

Chumaxian and the Construction of Subjectivity in Northeast Chinese Fox-Spirit Worship

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Abstract:

This article examines *Chumaxian* (出马仙), a fox-spirit mediumship tradition in Northeast China, through Lacanian structural psychoanalysis and cultural functionalism. Drawing on a qualitative secondary analysis of published ethnographic materials, it asks how initiation reorganises visionary experiences, bodily sensations, and personal crises as a culturally recognised vocation. The article argues that *Chumaxian* may operate in a manner comparable to Lacan's *sinthome*: a stabilising structure that links the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real through ritual practice, interpretation, and social recognition. This comparison does not reduce spirituality to pathology. Instead, it shows how a non-Western symbolic system can sustain subjective coherence while exceeding Western clinical categories. Cultural functionalism complements this account by explaining the tradition's social persistence, moral authority, and adaptability. Together, the two frameworks clarify how *Chumaxian* organises individual experience and reproduces religious legitimacy under changing social and technological conditions in contemporary China. The analysis remains attentive to practitioners' own interpretive terms and contexts.

Keywords: Lacanian psychoanalysis; Animal-spirit mediumship; Chumaxian; Spirit possession; Ordinary psychosis

1. Introduction

Spirit possession has a long ethnographic history across societies, and local variants—fox-spirit worship in China, *zār* in northeastern Africa, Korean *mudang* rites, and Mongolian and Manchu shamanism—share certain structural features even as they differ in their cosmologies (Boddy, 1994; Lewis, 2003). Recent studies of contemporary Chinese spirit-medium traditions in Southeast Asia likewise demonstrate the continued social and ritual importance of spirit communication in modern Sinophone communities (Graham, 2020). The present article is concerned with one such tradition in contemporary Northeast China: *Chumaxian* (出马仙), literally meaning 'going out as a spirit-horse'. *Chumaxian* is a spirit-medium practice in which a chosen practitioner—known colloquially as a *dizi* (弟子) or *xianjia* (仙家) disciple—allows one of several animal immortals, most often the Fox Immortal (*Huxian* 胡仙/狐仙) or Weasel Immortal

(*Huangxian* 黄仙), to possess them in order to diagnose illness, resolve misfortune, and mediate between clients and the unseen world (Hai, 2019; Jia, 2021). Rooted in local shamanic traditions (Guo, 2001) and shaped by several centuries of contact with Daoist ritual techniques and Buddhist devotional vocabulary, *Chumaxian* is practised across the three northeastern provinces and has migrated onto online platforms where mediums offer consultations by livestream (Hai, 2019). English-language scholarship similarly identifies *Chumaxian* as a visible contemporary form of animal-spirit mediumship in Northeast China, characterised by ritual healing, spirit possession, and localised religious authority (Deng, 2014). Comparable transformations have been observed in overseas Chinese spirit-medium traditions, where ritual authority circulates through digital media, urban networks, and mediated forms of religious intimacy (Graham, 2020).

Two features of *Chumaxian* make it a compelling site for psychoanalytic inquiry. First, one does not choose to become a medium; one is chosen. Candidates typically describe severe disorientation—disturbed sleep, vivid visionary experiences, sensations of being watched or spoken to, and a collapse of ordinary social functioning—which is resolved only when an established medium recognises the crisis as a ‘connection with the immortals’ (*xianyuan* 仙缘) and inducts the candidate into the tradition (Jia, 2021, pp. 15–22). Second, after induction, candidates often report a return to coherent everyday life. The crisis is no longer interpreted as illness but is reorganised as a spiritual vocation within the tradition (Jia, 2021, pp. 17–22; Hai, 2019).

This dual movement—from disorganising experience to a socially legitimate role—invites comparison with Jacques Lacan’s structural account of psychosis and, in particular, his concept of the *sinthome*. Lacan introduced the term in his 1975–1976 Seminar to designate a fourth element that knots together the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real (Lacan, 2005). A terminological note is essential here. When this article speaks of ‘psychosis’ or the ‘psychotic subject’, it uses these terms in their Lacanian structural sense, not as DSM-style clinical diagnoses. Following Miller and the contributors to the 1998 Antibes Convention (Miller *et al.*, 1999), the article draws specifically on ordinary psychosis (*psychose ordinaire*): a subjective structure in which the paternal metaphor is not fully operative, but the subject nonetheless maintains a workable relation to the social world through singular supplements rather than overt clinical ‘triggering’ (Miller, 2009; Skriabine, 2009). Psychotic structure therefore refers here to a mode of subjective organisation rather than a psychiatric diagnosis. Visionary experiences, voices, or a sense of being addressed by a non-human Other are treated as meaningful subjective experiences

rather than merely pathological symptoms.

Situating *Chumaxian* within the framework of psychosis has three benefits. First, it avoids reducing folk religion to a symptom and treats alternative modes of subjective organisation as structures in their own right rather than inferior forms of neurosis. Second, it allows *Chumaxian* initiation to be considered as a stabilising symbolic structure: ritual language, lineage, deities, and somatic techniques may bring otherwise disruptive experience into a more coherent relation with a symbolic universe. Third, it brings Lacanian theory into dialogue with cultural-functional approaches (Malinowski, 1944, 1948; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Turner, 1967). Functionalism explains why the social structure permits and reproduces the medium's role, whereas Lacanian analysis asks why particular subjects assume that role and what ritual does at the level of subjectivity.

The argument proceeds in four parts. The first situates *Chumaxian* and fox-spirit worship within the local history of shamanism and the Daoist-Buddhist syncretism of Northeast Chinese folk religion. The second examines the chosen candidate, the crisis of initiation, and its ritual resolution through published ethnographic material, particularly Jia (2021), Hai (2019), and Yue (2014). The third develops the Lacanian interpretation, moving from the three registers and the Name-of-the-Father to the *sinthome*. The final part returns to cultural functionalism and considers the tradition's adaptation to contemporary digital environments.

2. Sources and analytical approach

This article is based on a qualitative secondary analysis of published ethnographic and historical materials on *Chumaxian* and related fox-spirit traditions in Northeast China. The primary analytical corpus includes Chinese-language ethnographic studies, historical studies of fox-spirit worship, and scholarship on contemporary ritual practice, including Jia (2021), Hai (2019), Kang (2006), Yue (2014), and Guo (2001; 2006), supplemented by English-language studies on spirit possession, local religion, and animal-spirit worship in Chinese contexts (e.g., Deng, 2014; Overmyer, 2009; Boddy, 1994). These sources include multiple forms of primary material, such as field interviews, ritual observations, locally transmitted narratives, and historical documentation, which are here treated as ethnographic evidence rather than as transparent factual records. Jia's (2021) fieldwork provides several especially detailed first-person interview accounts and is therefore cited for illustrative case material, but the argument developed here does not depend on a single source; rather, it emerges from a comparative reading across multiple published studies and historical accounts.

Methodologically, this article combines close textual interpretation of ethnographic narratives with Lacanian structural analysis, treating ritual discourse, initiation narratives, and mediumistic practice as materials through which subjective organisation becomes analytically legible.

3. Chumaxian and fox-spirit worship in Northeast China

The word *Chumaxian* is composed of three morphemes: *chu* (出, 'to go out'), *ma* (马, 'horse'), and *xian* (仙, 'immortal'). The medium is metaphorically the 'horse' that the immortal 'goes out' on—that is, the body through which the deity travels into the human social world. The term is contemporary and vernacular; it belongs to the popular religious vocabulary of the three northeastern provinces (Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning) and neighbouring parts of Inner Mongolia, where it names both the medium and, by extension, the tradition itself (Jia, 2021, pp. 10–15). The immortals in question are predominantly the 'five great families' (*wu da jia* 五大家) of animal spirits—fox (*hu* 狐), weasel (*huang* 黄), hedgehog (*bai* 白), snake (*liu* 柳), and rat (*hui* 灰)—with the fox and the weasel occupying the central positions in the pantheon (Kang, 2006, pp. 3–15; Hai, 2019).

The pronunciation of *Huxian* (胡仙) for the fox deity is itself a ritual convention. Practitioners substitute the homophonous character *hu* 胡 (a surname and an ethnonym) for the graph 狐 ('fox') as an act of ritual avoidance, on the principle that directly naming the spirit risks profanity (Hai, 2019). The fox cult is deeply stratified: in some households, a domestic altar and incense are maintained for protection, healing, and prosperity; in others, a dedicated medium conducts séances for clients; in still others, small temples serve a neighbourhood clientele (Kang, 2006, pp. 75–110). Fox-immortal worship has been ethnographically documented in North China since at least the early twentieth century (Li, 1948) and has been the subject of sustained historical and comparative study in recent decades (Kang, 2006; Hai, 2019). One of the few extended English-language studies of contemporary animal-spirit mediumship in Northeast China is Claire Deng's (2014) research on Liaoning spirit mediums, which similarly describes the integration of possession, healing, and local cosmology within everyday religious life. Recent literary and historical scholarship further demonstrates that the fox occupies a uniquely unstable position within the Chinese cultural imagination, simultaneously associated with seduction, danger, spiritual power, and moral ambiguity across late imperial narrative traditions (Huntington, 2020).

Although *Chumaxian* is often described—accurately in broad outline—as a local adaptation of shamanism (Ding, Zhao and Bai, 1989, pp. 369–392; Guo, 2001), the tradition as practised today is a syncretic formation rather than an unbroken inheritance from pre-modern Tungusic shamanism. Its ritual frame retains shamanic elements: the medium’s body as the site of a deity’s descent, song and rhythmic speech to induce and regulate possession, and the medium’s role as healer, diviner, and interpreter of misfortune (Guo, 2001, p. 261; Yue, 2014, pp. 134–137). At the same time, *Chumaxian* has absorbed Daoist ritual vocabulary—including talismans (*fulu* 符篆), taboos, and a celestial bureaucracy—and a popular Buddhist lexicon in which tutelary deities may be addressed as ‘buddhas’ (*fo* 佛) in the sense of protecting deities rather than doctrinal Buddhist figures (Kobori, 1949, p. 30; Guo, 2006). This is a practical pluralism that draws on locally available ritual technologies and embeds spirit worship within broader, socially recognisable religious vocabularies. Practitioners also describe ritual knowledge as transmitted through dreams or nocturnal encounters with the Fox Immortal (*Huxian*) and Weasel Immortal (*Huangxian*), who instruct mediums in healing, divination, and ritual procedure (Hai, 2019).

A brief historical context is useful. Animal-spirit imaginaries have deep roots in Chinese literature: the fox is already a richly ambivalent figure in the Six Dynasties collection *Soushenji* 搜神记 (In Search of the Supernatural), compiled by Gan Bao in the mid-fourth century (Gan, 1996), and the long history of fox tales through the Tang, Song, and Qing dynasties—culminating in the tales of Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi*—has been analysed in detail by Kang (2006). This dual perspective also aligns with broader studies of Chinese local religion, which emphasise that ritual efficacy in popular religious practice depends less on doctrinal coherence than on communal recognition, performative success, and symbolic usefulness in everyday life (Chau, 2006; Dean, 1993). Moreover, recent studies of witchcraft fears, spirit familiars, and animal-associated ritual practices in imperial China likewise demonstrate the long historical persistence of anxieties and sacred imaginaries surrounding non-human spiritual agents (Ter Haar, 2025). Recent scholarship has further emphasised the importance of fox imagery in late imperial Chinese narrative culture, where fox spirits frequently appear as morally ambiguous beings situated between danger, seduction, spiritual power, and transcendence (Huntington, 2020). In parallel, a lineage of ritual specialists known as *fangshi* (方士, ‘masters of methods’) is attested from the late Warring States and early imperial periods onward, combining divinatory, medical, and magical-technical expertise in ways that would later be partly absorbed into institutional Daoism (DeWoskin, 1983; Harper, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). The

contemporary *Chumaxian* medium is not a direct descendant of the *fangshi*, but the functional niche—an itinerant or semi-institutional specialist who mediates misfortune for lay clients—has been continuously reproduced in Chinese society for well over two millennia.

Within this composite tradition, the spirit-possession séance—sometimes called *jiangshen* (降神) or *futi* (附体)—remains the ritual core. Generic descriptions present a sequence in which the medium invokes the deity, enters possession through chant and bodily performance, delivers the deity's speech, and returns to ordinary consciousness after the deity's departure (Guo, 2006). Contemporary *Chumaxian* practice often attenuates these performative elements: the medium summons the presiding immortal, yields their body and voice, addresses the client's concern, and closes the séance when the deity departs (Guo, 2006; Jia, 2021, pp. 25–40). In urban and online settings, the sequence may be compressed further, with verbal exchange becoming the salient ritual event. The medium's authority ultimately depends less on theological coherence than on perceived efficacy (*lingyan* 灵验), particularly in healing, divination, and the resolution of misfortune.

4. The chosen fox-spirit medium

A defining feature of *Chumaxian* is that the vocation is not elected. One does not simply apprentice oneself to a teacher and acquire the role through ordinary ritual training; rather, one is believed to be chosen by the immortals themselves. In practitioners' own accounts, this selection is retrospectively recognised through an 'immortal connection' (*xianyuan* 仙缘), a condition understood as the necessary basis for mediumship (Jia, 2021, pp. 15–22). Unlike institutional religious training, becoming a *Chumaxian* is framed not as voluntary initiation but as an unavoidable spiritual calling.

Chinese ritual specialists who come to their calling through involuntary ecstatic experiences are well documented. Schiffeler (1976, pp. 21–22), writing about early Chinese ritual and medical practitioners, distinguishes those struck by the 'spirit'—described as trance-inclined, visionary, or ecstatic—from practitioners who acquire their art through apprenticeship or inheritance. Eliade (1992, p. 45) similarly describes shamanic vocation as a movement from a crisis of consciousness to the ritual incorporation of that crisis into a social identity. Anthropological studies of possession religions also emphasise the involuntary character of the experience that initiates a vocation and the close relation between affliction and calling (Bourguignon, 1976; Lewis, 2003). The analytical point is therefore not only the experience itself but the context that reorders it.

In *Chumaxian* practice, this phenomenon is particularly evident. Ethnographic materials drawn from Jia's (2021) fieldwork, together with broader studies of Northeast Chinese spirit-medium traditions (Hai, 2019; Deng, 2014), describe candidates who, often during adolescence or early adulthood, undergo periods of profound subjective disorientation. These experiences may include insomnia, visionary encounters, auditory presences, altered states of consciousness, sudden emotional outbursts, bodily discomfort without clear biomedical explanation, and an increasing difficulty sustaining ordinary social routines. Families frequently seek biomedical assistance first, yet clinical consultation often produces either no clear diagnosis or broad psychiatric labels such as 'hysteria' or 'mental instability.' At this point, an established medium may reinterpret the crisis as evidence that the individual has been 'chosen by the immortals' and should formally accept the *Chumaxian* vocation. Kleinman's (1980) distinction between disease and illness is particularly relevant here, since *Chumaxian* practice reframes distress not primarily as biomedical pathology, but as a culturally meaningful form of affliction situated within a wider symbolic and spiritual order. Rather than suppressing these experiences, the ritual system provides an interpretive framework through which they become intelligible and socially recognisable.

One of Jia's interlocutors, a 41-year-old female medium, describes the period preceding her initiation (Jia, 2021, p. 17):

At that time, I felt as if someone was always standing beside me, watching me, and it made me feel terrified. I would talk nonsense, speaking incoherently, and felt like I was being controlled. I would suddenly laugh, cry, or jump around without any reason. I didn't feel hungry even if I didn't eat, and I didn't feel thirsty even if I didn't drink water. I couldn't sleep at night, and I constantly felt like someone was talking to me. My whole state was like I had gone mad. After a few days, my family rushed me from Tianjin to the Shulan Psychiatric Hospital for treatment. The doctors there said it wasn't a physical illness but rather a case of hysteria. Later, they asked around and found someone who told them that I was meant to become a *Chumaxian*.

What is particularly striking in this and similar narratives is the extent to which subjective disorganisation becomes retrospectively meaningful after initiation. A mentor—often called a *lingluren* (领路人, 'road-leader')—identifies the candidate's presiding immortals, explains ritual taboos and obligations, prescribes altar arrangements and devotional practices, and gradually introduces the candidate into the tradition's symbolic universe. Following formal initiation,

experiences previously understood as terrifying or pathological are reinterpreted as signs of spiritual sensitivity and the immortals' presence.

Within the emic logic of the tradition, refusal carries consequences. Candidates who resist the calling are believed to remain afflicted by physical discomfort, psychological instability, recurring misfortune, or disturbances affecting themselves and their families. Acceptance, by contrast, is said to restore balance and end the crisis. Comparable 'affliction-until-acceptance' patterns occur in other spirit-possession traditions, where illness or misfortune becomes the route to ritual vocation (see Lewis, 2003; Boddy, 1994).

A structural reading of this process follows Eliade's observation that shamanic crises are culturally organised experiences rather than merely pathological abnormalities reducible to psychiatric classification (Eliade, 1992, p. 45). *Chumaxian* initiation functions as a symbolic reordering mechanism: it gathers fragmented and distressing experiences into a coherent cosmological framework that provides explanation, identity, and social function. Through ritual naming, lineage affiliation, possession practices, and ongoing devotional activity, the candidate's crisis is transformed into a socially intelligible vocation. From a strictly biomedical perspective, this collective symbolic work often remains invisible. From a Lacanian perspective, however, it is precisely this transformation of disorganisation into structure that makes the phenomenon analytically significant.

5. Structure, signifier, and the sinthome: a Lacanian reading

The theoretical framework adopted here is Lacanian structural psychoanalysis, particularly the later seminars and post-1998 discussions of ordinary psychosis. Because these concepts have specific meanings that are not always familiar outside psychoanalysis, this section introduces the terms required for the analysis of *Chumaxian* practice.

Lacan differentiates three registers through which subjective experience is organised: the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real (Lacan, 1993, pp. 17, 60). The Imaginary concerns images, identity, and the cohesion of the ego; the Symbolic concerns language, kinship, law, and networks of signifiers; and the Real names what resists symbolisation and returns as rupture, impossibility, or excess. In Lacan's account of neurosis, the Name-of-the-Father (*Nom-du-Père*) is not the empirical father but a signifier that supports the subject's insertion into a mediated symbolic order. In psychosis, this paternal signifier is foreclosed—that is, excluded from integration into the Symbolic (Lacan, 1993, pp. 45–47). Foreclosure does not mean that 'the father' simply disappears. What has not been integrated may return in elementary phenomena such as voices,

excessive signification, a sense of being addressed from outside, or the certainty that surrounding events refer personally to the subject (Lacan, 1993, pp. 50–75; Vanheule, 2017).

Classical Lacanian theory often discusses this structure through overt psychosis. Later developments, especially Jacques-Alain Miller's concept of ordinary psychosis, complicate that picture. Ordinary psychosis refers to subjects for whom a stabilising paternal metaphor is absent but who maintain a relatively stable social life through alternative forms of symbolic compensation (Miller, 2009). They may work, sustain relationships, and participate in ordinary social life without manifesting overt psychiatric psychosis; structural instability appears only in subtle and discrete signs. In this article, 'psychosis' and 'psychotic structure' refer exclusively to this Lacanian definition, not to biomedical diagnosis. The argument does not claim that *Chumaxian* practitioners are mentally ill. Lacanian theory is used instead to describe how ritual action may stabilise subjective experience. Related discussions of signification, subjectivity, and psychotic structure also appear in Chinese-language engagements with Lacan, Derrida, and post-Heideggerian theory (Shen, 2010).

The most pertinent concept is Lacan's *sinthome*. In *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan reconceives subjective structure through Borromean topology, in which three rings are linked so that removing one releases the others (Lacan, 2005). The *sinthome* acts as a fourth ring that can secure the knot when the Name-of-the-Father no longer performs this function. Unlike a symptom understood as something to be relieved, the *sinthome* names a singular stabilising function. It may take the form of repetitive activity, somatic discipline, artistic work, ritual, or attachment to a specific symbolic structure. Figure 1 presents the three registers schematically.

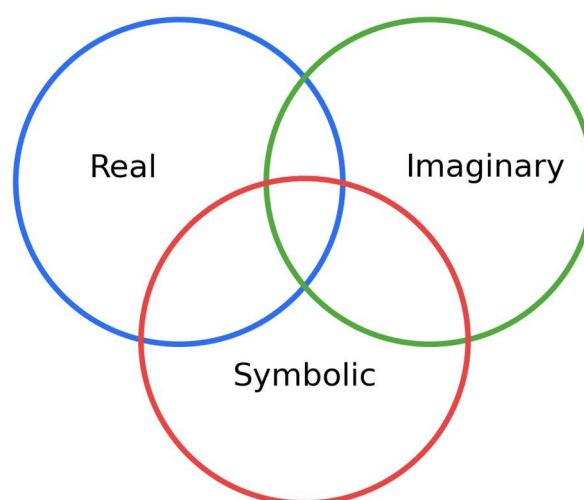


Figure 1: The three registers in Lacanian theory. Source: author's diagram based on Lacan (1993, 2005).

From this angle, three features of *Chumaxian* come into view. First, pre-initiation experiences resemble what Lacanian theory describes as elementary phenomena: voices, sensed presences, over-invested events, and disruptions of everyday social reality. Second, *Chumaxian* provides a structured symbolic universe within which such experiences can be named and interpreted. Immortal lineages, ritual obligations, possession, taboos, altars, dream interpretation, and ritual language organise otherwise uncategorised experience within a coherent cosmology. The tradition does not erase visionary experience; it reworks it as meaningful and socially legitimate. Third, this symbolic universe is maintained through repeated practice. Offerings, séances, prayer, and dream communication sustain the medium's relation to the immortals, so stability depends not on a cure but on continuing symbolic performance. This can also be understood as embodied ritualisation, in which symbolic authority is produced through repeated practice rather than belief alone (Bell, 1992).

The possession ritual is particularly significant in this process. As described earlier, possession is staged through the invocation of a deity, the medium's altered state and speech in the immortal's voice, and a return to ordinary consciousness when the deity departs (Guo, 2006). Contemporary practitioners may describe possession as a temporary merging of human and divine agency in which the distinction between the two becomes unstable. The ritual therefore does more than represent a belief: it repeatedly enacts the symbolic position through which experience is stabilised.

From the perspective of Lacanian theory, *Chumaxian* initiation may be understood as a culturally inherited form of *sinthomatic* organisation. The tradition supplies names, cosmology, lineage, and embodied ritual through which otherwise unbound experiences can be brought into relation. Subjective disorganisation is thereby reorganised as a socially recognisable vocation. This reading does not pathologise spirituality; it emphasises the work performed by a non-Western ritual framework that psychiatric categories alone do not fully explain.

The boundary of this claim must remain clear. The article does not argue that all spirit mediums are psychotic in Lacan's structural sense, nor that every possession tradition should be interpreted through psychoanalysis. Its narrower claim is that *Chumaxian* initiation may be structurally analogous to *sinthomatic* stabilisation: both organise disruptive experience through a supplementary symbolic form. This analogy helps explain why initiation can reorganise experiences that were previously unbearable or chaotic without treating the two processes as identical. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate this proposed relation schematically.

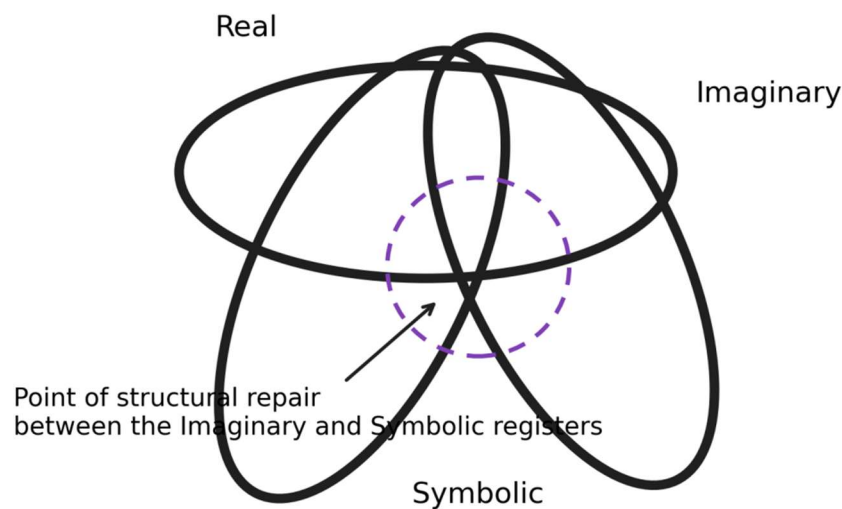


Figure 2: The Borromean knot and structural repair. The dashed circle marks a point at which the Imaginary and Symbolic registers are reconnected. Source: author's diagram based on Lacan (2005).

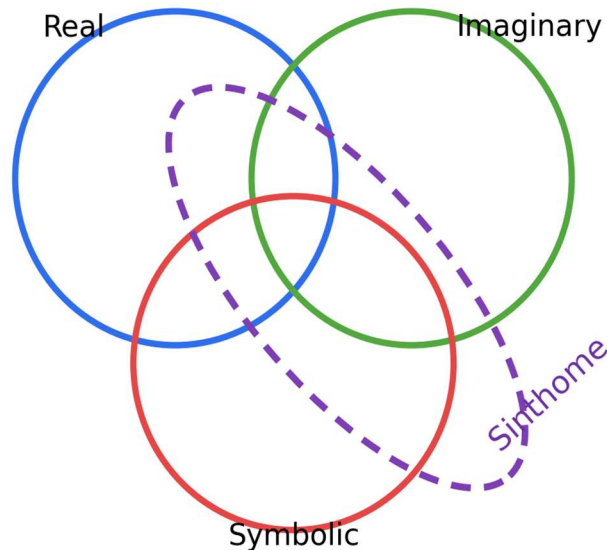


Figure 3: The sinthome as a fourth knotting element. Source: author's diagram based on Lacan (2005).

A further implication concerns the medium's relation to belief and certainty. Ethnographic accounts consistently note that *Chumaxian* practitioners experience visions, dreams, spirit communication, and possession states as immediately real rather than metaphorical (Jia, 2021). In Lacanian terms, this relation to signification differs from the neurotic structure, where

meaning is mediated through doubt, displacement, and symbolic ambiguity. Here, the signifier is often experienced with a greater degree of certainty and directness (Shen, 2006, p. 42). What *Chumaxian* practice provides is not the elimination of this certainty, but a socially shared symbolic environment within which it can be collectively recognised and regulated rather than remaining isolated and destabilising.

Finally, the *sinthome* should not be understood only as an individual artistic creation of the kind Lacan famously associated with James Joyce. *Chumaxian* suggests that the *sinthome* may also operate as a culturally transmitted ritual form. The stabilising knot is reproduced collectively through repeated ritual practice, initiation, possession, and symbolic participation within an inherited cosmology. In this sense, *Chumaxian* mediumship can be understood not merely as private belief, but as a socially organised mode of subjective stabilisation sustained through ritual continuity and communal recognition.

6. Cultural function and the transformations of Chumaxian

The Lacanian account developed above concerns subjective structure: how *Chumaxian* initiation may reorganise and stabilise a practitioner's experience. It does not, by itself, explain why the tradition persists and adapts in contemporary China. Cultural functionalism therefore provides a complementary framework for examining the social work performed by ritual and religion.

From a functionalist perspective, *Chumaxian* offers ways to explain and symbolically manage uncertainty, pain, and misfortune. North Chinese local religion operates through open and localised networks of lay healing, ethical guidance, spirit mediation, and practical problem-solving rather than only through formal institutions (Overmyer, 2009). Malinowski (1944, 1948) argues that religious institutions help people address crises beyond ordinary practical control while sustaining social solidarity. *Chumaxian* séances perform a comparable function. Illness, financial trouble, family conflict, infertility, bad luck, and accidents become intelligible within a cosmology that attributes misfortune to neglected immortals, disturbed ancestors or graves, disrupted *fengshui*, karmic consequences, or unfulfilled ritual obligations. These explanations also make intervention possible through offerings, altar care, spirit-medium consultation, divination, and related ritual practices.

Secondly, mediums often serve as arbiters of morality in their communities. Rituals may often serve to re-install the group norms through pronouncement (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). The pronouncement made by the *Chumaxian* medium during consultation often emphasises

the importance of filial devotion towards parents, responsibilities for brothers and sisters, and the role of the married person in a family or the required behaviour for single individuals. The power of the pronouncement is derived not from the authority of the office but from the speech of the immortal god who possesses the medium. Therefore, the séance is not only a stage of healing or divination, but a way to establish and regulate the morals of the community.

Turner (1967) similarly approaches ritual as symbolic transformation. Possession creates a setting in which fear, doubt, shame, and anxiety can be articulated and acted upon. The client's distress is placed within a spirit narrative and a wider cosmological order, while the immortal's speech offers diagnosis, guidance, or moral explanation. Ritual thus concentrates diffuse emotional tension into a shared symbolic process.

These functionalist insights should not be conflated with the Lacanian framework because they operate at different analytical levels. Cultural functionalism explains the social persistence of *Chumaxian*: the needs it addresses, the practices through which it is reproduced, and the sources of its legitimacy. The Lacanian account concerns subjective structuration and the stabilising work that ritual may perform for particular practitioners. The two models are methodologically complementary rather than competing explanations.

Recent ethnographic research suggests that *Chumaxian* practice has been reworked under digital conditions. Whereas earlier generations of mediums worked mainly within local communities and kinship networks, some practitioners now maintain public profiles through livestreams, short videos, and social-media messaging services (Hai, 2019). Consultations may take place through online video-conferencing platforms or private text-based chats, while online reviews supplement word-of-mouth reputation. A medium may, for example, receive a client's account by private message, conduct a video consultation, and recommend offerings, altar care, or other ritual actions. Despite the change in medium, the explanatory logic remains recognisable: illness, family conflict, financial difficulty, and requests for protection are interpreted through relations among immortals, fate, karma, and ritual obligation.

The digital transformation of *Chumaxian* demonstrates the flexibility of folk belief under changing social conditions. Spirit-medium practices have not disappeared under modernity or scientific rationality; they have been reorganised through new technologies. Domestic altars, incense, dreams, possession narratives, and kinship networks now coexist with livestreamed consultations, private messaging, and video calls. This adaptability is consistent with a functionalist account of religious resilience: the tradition persists because its rituals change in response to new social environments while continuing to address recognisable needs.

From the Lacanian perspective, this displacement also matters. If the *sinthome* is understood as an operation of symbolic stabilisation rather than a fixed object, the material form of ritual can change without necessarily altering that operation. A medium who consults through livestream or video call may perform a function comparable to one who conducts possession before a domestic altar. What is preserved is not every ritual detail but a mode of stabilisation organised through symbolic performance, spiritual instruction, and recognition.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined *Chumaxian* mediumship and fox-spirit worship in Northeast China through a dialogue between Lacanian structural psychoanalysis and cultural functionalism. Drawing on published ethnographic materials, it has argued that *Chumaxian* initiation reorganises experiences of subjective disorganisation through a culturally recognised symbolic system centred on spirit possession, ritual practice, lineage relations, and communication with animal immortals. Rather than treating these practices merely as superstition or pathological belief, the study has approached them as meaningful systems of symbolic organisation embedded within a broader folk-religious cosmology.

Using Lacan's concept of the *sinthome*, the article proposes that *Chumaxian* practice may function as a stabilising symbolic structure through which otherwise disruptive experiences are integrated into socially recognised forms of identity and ritual vocation. Importantly, this argument does not classify practitioners according to biomedical psychiatric categories. The discussion of psychosis throughout the article refers specifically to Lacanian structural theory rather than clinical diagnosis. In this framework, the focus is not on pathology but on the ways symbolic systems organise subjective experience and sustain coherence.

At the same time, the article has argued that psychoanalytic interpretation alone is insufficient for understanding the persistence of *Chumaxian* within contemporary Chinese society. Cultural functionalism clarifies how the tradition continues to provide explanatory models for suffering, mechanisms of communal integration, moral guidance, and ritual responses to uncertainty. The conjunction of these two frameworks allows *Chumaxian* to be understood simultaneously as a system of subjective stabilisation and as a socially adaptive religious institution. The persistence of fox-spirit belief and spirit-medium practice in contemporary China also reflects the remarkable historical continuity of Chinese traditions surrounding invisible agency, spirit affliction, and ritual mediation documented across both imperial and modern contexts (Ter Haar, 2025).

The study also contributes to broader discussions concerning the relationship between non-Western religious practice and psychoanalytic theory. *Chumaxian* does not merely serve as an illustration of Lacanian concepts; rather, it complicates and expands them by demonstrating how symbolic stabilisation may emerge collectively through transmitted ritual systems rather than solely through individual artistic or symptomatic formations. In this sense, Northeast Chinese spirit-medium traditions offer an important site for reconsidering the cultural dimensions of subjectivity, symbolic structure, and ritual embodiment.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The present discussion is based primarily on secondary analysis of published Chinese-language ethnographic materials, especially Jia's (2021) fieldwork. Further first-hand ethnographic research with contemporary *Chumaxian* practitioners—particularly those operating within digital environments—would provide a more detailed understanding of initiation, ritual performance, dream transmission, possession experiences, and changing forms of authority. Comparative work with related possession traditions, including Korean *mudang* practices, Manchu shamanic survivals, and Mongolian ritual specialists, would also help clarify which structural features are culturally specific and which may reflect broader regional patterns.

Within Religious Studies, the present argument is intended not as a replacement for phenomenological, historical, or theological interpretations of spirit possession, but as an additional analytical perspective through which the continuing vitality of these traditions may be understood. *Chumaxian* demonstrates that spirit possession remains not merely a remnant of pre-modern superstition, but an evolving symbolic practice through which questions of suffering, identity, morality, and subjectivity continue to be negotiated in contemporary society.

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Appendix A. Supplementary Ethnographic Material from Jia (2021)

Case A: Everyday Identity and Ritual Embodiment in Chumaxian Practice

The following interview excerpt, cited from Jia's (2021) fieldwork, further illustrates how *Chumaxian* practitioners distinguish between ordinary social identity and ritual embodiment during possession practices:

I also have an ordinary job. I became a *Chumaxian* medium when I was in my early thirties, but I continued working normally. I do not rely on this practice to make money. If someone comes to me and has affinity with my immortals, then I may help them; otherwise, I tell them to seek someone else. My family members and close friends know that I am a medium, but many of my colleagues do not. In everyday life, I am just an ordinary person. Only when the immortals arrive am I different from others and able to 'see' things. In truth, it is not I who can see; it is the immortals speaking through my mouth.

(F1, female *Chumaxian* practitioner, age 41, interviewed May 2020, cited in Jia, 2021; translated from Chinese by the author)

This interview material reflects what Chinese ethnographic discussions of shamanic personhood have described as a dual 'human-divine' status. During ritual practice, the medium is not understood merely as an intermediary between humans and spirits, but as a temporary embodiment of the immortal itself. For this reason, local practitioners sometimes refer to experienced mediums as *dashen* (大神, 'great gods'), reflecting the temporary sacral authority acquired during possession rituals.

At the same time, the interviewee repeatedly emphasises that ritual efficacy originates not from the practitioner as an autonomous individual, but from the immortals temporarily acting through the medium's body and speech. The medium therefore functions as a ritual vessel through which the immortals diagnose affliction, communicate instruction, and intervene in misfortune. Outside ritual settings, however, the practitioner returns to an ordinary social identity without permanent sacral status.