



## Rethinking the “Magic State” in China

### Political Imagination and Magical Practice in Rural Beijing

This paper discusses the local imagination of the Chinese state in rural Beijing using ethnographic evidence. In particular, it examines the process by which the state is internalized in people’s lives through local magical practices and collective memories of traditional rituals, geomancy, and spirit possessions. I argue that the magical aspect of the Chinese state in people’s imagination denies an understanding of a magic state as the alternative for a violent and hegemonic reality for the state. In this sense, the Chinese popular perception of the state challenges the established concept of the state as the consequence of an elitist discussion and definition, and at the same time also challenges the national discourse. Furthermore, magical practices and beliefs in rural Beijing in relation to the local comprehension of the Chinese state show that in many cases, the state is considered as powerless.

KEYWORDS: magic state—ritual—power—city—Chinese ritual—Beijing

To understand the popular perception of contemporary Chinese politics we cannot neglect the rumors, stories, and ritualistic practices related to those magical and mythical aspects of the Chinese establishment and its history.<sup>1</sup> Although self-claimed as a modern state, magical practices and popular religious rituals in Communist China were never completely eliminated and have experienced a wave of resurgence in the past decades, especially in rural China (Dean 2003; Wu 2011). Among them is the trend to adapt “traditional” practices to the current Chinese regime. Contemporary political leaders gradually became the center of the political imagination and the reviving ritualistic practices in rural China.

A close look at the inheritance of the popular memories of the Communist regime in rural China may even suggest that the magical imagination and the belief in the magical state have never faded away. The established understanding of the imagination of a modern state with magical elements tends to see state power as the hegemonic “culprit” of such an imagination. In other words, there is a magic state that lives in people’s magical imagery of it. But this is the point that we need to rethink, according to the ethnographic evidence in my fieldwork. My study of magical practices and beliefs and the collective memory of the city of Beijing under the Communist regime, in the small village of Shuiyu in Fangshan district, in the rural area west of Beijing, investigates the relationship between the local magical beliefs and the villagers’ memory of the Communist regime, specifically their understanding of Beijing city not only as a spatial center of their life but also as a center of the invisible power in which the state is absorbed. We shall see how the city of Beijing is perceived as a magical city that not only rules the human state of China but constantly interacts with the world of deities, magical powers, and ghosts, and how this forces us to rethink the concept of the “magic state” not as a passive and peripheral reaction to state, hegemony, but as a discourse with contrasting sides; the total denial of the national discourse and the incorporation of the state into local people’s broader imagination of the world. That is to say, the state itself is not perceived as magical, but it is made magical by something else.

The question here is what the magic state is not. My own answer is that it is something that cannot be seen as the result of the hegemony of the state, a distorted imagination of the periphery of power, or something “made up” by the victims of a violent history. Seeing the Communist regime as a dynasty in the cycling pattern of historical movement rather than a disparate form of state from the past

still remains the popular view. From my fieldwork in Beijing, it was clear that the idea of China as a modern state only indicated the temporal status of the country rather than a new political and social reality. Local people in rural Beijing talked about the modernization of China, but mainly in terms of its technological and institutional changes that have progressed the overall material life of Chinese people. Yet the state itself, emblemized by the city of Beijing, was still regarded as a dynastic state with magical legitimacy. To the villagers, the differences between the urban center of Beijing—which they called “Beijing city” (*Beijing cheng*)—and the rural areas are mainly economic and cultural. Because of the drastic economic differences and differences in lifestyle, local villagers of Shuiyu did not often see themselves as local Beijing people. The three case studies on ancestral worship, ghost possession, and spirit writing illustrate the popular belief in the magical power of the capital city, and the bond between the world of deities and ghosts, the state, and the political power of Beijing. These cases show that the perceived magicality of the state does not exist as the result of people’s passive reaction to state power, and the current establishment is seen as weak and powerless. The reinforcement of a national and local identity is achieved not by imagining the state itself as magical, but by imagining the state as the victim or recipient of the magical.

By looking at the three cases of the collective memories of magical practices in the city of Beijing I shall prove how the state’s power is dampened and local values are reinforced in this rural Beijing community. The city of Beijing is not only the center of the country for the village society but also a collective conduit of different powers and beings. Inside the city’s magical power, as understood and practiced by the local people in Shuiyu village, the magical, political, and economic connections are not accepted univocally as an ensemble of powers positive to human life but as a type of irresistible force that everyone has to be part of, including the state. We shall see how the magical aspect of life in rural Beijing leads to a perception of the state abiding in an intensely patriarchal society with concentrated political power, in contrast to the established understanding of the magic of a state.

#### MAGICAL PRACTICE AND MAGICALITY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

Magical practices in contemporary China include many different types of performative acts and techniques related to religious teachings and traditional Chinese cosmology. As Miller (2006) suggests, it is very hard to distinguish between religion, magic, and local cultural rituals in China historically and socially, because in many cases they are just fused into one. Especially on a local level, ancestral worship has dominated indigenous communities in China for centuries and is still powerful today (Overmyer 2008). Ancestral ghosts are regarded as effective and superior deities with magical power and blessings, who also require constant ritual sacrifice. Magical efficacy remains the core of rural China’s ritualistic as well as cultural life (Tam 2006). Yet the state’s attitude toward the magical as well as religious aspects of Chinese people’s lives is often ambivalent. On an ideological level, this means that anything that is not “scientific” enough and at the same time

not Marxist enough for a modern Chinese state (Anagnost 1987)—i.e., geomancy, fortune-telling, exorcism, shamanistic possession, traditional bodily practice, Buddhist and Daoist rituals, and so on—is traditionally considered as confusing superstition (*mi xin*) according to the official ideology of the Communist Party. Yet these magical practices have never been fully eliminated under the Communist regime’s control and have been constantly transformed and popularized. Even the state itself became part of them. As Ownby (2003) points out, the Chinese state has long lacked an effective method to intervene in the folk religious and magical practices. In return, magical practices in contemporary China have started to show the tendency to modify and subsume the official ideology of the regime. At this point, the popular political understanding of Chinese society always blends with the magical beliefs originating from these practices. This fusion of a rather ineffective state ideology and local magical rituals raises a question: is there a predominant “magic state” in Chinese society regulating and steering people’s lives?

Imagining the modern state as magical in ritual and witchcraft is certainly not new in either anthropology or the study of China. Taussig (1997) first points out that a modern state depends on its phantom incarnations like ghosts, shamanistic possessions, and magical rituals to maintain its political, legal, and economic influence on its people in a post-colonial context in Latin America. Erik Mueggler (2001) applies this idea of the “magic state” onto the post-revolution villages in Yunnan province, on the border of southwest China, seeing the local stories of wild ghosts and rituals blending with Maoist discourse as a strategy to cope with violence, state hegemony, and new political reforms. This indicates that the magic state in this sense is a reification of the omnipotent state power and an alternative imagination of the violence, havoc, and tragedies brought by the state. The same goes with Emily Chao’s (1999) fieldwork on the shamanistic rituals of Chairman Mao in the same province, which indicates that by grafting the Chinese national discourse onto local ethnic rituals, the conjured shamanic spirit of the national chairman is a parallel of the state power. This distinction between the powerful state and the passive local, the center and the periphery, and the state and the magical definitely represents the reality of certain kinds of post-revolution perceptions of the Chinese state, to some extent. Yet it would be perfunctory to label all the ostensibly similar phenomena in contemporary China as essentially the same. As Andrew Beatty (2012) argues, the top-down view of understanding power and hegemony is definitely overused, even when scholars examine the so-called “periphery” of a society. In reality, a local society is often replete with strategies to maintain their own power and autonomy against the superior by manipulating the power discourse. Thus it is worth asking the question: is the power of the state overrated in literature about contemporary Chinese religion and rituals? How are we to understand the discrepancy between the view of a weak Chinese state in controlling local religion and rituals, and the suggestion that there is a strong and innately magical Chinese state incorporated into local Chinese people’s religious life?

This issue was also present in my fieldwork in Shuiyu, not only to me but also to the locals themselves. They admitted that the Chinese state is powerful, but they also believed that its power does not come from itself, that it is not innately

powerful. In this sense, the magic state is not magical on its own. The magical power of the state was perceived as something given by deities and magical beings co-existing with human beings, and the state in this case was understood as part of a “bigger picture” in local cosmology. Therefore, the way in which local people tackle the contradiction between a powerful Chinese state and a powerless state—which had failed to unify and regulate people’s religious beliefs and ideology—was to make the power of the state the subject of local magical beliefs. We shall see how this was achieved in Shuiyu villagers’ collective memories of magic, ritual, and local history.

Here, I use the term “magicality” in a Maussian sense, that our society and daily lives are affected by the invisible and inexplicable power of magical beings (2002). This magicality is embodied in the imagined magical superiority of Beijing city as the capital of the nation and its influence on local villagers’ magical events. The memory of these magical events from local villagers in Shuiyu adumbrates the ubiquitous power of deities and ancestors reified in the magicality of the city. The city itself, rather than perceived as the result of recent processes of urbanization, is seen as the condensation of the magical power and material evidence of China as an imperial continuum from the past, which is the work of a magical power. The magical influence of Beijing city on its peripheral areas shows how people are aware of and naturalize power in a spatial order and how they see the state as a recipient and victim of magical power. The city in this case is more than a location, but is also a mixture of visible and invisible powers that are superior and hegemonic (Feuchtwang 2006). Yet this hegemony is, as we shall see, perpetuated by its magicality that lies in the Shuiyu villagers’ collective memory of the past. Beijing city is comprehended as the mediator not only between Chinese society and the state, but also as a magical mediator between the state and the invisible realm of deities and spirits. Thus, proximity to the capital city not only means an intimate connection to its resources, lifestyle, and social superiority, but also a spatial and physical connection to its magicality.

Shuiyu village is about 80 kilometers from central Beijing. It is a medium-sized village in Beijing with roughly 1,500 people and 490 families. Surrounded by mountains and valleys, the village also enjoys good transportation to central Beijing through bus shuttles.<sup>2</sup> The villagers now have their own private business in each household as a consequence of the economic reform of rural China during the 1980s, when the state monopolization of the rural economy was put to an end (Yang 1994). Local people often define themselves as the “Beijing rural” (*Beijing jiaoku*) residents. They identify the village as part of Beijing as a geographic fact but as culturally and socially rural, and they differ themselves from the urban citizens in terms of lifestyle and values. Yet the pride in being a Beijing resident is definitely felt everywhere. Local villagers constantly talked about the privileges and benefits they enjoyed as Beijing residents, including medical care, educational advantages, and the chance to see high-level officials.

Shuiyu’s political position is interesting in that it is located at the periphery of Beijing city but also the geographic center of the state. Its proximity to the capital city strengthens the local villagers’ perception that the magical power around them

and the city is something resulting from both the central and peripheral political geography. The uniqueness and originality of Shuiyu's case lies in the local understanding of the state as weak and not essentially "magical" but bestowed with a capability of controlling and influencing, and that the current national discourse of denying its magical and cosmological inheritance is a sign of its weakness. The magicity of being Chinese, to the local people, is the core of being Chinese and of living close to the capital. This is the point by which the three cases in Shuiyu force us to rethink the concept of a magic state.

#### CASE I: SPIRIT WRITING AND THE DEIFICATION OF POLITICAL LEADERS

One significant magical belief in Shuiyu village lies in the power and credibility of spirit writing, which is not unusual in Shuiyu or other neighboring villages. Many mid-aged women in the village claimed that they had experienced being the medium for spirit writings around the end of the 1970s, when they were young. The widely spread stories in Shuiyu depict an unusual atmosphere in Beijing, especially after Chairman Mao's death during the Cultural Revolution (*Wenhua dageming*, or *Wenge*). Strange natural and magical phenomena were said to have been witnessed in Shuiyu in the year of Chairman Mao's death and orally passed down from the older to the younger generation. One of the villagers, a fifty-year-old local plantation owner (see Figure 1), told me that when he was a young boy, on the day of Chairman Mao's funeral, that evening he and his whole family saw the sun and moon radiating bright light at the same time in the sky.<sup>3</sup> Similar stories were told by other people as well, about how on the same day local animals behaved strangely and local shrines had unusual lights. Most of these stories occurred during the Cultural Revolution, a time when China experienced its most politically radical phase and the peak of Mao's manic worship.

One of the most vivid stories remembered from that day was told by the plantation owner's wife. On the day of Chairman Mao's funeral, she overheard from her neighbor's conversation that there were miraculous things happening in other villages in rural Beijing related to Chairman Mao on that day. If a "clean girl"



Figure 1. Outside the plantation owner's house. Photograph by the author.

(*ganjing de nühai*)—a virgin—bowed to Chairman Mao’s portrait three times and then used a stick to do spirit writing on a pile of grain, then Chairman Mao’s spirit would be conjured and respond to her request. During the Cultural Revolution, every family in Shuiyu had Mao’s portrait hung on the wall in their house. The wife did not know back then what “clean girl” meant, but she was curious about conjuring Chairman Mao’s spirit. That night she tried to bow to a Chairman Mao poster in her house three times, and then spread some homemade corn flour on the ground. She then found a flat crate and inserted a wooden stick into the crate. She held the crate and let the stick stay vertical to the ground above the corn flour. She said in front of the poster of Chairman Mao: “Great Chairman Mao, can I pass all the exams this term and graduate successfully from primary school?” After her question the crate started to rotate rapidly by itself, and as if an invisible power was moving the stick, it started to write on the flour.

In response to her question, a poem in a traditional genre appeared. She could not understand at all what the poem was saying. Then she said loudly that she could not understand the poem and wished Chairman Mao could respond to her question in an easier way. The stick moved again for the second time and it only wrote two characters on the flour, *ke yi*, which means “yes.” Her parents witnessed the whole process and her story quickly spread throughout Shuiyu. Many people came to ask her to conjure Chairman Mao’s spirit again, but after the day of his funeral no matter how hard she tried she could not redo the conjuring of Chairman Mao again. What she described was very similar to the Chinese divinatory conjuring ritual known as “spirit writing” (*fu ji*). Normally there are specific spirit writing deities that one can choose to conjure for the writing, and the prophecy is written in a traditional poetic genre, which is believed to be able to trespass the boundary between life and death (Zeitlin 1998). The local people in Shuiyu did not have the word *fu ji* for this kind of spirit writing, and they simply called it a kind of *zhuan zhuan*, whose literal meaning is “rotation” or “haunting,” and which refers to all the phenomena related to the spirit of the deceased coming back to the human world. *Zhuan zhuan* according to the local villagers’ interpretation meant that the spirit was still wandering and haunting this world.

Local villagers frequently referred to Chairman Mao as a highly superior deity (*shen*) rather than a political leader. To them, Chairman Mao reincarnated to this world from heaven to conduct the grand heavenly plan for China in a time when the Chinese state (*guojia*) was weak and in danger. Stories and magical practices around him, his deification, and his consecration in the village were regarded as an open secret during the Cultural Revolution. The villagers believed that this is something that had been missing in the national discourse of Chairman Mao. It was public in the sense that most of the people I encountered in many different areas around Beijing city and even people who lived in the city, held the same belief. It was a secret in the sense that local villagers were aware of the fact that such a belief opposed the communist party’s official ideology of materialism and this was not something they could openly talk about.

It is said that the practice of conjuring Chairman Mao’s spirit for spirit writing was witnessed in many villages around Beijing right after his death. Chairman Mao

was believed to have deliberately revealed his true identity as a deity right after his death by magical miracles and spirit writing. The rural area of Beijing was the place where such a revelation could be accomplished due to its proximity to the city center, where Chairman Mao's body was preserved. "He is still protecting the state," one of the young villagers said. "He is the root of China, and the state is under his protection. The government just did not want to claim this. Chairman Mao is a god."

Stories of the deification of political leaders also include figures in the current government. These stories were also spread via local villagers' social media posts, such as on the Weixin platform, saying that most of the prominent and strong political leaders throughout China's history are incarnations of stars and constellations. What the stories indicate is that throughout history the volatile Chinese state has always depended on powerful leaders to continue. Many people said that they could only publically talk about these kinds of topics very recently, when the government's attitude toward such sensitive topics became vague and neglectful. By public they mean that they could not say these kinds of things to tourists or online, until recently. The local people despise the current establishment because of corruption in government and the inactive attitude they often encounter in government offices in Beijing. Chairman Mao represents something bigger than the state, a realm of deities and magical power. After he died, he was believed to go back to that realm where he came from. Thus the state is not the end of magic.

Billioud and Thoraval (2014) discovered a revival of the traditional "Confucian religion" in mainland China at both the government and popular levels, which is initiating a restoration of the traditional Chinese historical and cosmological views. They particularly pointed out that on a popular level, traditional rituals, cults, and semi-religious communities are rising up in recent years due to the resurrection of the traditional Chinese views of the circular movement of history. It seems that these kinds of traditional views never disappeared from mainland China even during the most radical period of its history, the Cultural Revolution (Chao 2013).

Chen-Yang Kao (2009) points out that the time of the Cultural Revolution was in fact not a period when religion and local rituals were radically eliminated in China, but instead a time when religion and ritual were transformed and altered in their interactions with a radical state ideology. His case study was Christianity in southern China. The deification of Chairman Mao in Shuiyu village shows a similar kind of transformation. The Chinese state and society have always been perceived as traditional, imperial, and mandated by heaven. Even the Communist regime, which explicitly and officially condemns such a view, is included in this magical reality.

The Cultural Revolution did not suspend local rituals and magical beliefs, but added new content and elements to the old framework. The Communist regime is not an almighty state but is popularly regarded as a contemporary dynasty. In the case of Shuiyu, the awareness of an irresistible magical power dominating the rise and fall of particular nations—and dynasties—indicates that the state itself is powerless and subject to magic. Thus the Chinese state is not powerful on its own but is part of the magical belief system that the local villagers stick to.

## CASE 2: ANCESTRAL SACRIFICE AND THE PRESSURE FOR RITUAL

The mystification of Beijing city and the state is accompanied by a delineation between local villagers and people in the city. For example, one of the informants, Uncle Bian, told me that his son moved to Beijing city last year and moved in with his girlfriend. They got married in the spring and had an urban wedding in the city, and right after the first wedding they came back for another traditional village wedding. My informant's daughter-in-law was from the urban part of Beijing so they had to hold the first wedding in the city. When I asked him what the need was to hold the second wedding, the answer was: "...because the ancestors would not go to the city. They must be venerated there in the village wedding." The ancestors he referred to were his deceased father and mother. In the traditional village wedding in Shuiyu, the convention is to conduct ritual offerings of cooked food to the deceased ancestors before the banquet begins. This pleases the ancestors and their blessing will fall upon the new couple.

Uncle Bian had once experienced the "actual efficacy" (*zhen lingyan*) of the ancestral power, the magical moment, during his son's village wedding. Because of the busy day and the bride detesting these kinds of rural "superstitions," the whole family forgot to offer food to the deceased ancestors before the banquet. The wedding banquet in Shuiyu is called the "Banquet of Flowing Water" (*liu shui xi*), which means that normally the lunch banquet opens up to anyone who steps into the wedding tent. After paying the celebratory Red Pocket Money (*hong bao*), anyone can choose any empty seat and their food will be served.

Often the hosting family hires two or three different caterers and the banquet lasts for about three hours. The preparation of food takes up to two days and the hosting family often prepares enough food for the whole village, because any shortage of food in the banquet is a humiliation of the family's generosity. Yet in the middle of Uncle Bian's son's wedding, all of the food was completely consumed after twenty minutes, while there were around one hundred people queuing up and waiting for the meals. This unusual shortage of food scared Uncle Bian and made him start to think of ritual flaws that caused this unusual and unexpected situation. He then remembered that the family had not made food offerings to the deceased ancestors yet.

When he came back to his own house where the new couple stayed and the ancestral shrine was located, something strange happened. His son said that the bride had gone into a trance and was rambling in a spooky voice that he had never heard before. The demeanor and voice of the bride changed into something similar to an old lady. Uncle Bian said that every single movement the bride made resembled Uncle Bian's dead mother. It was a ghost possession. Uncle Bian's defense was that the bride had never seen or talked to his dead mother at all. In fact, when the bride met his son, his mother had been dead for three years. And, he wondered, how could a person's voice change so drastically and vividly like that? At that moment, the bride had completely changed into his dead mother, with the same voice, same behavior, and even the same facial expression. She sat on the bed and asked for his dead mother's old tobacco pipe, and that was another secret hobby of Uncle Bian's dead mother that no one outside the family knew.

She sucked on the old pipe as if she was smoking. With the typical local accent and the tone of an angry lady, the bride admonished Uncle Bian and his son for not being filially pious to their ancestors. She said that she was Uncle Bian's mother who travelled back from "the other side" (*ling yibian*) because on this important day everyone at the banquet was fed but the deceased ancestors were forgotten. The dead mother was enraged and accused her two male descendants of being oblivious and disrespectful to the deceased ancestors. She claimed that this was not only from her but also from Uncle Bian's father, who was also in the room but did not want to show his presence.

Uncle Bian and his son knelt down and paid respect to the possessed bride, apologizing for their disrespect and the absence of ritual offerings. Soon they burned some incense and offered some dumplings to the shrine. The bride passed out again. An hour later she woke up and had lost all memory of this event. She felt sick, as if she had recovered from some severe disease. This sickness lasted for a month. Later the banquet went back to normal and the food supply came back as well. Uncle Bian said that these kinds of ancestral possessions were something very normal. He had heard and witnessed them at least three times in Shuiyu village since he was a kid. Usually if the deceased ancestors or the local deities were not properly venerated and served, then the wedding ceremony would be disturbed. This was explained by Uncle Bian as "the pressure for ritual" (*jibai de yal*). The ancestors are constantly watching and inspecting the living descendants and they come back to the living world and express their dissatisfaction if there is any. Uncle Bian said that the manner of ancestral revelation varies from family to family. Possession and food shortage used to be the most frequently seen type of revelation.

I asked him why the ancestors would not go to Beijing city. He gave me a brief answer: "...because Beijing city is not their home, they couldn't go that far. There are powerful beings guarding the city anyway, so that normal ghosts cannot enter." He did not explain what the powerful beings were, but there was a clear sense that Beijing city was a place where the ancestral influence could not reach. That was why there had to be two separate weddings in both the city and the village. Beijing city was, according to him, a place with special geomancy design and magical protections. This is a popular belief in Shuiyu village.

When Uncle Bian's father died, his son often "received" dreams from his grandfather when he lived in the village. But whenever he stayed in the city, such dreams never appeared even once. Therefore, he was convinced that the ancestors could not leave the village. Beijing city was to him not only the center of the state but a completely different space in terms of its ritualistic and magical significance. Uncle Bian said that his grandchildren's generation, who will obviously live in the city, will not have the pressure for ritual sacrifice anymore, yet after he dies he will be buried in Shuiyu. He was worried that he will not be venerated anymore. "In the underworld," he said, "I will be forgotten by my descendants in the city." Uncle Bian said that the urban lifestyle will eventually take over Shuiyu, and it is the government's fault that a lot of the good traditions have been lost. But Uncle Bian's son held a different view. In his eyes, urbanization will never conquer Shuiyu completely because "the state is less stubborn than the ancestors," he said and laughed.

The pressure for ritual mentioned by Uncle Bian is something more collective than personal. Many other of my informants from Shuiyu village shared the memory of the ancestors coming back for the admonishment of their living descendants' ritualistic faults. To the local residents in Shuiyu, the influence of the ancestors is ubiquitous, and so is the case with many other villages nearby. The living parents of someone may not effectively control their child's life, but after they die, their invisible power will become efficacious. Death reinforces the ancestral superiority in Shuiyu villagers' eyes. Yet this powerful influence of the deceased ones also has a limit. The power of the ancestors is extremely localized. The geographic relationship between the village and Beijing city also includes a magical as well as ritualistic distance. For young couples from the village who settle in the city, having two separate weddings is very popular these days. To many local villagers the localization of ancestral power and the belief in the limits of such power were not only evidence of the invisible world of spirits, ghosts, and deities, but also the justification of the division between the urban center and the rural periphery. People often mention that ancestral spirits and ghosts could not enter Beijing city, because the yang energy from the living people is abundant, so that the ghosts and spirits of yin energy were not able to approach. Moreover, in the local villagers' minds the capital city was even more special and powerful in that it was the ensemble of national institutes and government bureaus, which are the strongest and most aggressive concentrations of yang power in the local feng shui belief, and the reason why the emperors of the past had to locate these important bureaus in Beijing. Beijing is doomed to be the capital in the end because of the geomantic power that still remains there. They explained the failure of the Republican government before the Communist Party due to the bad location of the capital. "It was all destined," a thirty-year-old high school teacher said. "Because even the parties and the state cannot decide their own fate. It is all Heaven's Mandate [*tianming*]."

These governmental and national institutes and bureaus, as aggressive and cogent feng shui objects, override the power of the ancestral spirits. This indicates that the wedding in the city can be without the ancestral rituals and, therefore, "untraditional," because the ancestral power cannot reach the city. But it does not mean that the ancestral power does not exist—only that the ancestors have to yield to the more powerful beings and the material dimension, the city and the institutes. Admittedly, this does indicate that the state possesses certain kind of superiority. Yet the next question would be: where the locals believed the power of the city and state comes from? Beijing city is believed to be the capital of the state not because the state decided so, but because of the geomantic power it holds. In other words, the state is the recipient and the victim of magical power, or heaven, just like the deceased ancestors.

### CASE 3: POSSESSION AND ITS PURIFICATION IN THE CITY

Sister Bai used to be a well-known magical healer in Shuiyu village several years ago until 2010. She claimed to be possessed by a local "tea deity" (*cha xian*) and could

heal any disease with normal tea leaves by touching them and letting the patients drink them. Many villagers said that they and their family members were cured numerous times by Sister Bai's magical touch on the tea leaves. She was famous for the effect of her healing technique, and it was witnessed that a lot of people with complex and incurable symptoms from Beijing city came to see her and were cured in the end. Almost all the villagers I met knew Sister Bai as the former magical healer in Shuiyu and her story of being possessed by the celestial being.

She told me the full story of her possession as a kind of ethical lesson. She kept mentioning the "ethical bonds" (*daode lianxi*) between human conduct and the unseen world of mysterious powers. "The state is in such a bond too, ethics also matters to the state," she said. Sister Bai was possessed for a rather long time, roughly five years. At first she had a dream about a flying man with a beautiful face who came down from the sky and told her that she was assigned with the mission of curing patients in the human world for the local deities. After the mission she would be rewarded with miraculous merits and blessings. Sister Bai agreed with the conditions in the dream. After she woke up in the morning, she discovered that the man with the beautiful face in the dream, the celestial being, was standing just behind her. She talked to him but he did not speak at all. Wherever she went the celestial being followed her but did not speak. No one else apart from her could see the celestial being. Sister Bai said she was slightly scared. In the afternoon on the same day she went to visit her aunt. Her cousin had had a strange blemish on his thigh for a very long time, and different medical treatments had failed. The celestial being then got close while she was chatting with her cousin. The celestial being whispered to her in a strange voice, saying that she should find some tea now. She said after hearing the voice, her body became really light and she entered a hypnotic state, as if she was commanded by the voice. The only thing on her mind then was to find some tea. She suddenly asked her aunt to give her some tea leaves and put them in the palm of her hand. Then the celestial being blew his breath on the tea leaves, and then asked her to pick up three dried tea leaves to make a brew for her cousin. She did so and asked her cousin to drink the tea. Then the celestial being remained silent again. This type of possession differs from the kind of ritualistic and shamanistic possessions we often see in African and Amazonian societies, where spiritual possession often follows a trance by the possessed or a certain kind of transformation of the mental state of a shaman (Lewis 1989).

The next day, her aunt and cousin came to visit Sister Bai and told her that after drinking the tea the blemish had completely vanished. Her aunt said that this must have been the power of the miraculous tea that she asked her cousin to drink. Sister Bai was surprised at how rapid the effect of the tea was. Her aunt insisted on giving Sister Bai some gifts for the treatment, but immediately the celestial being said no to her so she did not accept the gifts. Later that night the celestial being told her in her dream that she must not accept any form of remuneration for the treatment, for that would impair her actual reward from heaven. The celestial being was very serious about her providing free treatment because the purity of the effect would be damaged by corrupted and selfish thoughts. She understood it as the ethical bond between the magical tea treatment, her mission, and the celestial being. Her

mission involved not only her assistance to the celestial being by healing disease as a neutral medium but her own ethical purity as well. “As a single woman and a virgin,” she said, “there are reasons why I was chosen to do this.”

According to the villagers, Sister Bai’s reputation soon spread to the west of Beijing, and often outside her door there were long queues of patients from other villages and the city for her magical healing. Many people in the city believe that numerous magical healers and masters of divination live in the mountainous areas around Beijing, and when some of the city residents encounter problems beyond their purviews and capabilities, they tend to find these figures in the rural areas. To a lot of the urban dwellers, the rural areas of Beijing are a center of magic, and magical practice is the ultimate cure for severe problems. The way of Sister Bai’s healing was simple: she picked up some tea leaves from the tin and waited for the celestial being to blow on them and give the tea leaves magical efficacy. Sometimes, she said, she had no memory of doing this at all, but only a blank in her memory. She never charged these patients any payment or remuneration because of the celestial being’s caveat. But one day, one of the patients brought her an expensive jade bracelet for her effective treatment from the tea leaves. She was tempted and took the gift. But the next morning she discovered that the celestial being had completely disappeared, and so did her magical power of healing.

Sister Bai believed that her immoral conduct led to the sudden disappearance of the celestial being. Since the celestial being clearly told her not to accept any form of remuneration and she violated the deal between them, the promise between them was broken. Sister Bai felt physically ill and in a vulnerable condition for a month. After her rehabilitation, she carried on with her life but the villagers said that Sister Bai still remained a bit quirky and paranoid after the possession. Her mom said that she was very scared when she first heard that her daughter was possessed by some spirit, and normally as commonsense in the village, malicious possessions could be cured by sending the possessed person to Beijing city. The local explanation was that malicious spirits could not enter because the city was originally designed in a particular feng shui structure to make sure that malicious powers could be screened out. In fact, the old house where Sister Bai lived had a similar geomantic design (Figure 2).

Several different local stories contained a similar plot: someone was possessed by a malicious spirit when he or she (in most cases she) was passing by a cemetery or when their house was built on a tomb, and the possessed person started to harm his or her family or self-harm, then the family took this person to Beijing city. The moment when they were passing a particular bridge, called the Lugou Bridge (*Lugou qiao*), which is the one that used to connect central Beijing city and the rural area and was the boundary mark of the city, the possessed person usually fell into a faint. And when they woke up in the city, they would be conscious again and fully cured, unless they went back again to the place where they were possessed. The local stories described this bridge as a lock of Beijing city and attributed the geomantic function to the first Ming dynasty prime minister Liu Bowen, who legendarily designed the city according to his esoteric feng shui knowledge and made the city an invincible capital (Chen 1996).



Figure 2. An old “expelling-evil” (*bixie*) stone on the wall of Sister Bai’s house that says “Quell the House” (*zhenzhai*). Photograph by the author.

Sister Bai’s mom once tried this technique with Sister Bai, but it did not work at all. People were convinced that because Sister Bai’s possession was not a malicious one but a good one, the expelling effect of the city would not work. The good spirits, not to mention a local deity, are welcomed in the city. In other words, the feng shui power of the city is used to maintain the balance between the human world and the unseen world. There is a system of justice and a standard of what is good and evil in both spiritual possession and geomantic design. This system is believed to control the individuals in the Chinese state and the state itself. Meyer (1978) suggests that the geomancy of Beijing city is purposefully conceived to order and tame the monstrous and ferocious power in nature and the unseen world, so that the city is protected with positive patterns and symbols, and so is the state. In the local understanding, possessions have a moral nature. It can be either auspicious or inauspicious according to the cause of the possession and the moral essence of the ghosts. Many other possession stories spread in Shuiyu village were related to the accidental trespass of the territory of the deceased or the disrespect of demons and ancestors. The unseen world reacts to the moral conduct of human beings in a moral way. Thus, to Sister Bai her experience was a moral teaching for her. It was not really a “possession” *per se* because the celestial being rarely took over her body. For most of the time it was more likely that the celestial being manifested himself to her in a conscious and less invasive manner. The loss of all the blessings promised by the celestial being to Sister Bai indicates a type of surveillance of human beings’ ethical conduct from outside human society. Many local villagers believed that most of the time these powers from the unseen world would not intervene too much into human society on a daily basis, but on many important occasions their influence was present. The two different types of possessions, malicious and good, are proof of the order of the unseen world. Feng shui techniques, magical healings, and possession itself are regarded as the actual effect of the power of human and non-human ethical conduct. Thus our social order is not only a social issue but is believed to possess actual power.

Sister Bai's possession experience was also associated with the belief that there had always been a heavenly plan for the Chinese state, and that the state temporarily fell and eventually would rise up again, like in history. Every particular individual has its own mandate, and likewise, the Chinese state also has a mandate as well, which is arranged by the deities. Villagers often talk about the secret movement of such a mandate whenever they talk about Sister Bai, as if her possession experience is the solid evidence of the existence of a secret plan for both individuals and the state. Thus, to them the state is not an omnipotent entity but a collective of individuals like Sister Bai. Beijing city as the center of the state is a result of the deities' grand plan.

#### THE MAGICALITY OF DAILY LIFE AND THE STATE

From the three cases we see that the state was perceived as weak and ineffective in local people's daily life and comprehension of human ethics. Human social ethics and moral conduct are not seen as purely secular but magical, particularly in the case of ancestral possession and the celestial possession of Sister Bai. This magicality is constantly defined by the local discourse as "miraculous things" (*shenqi de shiqing*), something related to the realm of gods, ghosts, and geomancy, and beyond daily common sense—but the state is not highlighted in these powers. The causes, processes, and consequences of social behaviors are monitored by the invisible powers and magical beings. Magical beings who supervise and occasionally even interfere with human affairs can directly influence people's lives and even social formations like the state. They are invisible most of the time but manifest themselves to us if needed. As Parkin (1985) suggests, there is always the bond between the domain of the moral and the domain of the physical and the natural, specifically in the context of distinguishing what is good and evil. In the case of Shuiyu, the stories and local villagers' personal experiences indicate that what is ethical in daily life and society is magical as well as natural. The state itself, as an emblem of social ethics, relations, and regulations, is seen not as almighty, but only the result of magical actions. The loss of traditional morality, lifestyle, and the context of magic in Beijing is perceived as evidence that the state is embarrassed to admit its subjected position to traditional values. The magicality of everyday life becomes a strategy for local people to reinterpret the state beyond an official discourse.

It is this view that compels the patients to consult Sister Bai for magical healing, and Uncle Bian to offer food for the deceased ancestors, and the plantation owner's wife to conjure Chairman Mao's ghost. The relationship between the state and individual's life is believed to be navigated by the magic power that controls both sides of this relationship. Individuals are affected at the same time by ancestral pressures, ethical norms, and magical power. Beijing as the capital city of the Chinese nation not only absorbs and concentrates money and political power from the whole nation but even purifies malicious ghost possession with its magical geomancy. The magical power of this place is the reason why Beijing was made the capital in the first place. The source of its superiority is not the state, but magical power itself. The city is more than a symbol of political power of the state but

possesses actual magical efficacy, by which the state is also influenced. The state is seen by the local villagers in Shuiyu as something that is ignorant of its origin, where it comes from: the traditional values that the rural dwellers still possess.

In the case of conjuring Chairman Mao's ghost for spirit writing, one particular individual as the political leader of the state is the incarnation of the grand plan for China as a whole. Chairman Mao was believed to rule in Beijing according to his Heavenly Mandate, the same heavenly command that made Beijing the capital city of the country for centuries. Based on the elite discourse, many scholars have discussed why Maoism resembles a type of religion or quasi-religion in modern China (Kitagawa 1974; Wakeman 1990; Zuo 1991). Yet this is only from the perspective of the top levels of society that retrospectively looks at the history of the PRC from the 1950s to the 1970s. In Shuiyu's case, Chairman Mao is regarded as an authentic deity juxtaposed with other traditional deities and celestial beings. He is so powerful that even his ghost influences individuals' lives beyond state control, and this is something absent from the elite and national discourse. Local people use its absence to dampen the power of the elite discourse on the state. In this sense, the invisible magical realm and the grand plan for China manifests the fate of a state beyond the social discussions of it. The state is an entity that even exists in the magical realm, and it is related to each individual within its territory. Beijing city on the one hand mediates and concentrates the magical power toward the state, and on the other hand influences each individual's daily life in a magical way. This is just like Beatty's argument mentioned at the beginning, that the role of the state and the top level of the hierarchy are overrated in understanding the social dynamics of power and hegemony. Everyday-life magic serves as a tool for people from a lower social station to encompass the state into their cosmology in understanding the world.

#### IS THE STATE MAGIC?

From this ethnographic study we can state that the state is not perceived as autonomous and omnipotent. All three stories display the social landscape where power is manifested and how power impacts people who live in the lower social stations in China, be it the power of the ancestors, the power of the city, or power from the invisible world of ghosts and deities. The particular location of Shuiyu village makes this place an even more extreme example: a village in rural Beijing that is geographically intimate with the capital city but socially distant from the urban culture. Thus the location where all the magical phenomena occurred is a hybrid of a social periphery and geopolitical centrality. The magical facet of Beijing city and the stories of possessions and spirit writings in Shuiyu imply that the realm of magic is something that the locals understood but the state is too embarrassed to admit. The argument that the hegemonic state forces village people to believe in an alternative magical reality, like Hu (2012) observes, is not what happened in Shuiyu. The state itself is not magical, but magical beings themselves are. These kinds of powers subsume human society into a bigger world of invisible plans, where our existence is only the perceptible range of the whole spectrum. The

influence from the invisible realm is ubiquitous in people's lives and the capital city Beijing is where these invisible influences are considered to condense, which goes beyond a simple center of the state. Chao (1999) has shown how a similar shamanistic ritual for conjuring Mao's spirit in southwest China serves as a mediator between the local people's complex transformation of their identity and state power in the post-Mao era. In a similar way magical phenomena in Shuiyu, including spiritual possession, entails both the imagined reality of state power, its limitations and provenance, and the mockery of the modern and secular Chinese state. This contradictory process means that from the bottom of the society, the fate of the state and state affairs appear not even determined by social elites or the state itself, for they are also the susceptible subjects of an invisible magical power. The local villagers felt that they are closer to the center of the state and the authentic "Chineseness" than anyone else in the country.

Local villagers' perceptions of and interactions with the state went beyond the situation in which voices of the Chinese state try to impose it as a secular and modern sovereign with its unique historical continuity. The state is not even reinforced by magical beliefs, either. These imaginations as active constructions from the local are absent in the national discourse, and they are used as a transformative tool for the locals to consolidate their own values in the process of urbanization. The Chinese state now is essentially the same as other previous dynasties, which were under the influence of magical power and were the subject of a grand plan. To them, the Chinese state is not only what Anderson (1983) concludes is an imagined assembly of social consciousness that is further recalibrated by the elites in words; nor is it a demonized magical being that terrifies everyone in the periphery, such as how we traditionally understand the magic state. As Gates and Weller (1987) point out, Chinese popular ideology since the late imperial period has always been to some extent independent from the elites' discourse in the country, and the mystification of power is often initiated from the folk ideology rather than the official one, particularly in the case of Chinese popular religion and popular belief (Anagnost 1987). This type of mystification not only puts forward the inevitability of Chinese state power, but also challenges the veneer of the Chinese state established by the Communist elites and intellectuals, who claim that China has abandoned its problematic past. As Bruun (1996) found in the revival of Chinese feng shui geomancy in the post-Mao era, traditional techniques like geomancy and possession live outside explicit articulation and reinforce local communities' identities.

In other words, the magic state is an active and subversive tool for local people to resist state ideology and weaken its power. The people in the state, or the so-called masses, are not simply muted recipients of state power but active contributors to the existence of the state, who sometimes even challenge the establishment's endeavor to "de-magicalize" China (Poon 2008). Because of their close proximity to Beijing, local villagers have seen the weakness and loss of power by the state and find a way to encompass the state into their own cosmology. They see its vulnerability, and their proximity to traditional values and beliefs allows them to see themselves as the ones who know the state better than itself. Ling (1994) argues that the contribution to the strengthening of state power from the

process of naturalizing the state within mass society is even more essential to the Chinese state than elite reinforcement. The perpetuation of the Chinese state in my ethnography lies in the understanding of the state as the mediator between society and the invisible world of spirits and deities, and the material evidence is the magicity of its capital city. This is in fact the “cosmologization” of politics from the bottom of a society, in which the state is nothing but a delegate of magic. This is why Yang (1988) believes that the division between the state, the society, and the people is useless in explaining the dynamics of state power, especially in the Chinese case, when in practice the state and society are fused together historically and cosmologically. Accordingly, the anthropological concept of the magic state should be adjusted in order to understand the case of Shuiyu. The state is not magical *per se*, the state is embedded in magic without knowing it. Beijing city is magical because of the ubiquitous magical power condensed in its geographic location. Bell (2012) argues that magical beliefs of the state and urbanization in London during the 19th century were active endeavors by the city dwellers to adjust themselves and empower those in low positions. With an absence of such a magical context in Beijing city, magical beliefs related to social ethics and the state function as such in a transitional area between the center and the periphery, rural Beijing.

## CONCLUSION

If we look at the memories of the villagers in Shuiyu retrospectively, there is a detachment from the official ideology, which to the local villagers is only the ostensible facade of the Chinese state. There is also a view that sees the state not as powerful in and of itself but as bestowed with a power it does not fully understand or know how to wield. In their memory and their perception of the magicity of both daily Chinese life and the state, it is a state that possesses magical efficacy, is susceptible to the mysterious projection that has lasted throughout history, and which cannot autonomously run on its own. In a world where Chairman Mao is a god sent down to save the Chinese state, where the capital city Beijing is chosen because of its geomantic values, and where a tea deity said there was a grand plan for China, the issue of the state is even irrelevant. The magical power itself is what matters in this case, which the state is too embarrassed to admit. Beijing was designed as a capital city with its magical superiority, and the magicity of this city guarantees an intact state under the mandate of heaven.

The magic state is not so magical and powerful from top to bottom in Chinese society, as we have seen in the case of Shuiyu. The magicity of the state is perceived as something bestowed by deities and magical beings, and local people believed in certain kinds of greater powers that influences or even determine the fate of a nation. The state is powerful, but its power does not come from itself. The state is only a medium through which the magical beings communicate with human beings. The positionality of Beijing city is a result of the magical power that influences the fate of the state. The state did not create Beijing’s magical positionality, and conversely, Beijing’s magical positionality determines the future of the

state. This is a political cosmology that make the state part of a grand plan connected with a magical universe. The magic state is not magic, but is made magic.

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#### NOTES

1. My greatest thanks to Dr William Matthews for his help in reading this paper and encouraging me to publish it. This research was also conducted with the help of my friend Kiki Qiyao Wang.
2. For the village's official website see Beijing shi fangshan qu nanjiao xiang renmin zhengfu (2017).
3. For ethical reasons all of my informants have aliases. Other information is revealed with their consensus.

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