



## Spectral Revolution:

### Notes on a Maoist Cosmology

The Chairman, from the temple square. PC: Emily NG, 2013.

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*This essay describes the cosmological role of Mao in ritual and spirit mediumship in rural China. It considers the occulted forces hosted by the Chairman's image and words, across movements of display, concealment, and circulation. Here, the Party-state has a cosmic double, and Maoist anti-religious policies are not what they seem.*

The essay features adapted excerpts from the author's book, *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost after Mao* (University of California Press 2020).

Her hand smooths over the face of Mao on the one-hundred-renminbi bill placed atop a stack of blank, beige spirit money. Her fingers lift the edges of the spirit money as the same red renminbi bill is successively pressed on to the next blank sheet. She describes it offhandedly in the language of currency production—to 'imprint it a bit' (印一下), transferring the vital value of the living yang world to the yin world, the world of that which 'cannot be seen or touched' (看不见, 摸不着). It was one among many ritual techniques



'Imprinting', between *yin* and *yang* currencies.  
Photo by the author, 2012.

used for processing spirit money to ensure an activation of value as it journeys toward the other realm.

On the anniversary of her mother's death, Cai Huiqing (pseudonym) borrows the face of the sovereign to infuse otherworldly currency with value, in the hopes of securing a decent life for her mother in the afterworld. Nestled between her palm and the beige sheets, the Chairman's visage partakes in a haptic intimacy at the crossing of worlds, exceeding apparent paradoxes of communism and the money form, atheism and the ritual-religious form.

Unlike others I met in Hexian, Cai Huiqing did not speak much of Mao, either at that moment or during the time I stayed in her home over the course of my fieldwork. Nonetheless, she knew from local ritual practices that the Chairman exuded a certain potency, which would enable a pivoting between the visible and invisible, living and nonliving. After decades of national, global, and local reproduction and circulation, whether as currency, propaganda, pop art, or otherwise, Mao's image seemed to gather

a force at once cosmic and spectral, world-ordering and haunting, in its absence-infused presence and presence-infused absence.

In his seminal essay on artwork in an age of technological reproducibility, Walter Benjamin (2008) writes that the aura of early art forms arose from their foundation in ritual. Yet, since the appearance of mechanically reproducible forms—photography and film—art, he suggests, has been emancipated from its previous role in the service of magic and ritual, and finds its basis in a new, revolutionised social function: politics. In the former mode, Benjamin continues, art was only exhibited to humans by happenstance—'what matters is that the spirits see it' (2008, 25). The human gaze was unneeded, and indeed at times banished. By contrast, exhibition to the living would become central to modern art forms. Contrasting the 'cult value' of ancient arts with the 'exhibition value' of modern photography, Benjamin pauses on a site of slippage between the two forms of value: the human face.

As part of this special issue on occult economies, I draw here on the time I spent in 2012 and 2013, and then again in 2018, in a rural county of China's Henan province I call Hexian to consider Mao's role in the contemporary cosmology. In both its adjectival and its verb forms, *occult* points to questions of presence and perceptibility. In common current usage, it evokes secreted knowledges and practices, magical or otherwise. In earlier scientific writings, it referred to matter and properties not accessible through direct observation. In astronomy, it points to the concealment of one celestial body by the interposition of another, passing by or being in front of it—an eclipse. Taking its cue from Benjamin's reflection on the multiple operations of value potentiated by visual forms, alongside the theme of the occult, this essay considers the significance of and power embodied in the Chairman's image in contemporary Chinese ritual and spirit mediumship, across movements of eclipse and disclosure.

## Ten Thousand Years

On the eve of the lunar year of the dragon, I wandered through the central temple in Hexian, dedicated to Fuxi, the mythological sovereign known as the progenitor of human civilisation. Amid the crowds on the vast square outside the temple gate, I heard a rumbling drum beat. A large circle of onlookers gathered around a small group of middle-aged women and men as they prepared for ritual. They donned matching and seemingly brand-new green Mao-era army coats, topped with brown Soviet-style fur hats, with a single red star at the centre. One woman at the inner edge of the crowd held a tall pole, topped with a large yellow flag with the word *ling* (令)—in this context referring to divine command—etched in red.

Inside the circle, 18 sheets of yellow fabric—used commonly in local rituals and often described at the temple as the colour of the emperor—were laid out in the shape of a fan,

flanked by a head of cabbage and two large stalks of scallion. Agricultural goods were often incorporated into ritual spreads on the temple square, sealing symbolic meanings and forces within them, both the commonly shared and the esoteric. Above this was more yellow fabric, every other sheet topped with a bamboo platter—a regional kitchen implement used for drying grains and vegetables. Atop the platters sat paper cuttings of concentric red stars—stars of the Communist Party. On the central bamboo platter, three cigarettes pointed northward, an offering to the gods, I was told. Above the cigarettes, four sticks of incense burned in a golden urn—three for humans, four for ghosts, as the saying went—aside a row of plastic-wrapped sausages, 'because gods like to eat too'.

At the very top, farthest north, thus of highest position in the cosmic-symbolic geography, was a large poster of Mao in a red collared shirt, seated and flanked by his generals in blue uniform. On the poster sat some mandarin oranges and three slices of metallic-gold ritual paper—two covered in looping spirit writing, the third with the words 'Through virtue, one gains all under heaven' (德得天下).

As more onlookers gathered around, a man began swinging a three-foot-long necklace of Buddhist beads above his head, then lowered it meticulously atop the poster of Mao and the generals. Two men in Maoist army coats began striking a gong and cymbals, tracing deliberate steps across the spread of ritual offerings. Others joined to walk the perimeter of the encirclement, some singing, some dancing, some plucking offerings off the spread, brandishing them toward the heavens. The percussion gained speed. Cries from the crowd intensified—*ayahoo! Ayahoo!*—an acknowledgment of the spirited airs and presences (灵气) passing through. A voice bellowed, cutting through the drum and song: 'Ten thousand years! Ten thousand years! Ten thousand years for Chairman Mao!' (万岁! 万岁! 毛主席万岁!).

A woman, standing beneath the yellow flag of divine command, howled at the top of her lungs. In an adjacent ritual circle, the drumming had also reached its peak:

'Victory! Victory to all! The world has reached supreme peace! China has reached victory!' (胜利了! 大家胜利了! 世界大平了! 中国胜利了! )

'Ten thousand years, *wansui*! Ten thousand years, *wansui*! Tens of thousands of years, *wanwansui*!' (万岁! 万岁! 万万岁! )

An address reserved for emperors for much of Chinese imperial history, *wansui* (literally 'ten thousand years of age' and commonly translated as 'long live') gained widespread usage during the Cultural Revolution, after Mao's public mass reception on 18 August 1966, when he took the crowd by surprise with an early morning appearance on Tiananmen Square. As described by the *People's Daily*,

This morning at 5am, 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 ... At the moment, the Square boiled over ... Many people clapped their palms until they turned red ... On the Square, tens of thousands of people loudly called: 'Long live Chairman Mao! Long live! Long, long live!'

After this appearance and its press coverage, *wansui* and its variant *wanshou* (万寿) were soon incorporated and codified into official Party discourse. By 1968, texts, meetings, speeches, and phone calls often opened with a formal wishing of eternal life and eternal health for the Chairman. During the same period, badges and images of Mao—not unlike those circulating in Hexian at the temple square decades later—also intensified in their mass production and circulation.

While Mao himself was said to have been cognizant of his iconic power and to have curbed the unofficial duplication and distribution of his words and images in the initial post-Liberation years, by the late 1960s, amid the Cultural Revolution, unauthorised media began multiplying at unprecedented speed, launching their circulation and signifying capacities beyond the containment of the state (Leese 2011). Outside of China, in the early 1970s, Andy Warhol would famously reduplicate Mao's portrait, adding another layer of significance to the reproducibility of his image.

In the 1980s and 1990s, after his death and amid major transitions toward economic privatisation, iterations of Mao's image continued to proliferate in China and abroad, now through new waves of contemporary art and kitsch. And in 1999, two years before China joined the World Trade Organisation, RMB bills would, for the first time, begin to deploy Mao's face as their central image. As China continued to rise economically, international news cycles began featuring footage of automated bill counters in China. The Chairman's face appeared again and again, now accompanied by the fluttering sound of paper money, like a flipbook that paradoxically reinstated the staidness of the image through its flickering animation; a filmic still life.

Meanwhile, Mao's words and images have also been used to conjure themes of revolutionary change. Student protestors at Tiananmen Square in 1989, for instance, issued a manifesto that opened with words from an essay by Mao: 'This country is our country, this people our people: if we don't speak out, who will? If we don't take action, who will?' (cited in Davies 2019, 94). Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, Maoist slogans and Mao's effigy were a common sight in worker protests following layoffs at state-owned enterprises (Lee 2007), and as late as 2018 Maoist supporters were playing an important role in prominent labour protests in China (Au 2019; see also Zhang Yueran's essay in the present issue). More recently, amid objections





Spectrality, immortality. Mao and Zhou Enlai, at the temple square. Photo by the author, 2013.

in Hong Kong to the increasing encroachment of mainland Chinese rule, Maoist slogans such as ‘A revolution is not a dinner party’ cropped up in graffiti and on posters, after the prohibition of more straightforward pro-democracy slogans. As one restaurant owner put it: ‘If [the police] were to come in and say, “You are breaking the law by posting these [Maoist posters],” I can say, “Well, then you are against the Chinese government”’ (Prasso 2020). The Chairman’s presence thus allowed for a simultaneous exhibition and concealment, hosting particular forms of speech while, in some cases, momentarily trapping the act of policing in the fissures of language.

In an essay on Maoism and immortality (不朽), Gloria Davies (2019) writes that post-Mao evocations of Mao are by no means monopolised by the Party. Citing Alexei Yurchak’s (2006) work on the Soviet Union, she suggests that these evocations make way

for ambivalent forms of overidentification through which endorsement and critique can sometimes become indistinguishable. Through its deployments across art, memorabilia, cash, and protest, the Chairman’s image comes to host myriad meanings and powers, from the satirising of state power to the reinstatement of its new forms, from an alignment with the founding spirit of the Party to the (at times simultaneous) ironic turning of the Party’s own words against itself. Through its multiplication of ambivalent meanings, Mao’s presence seems to take on new modes of life after death.

## Cosmic Doubling

The incorporation of Mao’s image in the temple ritual in Hexian may at first strike some as surprising. By most accounts, whether

popular or scholarly, the Maoist era had been an age of religious repression and the post-Mao market reform era one of religious revival. In such accounts, the Maoist years mark an apex of modern secularisation efforts, intensifying the anti-superstition campaigns of its Republican-era predecessors, culminating in the banning of religion during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Market reforms, by comparison, ‘opened up’ many aspects of life, allowing for a return of previously barred religious practices.

Yet, the spirit mediums I met in Hexian offered a different account of this history, and thus a different account of the present. For them, the ostensibly atheist Maoist campaigns against religion were in fact a matter of righteous, heavenly command, and the appearance of Mao on earth itself signalled a reincarnation determined by otherworldly forces. Conversely, 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.

The purportedly antireligious campaigns of the socialist state, for the mediums, thus constituted cryptic acts of divine intervention, which in turn allowed the earthly state to misinterpret itself as secular. As Xu Liying (pseudonym), a spirit medium in her mid-sixties, put it:

When Mao descended to earth, he did not want to. But they insisted, saying he must be sent down ... Once Mao took office, he banned religious faith. After he reincarnated as a human, he smashed all the temples, no? Heavenly command was given from above, telling him to smash them all, keep none of them. They were filled with demonic spirits!

While scholars have pointed to the ritualistic quality of the so-called Mao cult both during and after his lifetime, it has often been distinguished from religion proper due in part to Maoism’s explicit antireligious stance and policies. Tracing the use of Maoist iconography in (mostly urban) art and kitsch in the 1980s

and 1990s, for instance, Geremie Barmé has suggested that this ‘new Mao cult’ was ‘divested nearly entirely of its original class, ethical, and political dimensions’, along with the sense of ‘moral revival, sanctity, and the general religiosity and fervor that characterized the earlier Cult’ (1996, 5, 13). But temple rituals and cosmological accounts in Hexian pointed to a different engagement with the Chairman.

For those in Hexian who dealt with the world of spirits, ‘the time when Chairman Mao reigned’ (毛主席当家的时候)—an everyday phrase there for articulating contrasts with the post-Mao present—marked not only his earthly rule but a cosmic punctuation and rectification, after which the cosmos collapsed into chaos.

In everyday chitchat the phrase usually referred to a time of safety, stability, and fairness. By contrast, with the arrival of the reform era—the ethos of which was seen to be captured by Deng Xiaoping’s slogan ‘It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white; as long as it catches mice, it’s a good cat’—state officials began losing fear and gaining courage, siphoning off increasing amounts of money to the detriment of commoners. While officially taken as a statement of Deng’s pragmatic stance toward market economies, the slogan was usually evoked by villagers in Hexian for its moral implications, authorising an era of greed. With the rise of privatisation and labour outmigration to major cities, both the sense of both opportunity and disparity grew, intensifying desire and envy of one’s neighbours, leading, I was told, to escalations of theft and corruption. A sense of mutual mistrust deepened among villagers. Even if such mistrust may not have been absent during the Maoist era, day-to-day accounts of the past emphatically distinguished the morally upstanding past from the morally degenerate present.

While sentiments of mistrust and moral decay are not uncommon across Chinese contexts, they strike a particular chord in Henan province, given its place in post-reform perceptions. Once part of the ‘cradle of Chinese civilisation’ and the centre of the

cosmopolitical universe, this landlocked, heavily agricultural province has been recast through a spatial-temporal mapping of those ‘left behind’ in a contemporary geography of value. Now, in place of a civilisational centre, 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. Reversing Maoist discourses of a revolutionary, future-facing peasantry, rural Henan now appeared as a hollowed space from which one must depart if one wished to seek any semblance of a future.

The contemporary cosmology sketched out by spirit mediums echoed everyday evocations of post-Mao distrust and disintegration in Hexian, centring on the mythohistorical rises and falls of greed, corruption, and fakery across heaven and earth. Indeed, the same official political slogans carried a double function in the invisible *yin* world. According to spirit mediums in Hexian, given the Chairman’s rightful heaven-sent status, ghosts and other spirits did not dare appear during his reign. With his pronouncement ‘Sweep away all cow-ghosts and snake-spirits’ (横扫一切牛鬼蛇神), all these spirits vanished—some said they hid in remote mountain caves; others that they disappeared altogether. Originally appearing as the title of an official Party editorial, the phrase became a widespread Maoist slogan during the Cultural Revolution and is generally considered a secular political call for heightened attacks on so-called reactionaries and class enemies. Moreover, it had marked the beginning of some of the most thorough campaigns against religion, including the destruction of icons and temple infrastructure in Hexian.

Yet, in its cosmological rendering, the slogan took on a force of heavenly command beyond earthly statecraft—a call for the banishment of corrupt spirits in a moment of cosmic chaos. Although technically stated in the middle of Mao’s rule in earthly historical time, the power of this slogan, in the mediums’ usage,

came to signify the whole of Mao’s reign. For the mediums, this cosmic chaos could be seen in the ongoing warfare with foreign powers in the pre-Liberation period, when Western and Japanese powers occupied various regions of China. In Hexian, memories of Japanese occupation circulated in the oral accounts of elders. Imperialism and occupation, according to the mediums, were not only secular political acts, but also manifestations of demonic forces. Given this scene of demonic intrusion, Mao was sent from the heavens as an act of divine intervention, to save China from full foreign domination.

The earthly state, in other words, had a cosmic double. Heavenly forces deployed purportedly atheist images, words, agents, and acts of the Party-state for purposes beyond its own knowing. The figurehead of Chinese Communist sovereignty was inseparable from an otherworldly sovereignty, and the Communist Revolution, in this rendering, was in fact a divine affair, aimed at rescuing China from demonic imperial forces. Indeed, some mediums said that Mao himself was unaware of his own otherworldly role during his time on earth, and only learned of it after he returned to the heavens.

Bookending the Maoist-era slogan that was said to banish the demonic spirits, the Deng-era exhortation on black and white cats was cited by spirit mediums as another moment of transformation in the invisible *yin* world. As Xu Liying would go on to describe, with a slight twist on colour scheme:

When Mao died, once Deng Xiaoping took office, 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 (怪), appeared in the world.

The monstrosity she referred to involved the return of myriad corrupted spirits, including ‘fake gods’ (假神)—demonic spirits that now masqueraded as deities, duping humans for

their offerings, vying for wealth and power in the underworld. According to Xu Liying as well as other mediums, this rampant corruption in the heavens has been mirrored on earth. Ever since the Chairman's death, humans and spirits have been driving one another further in their duplicity and greed, resulting in a moral collapse across realms.

Under such circumstances, some spirit mediums described a coming end of the world—a messianic vision in which Mao, or someone like Mao, would someday return, sent by the Future Buddha Maitreya. This messianic return would be accompanied by the annihilation of the current world; the precious few deities and humans who remain virtuous in such chaotic times would be kept, and would repopulate the new world. This new world the mediums described was articulated in both Buddhist eschatological and revolutionary terms: that of a 'true socialism'.

## Spectral Revolution

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida raises questions of inheritance and mourning following the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Christian Sorace (2020, 130) put it in a recent contribution to the *Made in China Journal*, 'the loss of the promise of communism is also a loss of the horizon of future'. For Derrida (1994, 19), to consider place and time 'since Marx', following pronouncements of the triumph of global capitalism, is to consider what remains in the 'non-advent of an event', which carries on in forms secret and ghostly; the very deferral of the event may in turn affirm the sense of a future-to-come.

For the spirit mediums I met in Hexian, the death of Mao and rise of market reforms marked a deferred promise and a haunted present—a moral vacuum filled by swarms of demonic, corrupted spirits. Between visions of Henan's ancient grandeur, memories of pre-Liberation warfare and occupation, and a sense of post-reform dispossession, sat an interval of divine

sovereignty—one in which the peasantry, as Mao (1967, 23) once put it, was poised to 'smash all the trammels that bind them', whether put there by imperialists, warlords, or corrupt officials, and pave the way toward revolution.

Now, as the splendour of the ancient centre and glow of revolutionary horizons come to be eclipsed by new orbits of value, the face of the Chairman interposes itself as a pivot between worlds, hosting multiple forms of power through plays of exhibition and concealment. Occulted forces and signals of the virtuous spirits that remain exude quietly from the state-sanctioned celestial body—the body of the (lost) sovereign.

Through its absent presence, the face of the Chairman gazes over a scene of decay, while animating those who can perceive and decipher his secreted message from the *yin* realm, urging them to toil for the spectral revolution. Such a sovereign faciality, as Hoon Song (2016) writes of North Korea, lends its own embodied presence to the historical gap and promise of a (Marxist) knowledge to come. For the mediums, in spite of his departure from earthly life, Mao's images and words continue to offer visual and linguistic channels for the passage of spirits—spirits of a true socialism. Meanwhile, for those like Cai Huiqing who may or may not engage with these more elaborate cosmological accounts, the face of the sovereign lends itself to critical transfers between worlds, securing the promise of a good life to come. ■



This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 2, 2020*,  
edited by Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2020 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.10](https://doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.10)