

A poetics and politics of possession: Taiwanese spirit-medium cults and autonomous popular cultural space.

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## **A Poetics and Politics of Possession: Taiwanese Spirit-Medium Cults and Autonomous Popular Cultural Space**

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A Poetics and Politics of Possession:

# Taiwanese Spirit-Medium Cults and Autonomous Popular Cultural Space

Peter Nickerson

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My intent in this essay is to discuss cults of spirit possession and healing in Taiwan, to consider the potential for this form of popular culture to create autonomous spaces, and to evaluate the larger social and political consequences of such autonomy. However, before turning to discussion of Taiwan, it would be useful to examine briefly another recent study of possession cults in a perhaps not entirely dissimilar environment, namely, Michael Taussig's barely fictionalized Venezuela. (Taiwan is also a former colony with a well-developed modern economic sector.) In his *Magic of the State*, Taussig describes a kind of symbiosis between the state and popular religion, in which the same force that animates the bodies of the possessed is the history, and the historical figures and stereotypes, on which the state relies for its legitimation: “a sixteenth century *cacique*, an early nineteenth century barefoot black cowboy freedom fighter, ... the Liberator [Simon Bolívar] himself, coughing blood.” And in thus physically manifesting, making **[End Page 187]** palpably real, the normally merely metaphorical figurations on which the nation-state depends for its own legitimating appropriation of history, popular religion—the bodies of the urban poor—“suppl[ies] stately discourse with its concrete referents.” At the same time, participants in the possession cults themselves become in some way empowered—able to make magic from the magic of the state.<sup>1</sup>

All of this might be applied to contemporary Taiwanese popular religion, except the magic involved is that of a state that went out of existence in 1911. Most discussions blithely skip over this issue, referring to the bureaucracy of the other world as an obviously more or less accurate reflection of this-worldly administration, all the while failing to note that the Jade Emperor's earthly counterpart can no longer be found.<sup>2</sup> So that, perhaps, is one way of stating the question this essay seeks to address: What possibilities open up when the state chooses (as I shall discuss in more detail below) to rely on other, secular sources for its legitimacy?

Taussig's analysis, which I by no means would wish to dispute, fits rather nicely with many currently accepted notions of what constitutes popular culture. As is well known, most debates on this topic have oscillated between two poles. On one end of the spectrum is the gloomy view of the Frankfurt school, according to which the public at large is subject to the hegemony of a “culture industry.” Ordinary people, while presented with the illusion of choice, consume culture the same way they consume any other industrial product, and thus are placed under the same restraints to which their bourgeois overlords subject them in the more purely economic spheres of labor and the consumption of material goods.<sup>3</sup> On the other end of this spectrum, those who have sought elements of resistance within popular culture have done so by claiming that the dominated might make use—in a subversive manner—of what is given to them by the dominant classes. Such resistant uses themselves then become a praxis that is not only consumption but also the production of new meanings or “readings.” One might mention Michel de Certeau's metaphor of the rented apartment, not owned but decorated to the renter's taste.<sup>4</sup> But, ultimately, only limited gains can be made. Consider John Fiske's comparison of popular uses of the products of the dominated to guerrilla warfare. The guerrillas may resist, and indeed may win concessions from the established authorities, but ultimately, like so many Viet **[End Page 188]** Cong, they need to melt into the general village population again, once more indistinguishable from the rest of the compliant masses.<sup>5</sup>

Taussig's stance is quite consistent with this latter view: the “people” use what is given to them by the state—the history with which the “State of the Whole”

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