

Partnering with Deities: The Modernization Path of Chinese Shaman— “Chuma Xian”

In order to search a belief that is rarely seen in textbooks but truly exists in our life: the "Chuma Xian". I went to Chifeng City, Inner Mongolia, China in May this year for a two-month fieldwork.

The belief in Chuma Xian is a folk practice popular in Northeast China and Inner Mongolia. Its core lies in the coexistence of humans and the spiritual world. Here, people believe that they can establish a mutually beneficial relationship with spirit cultivated from animals (common ones include foxes, yellow snakes, hedgehogs, etc.). If a person with a karmic connection is chosen by an animal spirits, they need to go through a series of ritual to become a Chuma Xian. That is to say, a belief system that uses one's own body as a medium to act on behalf of spirit to accumulate merit, solve problems for others and earn economic rewards for oneself integrates various elements such as shamanism, Taoism and Buddhism, forming a unique cosmology and belief logic.

This is not a wonder in myths and legends, but a daily occurrence where humans and animal deities work together. Some offer incense at the "Tang Kou", some use "possession" to diagnose and solve problems for people, some take it as a side job, and others regard it as a career. After two months of on-site life and participation, I found that this belief is not an unchanging tradition. Under the pressure of modern life and the market, it constantly adjusts its appearance

The first thing that surprised me was the professionalization of Chuma Xian. In Chifeng, Chuma Xian not only continues the ancient ritual but also understands modern "business wisdom" : they divide possession into "Full-possession" and "Semi-possession", and price them based on physical exertion and the strength of performance. The Tang Kou is both a sacred space and a place for providing services. In the face of the impact of urbanization, many Chuma Xian have transformed the energy-intensive "Full-possession" into the more peronic "Semi-possession" ,The seemingly deceptive performative religious behavior is actually a strategic compromise made by Chuma Xian between physical consumption, authority establishment and the expectations of those seeking help. It's retaining the "visible" sense of sanctity while adapting to the physical and market constraints of reality. It can be said that this is a vivid case of mutual compromise and transformation between faith and economy.

What is even more thought-provoking is the reconstruction of the relationship between humans and deities. Becoming a Chuma Xian is often not an active choice but rather a "chosen by deities". Many people first go through the torment of the "excruciating" stage, and then through the guidance of a guiding master, enlightenment, Li Tang (establish shrine) and other procedures, they transform from ordinary people "possessed" by deities into "partners" who can manage the Tang Kou(shrine), deities and take responsibility. This series of ritual is not only a spiritual inheritance but also a set of institutionalized power reorganization. It reminds us that religion and belief is not inherent, but is constantly constructed and reproduced through discipline, reciprocity and economic systems.

This fieldwork experience also gave me a deeper understanding of research methods. First of all, respect the daily perspective: Personally participating in the ritual and having meals and conversations with the believers can better understand why they persist in such a life than observing from afar. Secondly, fieldwork should not only record the "wonders" but also see the "ordinary" : the beliefs of most people are not manifested in dramatic miracles, but in the small confirmations in life, mutual assistance in social networks, and the continuous reshaping of identities.

If the Chuma Xian is regarded as a mirror, it reflects the resilience of contemporary Chinese folk beliefs: it not only absorbs elements of Buddhism and Taoism but also continues the shamanic view of animism. It not only withstands the impact of the modern society but also seeks a way to survive within it. For me, the field is not merely a process of collecting materials; it is also a journey of listening, empathy and reflection - researchers are not only recorders but also those who have been quietly transformed by that world.