

THE PRESENCE OF THE SOVEREIGN: AN INVESTIGATION ACROSS SOCIALIST SPACES

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Introduction

How are we supposed to imagine the relics of the sovereign? In what way should we reconfigure the heritage of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and subsequent socialist leaders? Under historical terms, in what way should we make sense of the presence of socialism across different nation-states, and what is the appropriate way to think about history? Questions such as these always take an examination targeting multiple socialist leaders as their starting point, since the sovereign attains a much more profound ideological and cosmological significance in socialist and post-socialist states. In this short essay I wish to elaborate on the presence of the sovereign across various post-socialist states. Principally pivoting around the ethnographic as well as literary accounts of Ngo, Ng, and Ryang, I hope to briefly touch upon the position of the first socialist leaders in Vietnam, China and North Korea. I will then further my argument by incorporating sociological, historical and philosophical lenses from Zhe, Zuo, Groys and Derrida.

I attempt to argue that, the revolutionary leader can be understood not only as the "return" of the sovereign but also as a perpetual presence, a mode of existing that is inseparable from the way in which each government responds to the collision between religiosity, ideals of a socialist state, and localized nationalism, as proposed by Tam T. T. Ngo in *The Secular in South, East, and Southeast Asia*.¹ As I explain later, the presence of the sovereign often takes the form of either spirit possession, concurrent with popular religion, or a god-like specter that dictates the civilians' everyday lives, which evokes the ambiguity between the state's secularization and the sacredness embedded in the regimes. Ngo sets up the theoretical lens of sacred secularity and secular sacrality, scaffolding a possible lens through which he examines the interactions between communism, religion, and localized nationalism. While sacred secularity is best exemplified by the state-sanctioned Ho Chi Minh cult, secular sacrality is illustrated by bottom-up religious groups that pivot around the notion of Ho as a god. According to Ngo, what plays the most prominent role in the varying phenomena surrounding the worship of Ho is the "sacredness of the nation-state," carving out a potential pathway for us to study the presence of the sovereign in the form of religious reverberations.²

¹ Tam T. T. Ngo, "The Uncle Hồ Religion in Vietnam," *The Secular in South, East, and Southeast Asia*, edited by Kenneth Dean and Peter van der Veer (Springer International Publishing, 2019), 217.

² Ngo, "The Uncle Hồ Religion in Vietnam," 221.

Using Ngo's two ethnographic records, the state's sacralization of Ho Chi Minh can be considered as consisting of two stages with a coherent lineage that strives to merge the sacredness of Ho with Vietnamese national identity. The first stage is characterized by Ho's consistent endeavor of "promoting his own image as not only the leader of the nation but also as the Uncle," a tactic that aptly bonds the revolutionary leader with Vietnamese identity. The logic that portrays kinship as the minimum foundation of the nation-state prevails in the political project of Ho, while specific rituals and commemorations in implementing such a project are often borrowed from strategies applied in socialist states, especially the Soviet Union.³ The living Ho has already become the embodiment of the state, yet his posthumous cult of personality begets remnants that are even more astounding. After Ho's death in 1969, his position as the Uncle is accentuated by the state's conscious attempt of connecting the first revolutionary leader to the tradition of ancestral worship in Vietnam. Venerations of Ho that are prescribed by the state often covertly declare their compatibility with ethnic and national traditions, such as burying Ho's visceral organs in Tan Vien Mount, a mountain that is deemed as "the most sacred mountain of Vietnam which received the universal energy and passes it down to the country's capital".⁴ Ngo then argues that the state's divination of Ho in fact serves as perfect exemplification of the way in which atheist secularism is implemented, in the sense that the Vietnamese government does not merely aim at eradicating all religions but at skillfully incorporating its own political agenda through quasi-religious means.⁵ The top-down design of the Ho Chi Minh religion thus appropriates religious notions for its own national use, yet as Ngo details, "Its power is limited when it comes to asserting control over the people's appropriation of the same rituals and cosmology."⁶

The bottom-up Uncle Ho religion denotes a cosmological space where spirit possession prevails. First of all, folk religious interpretations often defy the homogenous image of Ho that is prescribed by the state. Different from views that consider Ho as a spirit trapped in his perpetually preserved dead bodies or ideas that merely paint him as a national historical figure, some places in Vietnam consider Ho Chi Minh as more of a guardian spirit whom the residents can ask for protection. While some scholars may deem the Uncle Ho religion as a variant of the hero and ancestral worship in Vietnam, Ngo shows that it is more than a lineage of the tradition since it is a new product enmeshed with the state's political ideology as well as with a Vietnamese nationalism that pivots around the revolutionary history.

The first group that Ngo studies revolves around the spirit medium Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dien, a female peasant leader who claims to be the true messenger of Uncle Ho. The cult is highly institutionalized in the sense that the procedures of being

³ Ngo, 9.

⁴ Ngo, 220.

⁵ Ngo, 221.

⁶ Ngo, 222.

accepted as a member of the cult are standardized. Consequently, the cult is consistently considered by the state to be a potential threat for its profound capability to mobilize the common people. Major activities of the cult are often conducted on national holidays, and the social groups who engage in Mrs. Dien's Uncle Ho religion are peasants as well as civil servants of lower ranking.⁷ The second Uncle Ho religious group, on the other hand, attracts relatively small clusters of individuals who are nonetheless of higher social status. The way in which the second Uncle Ho religious group functions pivots around the mutually recognized fact that Ho's spirit will possess the spirit medium Mrs. Hoa's body during the ritual, rendering Mrs. Hoa as the temporary representative of Uncle Ho. As someone with a rather humble background, Mrs. Hoa earns the trust and respect of numerous retired politicians and scientists since they deem her mind "not spoiled by education and rationality."⁸ Ngo's ethnography for the second group is particularly intriguing in the sense that the aforementioned quotation candidly reflects a dichotomy that places rationality on one side and the supernatural on the other, a recognition that is historicized by the interactions between the modernization project accompanied with the nation-state and a state-sanctioned atheist secularism.

While Ngo approaches the presence of the sovereign from the lens of spiritual nationalism, Ng's ethnography delves into the cosmological existence of Mao in a village named Hexian located in Henan, China. As indicated in Emily Ng's *A Time of Lost Gods*, the return of Mao starts from the scene in which "an older man stands in the shadows of the temple gate, reciting Mao Zedong's poem 'Snow' in a bellowing oratory to no one in particular."⁹ To some villagers, the man's intonation in front of the local Fuxi Temple denotes that it is not he who is reciting the poem but Mao's spirit, a claim that is reminiscent of the spirit possession in the Uncle Ho religion, where the revolutionary leader is said to speak through a living individual. Ng then investigates the cosmological status of Mao in local imagination from two perspectives, one historical and one socio-economic. One possible mythological and historical equivalent of Mao, Ng argues, is Fuxi, who is often deemed the mythical ancestor who brings early humans into civilization.¹⁰ The Fuxi Temple also reminds one of Beijing's Tiananmen Square, with both presenting an architectural and symbolic space where political power resides. In Hexian, the Fuxi Temple serves as an efficient locus of the scaffolding of collective memory, since the temple is always recounted in relation to mythical ancestors such as Fuxi, imperial rulers such as Zhu Yuanzhang, and the revolutionary leader Chairman Mao.¹¹ Therefore, the sovereign occupies a pivotal

⁷ Ngo, 228.

⁸ Ngo, 234.

⁹ Emily Ng, *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and Ghosts after Mao* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 56.

¹⁰ Ng, *A Time of Lost Gods*, 58.

¹¹ Ng, 60.

place in public memory in Hexian through a specific geographical location that reconfigures time and space.

The socioeconomic aspect pertaining to the local reconfiguration of Mao is less about the return of the sovereign than it is about the departure of a virtuous leader. In Hexian, the earthly regime that implements the economic reform in the 1980s and thus induces irrevocable moral devastation is mirrored by the corruption of heavenly beings, with the most detrimental consequences being the falling of deities and the return of vicious ghosts. Fuxi is said to be not falling from heaven but growing corrupted, thus becoming disenfranchised from the position of a respectful guardian spirit.¹² What is especially worth noticing in Ng's ethnographic records and theorization is the way in which the local residents of Hexian frame historical upheavals. The temple-destruction campaigns during the Cultural Revolution are deemed "not truly acts of an atheist state but cryptic acts of spiritual rectification," and the economic reform is believed to be an utter destruction of Maoist ideals, both moral and cosmological.¹³ The virtuous time where vengeful spirits dare not to come close has already vanished with the death of Mao the earthly sovereign and the collapse of order in heaven.¹⁴

Ng cautiously provides a localized imagination of the first revolutionary leader in a small village of China, an account that is contextualized by a religious status quo where no outwardly spiritual activities are prescribed in Chinese statecraft in relation to political figures. The enmeshment of nationalism, religion and communism takes a new form in Hexian, where the official image of Mao is contested by a specific way of mourning the departure of not only the leader but also the alleged possibility of a virtuous era. Ji Zhe's account on contemporary China's state-religion relationship in "Secularization without Secularism" may testify for the supreme status of Mao in Hexian's cosmology.¹⁵ Zhe argues that the post-1989 political religion implemented by the party-state differs significantly from the Maoist political religion, as the neo-totalitarianism of the present lacks the latter's "utopian, charismatic, and transcendental dimensions."¹⁶ Taking Zhe's viewpoint into consideration, Hexian's cosmology can also be read as a deferred appeal to the justice granted by the first socialist leader, as well as a withdrawal of acknowledgement to the turbulence allegedly brought by the economic reform.

Moving sideways from the articulation of Ng's description regarding a localized presence of the sovereign, I would like to offer another elaboration on the omnipresence of Mao specifically with respect to his personality cult during the Cultural Revolution. In Jiping Zuo's "Political Religions: The Case of the Cultural

¹² Ng, 76.

¹³ Ng, 71.

¹⁴ Ng, 73.

¹⁵ Ji Zhe. "Secularization without Secularism," *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents*, edited by Tam T. T. Ngo and Justine B. Quijada (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 108.

¹⁶ Zhe, 109.

Revolution in China,” the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution conducted ritual activities “in association with this fanatic devotion to the idol Mao,” as the family would ask for instructions from Mao in the morning and confess their wrongdoings in the evening, both in front of Mao’s picture.¹⁷ Zuo then proposes that the eradication of traditional religious practices during the Cultural Revolution does not wipe away all spiritual remnants, since “a new religion was created” in relation to Mao’s personality cult.¹⁸ Nevertheless, I would deem such argumentation as slightly limited and even somehow imprudent, since it still insinuates that religion belongs to an obsolete realm where “feudal superstition” resides and that the leader’s personality cult is no less fatuous and backward than what has already been exterminated. From my perspective, the theorization provided by Sonia Ryang pertaining to the construction of self in North Korea might be a more considerate way to illustrate the internal tensions of atheist secularism, since Ryang traces her analysis back to the technology of the self instead of a reductive vision of how an overwhelmingly broad vision of “religion” functions.

Both Ngo and Ng’s renderings of the interactions between history and cosmological configuration are presented in the form of anthropological interpretation, where phenomena under the umbrella of atheist secularism are read semiotically. Ryang, on the other hand, approaches the problematics regarding the presence of the sovereign by closely examining the narratives of two North Korean stories, both published as medium-length novels that were written for entertainment in her book *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry*.¹⁹ Ryang’s analysis carves out a model for the cultivation of the self in North Korea, where the communication between one and the other is quintessentially mediated by the confessions of both to the Great Leader, a figure that can be compared to the Judeo-Christian God. The tropes of the two stories that Ryang focuses on efficiently reflect the process in which the North Korean self is constituted by public confession through which one directly seeks appeal from “the Great Leader.” The characters’ relationship is animated by their routine confessional behaviors to the god-like figure of the Great Leader, and the most significant plot twist and narrative climax is designated to reflect the characters’ loyalty to the Great Leader through their outward confessions. Ryang then argues that the distinction between the public and the private is blurred, in the sense that the private self is essentially constructed in a communal space. One has to be stripped naked spiritually in order to purify oneself and to attain self-improvement in front of the Great Leader, where self-criticism in relation to one’s deficiencies is the most prevalent form.²⁰ Near the end of the rendering pertaining to the two North Korean medium stories, Ryang pinpoints that “only political life allows individuals to have a self,” a

¹⁷ Jiping Zuo. “Political Religion: The Case of the Cultural Revolution in China,” 101.

¹⁸ Zuo, “Political Religion: The Case of the Cultural Revolution in China,” 103.

¹⁹ Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 144.

²⁰ Ryang, *Reading North Korea*, 143.

claim that is tightly intertwined with the fact that the characters confess to each other by enacting a confession with respect to the nation and, specifically, the Great Leader.²¹ Therefore, the individual has to bear the sovereign in mind and genuinely “feel the presence of the sacred being” within every second so that he or she can “reveal to this great entity every shortcoming that they happen to possess, so as to attain self-improvement.”²² It is not the political power that the sovereign represents that transcends anything else, since the sovereign is essentially united with the political. Under such circumstances, any other kind of human interaction, such as economic, social, or ethical, has to be animated by the purest form of political religion in order to remain effective. The spectral presence of the sovereign is disseminated into every individual, since “one has to die loyally in order to live loyally for the Great Leader.”²³

Following an examination of the four authors’ writings, I understand the overarching presence of the sovereign as a pivotal starting point in delving into not only the socialist statecraft of atheist secularism but also the realm that socialist sovereignty occupies. Such an examination further sheds light on the nuances embedded in post-socialist states’ distinction between the sacred and the secular, bridging the gap of relevant scholarship which mainly concerns a top-down, state-oriented perspective on the role of religion in post-socialist states.

Whereas Ngo offers the theoretical framework from which we can scaffold our renderings, Ng’s ethnography in China and Ryang’s textual analysis of North Korean literature enrich the way in which scholarship talks about secular sacredness and sacred secularity. Vietnam’s state-sponsored Ho Chi Minh religion removes the westernized barrier between secularization and atheism, and the sovereign presides over the docile realm where both top-down state design and bottom-up localized interpretation are allowed to circulate. In Hexian, the sovereign is incorporated into a cosmology that permits the residents to make sense of historical turbulence, where the nostalgia for broken promises, both in socialist and post-socialist China, is embodied by the doubling of earthly and heavenly affairs. The omnipresence of the sovereign in North Korea occurs to be the most secular, in the sense that no place in the recounting is saved from the return of a regional tradition or any “superstitious” element. Nevertheless, the cultivation of the self is to a certain extent the most religious, or theological, since the way in which individuals mediate their technologies of the self is directed towards a god-like figure who is no less divine than the Judeo-Christian sovereign.

Perhaps another way for us to study the presence of the sovereign in socialist states is to look through an utterly religious lens, one that is best exemplified by Boris Groys’ analysis pertaining to the image of Lenin, the first socialist leader of the first socialist state. According to Groys, Lenin’s image is entirely decontextualized in a

²¹ Ryang, 181.

²² Ryang, 183.

²³ Ryang, 188.

similar way as the Russian Orthodox icon is removed from history. The aura of Lenin's image is stripped off as well, since it is perpetually replicable and is thus "the eternal return of the one and the same image."²⁴ Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union did the image of Lenin gain historicity, as it is now a "Soviet object" that is permanently left in the past. It thus appears to us that the era of post-socialism is the best time to look back at the legacy and relics of socialism, yet the presence of the sovereign portrayed in the aforementioned writings debunks our initial premises: the sovereign does not have to "return," since he is forever there and keeps coming back as a perpetual, solid, and dominating specter. Jacques Derrida's note on "hauntology" adds another layer to such an all-encompassing interpretation as well: as stated in *Specters of Marx*, the present is incessantly "haunted" by the possibility of lost futures.²⁵ "A ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back": the neoliberal dreamlands are always going to be unsettled by the disavowal of lost futures promised by the apparitions.²⁶ Only in the case of the three aforementioned post-socialist states, the specters of the first socialist leaders do not coincide with ideological returns but are instead reincarnated in folk religions or quasi-religious entities. Even though I align with Derrida's attitude in terms of defying the Fukuyamian discourse, I do not aim at proposing a fanatical enshrinement of totalitarian practices under the glorious name of utter emancipation. Instead, by elaborating on the possibilities in reimagining socialist pasts in the post-socialist present, specifically concerning religious or quasi-religious practices in East Asia, I hope to present an angle that ties a remembrance of the lost futures to social realities that deal with such nostalgia in a more nuanced manner.

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²⁴ Boris Groys, "Lenin's Image," (e-flux, 2021).

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of the Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).

²⁶ Derrida, 123.

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