THE WORKROOM: THE VERNACULAR PRACTICE AND THEORISING OF A RELIGIOUS GROUP IN CONTEMPORARY NORTHEAST CHINA*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates a religious group in contemporary northeast China. The group is formed by ritual experts and adherents of a traditional folk belief in animal spirits. The group runs as an institution providing aid to those who need psychological treatment, mainly using unorthodox psychological methods and therapies. Most members of this group identify themselves as devout Buddhists. They have developed a series of innovative rituals and generated syncretic teachings combining folk beliefs, vernacular Buddhism, Chinese traditional medicine, and unorthodox psychology.

Based on primary fieldwork materials, this research regards this group as a unique religious phenomenon rooted in the particular sociocultural context of contemporary China. The structure and nature of the group is analysed from a folkloristic perspective, according to which the communicative process is highlighted. Two paradigms of the constitution of the group are examined: the network of interaction, and the community of intra-action. This research finds that the group is constituted in the dialogue of the two paradigms, which are unified by the coherence of the vernacular religion experienced by the members in everyday life.

KEYWORDS: religious group • Chinese folk religion • vernacular religion • shamanism

INTRODUCTION

"Psychological Counselling Service Centre for Adolescents: psychological consultation, psychological guidance, psychological healing, physical recovery and cranial nerve

healing." This is the English translation of what was written on a shop sign somewhere in a town located in northeast China. Labelling itself as a psychological workroom that aims to provide mental aid to teenagers, it is, in practice, a gathering place for a religious group, the majority of whose members are shamanic ritual experts who have worshiped animal spirits (*xian*). The group is led by a mentor who is an experienced shamanic spirit medium and at the same time a devout Buddhist.

Various disciplines have focused attention on such non-institutional and non-mainstream religious groups, especially the sociology of religion, which focuses on the organisation and orientation of such groups. Two concepts are applied to distinguish different types of deviant group in relation to the normatively sanctioned form of beliefs (Wallis 1975: 89; Hampshire and Beckford 1983: 208). The first is 'cult', which is a more individualistically and mystically oriented group identified as having a transient, tolerant and non-exclusive nature and an amorphous and un-condensed structure (Troeltsch 1931; Nelson 1969: 155; Campbell 1977: 375; Campbell 1978: 228–229; Richardson 1978: 31). The second is 'sect', applied to particular groups that have a tendency to separate from mainstream society and offer itself as the uniquely legitimate access to truth or salvation (Marty 1960: 130; Wallis 1975: 90; Campbell 1978: 229). Because the pejorative associations attached to them in non-scholarly contexts (Richardson 1993: 348), alternatives such as 'new religious movement' (NRM) have been in use since the 1990s (Olson 2006; Gallagher 2007; Cusack and Kirby 2014).

However, as sociological definitions of sect and cult developed in the research on Western and Christian societies, the terminological demarcation between these terms is not very well established in other fields. Actually, even inside the field of sociology of religions, sect and cult are sometimes used indifferently as synonymous, and NRM used as their preferred alternative (Enstedt 2020: 292). In the field of Chinese religious studies, the term sect mainly indicates a syncretic religious group with clear criteria for memberships, distinguishable beliefs and doctrines, and unique means of salvation (Overmyer 1981: 154; Harrell and Perry 1982: 285). Cult, often modified by "local", refers to the worship of a certain deified being, whether individual or animal; the organised groups around the deified objects are not the highlighted perspective when cults are referred to (Shahar and Weller 1996: 3; Szonyi 1997). Sometimes the two terms are conflated and complementary with sect used to denote an organised group of people engaged with a cult. This can be observed in the anthropological research on Chinese sectarian groups conducted in Taiwan by David Jordan and Daniel Overmyer (1986: 7). Some active non-mainstream religious groups in contemporary Chinese societies are labelled sect (Thornton 2010 [2000]: 215; Lin 2017), sectarian group (Dubois 2005; Yang and Hu 2012) or NRM (Ownby 2008: 4).

It would be difficult to define the group depicted at the beginning of the article with any one of the terms listed above. During my participant observation within the group, I have found that it is equipped with Buddhist teachings and psychological therapies and runs as an entity where adepts of traditional folk belief gather and accept doctrines. The group lacks an organisational structure, and all its knowledge and skills are exoteric. It aims to provide mental aid to the whole neighbourhood. Although some of the rituals and theories are rooted in the shamanic tradition, members of the group believe their activities are entirely rationally and scientifically oriented. Although they share a unanimous religious understanding, they do not consider themselves a religious organ-

isation. Some members of this group may share similarities in certain respects with any one of the types of religious groups listed above, from cult to NRM. According to Adam Y. Chau's (2006: 75) modalities of Chinese religious practice, the way of "doing religion" in this group is a mixture of personal–cultivational, liturgical–ritual, immediate–practical, and relational modalities. However, in general, the group's way of doing religion does not precisely resemble any conceptual model and thus placing it on the Procrustean bed of any ideal type would be arbitrary. Neither would I hasten to make a definition for their practice. I will call it the Workroom in this article, as this is what they call themselves. This term in Chinese, *gong-zuo-shi* ('workroom'), refers to the place where the group gathers, as well as to the group as an organisation informally. In practice, *gong-zuo-shi* has become an endonym for the group. The Workroom is a unique religious phenomenon rooted in the high mobility of the sociocultural environment in contemporary Chinese society. Attention has rarely been paid to this type of religious group, at least in the field of research on Chinese religion.

The materials of this research are mainly from my own fieldwork in northeast China in the summer of 2024. Except for the mentor, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine core members of the Workroom. Four of the interviewees are also assistants to the mentor. All of them are female, aged from 35 to 50, born and brought up in rural regions. Only a few finished secondary education, but all of them are literate. The mentor was interviewed six times in the period from 2021 to 2024, including both online and face-to-face interviews. In addition to interviews I also did intense participant observation for a week as part of the Workroom, during which I observed and recorded two longer rituals and several daily events.

Based on these materials, this article will shed light on the following questions: How is the Workroom organised and run as a religious group? What kind of tradition is developed inside the Workroom? How has the Workroom combined traditional shamanic folk belief, vernacular Buddhism, and psychological therapies?

In order to answer these questions, the structure and nature of the Workroom as a religious group should be analysed. In this article, as the focus is on the emergence, transmission and variation of the performances and traditions in the Workroom, the concept of group will first be discussed in a folkloristic sense. Group has served as an essential concept in folkloristics since Alan Dundes (1965: 2) made the classical definition of folk and folklore, according to which folk is any *group* of people who share common tradition. Dan Ben-Amos (1971) conceptualised folklore as a communicative process that takes place in social interactions, as per his definition of folklore as artistic communication in small groups. Thus, in a religious group, the shared common feature is the religious traditions that the group considers its own. The communicative process in the group is based on religious expression, such as the performance of rituals. Moreover, the performances and traditions generated from religiosity and expressivity can be discussed as a particular form of group folklore.

This article follows the folkloristic conceptualisation of group, using the model proposed by Dorothy Noyes (2016: 21) in which a group serves as the dialogue between two paradigms: the empirical network of interactions in which culture is created and moves, and the community of social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance. In this research, the first section will concentrate on the network of interactions circulating around the mentor, who is located at the centre. The network has

expanded from the centre to the periphery by involving more and more members who have accepted the tradition of the group as a way to communicate with one another. The second section highlights the community of social imaginary, which includes not only members of the group but also non-human agents such as animal spirits and soul ancestors, for they are involved in the same religious domain generated in the communicative process. The third section focuses on the performances of the rituals and a theorising of the traditions.

THE NETWORK OF THE WORKROOM: SHAMANS, PROTÉGÉS AND CLIENTS

The network of interaction within the Workroom circulates around a central position occupied by the mentor, a 41-year-old female living in a county town located in northeast China. The Workroom was initiated in 2018, and she has been acting as a *Xian* since her 20s. She has also been a devout Buddhist for more than ten years and acts as an alternative therapist. These multiple roles and identities have shaped the network of interactions of the Workroom in multiple ways, and ultimately the network was formed as a result of her attempt to unify these roles.

The Workroom might be a new phenomenon in the context of Chinese religious life, but long before its emergence the mentor had been practicing *Xian* shamanism. Traditionally, the core of *Xian* belief is the worship of different animal spirits, which are believed to originate from wild animals and which have obtained supernatural abilities and lifespan through a process called self-cultivation (*xiu-lian*, *xiu-xing*) (Li 2023: 18). According to this folk belief, animal spirits are enshrined on the altar of the spirit medium and are regarded as the tutelary deities and origin of his or her supernatural power. The role of ritual experts in this folk belief concurs functionally with the role of shaman, according to Thomas Dubois' (2009: 6) definition: a communally recognised professional who cultivates personal relationships through assistance in order to achieve particular aims for the community, which are generally healing, divination, and/or control of the future.

The ongoing shamanic career of the mentor, which started relatively early in her life, has had a profound influence on the formation of the Workroom, making it at least partially an analogy of the network formed by shaman and clients in the practices of folk belief. This can be demonstrated by the fact that many of the core members, who participate in the activities and rituals regularly in the Workroom, are at the same time novice shamans initiated by the mentor. It is normal in various shamanic cultures around the world that an experienced shaman should initiate a novice shaman. What is unique in *Xian* shamanism is that the novice or potential shaman more approximates a client than a protégé to the experienced one. Shamans often point to a period of disease in their personal lives as a pivotal event that led to one or more spirits making themselves available as a resource for healing or survival (ibid.: 57). In the case of *Xian* shamanism, the shamanic disease might turn out to be various circumstances of disorder that disrupt normal life. This disorder could be mental or physical and is often caused by animal spirits in order to force the potential shamans to be subjected to the will of the spirit and offer his or her cooperation to this spirit. In this situation, a potential shaman

would seek help from an experienced one as a client because of the ordeal of shamanic disease. If the experienced shaman detects the client's disease as a disorder triggered by animal spirit(s) "recruiting" a new shaman, a ritual called 'establishing the altar' (*li tang-zi*)[1] would be performed (Li and Zhou 2011: 58; Li 2013: 5; Liu 2020: 21). The ritual is regarded as a formal shamanic initiation, after which the novice shaman starts to enshrine animal spirits and practice as a shaman. Ideally, the novice shaman would recover from the shamanic disease and establish a mentor–protégé relationship with the experienced shaman to learn the necessary skills and knowledge.

Part of the network of interactions in the Workroom has been formed in the same way. Potential shamans were engaged in the network, with the mentor positioned at the centre, for the sake of a solution to the disorder caused by animal spirits. Then, like other experienced shamans, the mentor attempts to restore harmony between the potential shaman and the animal spirits by confirming their relationship of worship and cooperation through certain rituals, after which potential shamans remain in the network as protégés instead of clients. Nevertheless, compared with the network of conventional *Xian* shamans, the network of the Workroom is tighter and more stable. It is not easy to maintain such a well-constructed network with active participation for conventional experienced shamans for two reasons. First, in practice, not all potential shamans become novice shamans after the ritual of establishing the altar. It is sufficient for many to enshrine and worship the animal spirits regularly to avoid the disorder. Thus, those who lack the intention and motivation to continue with careers as an expert in shamanic ritual will probably not remain in the network based on the mentor–protégé relationship with the experienced shaman. Second, after the ritual of initiation, if the novice shaman should still suffer from the disease, then as a client with an unsolved problem, he or she would conceivably turn to the next experienced shaman and repeat the process. Hence, in *Xian* shamanism in northeast China, a shaman can be initiated multiple times and eventually remain close to only one of his or her initiators in the network of interactions. A notable proportion of the mentor's protégés had already been initiated by other experienced shamans before they came to the Workroom. Thus, there are certainly other factors and features that ensure the tightness and stability of the Workroom's network.

Those factors can be found in the development of the Workroom, during which the mentor's other roles were revealed. According to the mentor, the Workroom originated in 2018 when she started as assistant to a teacher from Canada, invited by her relative to teach *Chan* meditation.[2] This kind of activity, which follows the model of the popularisation of Japanese Zen in the West, has been rediscovered in China as a sort of "culture" or "lifestyle" in tune with modernity since the 1980s (Ji 2011: 36). The meditation course lasted for half a year. After the teacher left for Shanghai in 2019, the mentor started to preside over the Workroom and give lectures on traditional cultures and psychological knowledge. (FM: interview 2, 27/07/2024) Although no member of the present Workroom group has attended from the outset, it is at least certain that the mentor has been the only Workroom teacher for most of the time.

Since the mentor started to lead the Workroom, it has gone through a transition from a group pursuing a modern lifestyle, to its present form, a medical establishment targeting adolescents with mental problems. Where the mentor overtly performs the role of therapist, considered the other side of the coin to the role of shaman: the two roles can

overlap and intersect, but they are not completely identical to each other. What links a shaman with a therapist for mental problems in adolescents is another characteristic of the shamanic belief in northeast China, specifically a spirit's call could apparent not only to the potential shaman but also, sometimes even exclusively, to that person's child, i.e. disorders suffered by a child can be interpreted as the spirit's revelation to a family member. In the Workroom, the clients' disorders are interpreted and diagnosed by the mentor according to the shamanic worldview, while many of the clients, whether adult patients themselves or the parents of adolescent patients, have already been aware of or even previously involved with *Xian* shamanic practices. However, the Workroom is far from merely a shamanic group, as the mentor does more than perform treatment as a shaman. Apart from innovative shamanic rituals, the mentor's healing techniques include a series of bodily and mental interventions that enhance and tighten the client's interpersonal contact with her and other members of the Workroom, which derives the ability to restore the patient's sense of belonging and intactness (Koch 2015: 449). For example, in the case of an adolescent mental disorder, the mentor often attempts to reveal the spiritual aetiology by using sandplay therapy or other psychological games; for older clients and members, a family constellation is often organised as it is believed in the Workroom that by simulating the patient's family members, the karma that caused the disorder can be discovered. Interestingly, although these therapies are from Western psychology (whether academically sanctioned or not), they bear nuances in the Workroom, as they are incorporated into the Workroom's worldview. The mentor also heals her patients by regulating their way of breathing, with massage, or by making Chinese medical herbal plasters together with the members. Whatever techniques the mentor uses, the key point is that the patient should participate in her or his own healing maximally. Medical anthropology notes that spiritualist healing can gradually transform a person's existence by incorporating him or her, and sometimes the entire family, into a religious community, and over the long term this healing can provide a new interpersonal network (Finkler 1994: 189). This is exactly what can be observed in the Workroom. As an alternative therapist using the techniques mentioned above, the mentor very precisely grasped the needs of the patients, because for the patients or their parents, who are from religious backgrounds, the differences between biomedical and religious healing systems are less significant than their shared existential engagement in the problems (Storck et al. 2000: 592).

Both within and without the healing processes, the mentor also consistently shapes the recognition and worldview of the members through various teachings. Thus, we need to discuss her third role, that of teacher who gives instruction on psychological theories and therapies, knowledge of traditional Confucianist and Buddhist culture, and other vernacular knowledge. The teachings in the Workroom cover a wide range of forms and contents: non-profit lectures on Chinese traditional culture and self-cultivation methods, practices of meditation, Chinese traditional medicine, psychological therapies, etc. These teachings seemingly form a syncretic corpus that lacks an apparent system. In the interviews and lectures in which I had a chance to participate, some glimpses of the concrete content of the knowledge can be caught: Confucianist ethics ideology (FM: interview, 12/10/2022), Neo-Confucianist principles (FM: interview, 18/10/2022), Buddhist stories and doctrines, Chinese traditional medicine therapies such as massage and herbal plasters, the psychology of Chinese traditional medicine,[3] some

Western psychological therapies such as sandplay therapy and family constellation, etc.[4] Teachings based on knowledge shared by the mentor are practiced by members regularly, almost every day. The mentor's instructions to the clients are not confined to ritualistic healing but combine a series of practices consisting of innovative shamanic ritual, physical and mental consolation therapies, and reconstruction of worldview. It is a systematic therapeutic process derived from an unsystematic corpus of knowledge. The success of this process could be thanks to the mentor's effort to construct vernacular theories and to theorise the vernacular. Here, the concept of theory is no longer limited to privileged cosmopolitan and intellectual cultural achievements but includes the creations of the broader community (Briggs 2008: 102). In the Workroom, vernacular theories are constructed by absorbing knowledge from various origins. Versatile strands of fragmentary knowledge are contrived by the mentor into a series of diverse but congruent teachings. The majority of the teachings in the Workroom are theorised knowledge of vernacular origin, as they are not the academically sanctioned scientific or cultural canons but are conceived through the individual creation and interpretation of the mentor. Thus, these teachings can be discussed as a form of vernacular knowledge. Vernacular knowledge is not a systematic and consistent doctrine but rather an expressive strategy and its never-finalised product that appears in manifold forms (Valk 2022: 9).

If we examine the construction of the network from this perspective, then how the teachings are affective as vernacular knowledge is notable. Some members did not recover from the shamanic disease at once, although regardless of this they remained in the Workroom instead of heading to next experienced Shaman (FM: interview 3, 25/07/2024). As Ülo Valk (2022: 6) pointed out, vernacular knowledge can be viewed as the foundation for constructing identities, building ties between individuals and groups, and ascertaining shared values and beliefs. During the teaching and practice of the knowledge, the client is provided with a reshaped worldview that alters his or her previous understanding of the religious perspective of the disease and disorder, and the experience of being positioned in the collective that shares same worldview and behavioural principles. The mental aid and cultural knowledge available in the Workroom has also attracted members who were not potential shamans and even those who had no faith in the folk belief of *Xian* at all (FM: interview 2, 25/07/2024; interview 2, 26/07/2024).

Buddhist teachings have a unique position and functions in vernacular knowledge that is shared by the group. Nominally, the Workroom has never run as a Buddhist religious group; the group was not organised because of Buddhist faith nor to learn Buddhist teachings. Nevertheless, images and idols dedicated to Buddhist deities as well as books on Buddhist themes are notable components in the two-storied gathering place of the Workroom. The mentor identified herself as a devout Buddhist (FM: interview, 27/09/2021),[5] and her Buddhist identity is already tightly entangled with her role as a *Xian* shaman. She hinted that she is a reincarnation of a Bodhisattva who is able to save animal spirits and guide them on the path of Buddhist cultivation (ibid.).

On the one hand, the mentor is extremely cautious in spreading and practicing Buddhist teachings and beliefs in the Workroom. She avoids preaching Buddhist thoughts in the non-profit lectures, the event with the largest audience in the Workroom (FM: interview 2, 27/07/2024), nor is Buddhism introduced into the healing process for cli-

ents who merely seek mental aid. The cautiousness of the mentor with regard to Buddhist practices is understandable within the context of the interaction between religious practitioners and the state. Living not far from the place where Falun Gong, once one of the most influential religious movements in contemporary China, originated (see Tong 2002: 640), most members of the Workroom, including the mentor herself, have witnessed the peak of that sect as well as the turbulence that occurred during its conflict with the state. Therefore, they are perfectly aware of the sensitive status of a group of religious practitioners as being in a grey zone: any sect outside the state-sanctioned religions may be labelled an "Evil Cult", which are strictly prohibited by law (Zhu 2010: 474). In this context, it is wise to avoid any suspicion of acting as a religious sect and remain nominally an alternative medical institution.

However, the religious life and worldview of a notable number of Workroom members has been deeply reshaped by the mentor and her vernacular understandings and practices of Buddhism. The mentor believes that the best way to restore harmony between spirits and humans haunted by spirit is to convert both parties to Buddhism (FM: interview, 12/10/2022). In her alternative version of shamanic initiation, i.e. establishing the altar, the potential shaman is converted to Buddhism together with all the spirits connected with him or her (FM: participant observation, 25/07/2024). Almost all core members believe they are Buddhists converted by the mentor,[6] especially the protégés. In the events and activities with these core members, the mentor's identity as a Buddhist is more visible: Buddhist teachings are shared, vernacular Buddhist texts are distributed and discussed, and rituals with Buddhist elements are conducted. Therefore, in the network of the Workroom, though the mentor is probably not filtering the members intentionally, Buddhism functions as a criterion that demarcates core members from other members or random clients.

In summary, the network of interaction in the Workroom was formed from a shamanic ritual expert's network, expanded and consolidated with teachings from various vernacular knowledge bases. The centre of the network is the mentor, with random clients seeking mental health aid or traditional medical treatment situated on the periphery. Between them are the mentor's assistants who oversee the daily operation of the Workroom, other core members who attend the events and activities regularly, long-term clients who follow the events, etc. Although the Workroom labels itself as an institution that provides aid to adolescents with mental problems, most of its clients are adults, some of whom are the parents of teenagers troubled by psychological problems. Payment from the clients for the therapies forms the main income of the Workroom. The boundaries demarcating these types of participant are vague, and they are mutually convertible; all the assistants and core members were initially clients themselves. Yet not all the participants in this network are regarded as members of the Workroom. There is still a line, though not a rigorous one, drawn between members and those who are regarded as others. The key difference here is that the insiders interact with one another, obeying the traditions, which are some unified beliefs, values and worldviews adhering to the mentor's view on religion, especially Buddhism. The traditions will be discussed in the third section.

The network of interaction of the Workroom did not emerge *ex nihilo*; it is tightly embedded in the social network of the county town as an organic part of the local area. The acceptance and attitude of the Workroom amidst external society can be illustrated

by this story from one member from a rural region whose child suffered a depressive disorder. She spoke about her experience of being informed of the Workroom:

> I came to the county town without knowing where to go [to seek treatment for her child], so I asked the taxi driver. He took me to the hospital, but the hospital could treat my child only if she came with me, and she refused to come or even leave her bedroom at all. Then the taxi driver told me about this place.… Here the mentor taught me to give my child space and concentrate on my own problems, instead of the child's.… I believe my child could recover when I get rid of all my problems in daily behaviour, the mentor said it may take two or three more years. (FM: interview 1, 26/07/2024)

What we can learn from this experience is that, at least to some of the local inhabitants, the Workroom is acknowledged and recognised as an alternative medical establishment, parallel to modern medical institution with official backgrounds. Another member of the Workroom reported that her motivation for participating in the activities of the group was purely derived from her interest in Buddhism, as she had learned about the Workroom as a culturally oriented organisation. It is no wonder that the Workroom is presented to the outside world with different images, as it has several different facets. Overall, it has acquired a mainly positive social acceptance in the county town, even though religious groups are still a sensitive theme for the local people. In the local neighbourhood, the Workroom not only functions as an alternative mental health service for those who have no access to modern biomedical treatment, but also as a cultural organisation that spreads knowledge with the mentor's individual interpretation; at the same time, it fulfils the religious life of its members. Located in a county town, which can be regarded as a transition zone between urban and rural areas in China, most of the clients and members of the Workroom are middle-aged females from rural regions who are themselves the first generation to relocate to town. Their social, economic, and education backgrounds give them a relatively marginal status in the trend of urbanisation and modernisation, which leads to anxiety and mental health problems (see Li and Rose 2017). In satisfying their medical, intellectual and religious demands, the Workroom mitigates the anxiety created by their marginality. In this sense, the Workroom occupies a unique niche in the county town, functioning as part of the local intangible infrastructure, furnishing necessary services to part of the population and enrooting its network deeply in the local society.

THE COMMUNITY OF THE WORKROOM: HUMAN AND NONHUMAN AGENCIES

The community of the Workroom should be perceived as a more diverse and complex social formation than its network. A community can be understood as an invention, a social imaginary, a felt reality, etc. (Noyes 2016: 40). It exists in the process of realisation of social memory and the experience of the sense of belonging. In Dundes' (1965) notion of folk, this is also the process where every member is involved in the creation and perpetuation of the traditions of the community. If the network is constituted through a series of interactions between individuals, as has been discussed above, then

what makes the community felt and realised is "intra-action", to use the terms of Karen Barad's (2007: 33) conception that agencies are mutually tangled and not separable from one another.

In accordance with Bruno Latour (2017: 5), here the notion of agency is used in the sense of "power to act". Agency does not exclusively belong to humans, for it is not a given quality but is that which modifies other actors through the course of action (Latour 2004: 75). Agency is located not only in humans, but also in animals and invisible and even non-material beings, which should be regarded as volitional, sentient, sensitive, aware and intelligent beings that are capable of communicating with human social persons (Rival 2014: 7). In the community of the Workroom, the other-than-human agencies are perceived and are ubiquitously affective. Together with the human agencies located in the mentor, the assistants, core members, and other members, the nonhuman agencies such as those of the animal spirits, ancestors' souls and Buddhist deities are indispensable parts in the constitution of the community of the Workroom.

One of the categories of the most notable nonhuman agents is assuredly animal spirits, for a more significant number of core members, including the mentor, have associated with the animal spirits for a long time. They have been shamans, potential shamans, or lay followers of shamans. Traditionally, animal spirits are depicted as anthropomorphised deities with supernatural lifespans and abilities (Li 2023: 18). They serve as the origin of a shaman's power and enjoy absolute authority over the them (ibid.). In contemporary northeast China, the most common animal spirits worshiped by shamans originate from the fox, Siberian weasel, snake, and python. They are usually collectively referred to as *Hu-huang-chang-mang*[7] or simply *Hu-huang* (Li and Zhou 2011: 5, 167; Liu 2009: 254). Some shamans also worship spirits with more mythological characteristics, such as dragons, giant birds or cranes (FM: interview, 01/08/2024). In most cases the four kinds of spirit are worshiped simultaneously by shamans. Each kind of spirit is led by two magistral spirits, one male and one female, who are often also the most prominent spirits for the shaman. The total number of spirits enshrined on one shaman's altar is numerous, from several dozens to hundreds, with each one having his or her own name.[8]

Animal spirits are formally incorporated into the community of the Workroom together with the shaman, who had worshiped them. As elaborated above, spirits and the shaman are converted to Buddhism together by the mentor during the initiation ritual. After the ritual the protégés cease to worship spirits on their altars and the spirits are activated as agents in the community of the Workroom, meaning they start to act in a new form. The ways through which a shaman perceives his or her spirits are various. Some perceive the spirits in a vivid form, where they show their appearances, give concrete instructions, and express willingness to help (FM: interview, 04/12/2022); some perceive the communication only through hints given by the spirits in dreams (FM: interview 3, 25/07/2024); others are unable to perceive the existence of the spirits at all except through the shamanic disease caused by the spirits. For shamans and spirits, communication between them is the mode of "intra-action" (Barad 2007: 33) instead of the usual interaction. The concept of interaction assumes that agencies are separate and precede their interaction. However, the agency of a shaman is realised through the agencies of the spirits, for the duty of a shaman is to act as a medium and a channel between spirits and normal humans. Without spirits, shaman-hood would not exist: the

agencies of shaman and spirits are tangled and merged through intra-action. After the engagement of agencies of the animal spirits in the community of the Workroom, the mode of the intra-action between spirits and shamans as agents are generally reshaped. Several shamanic proteges who had been unable to feel the spirits' existence started to report their presence and endeavours during the process of healing other clients (FM: interviews 1 and 3, 25/07/2024). The power relations between the agencies of shamans and spirits is also different in the Workroom. For conventional shamans, spirits are in the dominant position, while those in the Workroom are elaborated as more equal co-operators who benefit mutually along with the shamans.

Other nonhuman agencies are recognised by members and intra-acted with, for example, the souls of members' ancestors are also engaged in the community of the Workroom. The agencies of the souls of the ancestors are derived from and embedded in members' cultural backgrounds and daily religious lives. Ancestor worship is an essential part of the religious life of the average Chinese person. Some estimates say that participants in ancestor worship make up over 70% of the adult population (Hu 2016: 169). Sacrifice to ancestors with offerings such as paper money is also one of the most frequently performed rituals of conventional *Xian* shamans, who believe that such offerings will satisfy the ancestors in the otherworld and ensure their blessing come to their descendants (FM: interview, 30/07/2024). For members of the Workroom, ancestor worship is of self-evident importance. The traditional Confucianist values and ethical principles have taken a notable position in the teachings of the Workroom, while in practice, these moral codes tend to be simplified into vernacular knowledge emphasising filial piety (*xiao*) (FM: interview 1, 27/07/2024), which, as one of the most fundamental Confucianist virtues in a more generalised sense demands not only disciplined behaviour when treating living parents and elders but also religious tributes to deceased ancestors (Holzman 1998: 186). For these reasons, the agency of one's ancestors is involved in the community of the Workroom immediately one joins it. It is often during the initiation ritual that the mentor asks for the surnames of the paternal and maternal ancestors, converting all of these ancestors to Buddhism in exactly the same way as with the animal spirits. Afterward, the agencies of the ancestors are continuously reinforced by the mentor, who highlights the importance of worshiping them, explaining using vernacular knowledge that the souls of the ancestors are able to influence the destiny of the descendants in multiple ways. Collective rituals of ancestor worship are conducted regularly in the Workroom on certain dates according to the traditional Chinese calendar (FM: Interview 3, 25/07/2024).

Apart from animal spirits and the souls of ancestors, other categories of other-than-human agents in the Workroom can also be listed: Buddhist deities, especially those who are traditionally associated with the religious practices of *Xian* shamans (Tathāgata Buddha (*ru-lai*), Bodhisattva Guanyin, Medicine Buddha (*yao-shi-fo*), Maitreya (*mi-le*), Amitābha (*a-mi-tuo-fo*), Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva (*di-zang pu-sa*), etc.);[9] all kinds of 'sentient being', a Buddhist term borrowed by shamans to identify invisible beings such as ghosts or souls who can cause disease. The Workroom is a realm where intra-action between these agencies and human agencies takes place. Humans in this realm perceive, recognise and are empowered by the nonhuman agencies. According to Jay Johnston's (2021: 236) term, such an environment, which acknowledges other-than-human agencies, is an ecology of other-than-human agency, an environment that must be

understood as being radically intersubjective. Members of the Workroom share a consensus that nonhuman beings not only exist and can be perceived but also belong to the same sphere as they themselves do and are able to shape their subjectivity. That is why I believe that humans and nonhumans have formed the community of the Workroom together, with their agencies constituting the intra-actional realm.

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Yet it can be unclear how a member in the Workroom is able to feel the reality that he or she belongs to a community together with other individuals' animal spirits and ancestors, i.e., how the social imaginary of the Workroom, as a common realm for all the human members and the actors with nonhuman agencies associated with them, has been formed and reinforced. The answer to this question is rooted in the rituals, performed by the mentor and partaken by the members, which involve nonhuman actors. Identification with a community is effected in performance (Noyes 2016: 41). Performance socially constructs a situation in which participants experience the making of symbolic meanings as part of the process of what they are doing (Schieffelin 2013: 109). The performance of rituals reinforces the social base of the Workroom community by boosting the density of mutual intra-action. Thus it is necessary to shed light on the performance of some crucial rituals in the Workroom.

The initiation ritual of a potential shaman has been mentioned several times in this article. For conventional shamans, this ritual is referred to as establishing the altar, while in the Workroom the innovative alternative conceived and practiced by the mentor does not have a fixed name. The mentor sometimes referred to it as spiritual promotion (*lingxing tisheng*) (FM: interview 1, 27/07/2024); it is also called upgrade (*shengji*) by some members (FM: interviews 1 and 3, 25/07/2024). Both terms connote that through this ritual a certain amount of spiritual enhancement is to be achieved for initiated shaman compared with the result of the conventional ritual of establishing the altar.

Such a ritual lasts approximately 15 to 30 minutes, with the procedure in detail varying from one individual to another. The whole ritual is directed solely by the mentor, who would adjust the content of the ritual according to the needs and situations of the initiate, although the general structure and several key links remain the same for every initiate. The ritual is conducted on the second floor of the Workroom in front of an altar on which are enshrined three idols of Buddhist deities, Bodhisattva Guanyin, Amitābha, and Maitreya. Like all typical altars in Chinese religious practice, before the idols is a rectangular table on which incense burners and offerings are positioned. The mentor stands in front of the table for most of the ritual, while the initiate stands, kneels, or sits next to her at different stages of the ritual. Behind the mentor and the initiate the audience is seated on beds with purple sheets, almost all of whom are the core members of the Workroom. At other times the beds used for massage and other physical therapies.

The process of the ritual can be clearly understood based on one example I observed (FM: participant observation, 25/07/2024). At the beginning of the ritual the initiate bowed three times and offered incense to the altar, then kowtowed three times. Then, kneeling on the ground with eyes closed, the initiate listened to the mentor strike the singing bowl five times. The mentor then ordered: "Ask all your ancestors in your

heart to come with us before the Buddha and take refuge from Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha." Having lit a candle held by the initiate, the mentor said: "Let's light an offering lantern for the ancestors." The initiate put it on the ground between the table and herself. The mentor read out: "Ancestors of the Lian family!" then asked for the surname of the initiate's mother-in-law, which was Wang, and read out at once: "Ancestors of the Wang family!" In this way, all the related ancestors whose surnames are known to the initiate were read out. The mentor repeated the order to ask the ancestors to take three refuges. The second candle was lit for initiate's three aborted or prematurely dead children to whom names had been given prior to the ritual. The third candle was lit for the animal spirits of the initiate, who were also invited to take three refuges with the initiate. When lighting the fourth candle the mentor required the initiate to ask Buddha to bless living family members and relatives. The fifth candle was for Buddha's blessing on the prosperity of the country of China and the happiness of all human beings. Then the initiate kowtowed three times again, with the mentor chanting "Namo Amitābha"[10] three times. Following this the mentor struck the singing bowl three times and the initiate was required to imagine all the animal spirits and ancestors kneeling together with her before the Buddha. Prior to the next three strikes on the singing bowl, the mentor let the initiate imagine Bodhisattva Guanyin descending to her and merging with her and Buddha possessing her. Here the mentor encouraged audience members to imagine this scene with their own spirits and ancestors. Then the mentor chanted the Heart Sūtra[11] for about two minutes. The chanting was followed by three kowtows, which the mentor did together with the initiate. Then, having seated the initiate on the ground, the mentor sat behind her and covered her eyes with her hands. "Now try to look up with your mind. Look as far as you can. Look with heart and mind, not eyes. Look up the side of the sky, look at the realm of the Buddha, look at the Dharma realm of emptiness. What kind of light, colour or image do you see?" asked the mentor. The initiate answered that she saw Buddha and a blue sky. The mentor told her to kowtow three times in her imagination to the image. Then the mentor repeated the requirement, this time the initiate should look to the left. The initiate saw a red light and kowtowed three times again in her mind. Then to the right the initiate looked and did the same. Finally, the intiate was told to look down, to look at hell. She saw many people against a black background. The mentor told her to chant "Namo Amitābha" to them and invite them to chant with the initiate. After this, the mentor patted the top of initiate's head nine times and her back and neck several times. The ritual ended with three kowtows, striking the singing bowl and chanting of "Namo Amitābha".

This ritual marked a period when the intra-action in the community of the Workroom was particularly intense, with various agencies tangled and merged. By performing this ritual repeatedly before the core members and encouraging them to empathise during it, the mentor robustly hinted that all nonhuman actors should present themselves, evoked the perception of the invisible beings, and reinforced the sense of belonging to a larger entity incorporating both the members and all the invisible actors.

Other rituals in the Workroom have the same effects. Three times a year, the mentor organises all the core members to worship the ancestors collectively. They inscribe the surnames of their related ancestors onto tablets and pay tribute to them, offering incense and chanting a Buddhist sutra. Thus, in practice, here everyone is worship-

ing everyone's ancestors, in this way strengthening ties with the nonhuman agencies brought into the community by others.

The rituals elaborated above demonstrate the religiosity in the Workroom, yet its religiosity does not fall into the category of any religion, whether institutional or folk. In order to understand the religiosity reflected by the ritual, the analytical tool of vernacular religion would be necessary. The concept of vernacular religion is applied to religion as people experience, understand, and practice it (Bowman and Valk 2012). This paradigm highlights the verbal, behavioural, and material expressions of the religious life of the individual (Primiano 1995: 44). These rituals originate from the innovation of the mentor, although many elements of Workroom rituals have their roots in prior traditions such as Buddhism, animal spirit worship and ancestor worship. Individual creativity and expressivity function as adhesive to aggregate the elements from written culture, folk belief, and personal innovation organically. Vernacularity refers to the process by which the lowest and highest voicings and revoicings are drawn upon and enable us to trace movements between the registers of traditional and innovative (Abrahams 2005: 12). In this sense, Workroom rituals are the practice of religious aspect of vernacularity, i.e. vernacular religion.

Yet vernacular religion is not only practiced in the Workroom, but also verbally expressed. The experience of religious life in the Workroom is interpreted into words that represent members' understandings of religion being done daily. Through this process members of the Workroom have gradually found some common beliefs, values and worldviews. Here, I refer to these common understandings as the traditions of the Workroom. The word of tradition, of course, bears many nuances, and thus many possibilities of expression. Here, it is used not only as a cluster of lore or knowledge but also as a system of rules that generates the performance and verbalisation of folklore (Ben-Amos 1984: 121) as well as an object of veneration and a monument of cultural identity (Noyes 2016: 109).

The tradition that is considered to have priority among the members is faith Buddhism. The core members in the Workroom generally believe that Buddhism is the way to salvation for themselves as well as their families, as well as the non-visible actors around them such as spirits, souls and other beings that have positive and negative predestined entanglements with them. The Buddhist faith was naturally extended to the belief in the importance of certain religious practices such as enshrining the images of Buddhist deities, offering incense and fruit to them, chanting Buddhist scriptures such as *Shoulengyan jing*, the Lotus Sutra, the Heart Sutra and *Dizang pusa benyuan jing*[12] (FM: Interviews 1 and 2, 26/07/2024), as well as vernacular Buddhist texts such as the Samādhi of Repentance (*chan-hui san-mei*).[13] The Buddhist faith also brought certain moral tenets to their everyday lives and behaviour, for example most of the members endorse the value of altruism and despise egoistical or profit-driven behaviour (FM: interview, 30/11/2022; interview 2, 25/07/2024), and ethos that might have its root in Buddhist ethics (see Perrett 1987).

The core members of the Workroom also generally recognise the existence of animal spirits, although there are also exceptions (FM: interview 2, 25/07/2024). Most of them have ceased to worship the spirits, for, unlike the traditional *Xian* shamans who regard spirits as their masters (Li 2023), members of the Workroom believe they have an equal

position to the spirits. Spirits can cooperate with them in healing others and help them detect the origin of patients' diseases (FM: interviews 1 and 3, 25/07/2024; interview 1, 28/07/2024). Spirits benefit from their Buddhist practices because they are also willing to cultivate themselves in the Buddhist way (FM: interview 1, 27/07/2024).

Apart from animal spirits, the tradition of the Workroom also indicates the existence of all sorts of invisible beings and links them with the origin of diseases. It is widely believed in Chinese folk beliefs that part of the diseases are non-physical and caused by ghosts or other similar beings (Li 2023: 30); these diseases are referred to as fake diseases or outsourced diseases. In the Workroom, this concept was generalised so that they believe that "behind each symptom hides a sentient being" (FM: interview, 02/11/2022). Thus, any healing is a process of restoring the harmony between humans and invisible beings, often with the help of animal spirits and Buddhist practices (FM: interviews 1 and 2, 25/07/2024; interview 1, 26/07/2024; interview 2, 28/07/2024).

Despite belief in invisible beings, members nevertheless regard the Workroom as entirely rationally and scientifically oriented (FM: interview 1, 27/07/2024); in this sense, they are similar to some New Age groups in the West (Hanegraaff 2007: 35). Members believe that phenomena such as the shamanic supernatural ability and reincarnation are confirmed by scientific research (FM: participant observation, 25/07/2024). This is also the reason they applied a variety of psychological therapies; after all, psychology, spirituality, shamanic power, Buddhism, and Chinese traditional medicine are all different ways to achieve the same goal.

Most of the traditions are derived from the mentor's creativity revealing her, and also other members', endeavour to theorise the vernacular religion they believe in and practice. These traditions, more specifically the shared beliefs, values, and worldviews, are the foundation of the daily interaction in the Workroom, because recognising those beliefs and values is generally the criterion that is common to interacting with others as a member of, rather than outsider to, the Workroom.

Theorising is not the only aspect of the religious vernacularity of the Workroom, it is also apparent in the form of rituals. Theorising the vernacular and practicing the vernacular are two sides of the same coin. Theorising leads us to the paradigm of the interaction in the network. By analysing practice of the vernacular, we reach the realm of intra-action within the community. What ties members together is the coherence of the vernacular – the vernacular religion of the Workroom's everyday life. By experiencing its living religion, the network of interaction and the community of intra-action are reconciled as a group, the group of the Workroom.

In order to define a group like the Workroom, I believe it is necessary to coin the concept of vernacular collectivity. Vernacular collectivity links a group of individuals who, with relatively high consistency, practice and understand religious, cultural, or epistemological vernacularity. Individuals tied by vernacular collectivity communicate and behave in accordance with a shared framework of vernacular knowledge; their worldview and sense of values are based on the uniformity of vernacular theories, although individual understanding within the group can differ from person to person. While the present discussions on vernacular religion emphasise religious experienced on the individual level (see Primiano 1995; Bowman and Valk 2012: 7), the individual experiences and subsquently developed spiritual ontologies of a vernacular religion may bind the members together as a collectivity rather than isolating them (Primiano

2022: 316). The case of the Workroom illustrates a scenario in which individual expressions of religion form a coherent body of knowledge and a consensus on the unique way in which these individuals understand, practice, and express their religious lives. Vernacular collectivity takes shape in the aggregation of volition, which, as descripted by Robert Howard (2022: 170), occurs though the repeated expression of shared belief by different members in a community. The consensus of vernacular collectivity is maintained voluntarily and flexibly, no effort to canonise or regulate it has been ever made. This demarcates a group that shares vernacular collectivity, from religious institutions with canonical authority, such as church or sect (in the sense of sociology of religion). Practicing vernacular collectivity can lead to the establishment of a sect or religion, although its underlying logic is different from sects or groups alike: in the absence of canonical authority and a hierarchical structure, its vitality and stability are derived from vibrant creativity, expressivity, and flexibility.

CONCLUSION

The Workroom is a religious group that gathers for nonreligious purposes. It is formed of practitioners and adherents of traditional shamanic folk belief who worship animal spirits in northeast China. These practitioners are devout Buddhists and have a firm enthusiasm for learning and promoting values and knowledge from traditional Chinese culture. The Workroom provides aid and therapies to those who are in need of psychological treatment and practices innovative rituals in order to restore harmony between humans and various invisible beings. In the Workroom, versatile strands of teachings such as shamanic belief, vernacular Buddhist doctrines, and psychological therapies are theorised and practiced by its members within a shared framework of vernacular knowledge. It is a complex and unique religious phenomenon embedded in the sociocultural context of modern China, where traditional beliefs and values are faced with high mobility brought about rapid urbanisation and modernisation.

As a religious group, the Workroom was organised loosely, without any mandatory demands on its members. Providing psychological treatment in the county town has extended its visibility in the larger community. The core members, including the mentor's assistants, were recruited from long-term clients who had sought healing and then recognised the shared beliefs and values of the Workroom, which are summarised as the traditions in this article. The traditions include firm belief and regular practice of vernacular Buddhism, new interpretations of animal spirits and invisible beings, and an open and positive attitude towards scientific research. These divergent perspectives were organically combined through the endeavours of vernacular theorising.

The Workroom as a group can be conceptualised as a result of the dialogue of two paradigms: the network of interaction, and the community of intra-action. Interaction between members is shaped and regulated by the traditions and process of vernacular theorising, while intra-action within a community, including human and nonhuman actors, was enabled and perceived through various rituals as a way of practicing the vernacular. The two paradigms are unified through the coherence of the religious aspect of the vernacular, i.e. through the religion that is experienced in everyday life. In order to define a group like the Workroom, a new term, vernacular collectivity, is nec-

essary to denote the cohesion of a group of individuals who practice and understand religious, cultural, and epistemological vernacularity in a relatively homogeneous way.

Despite its unorthodox methods and therapies, as one of the only two institutions in a county town that provides aid for clients with psychological problems the Workroom did help several people and families who were mired in situations caused by mental disorders. After all, the Workroom has some characteristics that are not easy to determine with academic research: a great sense of humanity, a strong capacity for empathy, and a simple willingness to bring benefit others, features that are indispensable in understanding the Workroom.

NOTES

1 In this ritual, the experienced shaman summons the spirits, sometimes with the help of an assistant who beats a drum and chants. The novice shaman writes the names of the animal spirits onto a red piece of paper and afterwards enshrines the paper.

2 The teacher from Canada has a Chinese name, so he is rather depicted as a *Chan* master of Chinese origin acting in the West.

3 This teaching is based on a book with the same title. In China, it is a sub-discipline under Chinese traditional medicine, attempting to discuss psychological phenomena with Chinese traditional medicine theories. It enjoyed popularity to some extent among the so-called supporters of Chinese traditional culture.

4 About family constellation therapy, see Hellinger et al. 1998. Regarding sandplay therapy, members of the Workroom didn't elaborate on the origin of the version they practice.

5 She said in the interview:

According to Buddhist classics… Buddha and Bodhisattva incarnate in all kinds of shape in order to save the creatures of the world. One Bodhisattva can come to human beings in the shape of a human being, she or he may have some experiences, and she or he can save others who have similar experiences. Just like what is written in the 25th chapter of The Lotus Sutra, 'The Universal Door of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva', the Bodhisattva incarnates as all kinds of people: if you were a *bhikkhu* [male Buddhist monastic monk], the Bodhisattva would present herself to you as a *bhikkhu*, if you were a king, the Bodhisattva would present herself to you as a king. You could be a dustman or the president of a country, the Bodhisattva would present herself to you as whatever, what is closest to you, to save you.

6 Interestingly, the concept of being converted to Buddhism is blurred in the Workroom. In China, one can formally be converted to Buddhism (take three refuges) only in Buddhist temples with the help of Buddhist clergy. The Workroom as a secular place led by a lay Buddhist has no right to convert anyone officially. But members of the Workroom generally believe their status as formal Buddhists is valid after taking three refuges in the Workroom with the help of the mentor.

7 The first characters of the names of the four animals in Chinese.

8 Animal spirits always have the surname of their kind: *Hu* for fox spirits, *Huang* for weasel spirits, etc.

9 Tathāgata Buddha: one of the most common epithets of Gautama Buddha (Buswell and Lopez 2014: 897). Bodhisattva Guanyin: the most famous and influential Bodhisattva in all of East Asia, commonly know in Western popular literatuure as The Goddess of Mercy (ibid.: 332). The Medicine Buddha: Bhaiṣajyaguru in Sanskrit, the Buddha of healing or medicine. His cult is widespread in East Asia (ibid.: 108–109). Maitreya: "The Benevolent One", a Bodhisattva abiding in heaven awaiting his final rebirth as the next Buddha (ibid.: 517). Amitābha: "Limitless light", the Buddha of the western Pure Land, one of the most widely worshipped buddhas in the

Mahayana traditions (ibid.: 34). Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva: and important Bodhisttva who has the power to rescue beings from hell (ibid.: 448).

10 "I take refuge in the Buddha Amitābha" is a common chant of buddha Amitābha's name in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition (Buswell and Lopez 2014: 567).

11 One of the most popular sutras in Mahayana Buddhism.

12 *Shoulengyan jing* is a Chinese indigenous Buddhist scripture, known in the West by its reconstructed Sanskrit title Śūramgamasūtra. It is especially influential in the *Chan* school of Buddhism (Buswell and Lopez 2014: 873–874). *Dizang pusa benyuan jing* (*Kṣitigarbhasūtra* in Sanskrit) is a scripture on Kṣitigarbha Boddhisattva (ibid.: 448).

13 A text in contemporary Chinese that contents of which are about repentance to all the beings who were wounded or insulted by the behaviour of the individual.

SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials from online interviews since 2021 and intense fieldwork in July 2024 in northeast China. The place of fieldwork, as well as details of the interlocutors, are not revealed in this article for the protection of their privacy, as religious groups can be a sensitive topic in contemporary China. In this research, references are made to 16 interviews and one participant observation in total. Fieldwork materials are coded in this article as (FM, interview/participant observation, DD/MM/YYYY). When more than one interview was conducted on the same date, interviews are differentiated by numbers, for example, (FM, interview 1, 25/07/2024) vs. (FM, interview 2, 25/07/2024).

FM, Interview, 27/09/2021: Online interview with the mentor of the Workroom (hereinafter: the mentor).

FM, Interview, 12/10/2022: Online interview with the mentor.

FM, Interview, 18/10/2022: Online interview with the mentor.

FM, Interview, 02/11/2022: Online interview with the mentor.

FM, Interview, 30/11/2022: Online interview with the mentor.

FM, Interview, 04/12/2022: Online interview with a 41-year-old female shaman affiliated with the Workroom. She lives and works in the town where the Workroom is located, originally coming from a rural region near the town.

FM, Interview 1, 25/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with a 35-year-old female shaman from a rural region who has lived and worked in the town since she was 15 years old. She had been a member of the Workroom for two years at the time of the interview.

FM, Interview 2, 25/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with a 50-year-old female. She had been a member of the Workroom for four to five years, although she had not been initiated as a shaman. Compared with other members, she has a better education background (vocational higher education) and works in the town as a teacher.

FM, Interview 3, 25/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with a 48-year-old female shaman from a rural region who had been a member of the Workroom for three years and had worked as the mentor's assistant for more than one year at the time of the interview.

FM, Interview 1, 26/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with a 41-year-old female from a rural region who had not been initiated as a shaman before, but went through the initiation ritual in the Workroom. She had been a member of the Workroom for less than one year at the time of the Interview.

FM, Interview 2, 26/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with a 37-year-old female from a rural region. She also went through the initiation ritual only in the Workroom. She had been a member of the Workroom for more than one year at the time of the Interview.

FM, Interview 1, 27/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with a 40-year-old female shaman from the town where the Workroom is located. She had been affiliated with the Workroom for more than four years and lives and works in a bigger city nearby.

FM, Interview 2, 27/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with the mentor.

FM, Interview 1, 28/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with a 45-year-old female shaman from a rural region. She had been affiliated with the Workroom for more than three years and works as an assistant to the mentor.

FM, Interview 2, 28/07/2024: Interview conducted in the Workroom with a 32-year-old female shaman from a rural region. She had been affiliated with the Workroom for more than three years and works as an assistant to the mentor.

FM, Interview, 30/07/2024: Interview with a female shaman in her 30s in a bigger city near the town where the Workroom is located. She is not directly connected with the Workroom but her experience is cited to demonstrate the general belief and practice of believers in *Xian* shamanism.

FM, Interview 01/08/2024: Interview with a female shaman in her 40s in a bigger city near the town where the Workroom is located. She is not directly connected with the Workroom but her experience is cited to demonstrate the general belief and practice of believers in *Xian* shamanism.

FM, Participant Observation, 25/07/2024: Conducted in the Workroom, lasted for about 7 hours, during which two initiation rituals and one collective healing ritual were conducted and one lecture was given by the mentor.

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