human bodies they occupy.

When I ask those who frequent the temple square about the nature of their being-there, two answers were common. Most often, they simply say, *shangmian de shi* 上面的事, “matters from above.” That is, heavenly matters. Then, there is another response, *dengren* 等人, “waiting for someone.” This person, this *someone*, is not merely the human person, but a proxy, a double or multiple presence, one deity seeking another. In practice, it means sitting, strolling, and lingering at the temple square, in anticipation of someone one does not yet know. Loitering, listening, gazing, cautious yet receptive of those who might walk up to your ritual spread, and start a dialogue or song about the enigmatic significance of the objects; a mode of hermeneutic address and inquiry, which seeks a mediated recognition through the outward sign, initiating a process of mutual discernment, a reading-together of otherworldly signals. Your possessing spirit registering the utterance of mine, through our borrowed mouths, after they had long lost track of one another. The public presence of this mode of active waiting is itself telling, revealing the status of the cosmos.

“Why do you think there are so many people here right now?” he looked across the square. I followed his gaze. “It is a sign, a sign of incompleteness. If the gods have all found each other, would there be so many people here still? That we see people here day after day is a sign of incompleteness.” We stood in silence, looking out at the square.
Chapter 5. Vertiginous Abbreviation

It had been eighteen years since Xu Liying was called to the divine task of revolution, which marks the beginning of what she calls her illness—a demonic affliction distinct from the psychiatric diagnosis offered at the county People’s Hospital. She was strolling down the street one morning, between her home and the small noodle shop she ran with her husband, when she felt a gust of wind sweep toward her. She lifted her gaze toward the sky to see the Ten Great Marshals descend from the heavens, along with Old Mao himself. They had come a long way, from the Jinggang Mountains—birthplace of the Chinese Communist movement—to summon her for the revolution. Knowing it would be immensely difficult work, she stood reluctant. Yet she could not refuse, as it constituted no less than divine command, ling 令, issued from the heavens.

Now, eighteen years later, she continues to carry out her allotted work. Her task is an urgent one, one that torments her as she opens herself to the co-presence of malevolent spirits, embodying them in order to destroy them, preventing them from causing further harm in the human realm. Such tortured struggles with evil were not always necessary. Back when Chairman Mao reigned, she said, ghosts and other demonic spirits were absent. As with others in He county who engage in spirit mediumship, “the time when Mao reigned” marked a hiatus for spectral stirrings. As we saw in the last chapter, the return of spirits marks a mutual delusion among and between spirits and humans, in which deception and decadence are mirrored between the earthly and heavenly realms. While possession by spirits is diagnosed as psychiatric disorder in the clinic, as in the case of Xu Liying, the language of mediumship provides an inverted diagnosis: it is through today’s precarious cosmology that psychiatric symptoms might be understood.

This chapter considers the contemporary cosmological significance of the psychiatric and the psychiatric rendering of the cosmological in He County. In particular, it reflects on the time I spent with Xu Liying in the psychiatric ward, and her fraught position as spirit medium and psychiatric patient. While not all of those who experience possession end up hospitalized (and if so, usually by their concerned family members), many of those I spoke with in the hospital discussed their illness in terms of possession, or the blurred boundary between possession and madness. As a young woman diagnosed with schizophrenia posed to me, how is one to ‘know’—how is one to apprehend the true

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121 As with others in He County who have experienced possession, the initial encounter carried an airy, pneumatic quality, a drafty sensation of spiritual potency—as lingqi灵气, lit. spiritual airs, experienced at times as yiguqi, a gust or puff of air.

122 The Ten Great Marshals of the People’s Liberation Army were conferred in 1955, including Zhu De, Peng Dehuai, Lin Biao, Liu Bocheng, He Long, Chen Yi, Luo Ronghuan, Xu Xiangqian, Nie Rongzhen, and Ye Jianying. For an account of the junction between spirit possession, psychiatric interpretation, and a different history of violence and Communist politics in Indonesia, see Lemelson (2014).

123 See Schaberg’s (2005) discussion on ling 令 and ming 命, commonly used in conjunction and at times used with nearly identical functions in Western Zhou writings. Whereas tianming was discussed as ‘heavenly command,’ those in He County tend to refer to ling and tianling 天令.
nature of the affliction, if demonic spirits are tricksters that aim to confuse and bring illness, and psychiatric disorders can conjure hallucinatory perceptions of intangible beings? Caught between two agents of duplicity, it is difficult to be sure.

The Cultural Intimacy of the Psychiatric

The hospital and the temple sit across the road from each other. Both face south, an auspicious architectural orientation, as an emperor faces south toward his subjects. The County People’s Hospital, built in 1952, merged a previous military clinic and public hospital, amid the CCP’s mass “Patriotic Hygiene Campaign” of the 1950s.¹²⁴ In these mobilizations around public health, “medical metaphors of the national body infected with superstition became entangled with the actual medicalized bodies of Chinese citizens” (Nedostup 2010, 216).¹²⁵ On the temple square, a large television screen stands tall, facing north toward the main temple gate. It blares a loop of advertisements from dawn to dusk. Mainly real estate developments in the making, but one stood out: it was an advertisement for the psychiatric ward, directly across the street. Indeed, the psychiatrists at times joked that all those who frequented the temple were, in some sense, mad. The laughter staged an unease—the conundrum of discerning the fraught boundary between tradition and psychopathology in the aftermath of anti-superstition campaigns. And when I then pressed them for the precise boundary between madness and culture, they conceded that it was a riddle without clear answer. Moreover, these conversations at times led to tales of one of the psychiatrist’s own visits to a select fortune teller—a more reliable one, they would say, someone knowledgeable, unlike those who lingered at the temple square.

At the time of our meeting, Xu Liying was 65 years old. She was diagnosed, notably, with an updated version of culture-bound syndrome—more telling in its back-translation: Psychiatric Disorder Intimately Related to Culture.¹²⁶ Of over fifty patients staying in the inpatient ward at the time, Xu Liying was the only one granted this descriptor. While possession was far from uncommon as a dimension of other patients’ experiences of illness, they more commonly received diagnoses of schizophrenia, bipolar

¹²⁴ The link between patriotism and hygiene was by no means new to the Chinese Communist Party. In her work on treaty-port Tianjin across the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Rogaski writes: “With the arrival of armed imperialism, some of the most fundamental debates about how China and the Chinese could achieve a modern existence began to coalesce around this word [hygiene, weisheng]. Its meaning shifted away from Chinese cosmology and moved to encompass state power, scientific standards of progress, the cleanliness of bodies, and the fitness of races” (2004, 1).

¹²⁵ Concurrently, the call to health was also a response to Chinese allegations of American germ warfare attacks. The figure of the American was metaphorically equated with the figure of the pest—to rid of germs, garbage, pest, and disease was to rid of the enemy. “To smash one fly to death,” one slogan went, “is to annihilate one American demon” (Xiao 2003, 99). The fear of germ warfare attacks was palpable, and the struggle against “nature’s tiny vectors of imperialism” became a rallying point for the development of public health infrastructure (Rogaski 2002, 389).

¹²⁶ Yu wenhua miqie xiangguan de jingshen zhang’ai 与文化密切相关的精神障碍.
disorder, or acute psychosis. Xu Liying was exceptional, in some sense, on account of her lucidity.

Xu’s husband and son had brought her to the hospital after she began performing rituals in the middle of a busy intersection, for fear that she would be injured. It was not the first time they brought her to a psychiatric hospital, but it had been years since their last efforts to seek psychiatric solution to what they saw as her excessive engagement with ritual. She was often out day and night, at times coming home for a meal, at times skipping meals altogether. Xu Liying knew of their concerns, and voiced her own regrets for not being home, not assisting in the care of her grandchildren. But she never swayed. She remained dedicated to her divine task, even from within the walls of the ward. For Xu, psychiatric disorders are demonological symptoms, symptoms of the times that point precisely at the urgency of her task. During her hospitalization, several fellow mediums came to visit, urging her to return to the temple to continue carrying out her work. To them, the doctors were mistaken in their diagnosis, as she is simply undertaking the spiritual work they shared, day after day. They tried to convince the doctors to release her, to no avail.

The psychiatrists themselves were, to some degree, caught in a parallel conundrum. Beyond what they and her family saw as Xu Liying’s excessive engagement with the spirit world, she showed few other signs warranting diagnostic attention. This ambivalence emerges across her intake form:

**Occupation:** Peasant.

**History of Present Illness:** Patient felt pressure in life eighteen years ago, felt society was unjust, gradually lost mental normalcy… Three days ago illness severity increased, main presentation of chaotic language, speech does not follow path, does not sleep well at night, feels society unjust, society needs reform, the world is going to end etc, often kowtows and pleas for protection at front gate of temple. Recently kowtow on major street intersection considering it efficacious, hard to manage...

**Cognition:** No sensory disability, no delusions, no hallucinations, thought process and association normal, logic normal, language and thought activity normal, content of thought damaged… attention normal… insight lacking.

**Severity:** Personal and family life affected, social functioning damaged.

**Diagnosis:** Psychiatric Disorder Related to Culture.

**Differential Diagnosis:** Although hallucinatory delusional thoughts are present, content adheres closely to real life, not systematic, not absurd, carries superstitious coloring, thus can be distinguished from schizophrenia.

At once delusional and logical, at once damaged and realist in thought, the status of Xu Liying’s engagement with spirits—and with it the status of the contemporary
cosmology—stands at an impasse, between superstition and schizophrenia, coded in the third term of cultural psychiatry.

Her diagnosis is found in the psychiatry textbook (Shen 1982) used for reference at the ward: Chapter Thirty-One: Psychiatric Disorders Intimately Related to Culture. Following a section on the “Asiatic psychosis” (English in original) of koro and qigong deviation psychosis, the final section is dedicated to Subcultural Hysterical Possession State.127 “Superstition and religion are common among the world’s nations and ethnicities,” the section begins. “As Marx indicated, religion is a type of social concept… yet is a type of illusory reflection, originating from the narrow and ignorant concepts of the age of barbarism.” Faith in deities, it went on to explain, constitutes “folk belief,” minjian xinyang (in both English and Chinese in original). A pithy description of Yin Yang, Five Elements, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and “ancient” witchcraft and spirit worship in China across millennia are told in one breath mid-paragraph, bookended by two apologias for the tendency toward superstition: first, the lack of scientific thinking among the ignorant, uneducated ‘lower strata’ of the population, and second, China’s high rural population and rates of rural illiteracy. Then comes an anthropological justification:

According to the famous anthropologist Malinowski in Witchcraft, Science, Religion, and Myth, the function of [witchcraft and witchdoctors] is to “increase belief that overcomes fear, and more valuably to provide people with self-confidence, conquer pessimism with optimism. If it were not for witchcraft, primitive people would not overcome practical difficulties, and would not progress to more advanced culture. Thus witchcraft was very common in primitive society, witchcraft held common authority.

The section continues, describing a Jungian view of therapeutic potential in witchcraft, but quickly warns that possession is often exploited for social harm, and closes with a reminder of the distinction between illegal superstition and legal religion before moving on to case examples. Condensed in Xu Liying’s diagnosis is an extended history of ambivalent translation: Marxian and social evolutionary analyses of religion and world history, functionalist anthropological accounts of witchcraft, Jungian considerations of psychological efficacy, modern Chinese renderings of a backwards, ruralized national body, and legal-political distinctions between religion and superstition inherited from missionary and colonial rubrics.

The notion of culture-bound and culture-related psychiatric disorders arose in the wake of colonial efforts at the turn of the twentieth century, when missionaries and physicians came to document ‘peculiar’ illnesses among their non-European counterparts—amok, latah, koro, pibloktoq (‘Arctic hysteria’), witiko, among others (Tseng 2006).128 Coined by Hong Kong psychiatrist Pow Ming Yap first as “mental diseases

127 See Chen 2003 for an ethnographic account of qigong deviation psychosis.
128 Some such manifestations may have arisen in their particular form from the history of encounter itself. Whereas amok once marked a war cry of a deliberate, honorable form of enemy assassination or political
peculiar to certain cultures” (1951) and eventually “culture-bound syndromes” (1967), this uncanny categorical remainder lingers at the edges of mainstream psychiatry. In the early 1990s, efforts to address the cultural dimension in the transition from the DSM III to the DSM IV ended in a compromised synthesis dissatisfactory to many of its creators: an appendix listing twenty-five Culture Bound Syndromes near the end of the manual, following over seven hundred diagnoses in the main text, and sporadic “off-handed references” within the main text mentioning a potential similarity with a Culture Bound Syndrome, “implying an ontologic status different from that of psychiatrically relevant phenomena” (Hughes 1998, 417; Mezzich et al. 1999). The suggestion by the appointed expert group on culture to include Western Culture Bound Syndromes—among them obesity, anorexia nervosa and bulimia, adolescent turmoil and rebellion, premenstrual tension syndrome (PMS), chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple personality disorder—was disregarded.

Paralleling other faces of colonial encounter (see Stoler 1995), the awkward concept of the culture-bound syndrome resembles at once the remnants of colonial curios and the implicit threat posed to the very core of modern Western epistemology and ontology, now sought, now contained. Work continues on the improved formulation of culture in the DSM V (see Lewis-Fernández et al. 2016), though some have also suggested that given the growing international hegemony of DSM discourse, transnational pharmaceutical industry, and rise of Global Burden of Disease approaches, the very meaning and relevance of debates over cultural classification must be rethought, and efforts should turn instead to practicable strategies of care provision, advocacy, and stigma reduction (Lee 2002). Between Kleinman’s (1977) call for a new cross-cultural psychiatry and the rise of global mental health, old questions continue to haunt new approaches (Hopper 1991).

Here, what interests me is the engagement with the parallel category of psychiatric disorder intimately related to culture by the psychiatrist in He County, in face of a diagnostic conundrum where more common designations of psychotic illness do not seem to suffice. From remnants of the colonial aftermath of culture carried in the psychiatric diagnosis, a space of epistemic murk is carved out for the uncanny figure of the lucidly possessed. For another elaboration of what this ‘illness’ constitutes, I return to Xu Liying.

Havoc from the Underworld

In retrospect, I’m uncertain why Xu Liying took acceptance of my presence in her hospital room. In He County, one is never entirely sure what a spirit medium sees in you, which entities might be guiding your desire, speaking in your name. Sitting cross-legged killing, without association with madness, in the colonial period of the nineteenth century, reports of amok episodes came to be marked by sudden, unpremeditated mass killings undertaken in a dissociated state, followed by subsequent amnesia. By 1893, legislation was passed by the British colonial government to try amok subjects in court (Ibid.).
on her ward bed, Xu assigned punishments rhythmically under her breath, as she flicked sunflower seeds one by one, as a mode of accounting:

“Hack the hands off, hack the feet off, down the eighteen strata of hell.” She was enacting dianming 点名, the naming and annihilation of ghosts and other evil spirits. Ghosts that inflict madness, illness, and death, ghosts the doctors can’t see. One by one, she culls them away—this is both the source of her affliction and her divine task.

“Others don’t understand what I’m doing, mired in this all day, this underworld (yincadifu 阴曹地府).” Although Xu did not agree with the doctors’ approach to her illness, she does consider the question of madness intimately linked to her task.

“These psychiatric disorders, how does wind up with them? When humans die, they have a breath of air, and this breath of air can reincarnate; at times it does not reincarnate into a person, and remains in the underworld. Now, through this breath, they become demons (xian 仙). They stick and attach themselves to human bodies, to quarrel and fight… And it’s not just one or two. If there are only a few, the person won’t make much of a ruckus. If there are many, they wreak havoc, they force you to do things. They control you, as if they were a deity.”

For Xu and other mediums in He County, as well as many others who engage directly or indirectly in the ritual economy of propitiations, the actions of human beings are not fully—if at all—within the jurisdiction of a self-conscious, self-transparent human subject. While humans are born with the breath of their soul—hun 魂, or lingqi 灵气 (lit. spirit-breath/air)—the body is a vessel that may be inhabited by multiple spirit-entities, thus driven to speak, think, and act by voices and desires beyond the boundary of the skin. As the mediums often say, deities borrow your body (jie ni shenti 借你身体) to carry out deeds, and borrow your mouth to speak (jie ni zui shuohua 借你嘴说话). Whether a deity makes its presence and desire known to the human whose body it occupies is under its own discretion. Thus, in the cosmological thinking of spirit mediumship, a fundamental precarity and divisibility undergirds the very constitution of the person (see Corin 1998, Crapanzano and Garrison 1977). The possessed person is not in command of themselves.

“The heaven’s will (tianyi 天意) arranges for you, tell you to go somewhere, at which temple to cultivate. They need you to go to this—or that place to do this—or that work… The heavens above and the earth below, they arrange for you, you’re no longer in command, (budangjia 不当家, lit., not heading the household). And if you are going to heal others, you’d better go where they want you to. We do not know in our world, we only walk here and there, passing like a film. The path in this world, full of curves, a harsh road, high as a tall mountain, sunken like the sea, yet we must pass through.”

Yet, the loss of command over one’s actions and desires grows hazardous with the presence of ghosts and other malevolent spirits. According to Xu, such demonic entities commit murder and arson, cause traffic accidents, dupe and steal, and bring a wide array

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129 Paralleling the other mediums’ usage of xian 仙 in He County (see chapter two), Xu emphasizes their ghost-like dimension, and even more intensely than others, their evil (w 恶) and their lack of cultivation, contrary to the positive valence of xian as an immortal or transcendent; thus I translate xian as demon or demonic entity in this chapter.
of illnesses—psychiatric disorders, cancers, leg pain, back pain, ankle pain, muscle and bone pain, arm pain, shoulder infections, eye problems, nose problems, bleeding of the ears.

I ask her why the ghosts made her ill in particular.

“You think these people all around us [at the psychiatric ward] are not the same? They are! To be frank, if they weren’t, who would come here?” For Xu, other patients in the ward were similarly afflicted, but simply remained unaware of their true condition due to the invisibility of spectral presence—demonic entities become visible to human beings at their own discretion, unless they have been ‘processed’ (chuli 处理). Those who have not yet been processed with nestle upon one’s body, impervious to vision. Suffering at the hands of such entities, one must avoid responding in anger—the escalation of anger only begets the escalation of demonic invasion. Among many mediums I met in He County, anger was considered a major risk and portal for both the intrusion of spirits and madness. The afflicted can only attempt to rid of them gradually, Xu said; there is no simple way.

“I name them, and the moment one is named, one is slayed (kandiao 砍掉). For instance, this one is surnamed Li, he committed murder, the sun orders for him to be decapitated, to be thrown into prison, to be melted by fire, to never reincarnate again. This is how they are rid of… If you don’t name them, you cannot rid of them.” Thus, to complete her own task and to rid herself of her own illness, she must remain patient—‘day by day, little by little,” naming ghosts and corrupt spirits one by one, from account books (zhangben 账本) kept by the sun deity, documenting the crimes each have committed. Through the ledgers as well as the assistance of the very few deities she trusts, particularly the sun, the moon, and the Eternal Mother, she names the demonic spirits one by one, ridding of them by naming them. At times she says she is sending them into the next round of reincarnation, at times they are prevented altogether from future reincarnation, never to affect the human realm or underworld again.

Xu’s account of the underworld resonates with visions of hell in China depicted particularly since the ninth or tenth century. Often enumerated at eight, ten, eighteen (as in Xu’s description), thirty, or sixty-four, Chinese Buddhist hells combined Indian concepts of karma and Chinese principles of bureaucracy. Each person would receive retribution for their deeds, and bureaucrats of the underworld collaborated with earthly and heavenly offices, keeping records of each person’s deeds, “forwarding the log-books at death to the appropriate court of hell, where the results were tabulated and a just reward meted out” (Teiser 1988, 460).

A Million Madmen Storm the Palace

For Xu, akin to other mediums I met, the abundance of demonic entities today, and the madness they induce, is symptomatic of a particular conjunction of history, politics, and cosmology. Usurping human bodies, demonic spirits attempt to seize power and take reign.

“Why psychiatric disorders? For instance, you or I become mentally ill, we all become mentally ill, what’s the aim? Before Old Mao died, he said: ‘In the future, a
million madmen will storm the palace, sweep out all cow ghosts and idiotic gods!” The phrase would return throughout our conversations, and brought together two Maoist phrases. The first, a line from Mao’s 1949 poem “The People’s Liberation Army Captures Nanjing,” a triumphant account of the occupation of the Presidential Palace, signaling the Communist Party victory in China. The second, the title of the official June 1, 1966 editorial in the People’s Daily, which would publicly inaugurate the Cultural Revolution, and become a slogan for denouncing the Four Olds—old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits.

Yet, the phrasings each took a new turn in Xu Liying’s account. Whereas the original line from the poem read, “a million-strong mighty army crossed the Great River,” Xu Liying offered a symmetrical, nearly rhyming iteration, “a million madmen storm the palace.” And whereas the original slogan read, “sweep out all cow ghosts and snake gods,” Xu Liying displaces she 蛇 with sha 傻—“snake” with “idiotic.” Moreover, while the original 1949 poem referred to the then-recent military victory, thus tends to be translated in the past tense in English, the grammatical flexibility of tense in the Chinese version allows for its poetic transformation from history into prophecy.

The “million madmen storming the palace,” for Xu Liying, refers to the contemporary moment, in which deluded and sinister spirits—including corrupted gods—have come swirling back upon Mao’s death. This precarious cosmology, for Xu and other mediums in He County, is the origin of madness today.

“When Mao died, once Deng Xiaoping took office (shangtai 上台, lit. took stage) how did he put it? Regardless of whether it’s a black cat, whether it’s a green cat, as long as it catches mice, it counts as a good cat. Once this phrase was uttered—whoosh!—the monstrous (guai 怪) appeared in the world.” Giving a slight twist to Deng’s maxim on black and white cats—oft-cited in everyday laments in He County on the post-Reform era—Xu paints a scene of chaos, in which humans are possessed by duplicitous spirits masquerading as deities.

“This god, that goddess, all from a fake family… Swindling people, extorting people, duping people, deluding people. And there are those clever ones, making you hazy and confused.”

Fraud, delusion, and madness intertwine with the motif of corruption:

“The Southern Heavens, the Northern Heavens, the Middle Heavens, they have all been corrupted! All idiotic gods, not one upright righteous god. If they are a righteous god (zheng’er 元), they would not ask for money from people, would not ask for pigs, sheep, mule, horses, would not ask for gold, ingots, and bread.”

Speaking from within Henan, which faces the characterological indictment of charlatanism (see Introduction), Xu gestures outward instead to a cosmic geography

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130 Baiwan xiongshi guodajiang 百万雄师过大江; Baiwan fengzi naojinduan 百万疯子闹金殿.
131 Hengsao yichie niugui sheshen 横扫一切牛鬼蛇神.
132 The phrase was first uttered prior to the Reform era, in 1962, in support of an experimental policy contracting land to individual peasant households, which would later be condemned by Mao (Naughton 1993).
133 Zheng’erhajing de shen 正儿八经的神.
saturated with greed. Her rendering points to two themes that fill post-Reform imaginaries of China at large: fakery and corruption. Whereas the fake often evokes questions of the copy and mimesis in relation to originality, truth, and identity, corruption suggests a debasement of reciprocity, a tainting of the threads of social exchange. The two, of course, are intimately implicated. In Yu Hua’s *China in Ten Words*, Copycat (shanzai 山寨) and Bamboozle (huyou 忽悠) stand alongside Revolution and the People, sketching tragicomic scenes of the people swindling the state, the state swindling the people, and imitative proliferations between the market and the state. En masse divorce among teachers to avoid a professional exam, in order to activate a waiver for teachers who are single parents—“the teachers soon got in the habit of greeting each other in a new way: ‘Divorced yet?’ ” (Yu 2012, 411). The increasing reliance on profit from “marketable operations” by local government, resulting in auctioned-off sidewalks and non-sequential street numbers. Yu’s own encounter with a self-proclaimed copycat interviewer, who published an interview with Yu without ever having met him.

In national discourse, paralleling Xu’s cosmological account of the death of Mao and the rise of Deng, concerns with corruption heightened with the dawn of the Reform era, intensifying across the 1980s and 1990s, and remained central to national political discourse of Xi Jinping’s administration during my time in He County in 2012-2013 (see He 2000). Writing of her experiences of the Tiananmen protests of 1989, Yan Sun (2004) tellingly notes that while foreign media tended to characterize Tiananmen as a prodemocracy movement, the rallying point for those in China was in fact that of corruption. This is not to say that democracy was not evoked as a political vision, but rather that this seemingly minute pivot in translational emphasis gestures toward a slippage, a site of misrecognition that opens up more profound divergences in assumption about personhood and political subjectivity. More than a peripheral issue, the problem of the copy and of corruption raises central questions about encounters with modern notions of self and governance.

Here, spirit mediums such as Xu find mimicry and corruption at the heart of a cosmology in peril, rather than, for instance, the repression of freedom so common in foreign journalistic and academic discourses on religion in China, pointing to an analytic shift that could elucidate dimensions of contemporary religious experience. This also prompts a repositioning of the problem as the other end of potentially distinct conceptual poles—the copy may or may not be the converse of originality; authority may or may not be the converse of liberty. More so than suppression and unfreedom, the risks posited in contemporary mediumship in He County revolve around questions of falsity and tainted reciprocity, of a flow of gifts, favors, and banquets (Yang 1994) gone awry. As discussed in the last chapter, with the end of the Chairman’s life and sovereign reign, not only have previously disappeared demonic spirits reemerged, but former figures of divine protection—Fuxi, the Goddess of Mercy, and other deities—have returned as corrupted versions of their former selves, rendering dangerous former relations of propitiation.
Travails of the Duplicate

In *Van Gogh on Demand*, on the Dafen ‘painting village’ of Shenzhen, where well-known works of art are reproduced in mass quantities, Wong suggests that the status of the copy eludes the opposing critiques of Chinese and Western elites, as well as standard discussions of aura and originality. By hand-copying versions of “Western art”—Van Gogh, Picasso, Warhol—the painters displace imaginations of industrial mechanical production with their peculiarly manual reproduction, along with their uncanny displacement of the signature: “Step 18: Sign ‘Vincent.’” “Savvy to the impotence of historical authority in their trade,” Dafen painters destabilize the centrality of auto-genesis and individuality in both the Western tradition of painting and many contemporary foreign projects that purportedly offer a critical exposition of Dafen (2013, 21). Starting their custom-order readymades with the notion of *gao* 稿, “draft”—or in this case, the “image source” of a photograph, printout, or electronic image file—Dafen painters and their own “ghost painters” (wives, assistants) “seem to skewer some of the most cherished notions of the Western authorial tradition, and to subject them to scrutiny in uncanny fashion” (Ibid., 233). Thrown into a regime of value that once rested on identity and originality, these hand-copied painters reanimate problems of mediation and duplication in both art and the commodity form, creating an uncanny auratic multiplicity that points to the fundamental reproducibility of the work of art, newly illuminating Walter Benjamin’s essay.

Raising a related question on originality, reproducibility, and mediation in the context of spirit mediumship in northern Thailand, Morris writes against standard discourses on the “revival of ritual,” and turns instead to the role of photographic reproduction in mediumship’s “movement into the domain of representation, a movement that nonetheless generates the conditions of possibility for a restoration of magical (which is to say antirepresentational) power,” in a “strangely doubled productivity of photographic and ethnofolkloric discourse” (2000, 9). Rather than a claim to the “absoluteness of the temporal threshold” with relation to the modern, Morris posits a multiplicity prior to a more common periodization of modern rupture, and aims to “tell the story of modernization from so many different locations but with reference to the same false origin,” alongside its many gestures of return, including the impossible effort of translation in ethnography (Ibid., 10).

Similarly, questions of duplication in Xu and other mediums’ accounts simultaneously conjure contemporary tropes of the fake and the copy in China, modern anti-superstition literature promoting the falsity of gods and ghosts, as well as older concerns over the non-congruence of image and identity among shape-shifting spirit entities. Part of both the conundrum and the efficacious power surrounding the mediumship is its very dealings with transferability and substitutability. If the human body and mind are fundamentally medium—to other forces and entities, the very intimate sites of voice and action are necessarily, to some capacity, other to the self, other to the markings of self-identity. To borrow from Wong, if the original “source image” is itself considered a draft among drafts—an origin that carries the same status as its further copies—the problem of duplication shifts its coordinates. The parallelism between origin
and (re)production resonates with Descola’s discussion of what he terms an analogical ontology (which he uses various strands of Chinese thought to elucidate), in which sets of analogies are drawn into “chains of transitive causality,” rather than assuming a “radical difference between the ontological status of the creator and that of whatever he produces” (2013, 218, 323).

I draw on these divergent texts in effort to raise the question: How might one approach the problem of “fake deities” today, when the language of mediumship—of mediation and substitution, of likeness and borrowing—is deployed in a time that Wong calls “after the copy”? How does mediumship mobilize divergent “drafts” of discourses on fraud and counterfeit, condemnations of mediumship as quackery, and spiritual notions of deceptive appearance to address the contemporary?

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The rise of the notion of superstition in China came as an effect of missionary and colonial translation and categorization, by way of what Lydia Liu termed a “return graphic loan”—words borrowed into other contexts that re-entered the modern Chinese lexicon, particularly via Meiji Japan. Discussing the example of wenhua 文化 (‘culture’), Liu writes:

The massive influx of semantic translations and ‘return graphic loans’ interrupt the classical etymons in ways that profoundly change their meanings and status. Because of this historical interruption, one can no longer bypass the Japanese bunka to explicate the meaning of wenhua as if the existence of a classical Chinese term written with the same characters would automatically account for the meaning of its modern counterpart. (1995, 34)

Whereas wenhua in classical Chinese pointed to a sense of refinement and cultivation in contrast to military prowess (wú 武), the modern usage of wenhua incorporated the Japanese equivalence drawn with a blend of English ‘culture,’ French culture, and German die Kultur, taking on a new set of connotations. In a parallel sense, the classical Chinese term mixin was taken up in Meiji Japan as a translational equivalent to the European usage of ‘superstition,’ and brought back into modern Chinese usage during intensified modernizing and state-building efforts across Republican and Nationalist periods, and remained in use across Maoist and Reform eras.

In Superstitious Regimes, Nedostup suggests that the modern Chinese bifurcation of ‘religion’ (zōngjiao 宗教) and ‘superstition’ (mixin 迷信) shifted the terms of prior debate. In its imperial-era usage, zheng and xie were mapped onto orthodoxy (zhengjiao

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134 For Wong, the manual adaptation of mechanical reproduction points to a technological determinism underlying Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” reinserting manual labor and the work of painting itself back into contemporary scene of global art circulation and mediated authorship. This is the situation Wong calls “after the copy,” in which “the ready-made is actually made-to-order, and aura is bespoke through the circulation of dehistoricized visual sources” (2013, 22).
and heterodoxy (xiejiao 邪教), respectively. Zheng rested on a sense of Confucian righteousness and moral emperorship, whereas xie marked that which strayed into the realm of improper cults or improper sacrifices. While strands of Buddhism and Daoism were at times accused of heterodoxy by the imperial state, the language of zheng and xie was by no means restricted to the official realm, but was also employed as a spiritual-religious concept beyond the imperial state, by the very groups condemned as heterodoxy. As we will see below, Buddhist messianic traditions also used zheng in reference to the True Doctrine practiced in accordance with the principles of the Buddha, while xie described the evil that would ravage the world in cosmic crisis (Zürcher 1982).

In contrast to the threat to righteousness and moral emperorship implied by the evil of xie, the accusation of superstition pointed rather to a post-Enlightenment ideal of rationality. Following the end of the dynastic system, “superstition” replaced “heterodoxy” as the weighty pejorative… mixin and zongjiao did not exist in the same kind of eternal combat as zheng and xie—perhaps because secularism stood by to undermine them both, but more inherently because the perfectibility of the modern self-conscious subject demanded that he be able to overcome superstition once and for all.” (Nedostup 2010, 8-9).

Influenced by evolutionary theories of religion that begin with ‘primitive’ religions and end in Christianity, Christian evangelists, the Nationalist government, and some reform Buddhists produced texts in the 1920s in the name of “eradicating superstition” (pochu mixin 破除迷信). Such superstition eradication texts continued to be published in the Maoist era, and new versions have been published well into the Reform era. Here, an excerpt from a 1964 edition of Questions and Answers about Eradicating Superstition, from a chapter entitled, “What is the situation with ‘possession by ghosts and gods’?”

So-called ‘possession by ghosts and gods,’ according to the name, is the attachment of ghosts and gods to the body of a living person. As was discussed above, there are no ghosts and gods in the world, thus, it is clear at first sight that so-called ‘possession by ghosts and spirits’ are nonsensical/ghostly words (guihua 鬼话) for duping people.

But some witches (wupo 巫婆) in fact play the trick of ‘possession by gods and ghosts’ to swindle for money and belongings. When others arrive to inquire about the circumstances of illness, to request spirit-cures, they (feminine) feign an appearance of sincerity, lighting incense, pretending/faking (jiazhuang 假装) that they themselves are possessed by ‘so-and-so god’ (moumou xianye 某某仙爷), ‘so-and-so goddess’ (moumou xiangu 某某仙姑), yawning continuously, stretching, rolling their eyes back, squeezing their fists tight, uttering phrases, saying that something is wrong with the spirit. After this charade, they begin to speak nonsense (huyan luanyu 胡言乱语)... they rely on ‘gods and ghosts’ to scam for money...

135 ‘鬼神附体’是什么一回事?
But in everyday life, there are those very few people who suddenly seem to have the problem of ‘possession by ghosts and gods.’ Their mind/consciousness (shenzhi 神志) is originally clear, and abruptly lose mental normalcy (jingshen shiqu changtai 精神失去常态), their voice while speaking and their movements almost seem like they are those of relatives who died; upon awakening, they themselves do not know what has just occurred. What is the reason for this?

We know that the brain (danao 大脑) can also get ill, the severe version is psychiatric disorder (jingshenbing 精神病), (when one is) mad (fengfengdiandian 疯疯癫癫) all day; the mild version is the condition of losing one’s consciousness (shenzhi hunmi 神志昏迷) short-term. These two types of circumstances are relatively common, and are not to be considered strange/unusual. But there is a type of patient, who regularly yearns for relatives that have passed away, and cannot seem to forget their tone of voice and their demeanor. Once their brain function becomes disordered, and they recall these impressions particularly vividly, that person might display the relative’s comportment. This is a particular expression of a nervous disorder (shenjing shichang 神经失常), absolutely not some ‘possession by ghosts and gods.’ (60–64, translation mine)

In the anti-superstition literature, the language of fakery and charlatanism become central in the discussion of spirit mediumship, along with the link between possession and psychiatric disorders. Lacking a home in post-Enlightenment ontology and epistemology, perception of and possession by non-empirical entities was relegated to the domain of psychopathology, in which madness, to some degree, lost its status in the quest for divine truth (Foucault 2006). Yet, contemporary mediumship, I suggest, doubles the language inherited from both anti-superstition campaigns and post-Reform articulations of the copy and the fraud (see Pang 2008), summoning them to address problems of divine discernment. Mediums in He County accuse deities and fellow mediums of falsity, yet they do so through a cosmological rendering that in turn diagnoses the contemporary.

Mediumship today thus incorporates Republican and Maoist vocabularies of governance, which themselves inherit missionary and colonial efforts to categorize Chinese religion. Nation-building efforts following the collapse of the dynastic system involved the imitation of Japanese and western constitutions founded on Christian conceptualizations of religion—and superstition as religion’s other. Officials and scholars worked to impose new distinctions between ‘genuine’ Daoism from ‘superstition’ (including mediumship and possession), the results of which would determine, for instance, whether a temple was preserved or destroyed (Goossaert 2005). Customs surveys distributed to county-level governments in the first half of the twentieth century dispersed the language of religion and superstition, as well as that of “belief” (Nedostup 2016).

The notion of belief was itself a fraught one prior to its Chinese translation. In contrast to medieval Christian usages signaling a sense of love, pleasure, and loyalty that brought one closer to the presence of truth, since the nineteenth century, the notion of belief in Western usages has come to stand in opposition to that of knowledge, coming to index opinion and error in modern and contemporary usages (Good 1993). The travels of
such concepts become central in the implementation of international projects of health and development, where ‘belief’ comes to represent a crucial site for the production of consequential effects. In the case of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, communities on the receiving end of ‘development’ must navigate meticulously between forms of truth and lie implicitly desired by the Chinese state and foreign researchers and aid workers, in the pursuit of moral consequences on their own terms. The tenets of Tibetan Buddhism and the world of spirits thus enter a triangulation of mutually displacing truths, between the necessity of politically correct speech and the search for scientific numbers (Adams 2005). Belief and falsity have thus been a terrain of tactical struggle in the encounter between the spirit world and those of modern institutions of government and health.

Here, I return to the question of what is posed as the converse of the fake in He County. In both Xu and other mediums’ accounts, the opposite of the fake deity is not merely the ‘true/real’ (zhèn 真)—the usual linguistic counterpart to the ‘fake’ (jià 假)—or the ‘original’ (yuán 原). Rather, it is the ‘upright’ (zhèng 正), as in the distinction discussed above between zhèng and xìe, between righteousness and moral emperorship or orthodoxy, and cosmic evil or heterodoxy. Mediums such as Xu Liying thus offer a pairing of the ‘fake’ and the ‘upright’—opposing modern and late capitalist notions of the fake not simply with reality, but with moral rule. The ‘fake’ deity includes not only those spirits who disguise themselves as a deity, thus a question of false identity, but also a deity that has lost moral standing. Fake deities are characterized by greed, exploitation, and the desire for harm—in other words, the fake brings us back to the theme of corruption—of not only those who falsify, but those who abuse their identities in the struggle for gain and power.

Corruption, Cultivation

After her initial encounter with the call to revolution, and as Xu Liying continued in her illness, she began to grasp the complications of a cosmos in chaos, a chaos too complicated for full explication, she said.

“Except for Old Mao who did indeed cultivate to fruition toward goodness (shànshìshàngguǒ 善始善果), cultivate to the point of righteousness (xiūchéng zhèngguǒ 修成正果), the rest of the Ten Great Marshals did not cultivate, and have all become corrupt. Premier Zhou, Zhu De, Jia Long, none of them cultivated to the point of fruition, and all became corrupt.”

The cosmic temporality of corruption is complex, less discretely punctuated than the appearance of demonic spirits upon the death of Mao and the rise of Deng.

“Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing—five dynasties; [yet] they are seven. Ordinary people only know five dynasties. Five periods of chaos (hūndùn), seven dynasties. The old white turtle took hold of the five dynasties. The son of the white turtle family is Zhou guōshì 国师, Zhou Enlai, he took reign for two dynasties, with the girl. The sixth is the ancient who split heaven and earth, is sister and brother. The old white turtle is their mother... The imperial palace is not the imperial palace, it’s a chaotic dynasty.”
The old white turtle Xu speaks of is the mythological origin of the eight trigram divinatory system employed in the Book of Changes, the shapes of which were revealed by the heavens to Fuxi on the back of the white turtle around the time of the rebirth of humankind (see discussion of the Fuxi mythology in Chapter 4). Locally, the turtle is at times said to still dwell in the lake adjacent to Fuxi’s temple. Xu Liying’s lament thus brings together the Maoist time of Zhou Enlai, the primordial time of the white turtle, and the rolling chaos of one dynasty after the other, propelled by power struggles in the underworld. Weaving historical and mythological registers, Xu conveys a tangled tale of power and betrayal, of coups amid swarms of demons.

“Old Mao should not have died. In the underworld they found someone to infect him with illness. [Zhou Enlai] had many connections in the underworld. He wanted to kill everyone else, kill Old Mao, leaving only himself. Can this be? To tell others to stray toward corruption, toward murder and arson, can the Communist Party allow for this?”

Her task, then, is to continue Mao’s revolution, to clear the current moment of cosmic decay by returning to an ethics of which he was exemplary.

“What I do is not domination! What I do is not Chiang Kai-Shek’s work, I do Old Mao’s work! I follow Old Mao. Old Mao doesn’t swindle, doesn’t cheat! Not greedy or corrupt, not rotten! He eats based on conscience and labor, eating and living collectively, right? I have been meditating in this direction for eighteen years now, and I never scrounge off of other people’s food. I eat what I carry with me.”

Not eating others’ food, buchi renjiafan 不吃人家饭, is a common phrase in He County, at times explained as a carryover from a moral economy of scarcity (see Thompson 1971). Given the local history and memories of mass starvation, both pre-Liberation (before 1949) and during the Great Leap famine of 1958-1959, to consume one’s rightful share constituted the foundation of everyday morality. In contrast, the wealthy and powerful today are perceived as those who consume the fruits of others’ labor, the grain they did not sow. For mediums such as Xu, to “walk Mao’s path” signals a striving toward an ethics now out of reach due to contemporary greed and corruption, in a crisis of morality and sovereignty of cosmic proportions.

“Whatever task he [Mao] gives me, I will finish it for him. Gloriously complete my duty, do good for the people my whole life. Those who do evil will forever be evil. Those who do good, let us show them... Old Mao acts and speaks honestly, for the sake of the people in all regards. Who are the officials today acting for the sake of? All for themselves. Eat, drink, get the money into their own hands, sitting there enjoying themselves. You as a commoner (laobaixing), you don’t have a path of wealth, he has a path of wealth, then what? Let me say this, I am not philosophizing, I’ve been mad for eighteen years, I say this all day—we people must maintain conscience (liangxin 良心), we cannot scam people and dupe people.”

Echoing accounts from the temple square, Xu speaks of Maoist anti-superstition campaigns as an act of divine intervention.

“When Mao was to be sent down to earth from the heavens (xiafan 下凡), he did not want to. But they insisted, saying he must descend. Once Old Mao took office, he banned religious faith (xinnian 信念). After he reincarnated as human (zhuarnen 转人), he bombarded all the temples, no? Divine command was given from above, telling him to
bombard them all, keep none of them. They were filled with demonic spirits (xian)! Yeee! You don’t know who is in there, is that the Goddess of Mercy or not the Goddess of Mercy? You cannot see them, you cannot touch them, and you wind up in the hospital.”

I ask Xu Liying about the other mediums at the temple square, thinking that perhaps she considers them to share in her task of transforming the present moment. Yet, she remains dubious of the others. With the Chairman gone, the very act of mediumship cannot be trusted.

“They sit there, even on a cold snowy day, they cannot help but sit there. They are not in control… The humans, running north and south with their satchels, crossing every which way. [But] it’s all demons (jing xian 净仙)! Not one is an upright god… No one can say for certain when it comes to these matters… If they’re real, they don’t swindle others, don’t take things from others, don’t eat from others, don’t drink from others, and can even help when one is suffering. This is called accumulating morality and enacting good deeds. Other [spirits] pressure you, lead you to death, that’s different… Who is in command? No one’s in command! Heaven guides you, earth guides you. This time around, it’s demons. No one is in command!”

End Time

Xu Liying tells me what must be done under such circumstances of moral and divine corruption. The task at hand, she says, is to assist in the “dynastic revolution,” chaoge 朝革, combining the imperial language of dynasties with the modern use of revolution. In line with imperial Chinese political thought, each dynasty is seen as likely to be efficacious and virtuous at its initiation, but gradually disintegrates into decadence. And the ‘dynasty’ of which the contemporary moment is part has reached an unbearable point of decay, in the mirroring of earthly and heavenly corruption. According to Xu Liying, given the severity of moral decay today—from politicians to temple-goers to spirits—the human race is headed toward an end time, toward a world aflame (huoshao shijie 火烧世界). In our conversations, one of the few figures Xu considers uncorrupted, aside from the sun, the moon, and Mao, is the Eternal Mother. And while she does not elaborate on this, eschatological anticipation has been central to the spiritual texts dedicated to the Eternal Mother. While they vary in detail across renderings, the central thread remains: Having lost her human children to worldly wickedness, the Eternal Mother sends a series of Buddhas to earth to lead her children back home. The arrival of each Buddha would coincide with a great kalpa era of tens of thousands of years. Each era would see a gradual degeneration and exacerbation of human wickedness, ending in a

\[136\] Xian is often translated as immortals, and does not usually imply evil. Yet, in the accounts of Xu and many other mediums in He County, xian signals a class of powerful ghosts that are wont to do harm. Thus, here I use ‘demon’ rather than immortals to convey this sense of evil. In Chau’s work in Shaanxi, mediums possessed by “proper gods” zhengshishen are referred to as wushen, and those possessed by immortals daxian are referred to as shenguan (2006: 54-55). But there, it does not seem that the dimensions of corruption and fakery are associated with the notion of xian.
cosmic destruction of the world, following which a new period would begin (Naquin 1976).

For Xu Liying, such visions of the coming end must be understood in light of foreign imperialism and communist revolution. Upon arrival, those living at the edges of the world will be burned, annihilated, trimmed like the outer branches of a large tree. This periphery she speaks of is associated with waiguo 外国, foreign nations—America and Japan in particular, due to their participation in invasion. China, in turn, stands at the center of the universe, the root of the tree, thus remains last to be demolished. Henan province, furthermore, heart of the central plains region, constitutes the center of China. He county, then, in the middle of Henan, is the very center of the center—the guodi 锅底, the pot-bottom. As the rice gets flung out of the edges of the pot, the bottom of the pot is where the rice sticks and remains.

Given this, He county will be the place from which the last humans will be chosen, and even within the county, only the few virtuous ones will be kept. Through this apocalyptic geography, Henan province, which in the national discourse is considered peripheral and left behind due precisely to its land-locked position, is re-inaugurated as a powerful center around which all else will collapse and burn, and figures of political and military domination—the US and Japan in this case—are rendered the ultimate spiritual-ethical-political periphery. Only then, says Xu, will the revolution reach its aim—that of true socialism.137

Like others at the hospital (Chapter 3), Xu is caught between the withdraw of the Maoist promise—a retracted miracle, and promises of a New Countryside that seem at once to betray the revolutionary ethos and repudiate the political-symbolic significance of those inhabiting ‘small places’ such as He County. Her tedious task gestures toward the impossible return to a cosmocratic mythologic of the People, in a time of lost gods, when wealth and bourgeois urban cosmopolitanism constitute measures for value, and the spectralized rural cannot but signify a perpetual not-yet. Between the lost sovereign and the ghosts, mediums linger at the temple square, where Xu Liying returned to continue her rituals after her discharge from the hospital. They await the day when all true gods will rediscover one another and reunite, after the measured discernment and annihilation of the fake and corrupt. Only then will the present period of demonic chaos reach an end, and the moral, political, and cosmological will realign once again. Upon this dynastic resynchronization and apocalyptic recentering, the cosmic-revolutionary status of the virtuous commoner and peasant shall be restored, as founders of a new, virtuous era, an eternal era of true socialism. As Xu describes it, true socialism is a world of equality, in which there will be no corruption, no cheating, no stealing.

“If today, I have a hundred mo, a hundred buns, and there are a hundred people, each of us get one bun. Even if there’s only one piece each, it still must be distributed. What’s equality? That’s equality. This bowl of water, wherever you go, you can prop it up for him to drink, isn’t that a good thing?”

Yet, for all the simplicity and clarity conveyed by this utopian image of the next world, the path is long, arduous, and without clear end. Xu Liying has been toiling in her

137 Zhenzheng de shehui zhuyi, 真正的社会主义.
revolutionary task for eighteen years, and there is no knowing how many longer. There is a radical disjuncture between the daily work of revolution, and the eventual arrival of its apocalyptic achievement, and Xu carries on her rituals daily, knowing she might not be around to see the end.

Vertiginous Abbreviation

Perhaps this is also what Derrida (1994) meant, in *Specters of Marx*, by the radical heterogeneity of the future, in his proposal of the “messianic without messianism,” in which ethics after disappointments and horrors toward socialist states resides precisely in a non-expectant, non-presumptuous, future-facing mode of anticipation, an anticipation open to a profound alterity; a sense of the ever-arriving marking the impossibility of ever arriving. Yet, if Derrida’s is an effort to augment Benjamin’s (1940/2005) “weak messianism,” in which the angel of history turns its back to the future, with a gaze toward the *demands* of the catastrophic, ruinous past, the spectral force of history, of foreclosed and deferred promises, cannot be easily sidestepped in He County. As Ownby (1999) writes, millenarian imaginations across Chinese history constitute often populist responses from within, often to times of war, famine, invasion, and calamity. From early medieval millenarianism (approx. 200-600 CE) accompanying the collapse of the Han Dynasty to the so-called White Lotus folk Buddhist groups from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) onward, from the Christian-inspired Taiping Rebellion to the eschatological oral traditions of the British-persecuted Triads.

Without trying to summarize this heterogeneous span of Chinese millenarianism, and without trying to collapse these with the Jewish mystical tradition inherited and renewed by Benjamin and others, my effort here is rather preliminary. I want to consider how ethical imaginations of end time, on the one hand by spirit mediums who draw from diverse strands of Chinese eschatological thinking, and on the other hand by European critical philosophers, both are inflected by struggles with the dilemmas posed by the gradual shattering of twentieth century dreamworlds. Particularly in these cases, the lingering hope and trepidation toward the ever-deferred promises of the figure of communism after Fukuyama’s so-called “end of history,” interlacing with anticipatory genres of spiritual-religious traditions, together raising questions about the possibility of rethinking culture, politics, and ethics today.

As Rebecca Karl (forthcoming) suggests, early twentieth century notions of semicolonialism, which Mao drew heavily upon in his elaborations of Chinese communism, arose in a moment of forced comparison, of forced translation, amid experiences of temporal disjuncture in the everyday, where—in the words of turn-of-the-century reformer Liang Qichao—China, along with other nations around the world, were being “eaten from the inside” by colonial intrusion, insinuating themselves far deeper than the more obvious forms of military action. The rise of a future-driven mass politics came to represent the temporality of salvation in a new teleological world-historical, when culture seemed to have no place but an anachronistic nostalgics toward a politically unviable tradition. Now, a century after Liang’s ominous observations, decades after French and other European Maoists uneasily dropped this self-reference after the tremors
of the Cultural Revolution, spectres of Mao return to Xu Liying and other mediums, awaiting the apocalyptic return of a revolution incomplete.

Here, I’m taken to Agamben’s (2002) indirect response to Derrida’s formulation of the messianic as a forward-looking embrace of infinite deferral, which Agamben sees precisely as a source of the danger and catastrophic failures of historical revolutions. Agamben suggests in contrast that messianic time doesn’t lie fully exterior to chronological time. Rather, it constitutes a peculiar portion of chronological time, the time it takes to register the always-already here, yet ever-still not-yet temporality of the apocalyptic, the time it takes for time to come to an end, for time to accomplish itself. “Or, more exactly,” he writes, “the time we need in order to accomplish, to bring to an end our representation of time” (p.5, emphasis added). A “contraction” of chronological time which “transforms it entirely,” a “vertiginous abbreviation” imploding the now into the eternal. But it is also a time in which prophecy must remain silent: “there is no one to ask: ‘how long’” (p.2).

I think, then, about the temple square, about those waiting, with no clear answer to the ‘how long.’ I think about Xu Liying, who toils at her task, without knowing when the revolution will truly arrive. Yet, does not the very time it takes to kill the ghosts, one by one, the time it takes for lost gods to travel from one body to another, before they reunite, constitute such a portion of time? Does not the very language and ritual of mediumship regarding the time it takes for time to come to an end hint precisely at this mode of transformation, in which a conventional sense of homogenous time, a time of progress that has led to so many calamities, might be rethought, quietly or dramatically refigured, through the daily, animated suspension of waiting in He County?

Perhaps in the very insistence on the experience of waiting, in the refusal to forgo their spiritual-moral task of ritual—now deemed superstitious or psychopathological in the aftermath of modern encounter—the mediums embody a certain registering of the deferred Maoist promises of peasant political subjectivity after semicolonialism, of post-Reform economic and symbolic dispossession in an era of uneven capitalist investment and labor out-migration, and of much, much more than any ethnographic retrospective can reconstruct. Anticipations of end time and cosmological realignment reach forward and backward, resounding the very disjunctures of time collected across China’s long twentieth century and beyond, carving out a portion of intensified time that attempts to register the very meaning of the “now,” between catastrophe and eternity.

It is in this sense that the precarious cosmology signals a pause—an impasse, an animated suspension in anticipation of an otherwise. Here, the progressive time of the socialist promise is swept along the course of dynastic cycling, together carried in a spectral temporality of returns, all the while awaiting apocalyptic renewal.

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A few days before I left He County, I caught sight of Xu Liying sitting by herself at the edge of the temple square, with a small bag of foodstuffs and a pile of sunflower seeds. It had been months since her discharge from the hospital. We chatted for a bit, then bid each other farewell. As I walked away, she went back to work, chanting under her breath, annihilating demonic spirits, continuing to struggle for the revolution. But
when the revolution will reach completion, no one knows, not even her. It is not for us to know.
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