

CHINESE SPIRIT-MEDIUMSHIP: ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ASPECTS

By J. I. Teoh

SYNOPSIS

This paper deals with the practices of Chinese spirit-mediumship which is prevalent in the Chinese community in Malaysia. It attempts to explain the socio-cultural roles of spirit-mediumship. The psychotherapeutic techniques displayed within the local cultural context are elucidated and much can be learnt by modern psychotherapists from their practices. This paper also tries to analyse the differing attitudes of the local community towards spirit-mediumship as contrasted with the western-orientated physician.

NATIVE COMMUNITY THERAPEUTIC ACTIVITY

Although the values and resources of any culture are often imposed by society on its members, the individual almost sees them in his own way and uses them for his own purpose and self fulfilment, knowingly or unknowingly. In spite of some crippling inconsistencies and disadvantages of certain cultures, the mentally ill, as a rule, continue to struggle for a sense of inner homostasis by using whatever cultural resources that remain at his disposal. Some of them are religion, folk belief, mythologies, and the native traditional healers. All these do provide outlets for a minimization of tensions within the community.

There can be no doubt that the role played by the traditional native physician be he a *bomoh* (Malay indigenous healer) or a spirit medium in the community in a developing country like Malaysia is of tremendous significance to psychiatric patients. It is difficult to gauge the proportion of mildly-disturbed and emotionally-unstable patients who rely entirely on the services of these healers. It can only be guessed that the proportion seen must be considerable, probably four to five times more than those seen at the western-type psychiatric centres throughout the country. Schmidt (1967) commented that in countries like ours where there is a chronic shortage not only of medical but psychiatric staff, it is more than ever advisable to see how such an integration of the native healer into the psychotherapeutic situation can be achieved taking into account local sensitivities.

It is a known fact that emotional stresses that are produced by rapid socio-cultural changes within our community resulting from rapid urbanization and modernisation of our society would put the community under considerable strain. One can easily infer how the role of the traditional healing agencies must have suddenly flourished to meet these new needs that cannot be catered for by the existing psychiatric services of the country. One may postulate, however, that these native healers not only supplement the limited facilities of the western-style type of psychiatric treatment that is barely available, but they do in fact shoulder the brunt of the mental health care in Malaysia.

A study done at the University of Malaya Medical Centre, Kuala Lumpur, (Teoh, *et al*, 1971) observed that at least 30% of the psychiatric patients first seen admitted that they had seen a native healer prior to seeing the psychiatrist. Schmidt (1967) in Sarawak estimated that roughly 40% of his patients treated at the Kuching Mental Hospital received, at some stage of the treatment, folk medicine (the reason being that the folk healer was nearer at hand). Observations (Kinzie, *et al*, 1972) showed that clients who saw a western-trained psychiatrist also frequented the native healers in a circular fashion and that no social class was excluded. There is no doubt that modern psychiatric treatment is merely one of the many options in the management of a psychiatric patient in Malaysia.

While modern psychotherapy has emerged step by step in time, man has tried to help his fellowman's emotional problems by more and more sophisticated techniques. In spite of such techniques and theories, the human mind has remained essentially unchanged over the course of centuries. The fact that traditional ways of handling mental patients have functioned so long and so well in the past, must indicate that they

must work to some extent (Frank, 1961). Thus the inquiry into the methods of traditional therapies would reveal some important psychotherapeutic principles which can be learnt and therefore applied in our present psychotherapeutic techniques.

SPIRIT POSSESSION IN A RIGID SOCIETY

The widespread practice of spirit mediumship in the form of trance-like states in our community is significant. This is prevalent in societies which are undergoing certain kinds of stress such as the South-China immigrant societies which have come to Malaysia. There is no doubt that the institutionalisation of spirit possession may be said to do something for the participating individual and fulfil a social function. Mediumistic possession states are more likely to exist in rigid societies rather than flexible ones e.g., the traditional Chinese culture which is extremely rigid. In a society that is tightly knit and where strong social and cultural pressures persuade the individual not only to conform to external rules, but to maintain an internal consistency in his behaviour on all occasions, changing the individual's behaviour is not feasible as it would involve breaking his single self-consistent behavioural pattern. If an individual is concerned or disturbed by a social issue, which he cannot consciously change, the best culturally-sanctioned solution is to be possessed by a spirit which is a mechanism that allows for an escape from these cultural pressures. Since possession is culturally sanctioned, heavily institutionalised and socially acceptable, it provides a legitimate outlet for one's socially undesirable impulses and desires. It offers an opportunity for the expression of much repressed and suppressed feeling and thought, and sets to motion an abreactive phenomena which eliminate frustrations that previously disturbed the individual.

The medium, acting as a spirit, makes it possible for the individual, the client, to be provided with solutions for some of his problems in a way that circumvent the rigid demands of Chinese traditional society. Yet, one might say that the medium follows social constraints in that he relies on an external authority, i.e., a spirit speaking through a medium to get authorisation for his action.

THE CHINESE CONCEPT OF DISEASE

Disease in the Chinese context, is an inseparable concept between the psyche, soma and life events in that it is related to all disasters, such as infertility, poverty, loss of prosperity and all other unhappy circumstances. Thus there is no definite distinction between the psychic, the somatic, and the psycho-

somatic and the way each is treated correspondingly. Thus, healing through the form of mediumship is meant not only in terms of physical or psychological recovery but also healing from all kinds of sufferings. The major contribution of mediumship to psychotherapy is the utilization of the religious instincts in healing, a function which seems greatly neglected by the modern psychotherapist.

CHINESE SPIRIT-MEDIUM PRACTICE IN MALAYSIA

Mediumship has a long history in China and was prevalent in the two southern provinces of Fukien and Kwang-tung. It thus followed that the Chinese immigrants predominantly from these two provinces who emigrated to South-east Asia have made mediumship a very popular phenomenon in Chinese religious life in all these areas, (Elliot, 1964). Sociologically, spirit mediumship represents a distinctive trend in the religion of the overseas Chinese.

In Malaysia, many people of all ethnic groups who need psychiatric help frequent the spirit medium because they are readily available. The spirit medium generally works in conjunction with one of the many hundred temples in Malaysia which may be dedicated to a particular deity. According to Comber (1958), when a medium goes into a trance, the spirits or the deity possess him and he is supposed to be in direct contact with the spirit world. In a survey of 100 clients, Elliot (1964), in Singapore found that of the 198 topics covered, 83 cases involved illness, 32 cases involved bad luck, 13 cases involved possession by evil spirits and only 3 cases involved insanity.

The basic principles of Chinese spirit mediumship are relatively simple. The underlying assumption is that the spirit being with vast and indefinable powers possesses the body of a human being who becomes its medium and this enables him to inflict self-injury upon himself without pain and to speak with divine wisdom, giving advice to worshippers and curing their illnesses. The medium, when possessed by a god during a public performance speaks as a god. On the assumption that no other conscious play-acting is involved, the medium temporarily suspends his identity. Such an impersonation is indeed one of the hallmarks of possession trance which is characterised most often by such "otherness".

(a) The *Dang-ki* or *Ki-tong* (Spirit Medium)

The medium is popularly known as the *dang-ki* or *ki-tong*, meaning "divining youth" whose horoscope indicates that he is bound to die young. So his serving as the medium of a god is

a way to compensate for the otherwise ill-fated life (Stirling, 1924). He is usually possessed by one familiar god although some *dang-kis* can be possessed by different gods on different occasions. Trance comes initially by the shivering of the body and the swaying movements of the head. Often self-mortification and self-injury take place, i.e., the cutting of tongue, the flailing of the back with nail-studded balls and flagellation to the point of bleeding. Self-mortification is mainly to dramatise the ritual performance. This phenomena appears to be a sado-masochistic form of behaviour and assumes strong sexual significance in the form of projection of sexual guilt on the part of the observers onto the *dang-ki*.

(b) Clients of the *Dang-ki*

A great majority of the worshippers are women, as indeed are the majority of all worshippers in temples in this country. The most ardent supporters of the spirit-medium cults are found among the older-aged straits-born Chinese women of the poorer social class. Indeed these women are usually illiterate and conservative. For most of the clients, the most important event in the ceremony is the verbal pronouncement by the *dang-ki*. In most cases *dang-kis* speak with the kind of language which is unintelligible to others but to its interpreter.

(c) Identifying the Cause or the Diagnosis

The *dang-ki* goes into a trance after being consulted by the client; he (the *dang-ki*), in fact, pronounces to him (the client) of his problems. Often the physical illness is interpreted in terms of calamities, disasters, metaphysical causes or temporal elements (fated events in life), since all Chinese attribute all calamities to supernatural or metaphysical causes.

(d) Treatment

In the form of treatment, he may prescribe simple Chinese herbal remedies, paper charms to wear or charmed water to drink or bathe in. For physical illness, a simple herbal remedy; for metaphysical cause, proper rituals and worship; for problems of improper burial of ancestors, the performance of specific rituals; for fated events that are due to the incompatibility of the patient's horoscope characters in marriage or birth and a specific time spent, the patient may be asked to perform a certain rite.

The Interpersonal Relations of Mediumship

Since the traditional Chinese is very concerned about his niche in the kinship structure of the family system and the need to harmonise with the universe, the *dang-ki* remedies this by focussing on

observations of duties and obligations of kinship rituals, and the acquisition of proper position of the family or kinship line. There is thus an emphasis to maintain harmony and order of man-to-man relations, which is the focal point for the endeavour of being as a person in Chinese society.

In the man-to-nature relationship, the obsession of fate is a central concept. The *dang-ki's* remedies are purposely aimed at avoiding the antagonistic meetings of these cosmic forces, and to find out the compatible or lucky date in accordance with the patient's horoscope.

Generally the *dang-ki* uses Chinese concepts about the human constitution and the cosmos. It brings all the elements to bear on the problem of adjusting man to the universe. Since the Chinese concept of wholeness is to be in harmony with the universe, man and nature are two inseparable systems. Thus the *dang-ki* is not only providing a certain answer for his client, he is also using his whole cultural system to give a meaningful explanation of illness and problems to the client.

THE VARIOUS SOCIAL ROLES IN CHINESE MEDIUMSHIP

By assuming a state of trance, the medium temporarily loses in the ordinary sense his identity, and an impersonation is indeed one of the hallmarks of possession trance. This is characterised most often by "otherness". There is no doubt that spirit mediumship is seen as a "temporary substitution for the other selves" and the opportunity of acting out certain positively evaluated roles (Bourguignon, 1965). The sociological implications of possession are evident from such terms as 'legitimised', 'roles', and 'rights'. Yap (1960) interpreted spirit possession to "a disturbance in the balance of the "I" and the "me", to the unusual predominance, temporarily, of one phase of self at the expense of the others; of a certain position of "me" at the expense of "I". This pathological imbalance of "I" and "me" in possession allows the taking of the supernatural "other" which enables one to overcome the role deprivation one suffered in the social world, however temporarily, which might trigger a change in the behaviour system including that of curing.

(a) The Supernatural Roles

This role by spirits gives rise to the alleviation of the human being to a status beyond that of a human being (Murphy, 1964). In such a role, the medium plays a *succourant* (giving assistance) role of the distressed sufferer who is in a dependent disposition of the client. Here the spirit by ritual invitation turns to be a sufferer from pain and solicitous of human help and appealing for human

sympathy. In this way, clients turn to the medium who is (in a state of trance) and respond to his succourant role. If the suffering spirit plays a succourant, solicitous role, this role must be complemented by a *nuturant* (indulgent) role. The two mutually complementary roles, *succourant* and *nuturant* are taken sequentially, i.e., the succourant role in possession, and the nuturant role in post-possession.

(b) The Reciprocal Role

Here the spirit plays the part of the recipient, i.e., he receives gratitude which is obviously most gratifying to the client. As a form of atonement for his guilt, the client willingly bestows grateful gifts on the medium.

(c) The Dominant Disciplinarian Role

The medium in a strong commanding masculine tone berates and belittles the client expressing displeasure at the lack of discipline and sincerity. This primitive role occurs not only verbally but physically in a form of physical assault.

(d) The Retaliatory Role

It involves malevolence in a form of anger, cursing and grudge. The client then apologises for his misdeeds.

(e) The Status-Demonstrative Role

Here the status the spirit medium tends to hold is a prestigious one to increase credibility among the clients.

(f) The Informant Role

The supernatural can be identified as an informant either through the medium or through the client who goes into possession. This role is instrumentally used to facilitate communication. Here the client expresses himself more freely by taking the supernatural role and thus allows the freedom of ventilation and abreaction which is normally forbidden in rigid Chinese society. (Note: the expression of personal feelings within the extended traditional family is strictly forbidden, as it frequently leads to serious consequences, i.e., the break-up of family structure due to airing of suppressed conflicts).

The symbolic interpretation of the *dang-ki*, e.g., "your soul has temporarily left your body and has not returned yet" certainly gives a client a more comprehensive explanation of his illness than the modern therapist's statement: "your emotions are unstable and you have been making irrational decisions thereby causing a series of unhappy events". In fact, the symbolic interpretation is paradoxically more concrete and compact and it

is more easily understood and accepted by the client within his cultural background.

The interpretation of the supernatural cause of the client's problems provides a culturally-sanctioned externalization of his basic interpersonal and intrapsychic problems. The symbolic substitution of someone outside the family is vital in the close relationship of a standard Chinese family structure where overt conflicts between generations are strictly prohibited to prevent the fragmentation of the extended family system. Thus, the externalization of one's problems is a culturally-sanctioned mode of healing. In this way, no one is hurt and communication is always in an indirect manner, thereby protecting both the client and the medium from any form of external injury.

THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ROLE OF THE SPIRIT MEDIUM

Lederer (1959) has noted that primitive psychotherapists are effective in their own cultures perhaps because they have the cognitive understanding of the causes of anxiety within their culture. Thereby they can face the patient from a solid base of security. The therapist's own security then breaks the vicious cycle of insecurity and anxiety in the patient and in the cultural group. Although it is said that native psychotherapy does not produce any form of self-insight, the main form of cure produced is related to cultural beliefs, i.e., the discovering of the patient's lost soul or his transgressions. There is no doubt that the native healer uses certain techniques which are familiar to the modern psychotherapist although he does not utilise free association or character analysis.

Frank (1961) felt the effectiveness of magical and religious healings lay in the ability to arouse hope. The patient's hope is enhanced by a set of assumptions about his illness and healing he shares with the society. The ideology and ritual supply the patient with a conceptual framework for organising his chaotic and vague distress. It gives him a plan of action and also a sense of mastery. The religious healings may increase the patient's sense of self-worth and focus the group's attention on him at the same time.

Undoubtedly, mediumship gives hope and an understandable cause for the patient's distress (Kinzie, *et al*, 1972) whether it be due to a bad spirit or due to a ying-yang imbalance. This undoubtedly lowers the patient's anxiety and is by itself therapeutic. The fact that it is sometimes done in a group effort, which lacks privacy may suggest a need to evoke the entire group's support and expectations that he will recover. As Frank (1961) has noted, if the patient does not maintain his

improvement, he will be letting the whole world down. The healing is consistent with the cultural value of saving face and denying personal difficulties or interpersonal problems. In this way, it strengthens the mechanism of denial, repression and rationalization which by themselves are quite consistent with the Chinese need to harmonize his personality with the universe rather than to become an individual of his own right.

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC EFFECTS

(a) Gaining Acceptance

The effectiveness of mediumship depends on a related system of beliefs widely and emotionally held by the patient and his community, i.e., by the cultural group. The patient's hope is enhanced by a specific set of assumptions and the cause and methods of healing of the illness which he shares with the society.

(b) Group Participation

The lack of privacy often seen in the Chinese temple allows the spirit medium to take part in a group contact, i.e., the drama of curing is given public recognition. There is a strong psychological interaction between the medium, the patient and the onlookers which acts as a therapeutic force in the healing situation. The patient is surrounded by his familiar people and this group support is essential for his own well-being. Group solidarity heightens the patient's sense of self-esteem as he becomes the focus of the group's attention by implication and is worthy of the assembly before him. As the group is a healthy one, they are not likely to reinforce his maladaptive behaviour as might occur in a mental hospital.

(c) Focussing Awe

The medium does this by performing mystical and magical acts to remind the group of his extensive power. The patient and the group thus expect a favourable outcome which can be equated to identification or transference (in psychotherapy).

(d) Possession

In the case of mediums, possession by a familiar spirit inevitably occurs. It is by this agency that the medium vividly engages the cultural beliefs about the aetiology and cure of the illness, of the patient's and the group's faith which is brought into full play. Possession is a highly-charged emotional phenomena. The medium might act out a life or death struggle between the familiar spirit and the evil one which is offending the patient.

(e) Treatment

In addition to psychic procedures to save the lost soul, the medium conducts some simple thera-

peutic procedures which are indeed useful. However the subjective psychological perspective should not be minimised in the total therapeutic process.

(f) Involving the Patient

The patient is made to perform certain acts of atonement which psychologically causes him to believe himself to be rid of his illness.

(g) Suggestion

Through suggestion and the patient's personal involvement in the case, his visible acts further promote a psychological realisation that he is being cured.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP AND THE WESTERN-TRAINED PHYSICIAN

There can be no doubt that much is left to be desired in the practice of the spirit medium. But no doubt one can still learn a tremendous amount from and implement some of their principles in the practice of modern medicine. The general attitude taken by the local population is that the cause of illness is multifactorial. Physical symptoms are not considered adequate explanation, and yet not completely rejected. They are also attributed to supernatural causes (analogous to the theory of psychosomatic causes of disease). Very often relatives of the patient may start by visiting the spirit medium at one time or other, including the western-trained physician, and if all failed, they will return to where they have begun. The differences between the two healers are:

- (a) The spirit medium is known to inherit his knowledge directly from the elders and is revered much more than the physician.
- (b) The spirit medium displays absolute certainty about diagnosis and treatment. He makes it a point in therapy to discuss the entire "pathology" with both the patient and the relatives, while the modern physician or psychiatrist is often deliberately hesitant, vague and uncertain in his discussion of the illness. He almost never names the malady. Thus the spirit medium does give the relatives a more definite sense of security, protection and courage to face the inevitable and the unknown.
- (c) The spirit medium is definitely group-orientated in his technique, whereas the modern specialist is individualized in his approach. While the former views the patient as a member of the family, the latter regards him primarily as an individual and examines him privately. The most important role of the spirit medium is that the patient remains part of his family and the community, whereas long journeys have

to be made away from the family to see a psychiatric specialist in modern Malaysia. Furthermore, the healing methods involve the entire family and neighbours and thereby strengthen instead of loosen bonds (Schmidt, 1964). The sick patient is thus made to feel highly wanted and supported by the family. It is thus only inevitable that the family would want to be involved in the treatment of his illness which is often excluded by the modern physician. Thus the modern doctor cuts the individual patient adrift from the moorings of family security. It is understandable why the spirit medium is more sought after than the western-trained physician.

- (d) One of the reasons for late attendances to the modern specialist is his unavailability or inaccessibility. Besides, it often means hospitalization in an alien and frightful environment. There the hospital atmosphere presents a secularized, almost hostile effect on the patient. Observations made by Ackernecht (1958) reveal the modern hospital has lost its sacred character, its social control of function, its subjective influence on society and its meaning in moral terms. Then in their emergencies, they are cut off measurably from tried and trusted contacts and supports of family and community. Indeed during the patient's darkest hours, physically, mentally and emotionally, he is very likely made to feel rather much alone, if he is admitted into a modern hospital setting.
- (e) The medium is culturally in consonance with his client most of the time while the western-orientated physician although ethnically the same as the patient, often speaking the same language, has a cultural orientation alien to the patient.
- (f) In the event of illness the tendency to regress both emotionally and culturally makes patients more likely to go to native healers than western-orientated physicians.
- (g) The spirit medium is associated with highly cherished qualities or piety, personal sympathy and philanthropy. He is paid on a ritualistic and not on a commercial basis. He gets what is ritually expected from the patient but when cure is actually effected, he is given a special payment as an act of gratitude. The modern doctor is often regarded as a mercenary and a commercialised businessman, not dissimilar to the tradesman. He functions on a competitive basis for personal gain. He definitely asks for money and the exact amount as well. He presents his bill, as in contrast, the spirit medium never directly asks for a specific sum and would

accept what is given. The patient gives as he feels able to.

- (h) The spirit medium is more able to bestow a constant and personal attention. He is often less busy than the medical practitioner. His overhead expenses are definitely less. He sees his patients and family in a more leisurely fashion and such behaviour would go a long way to fortify their demoralised spirits in times of stress. However, the modern physician often adopts the procedure which is perfunctory and intermittent and completely devoid of the intimate and personal touch.
- (i) The spirit medium is admired because he can name the disease without extricating it from the patient. In short, he is often considered wiser than the modern physician who spends a long time in tedious embarrassing questioning.
- (j) It is a significant fact that the medium gives medicine out of his own hand, while the modern doctor sends the patient with a prescription to the pharmacist. The patient leaves the doctor's clinic symbolically empty-handed. There is thus the "healing touch" which is transmitted to the hands of the healer. This would lead to a diminution in the stature of the doctor in the eyes of the local population.
- (k) The spirit medium is known to the community and observes ritual purity and uses magical religious formulae. Hence, he is associated with moral serenity and is favourably contrasted with the godless modern physician.

The differences between the spirit medium and the modern physician, as viewed by the traditional Chinese community, clearly amplify some of the psychotherapeutic deficiencies of the modern medical practitioner. Although, scientifically the basis of mediumship is baseless, much can be learnt from the way he handles the local population within its socio-cultural context.

CONCLUSION

Man has always sought to induce an altered state of consciousness in an effort to gain knowledge, revelatory and prophetic states, mystical and transcendental experiences, thereby opening realms of new experiences to him. He thereby uses an altered state of consciousness to seek to reaffirm his moral values, resolve his emotional conflicts and enable him to cope better with the human predicament of his existence and the people surrounding him. It is used also as an explanation of physical and mental disorders. The local community in Malaysia does not consider spirit possession or spirit mediumship as abnormal in the sense that it is a discontinuity of personal identity

and it is not thought of as pathological. This structured form of behaviour sets a train of social reactions which try to eliminate frustrations under which one may be suffering. Kiev (1961) described it as an escape mechanism for those constitutionally less able to bear the cultural pressures before finally making the necessary adjustment to matured life.

It has a social as well as an individual value. From many individual points of view, mediumship allows the individual to attain a high status whereby he is seen and favoured in the realms of the supernatural world. It also enables many individuals to gain temporary freedom of responsibility from their actions and pronouncements, enabling them to act out in a socially-sanctioned manner, their aggressive and sexual conflicts or desires.

Spirit mediumship or possession trance involves role playing, taking on the roles not otherwise available to the actor in normal daily life, and demonstrating one's roles to others. To separate the performance from everyday self, possession trance is frequently followed by amnesia. It definitely gives relief to the sufferer and presents a safety valve for the society. Thus the subject is given a new sense of spiritual security and confidence which might support the despairing from the hopelessness of a marginal existence.

Indeed the existence of such a mental mechanism represents an excellent example of how a society creates modes of reducing frustrations, stress and isolation among its members. There is no doubt that as societies become less closely-knit and more permissive, the practice of spirit possession in the form of spirit-mediumship would be less utilised and therefore diminish.

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