

Introduction

The China of China

Flicking sunflower seeds from an unfinished pile to a finished one, Xu Liying is killing ghosts. I sit with her on the metal-framed hospital bed, the pile of seeds growing one by one on the white sheet.

“When Mao descended to earth, he did not want to. But they insisted, saying he must be sent down.” To descend to the ordinary earthly world (*xiafan*) marks the movement of a deity or spirit from the heavens.

“Once Mao took office, he banned religious faith. After he reincarnated as a human, he smashed all the temples, no?”

She is referring to the destruction of religious infrastructure during the antisuperstition campaigns of the Maoist era, commonly considered among the most violent of modern secularizing policies. Yet, in Xu Liying’s rendering, these orders for temple smashing were not given by the earthly party-state, as is usually assumed.

“Heavenly command was given from above, telling him to smash them all, keep none of them. They were filled with demonic spirits!”

With the presence of Mao on earth, harmful spirits vanished, Xu Liying explains. But with his death and the advent of economic reform, thousands upon thousands of ghosts, along with false, corrupt gods, swarmed back into the scene.

“This god, that goddess, all from a fake family . . . swindling people, extorting people, duping people, deluding people.” This, according to Xu Liying, is why there are so many people in the psychiatric ward today. “You cannot see [the spirits], you cannot touch them, and you wind up in the hospital.”

Mao was sent in a moment of crisis, Xu Liying continues, when China was on the brink of destruction at the hands of foreign powers. Now, decades after what she feels to be his premature death, she continues toiling for the revolution, culling

away demonic spirits, one by one. “The Southern Heavens, the Northern Heavens, the Middle Heavens, they have all been corrupted!”

According to Xu Liying, given the severity of moral decay today, across heaven and earth, the human race is headed toward an end time, toward a world aflame. Upon the arrival of this apocalypse, those living at the edges of the world will be burned and annihilated, trimmed like the outer branches of a large tree. This periphery Xu Liying speaks of is associated with foreign nations—the United States and Japan in particular, given their participation in invasions.

China, on the contrary, stands at the center of the universe, the root of the tree, and thus will be the last to be demolished. Henan Province, the heart of the Central Plain region, stands at the center of China. Hexian, in the middle of Henan, is thus the very center of the center—the *guodi*, the pot bottom.¹ Given this, Xu Liying says, this region 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.

As the rice gets flung out of the edges of the pot, the bottom of the pot will be where the rice sticks and remains.

Only after this burning and culling of the world, she explains, will the revolution reach its aim—that of true socialism.

SPECTRALIZATION OF THE RURAL

Despite variations on divine details, spirit mediums who frequented Fuxi Temple in Hexian agree: it was upon Chairman Mao’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 what was once known as the “ten-thousand-man pit” (*wanrenkeng*), where bodies of the poor and the treacherous were flung, throughout decades of famine and revolution. This is a story of stories, a story after too many stories have been told, a story told when no one believes in stories anymore—not the anthropologist, not the reader, not those they meet in person or in text. It is in the movements between these scenes of doubt and distrust, one reading the other, that the words here take place.²

The story here is set in a time. It is a time, I was told, when villagers feasted day to day beyond the wildest imaginations of Maoist cadres past, a time when money could buy anything and everything. Yet, in spite of the general sense that rural living conditions in Hexian have vastly improved since the economic reform era, it is also a time when the village was “still” the village, and the future was yet again elsewhere.

Soon after my arrival in Hexian, during a chance encounter on the street, an elderly man advised me 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 *lai*—amoral, unreliable, deceitful. 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 youths from Hexian, and Henan Province more broadly, migrated for work. What was it about this time that made this place a space of impossibility, a place from which future generations must so urgently flee?

What was it, in turn, to remain?

. . .

Once part of the "cradle of Chinese civilization" and the center of the cosmopolitical universe, the landlocked, heavily agricultural province of Henan has been recast through a spatial-temporal mapping of those "left behind" in a contemporary geography of value. Now, in place of a civilizational center, Henan is more potent in the national imaginary as a land of poverty, backwardness, charlatans, and thieves, evocative of the famines of the 1940s and 1950s under Nationalist and Maoist rule, and of the HIV scandal of the 1990s, when villagers contracted the virus from blood plasma sales for cash.

Drawing on Marx's account of capital's ghostly, vampiric qualities, Ann Anagnost writes of this blood economy as an effect of the "spectralization of the rural" after the reform era, in which value was drained from the bodies of peasants by state discourse and policy, rendering the rural an evacuated space (2006, 513).³ In this book I approach the cosmological accounts of spirit mediums in Hexian to provide another rendering of this spectralization, in which ghostly presences swirl amid the hollow of an emptied center, producing a different sense of the "post" Mao.

While images of abjection color Henan from without, and in another way from within, those I met from Hexian also speak with pride of their hometown and home province, of the significance of its lengthy history and the sense of divine regional protection provided by the Fuxi Temple in the county seat. They were the proud, loyal soldiers and supporters of Mao's 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 together create the feeling of a small urban skyline at night. Hexian thus partakes in the widespread rise of postreform 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 the first decade of the 2000s, there is still a sense of scarcity in local employment opportunities and of underemployment for those with higher educational attainment or

forms of aspiration driven by metropolitan imaginaries. Amid a “politics of destination” in which power is marked by upward and outward movement, departure seems ever the horizon in such places as Hexian, particularly for the working age (Chu 2010; X. Liu 1997). In 2012, when I first arrived in Hexian, China’s urban population at large, for the first time, had become equal to and began to surpass the rural. Within Hexian that year, over three-quarters of the residents were formally categorized as rural. Yet it was extremely common for one or more members of the family to be living and working away from Hexian for part or all of the year.

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 Hexian consider a life of sole small-scale farming on their allocated plots unsustainable. Within a given family it is common for several of the working age to depart, some returning seasonally to help tend to their family plots, some commissioning neighbors and kin to work their land while they are away. The sense of hollowing amid outmigration thus sets the scene for the questions of madness and possession I address here and what it means to stay (Scheper-Hughes 2001). Approaching contemporary rural China through its hauntings, this book asks, as Jacques Derrida (1994) does in *Specters of Marx*, albeit through the languages and rituals of mediumship: what ghostly forms remain of socialist visions after the “collapse”?

AFTER CHAIRMAN MAO’S REIGN

A Time of Lost Gods draws on a year of research in 2012–13, and again in 2018, in the county seat and surrounding villages of what I call Hexian, especially across the Fuxi Temple, the county People’s Hospital, and the home altars of spirit mediums. It also recalls some of my encounters elsewhere in China, to bring forth imaginaries shaping such places as Hexian from without. The chapters that follow pivot around a set of tensions, between a reconstituted rurality and an ambivalent urbanity, a mournful psychiatry and a shaken cosmology.

These tensions come in a time marked by a certain “afterwardsness,” with relation to what those in Hexian call “the time when Chairman Mao reigned.”⁴ The phrase takes on a doubled character in this book. A commonplace saying, “the time when Chairman Mao reigned” is the setting for wistful tales of a more fair and virtuous time. Among those who engage in spirit mediumship, it also speaks to an otherworldly temporality, an exceptional interval of divine sovereignty, after which the cosmos collapsed into chaos. This book is an attempt to convey what it is to experience the present as a postscript to such an interval.

At the same time, among those I spoke with during my time there, there is a sense that the new world—the promised world of the socialist vision—has yet to arrive, across waves of policies that have pledged to improve the rural lot. Out of this there emerges a matter-of-fact sensibility of self-preserving cynicism, in par-

allel with obstinate if fragile visions of a pristine era to come. The present thus feels caught between what could have been and what still might be.

The twofold significance of the Chairman's reign gestures more broadly toward what I call a cosmic or spectral doubling: the capacity for manifest phenomena—words, images, things, persons, occurrences—to carry force and significance across (at least) two realms. As Xu Liying's account suggests, earthly manifestations—nation-states, psychiatric disorders, revolutions—do not abide by secular divisions of the this-worldly and otherworldly, religious and nonreligious.

For those who engage in mediumship in Hexian—and I elaborate on what I mean by *mediumship* later—the world is often spoken of through several sets of relations and contrasts. Here I simplify to offer a general sketch—a cosmography for the sake of orientation. There are the yin and yang realms: *yinjian* and *yangjian*. The yin realm is the world of spirits usually imperceptible to humans, including ghosts of deceased humans, deities, animal spirits, and others (but since the yin can connote the negative, true deities are often evoked through other terms). The yang realm—often used interchangeably with the “human realm” (*renjian*)—is the world of the living and visible. When humans pass from the living world to the world of the dead, for instance, they are said to move from their yang house (*yangzhai*) to their yin house (*yinzhai*) of the grave. While living humans in the yang realm are present through their own material bodies, invisible personae in the yin realm often need to occupy material presences in the yang realm to produce material effects—possess a human person to verbally convey a message or physically harm another, for instance. Conversely, certain manifest phenomena and materials afford techniques for living humans to affect the invisible yin realm—the burning of a paper body as a substitute for a human body at risk for harm, the burying of scissors to “cut” the lives of passersby, or, most commonly, the burning of paper money and goods as gifts and payments to those in the yin world.

Then there is the division between heaven (*tian*) and earth (*di*), at times articulated in terms of a tripartite heavenly plate (*tianpan*), earthly plate (*dipan*), and human plate (*renpan*). The heavenly is often simply referred to as “the above” (*shangmiande*)—the site from which divine commands are issued and deities, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas descend and watch over the human realm. While those from the heavenly realm can be included in the broader category of the yin world, ghosts and other more negative yin entities are less likely to be evoked by the “heavenly.” Like other entities of the yin realm, those from the heavens need to deploy material means to produce effects in the visible world. They may, for instance, “borrow” human bodies, be “invited” into statues, and infuse symbolic words and things to transmit their signals. In the heaven-earth distinction, the “earthly” can refer to the world of the materially manifest, and, especially in the tripartite division of heavenly, earthly, and humanly, it can also speak to the underworld of the courts of hell. Meanwhile, the human stands between heaven and earth, where the world unfolds.

The notions of yin and yang and the heavenly, earthly, and humanly have been broadly used concepts across various Chinese contexts. There are therefore many shared terms between the conceptual and experiential vocabulary of contemporary mediumship and intellectual, medical, and religious traditions across time and space, although the semantic, contextual, argumentative, and efficacious fields they have operated in vary widely. The early Chinese compilation *Huainanzi*, for instance, describes the separation of heaven and earth from the ascending and descending of qi—which has been translated as pneuma, vital energy, material force, or simply air—paired with the splitting of yin and yang. The yin and yang then gave rise to the four seasons, and the four seasons gave rise to seasonal time and the “ten thousand things” (*wanwu*). This characterization of the cosmos was evoked across the centuries for various aims and was itself a response to debates in its own time (Puett 2004). In such early texts as the *Yijing* (commonly known in the West as the *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes*), the threefold division of heaven, earth, and human map onto celestial and earthly calculation and divination systems, linking constellations and elements to spatiotemporal coordinates of human birth to bodily parts. Such concepts were taken up across Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist thinking across time, often as mutually intertwined traditions, not always as fully distinct schools (Csikszentmihalyi 2006; Major 1993). The continuous, dynamic interplay between yin and yang, heaven and earth, would be elaborated in texts on Chinese medicine, statecraft, aesthetics, and beyond, and would find many contemporary articulations (Farquhar and Zhang 2012; Jullien 1995; Zhan 2016), including those that do not dwell on or that explicitly reject the world of ghosts and spirits.

In Hexian personae and forces from heavenly and yin worlds—deities, ghosts, and other spirits—are together described as that which “cannot be seen or felt” (*kanbujian mobuzhao*). While they at times reside in distinct spatial realms, they also share the manifest geography of living humans, variously inhabiting the visible world. I thus use *doubling* as shorthand across these multiple sets of divisions, referring to the potentiality for any seen and felt person, place, thing, or action to simultaneously host that which cannot be seen or felt. Throughout the chapters, when not using the original Chinese terms, I use *cosmic* and occasionally *divine* when evoking the more heavenly and benevolent aspects of the unseen world; *spectral* and occasionally *demonic* when attending to the more ghostly, withdrawn, or harmful dimensions; and *otherworldly* to refer to the unseen, intangible world at large. These are used descriptively to convey rather than categorically to define, as these aspects grow slippery in the cosmic accounts of the times.

While I use these terms to render ideas and scenes more easily imaginable to those unfamiliar with such worlds, it is important to recall the risks of such ease, as the lived conceptual world they are used to describe here differs from their English connotations. In spite of apparent similarities in the contrasts between the higher and lower, visible and invisible, divine and demonic, and material and

immaterial—and unlike the stronger divide connoted by the this-worldly and otherworldly in, for instance, Protestant and Protestant-inflected strands of thought—the yin and yang, heavenly and earthly, cosmic and technic are not so ontologically split and morally divided (Hall and Ames 1995; Hui 2016). They are in constant flux, one mirroring the other, one transforming through and into the other, in myriad ways.

On the smaller scale of time, the benevolent and the corrupt, the godly and the ghostly, have become dangerously blurred after Chairman Mao's death in the contemporary cosmology. On a lengthier scale gods have been corruptible and ghosts relatable far beyond the modern political era, and boundaries between the so-called natural and supernatural throughout Chinese mythical and medical traditions have been famously debatable. These and related differences have been variously marked in studies of China and Chinese worlds through such terms as *acosmotic*, *correlative cosmology*, *holistic*, *dialectical*, and *analogical*.⁵ I try to attend to relevant distinctions as they arise, and I pay the price, so to speak, of associative slippage for the sake of building a momentary shared imaginary.

With a similar risk, I use the word *cosmology* as a bridge between questions raised through China and recent debates raised through scenes elsewhere and to convey that which has its own account of the visible and invisible world. But, given the precarious, disorderly status of the cosmos as described by mediums in Hexian, I do not assume the connoted opposition between cosmos and chaos, which, in this instance as well as in others, are very much copresent (Puett 2014).⁶

Alongside the crossing of visible and invisible realms, cosmic or spectral doubling also creates links across scales of time. Through the copresence of yin and yang realms on a shared geographic plane, the temporal limits posed to the living—what may be thought of as lifespan—meet with operations grafted onto longer temporal stretches, some reaching asymptotically toward spans so long they are nearly indistinguishable from eternity. In the language of ghosts, gods, and immortals more resonant with Daoist repertoires, human souls (*hun*) are said to continue their existence after death.⁷ But lacking proper cultivation or other destination, the unbodied soul continues to dwell on earth among the living as a ghost, carrying its decades or centuries of invisible existence with it. With proper cultivation the unbodied soul might gradually reach the status of a god, over a course of hundreds or thousands of years. Gods, who see human history from a much higher and longer vantage point, may look on and live a life of ease from a distance or choose to get involved in the plight of earthly affairs.

Intertwined and partially fused with these are also concepts more resonant with Chinese Buddhism. Veering from yet overlapping with Daoist forms of immortality, these ideas turn toward the cycling of lives through reincarnation and karmic notions of merit accumulation, which combine with Daoist and Confucian notions of virtue and self-cultivation. Moreover, through such historically combinatory

traditions as those surrounding the Eternal Mother (Wusheng Laomu) and the future Buddha Maitreya, discussed later, the temporal question of Chairman Mao as a figure of virtue and cosmic sovereignty is drawn into Chinese Buddhist kalpic and eschatological time. To evoke the cosmic doubling of Mao and the socialist state, then, is to indicate travels not only between present human and ghostly worlds but also between immense scales of time. Earthly political imaginaries of “five-year plans” and the “postreform era” are swallowed into *kalpas* stretching forward and back, to upward of tens of thousands of years. The revolution to come, as anticipated by mediums such as Xu Liying, may thus arrive tomorrow, next month, next year, or far beyond one’s earthly lifetime.

CULTURE, AFTERMATH

While I evoke various sources of what might be called Chinese tradition, the centrality of Mao in the contemporary cosmology and the not-quite-legal status of mediumship also point to predicaments of sovereignty and symbolic elaboration in encounters with what might be called modernity. At the turn of the twentieth century, following the Opium Wars with the British, China, as a political and cultural entity, seemed to be gasping for survival. Faced with escalating military threats and peppered with foreign-occupied concessions—among them British, Japanese, French, Portuguese, Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, Belgian, and Italian—what it would take to claim a place in world history, rather than be demolished by it, came to be an inescapable question. While the result of this historical moment was not full formal colonization, the status of culture and tradition came to be haunted by what early twentieth-century intellectuals, including Mao, termed China’s semicolonialism or hypocolonialism.⁸

Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Republic of China, writes, “China is the colony of every nation that has made treaties with her, and the treaty-making nations are her masters. China is not the colony of one nation, but of all; she is not a semicolony, but a hypocolony” (cited in E. Lee 1930). Following Lenin’s usage of semicolonialism as a passage either to full colonization or revolutionary independence through national sovereignty, Chinese Communist thinkers of the 1930s often characterized semicolonialism as a transitional state of partial autonomy, limited by unequal treaties and territorial concessions. Building on these, Mao deployed semicolonialism as a call for revolutionary tactics against imperialist powers, aimed at conflicts of shifting spatial and temporal scales (Karl 2017).

Entrapped by unequal treaties and tormented by a sense of national and cultural humiliation, a range of exasperated answers emerged in China—iconoclastic denuncements of tradition as superstition, chauvinistic defenses of nationalism, and urgent assertions of cultural essence. Maoism itself, some have suggested, also arose as one response, at once of and against semicolonial conditions. Through its

incomplete and fragmentary forms, such conditions “sanctioned a degree of cultural colonization that was self-imposed,” after which “culture . . . was neither readily established nor available as an untainted and untroubled sanctuary” (Shih 2001, 36–37).

Given the reverberations of this sense of interruption and reorientation, I consider the contemporary cosmology in Hexian not through rubrics of tradition and modernity but through what Stefania Pandolfo (2018) calls the “aftermath of culture,” in which culture after colonial encounter comes, as Frantz Fanon (2008) puts it, to testify against its members. Yet this very site of devastation, Pandolfo suggests, offers potential grounds for transformation and spiritual encounter, and such transformation is at times reactivated precisely through imaginations of the beyond of human time.

To evoke themes of invasion and humiliation is not to presume the cultural as previously apolitical or unchanging or to sit contented with a so-called impact-response model of Chinese history. The very claim to the unity of China and of a Han ethnic majority by the Chinese state—before, during, and after Maoism—has been (and continues to be) produced through often violent demands for submission and varying degrees of assimilation, as well as civilizational discourses against barbaric others. And, as some have suggested, excessive gravity needs not be given to the role of the West when Chinese debates are centered elsewhere.⁹

Rather, to approach culture in and as aftermath helps elucidate the significance of a Maoism-inflected cosmology beyond more predictable responses of paradox, amusement, and surprise, produced through the conceptual tension provided by the bifurcation of religion and secularity, tradition and modernity. If classic anthropological accounts of symbolic efficacy relied in part on notions of a coherent wholeness of a symbolic system, the rupture and fragmentation of a “traditional” symbolic system by modern interruption would presumably rob the symbol of its efficacy, given its dislocation. In this, the symbol would no longer be able to act as a pivot between visible and invisible worlds. Yet cosmic doubling here points in part to the capacity of such pivotal operations to be activated by persons and things, words and images, beyond limits imposed by categories of tradition and modernity, religion and secularity. If the efficacy of such pivots is not assumed to rely on the wholeness or closedness of the system within which it is situated, then what could constitute an efficacious operator reaches far beyond what would customarily be located within a given tradition.

Recognizing a painful rupture to traditions of thought, in this sense, is not antithetical to taking seriously ongoing engagements with a cultural repertoire, as the cultural is loosened from assumptions of its qualities as an immobile, unbroken, closed system, and fragmentation is no longer assumed to be characteristic only of the modern or postmodern. Instead, attention to the aftermath of culture allows us to address how “culture” in the historical present is not simply an anachronistic

concept but seethes in its simultaneous transmission of efficacious potential and tormenting attacks—from within and without. Here it is from these very pained sites and languages that the pivot between visible and invisible worlds might be foreclosed but also activated.

This precarious sense of possibility and impossibility is seen in the present yet withdrawn status of Mao in the contemporary cosmology. The mediums' accounts of the partial yet deferred possibility of fully exorcising harmful spirits in his absence point to a sense of incompleteness with relation to efficaciousness. The cosmology thus gestures at once to openings and closures experienced in the present, tied to historical figures and movements of emancipation and domination. To attend to questions of aftermath, then, is to traverse the vicissitudes of aggression, which give force to renewed productions of internal exile—including the repeated exclusions of such figures as the spirit medium and the rural inhabitant. Those I met in Hexian inherit and offer their own responses to the stakes of this ongoing history, but not in any simple sense.

While this text is often elaborated in terms of conversations and debates on China, the questions it raises are concerns of the contemporary, of disparate worlds that nonetheless share certain dilemmas in their myriad manifestations, each pointing to a *here-else* beyond what can be grasped solely in terms of locality (Collu 2019). They are reverberations across concentric circles of violence, the resulting timbre of which carries both staid and surprising qualities. They are the enigmas of madness, which mark at once the impossibility of being and its very condition. 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 the oddities of representation, of the structuring forces of language and other mediums, and the ways things fall into and out of them. They are disappointments and horrors toward grand plans of the twentieth century and hopes that linger nevertheless.

In attempting to address these concerns through themes of mediumship, madness, and haunting, I have come to approach the person in part as a psychic-corporeal host to a meeting of temporalities—an individuation premised on cosmo-historical movements and collisions. To say this is not to define the person external to other terms, but to articulate the sensibility that allows me to hear resonances across disparate registers—the human body occupied by or dislodged of gods, ghosts, and souls in mediumship; parents and children caught amid inter-generational impasses in the clinic; and formulations of the subject in anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and China studies.

Such cosmo-historical encounters are mediated at various scales of personhood and collectivity. In this text they range from the singularity of symptoms to tales across families and villages, rural and urban, Hexian, Henan Province, China, the world historical, and beyond. And, in the case of Chairman Mao and the contem-

porary cosmology, the very movement between scales, figural positions, and symbolic orders seems to gather and intensify a certain potency. It is with this in mind that I turn to these figures and stories, both grand and minute.

THE STATUE

In December 2015 a 120-foot-tall golden statue of Mao was built in a village in Henan's Tongxu 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 Chinese RMB 3 million (more than USD 450,000)—resources that, it was said, could have been better spent for social purposes such as local education. Chinese online commentators also offered angry reminders that Henan Province was among the hardest hit during the Great Leap famine 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 what they called “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 a 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 undergirding the range of responses rang familiar. On the Anglophone front, they homed in on the ever-befuddling paradox of what the Chinese state calls socialism with Chinese characteristics, alongside easily renewed curiosities toward an “oriental despotism” (Wittfogel 1957). Chinese media and social media invoked modern antisuperstition as well as classic Confucian exhortations against the excesses of ritual expenditure. Their distaste echoed the 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 posited a certain irony, of a rural oblivion to the origin of the very historical catastrophes that struck them.

Less frequently mentioned across these accounts, perhaps owing to its dissonance with the paired motifs of rural irrationality and authoritarian terror, as well as the seemingly constitutive opposition of the Communist and the (properly) religious (Ngo and Quijada 2015), was the potential moral—not to mention cosmological—significance of the statue that may have brought it into existence and led indirectly to its desecration. A partial exception came from 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.” No possible ritual-religious dimension was touched on. But a degree of unease and forewarning was appended: “There is no need to build such a big statue, and I do not suggest people imitate this” (T. Phillips 2016).

The incident brings to surface a set of tensions undergirding the contemporary cosmology in Hexian. Since the economic reform era, Mao and Maoist policies had undergone waves of official denouncement, and the state today no longer relies as strongly on Mao’s image for legitimacy. At the same time it seems that Mao had come to stand in for a certain difference and excess, prompting the nervous system of the party-state to erase an unauthorized monument to its own founding figure (Taussig 1991).

In partial continuation of more overtly violent destructions of local temples and icons during the Maoist era, the postreform 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, 222). Yet in this instance the displaced symbolic order could not so easily be considered a localized externality to the state, as the state engulfed its own founding image in its demonstration of power. 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 enigma of the incident and the commentaries proliferating around it spoke to the ambivalence clustering around the figure of the Chairman.

Unlike the towering, if short-lived, presence of Mao’s statue in Tongxu County, no major icon is dedicated to Mao at or near Fuxi Temple in Hexian at the time of my visit. Instead, the absent presence of the Chairman is manifest through recirculations of his words and images on the expansive temple square—pins and badges, drawings and posters, People’s Liberation Army uniforms, poems, slogans. The passing appearances of such unofficial monuments raise questions of memory, mourning, and desire, as well as the never-quite-dead times of the gods amid secular historical time (Chakrabarty 1997; Winter 2014).

By many academic and media accounts, the Maoist era had been an age of religious repression and the post-Mao economic reform era a time of religious revival. In such accounts the Maoist years mark an apex of modern secularizing efforts, intensifying the antisuperstition campaigns of its Republican-era predecessors, culminating in the banning of religion during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Yet spirit mediums like Xu Liying offer a different account of the historical present. For the mediums the end of Mao’s reign and the advent of market reforms did not mark a return of *religion* but a return of *spirits*—corrupt, duplicitous spirits by and

large. Conversely, Maoist campaigns against religion, as Xu Liying puts it, were a matter of righteous, heavenly command, and the appearance of Mao on earth itself marks a reincarnation determined by otherworldly forces. The purportedly antireligious campaigns of the socialist state, for the mediums, constitute cryptic acts of divine intervention—acts inaugurated by otherworldly forces that allowed the earthly state to misrecognize itself as secular.

While many have pointed to the quasi-religious quality of the so-called Mao cult during his lifetime, it has often been distinguished from religion proper due in part to Maoism's explicit antireligious stance and policies. Posthumous circulations of Maoist iconography have also been said by some to be devoid of truly religious dimensions, even if ritualistic (Barmé 1996; Feuchtwang 2001; Leese 2011). While such distinctions may hold in some contexts of circulation, it seems that Mao's spirited presence in post-Mao ritual worlds might also be more widespread than previously thought, if perhaps scattered. Diane Dorfman (1996) relays similar accounts as the ones I write of here, regarding the banishment of (especially animal) spirits under Mao and their resurfacing after Deng by those in a rural county near Beijing. As in Hexian, the role of Mao there was articulated at the conjunction of peasantry and morality, against Deng as a figure of corruption. Koen Wellens describes a Premi interlocutor in Yunnan 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). Daniel Overmyer mentions hearing of possession by Mao in passing, among a list of other deities, in Henan (2009, 116). Liu Yongsi describes finding older women in rural Guangdong dressed in Red Guard uniforms performing revolutionary songs at temple festivals (qtd. in Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

There are also those who find Mao's presence in ritual contexts without a sense of his spiritual potency. Adam Yuet 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). Emily Chao (1999) describes a failed attempt to incorporate Mao and other Communist Party leaders in a post-Mao ritual in Yunnan, with its dismissal by the community signifying the incapacity of Mao to occupy a religious position. There are thus multiple ways of engaging figures and icons of Mao and the Party in ritual contexts.

In Hexian I had set out with a general wish to learn about mediumship and came to understand Mao's centrality in the cosmological accounts there after I arrived. This book is an attempt to sound out his significance to those I met, at times directly and at times through detours. In contrast to the irreverence toward Mao that Chao (1999) found in Yunnan, in Hexian the Chairman is central to the spirit mediums' accounts. The contemporary cosmos is elaborated around a

mournful relation to the lost Chairman, who looks on from afar, watching over the dissolution of the world. Yet his absent presence also animates the “now” in the wake of loss, reinaugurating Henan and Hexian as a cosmopolitical center.

As Katherine Verdery suggests of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, postsocialist politics move beyond novel forms of rationalistic government toward matters of “cosmic” concern, insofar as they involve a profound reordering of universes (1999, 125). Such cosmic reordering can be seen in transformations of ritual in the wake of violence across Vietnam, Mongolia, Siberia, and non-Han communities in southwest China (Bernstein 2013; Buyandelger 2013; Kwon 2008; Muegler 2001; Pedersen 2011). Of peculiar force as well in socialist and postsocialist worlds is the “corpse-qua-symbol” of dead bodies (Verderey 1999, 52), including figures of sovereignty who continue to occupy a position of exception in the wake of their passing—Lenin (Yurchak 2015), Kim Il Sung (Ryang 2012), Ho Chi Minh (Ngo 2019), and, as I suggest of Hexian, Mao.

Between spatial claims to sovereignty modeled on the nation-state and temporal claims to sovereignty through class struggle across dreamworlds and catastrophes of the twentieth century (Buck-Morss 2002), 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. While Mao’s theory of sovereignty might be fraught with contradictions alongside other articulations of the Chinese socialist state (Howland 2010), what interests me here is less the validity of such formulations than the spectral reappearance of the Chairman, which might be thought of on the order of the sovereign presence as miracle—“impossible, yet there it is” (Bataille 1993, 206; Song 2013, 316).

In this I am thinking alongside several works on North Korea: Sonia Ryang’s (2012) on the “sovereign self,” in which the leader is a direct manifestation of one’s own higher self, and Hoon Song’s (2016) on a “sovereign faciality” that lends its own embodied presence to the historical gap and promise of a (Marxist) knowledge to come. While the contexts and precise manifestations are distinct, these dimensions of sovereignty resonate here. In China the intensification of a sovereign selfhood and presence was enacted in part through Maoist storytelling practices and campaigns, in which a *cosmocratic mythologic* “telescoped” across scales big and small, fusing and mutually intensifying individual suffering, national history, and world history, “until Mao virtually fills the entire field of vision” (Apter and Saich 1998, 71).

I turn to the notion of sovereignty and its filling of vision to consider not the illegitimacy of autocratic rule as portrayed from the stance of liberalist (or nonliberalist) 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—here, threats and imaginations of China’s very demise—in a secularized theological rendition of the miracle (Schmitt 2006), which, in this

case, is redoubled cosmologically. Beyond a political theology at play in secular statecraft, slogans and iconography of the Chinese Communist Party provided dwelling for spectral power, redoubled as operators of cosmic force. If the souls of the dead in China have been said to be “transitional” by some, from what Philippe Descola (2013) calls an “analogist ontology” to an increasingly modern “naturalist” one (Kipnis 2017, 218), I consider instead how the living are deployed by a spectral polity sharing a symbolic repertoire with the earthly modern state. Socialist images and slogans come to make way for redistributions of the sensible (Rancière 2004), presencing an otherwise imperceptible world in the naturalist ontology of the secular party-state.

THE SOVEREIGN, THE GHOST, AND THE MEDIUM

Rather than the triad of gods, ghosts, and ancestors more common in approaches to Chinese popular religion (e.g., Jordan 1972; A. Wolf 1974), my thinking on the cosmology in Hexian pivots more often around the cast of the sovereign (the Chairman), the ghost, and the medium. This is not to say that the classic triad holds no relevance there but to reset the characters and shift the field of vision toward the present. I turn to the figure of the sovereign in part because Maoist articulations of revolution through an anti-imperialist principle of territorial sovereignty figure centrally in the cosmological accounts of the mediums. Alongside the acute sensitivity and knack for tactical evasions cultivated in the violent legacy of sovereign power (Farquhar and Zhang 2005), there also prevail ritual enunciations of longing for the return of the sovereign as a cosmopolitical figure. For mediums like Xu Liying, the Communist Revolution is not simply a worldly affair, and the desire to occupy that drives the imperialist enterprise cannot be understood without the demonic dimension of evil. In his descent into earthly form, the mediums say, Mao’s revolution was an act of salvation in the face of crisis, in a moment when China was under threat of foreign occupation.

Moreover, accounts of the momentary vanishing of all spirits (gods included) during Mao’s reign, the incapacity of post-Mao gods to similarly suppress dangerous spirits after his death, and longings for Mao’s return together point to the Chairman’s exceptional sovereign status in the contemporary cosmology. Although himself an instrument of larger heavenly schemes and although situated in cosmic alliance with other Buddhist, Daoist, and regional figures, in Hexian Mao’s role in recent cosmic history seems beyond just one god among others. If the Chairman was once the sovereign guarantor of the existence of China and its People, keeping demonic spirits at bay, the death of the Chairman brought with it a time of ghosts.

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 dead, implicitly forms the very basis of ancestor worship at the core of