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Social Science

Lijiang Stories: Shamans, Taxi Drivers, and Runaway Brides in Reform-Era China
Emily Chao
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Years after the death of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, taxi drivers in China began displaying laminated pictures of the Great Helmsman in their vehicles. Believing that his image possessed magical powers that otherwise belonged to local deities, they talked about accidents in which many perished while people in vehicles with Mao portraits survived. Zhang Hongtu, an artist known for his irreverent depictions of Mao, has described the power of the image: "When I first cut up a photo of Mao's face to make a collage, I felt as if I were sinning. Such feelings have made me realize how my work is really an effort to break the psychological authority that Mao as an image continues to hold over all Chinese. For me, working on Mao became a form of exorcism."

In *Lijiang Stories: Shamans, Taxi Drivers, and Runaway Brides in Reform-Era China*, Emily Chao, an anthropologist at Pitzer College, discusses a ritual conducted in 1991 in a village in the Lijiang basin of southwestern China. During the ceremony, a magical healer invoked Mao and other Communist Party leaders to scare away demons who the villagers thought were driving a farmer mad. The shaman recited Mao-era slogans, sang nationalist songs, and killed a chicken. At the end of the ritual, villagers appeared thankful, but minutes after the healer's departure they started criticizing her, calling her a cheat. For them, the ritual had failed. The Mao fever that had gripped other parts of China, Chao explains, had not yet spread to Lijiang. The shaman's attempts to conjure the Maoist era, a period that villagers connected with hunger and austerity, did not match the "shared memories of shamans and shamanic rituals" held by the audience. "She said Mao, Zhou, and Deng sent her to save the madman; she didn't know the names of the gods and didn't know how to sing shaman songs," one villager grumbled.

Lijiang, inhabited by the Naxi—a minority ethnic group, is now a tourist town. Listed as a World Heritage site by the United Nations in 1997, it attracts millions of visitors every year. The local economy is geared almost completely to serving outsiders who expect to see, and are

shown, glimpses of an exotic ethnic culture. Chao presents several aspects of this half-imagined culture: bride abduction, newly revived religious activities, music, and dance. Like an archaeologist painstakingly removing layers of dust to reveal an ancient artifact previously hidden from tourists' gaze, she uncovers the historical foundations of current cultural practices. As an entertaining account of her discoveries, *Lijiang Stories* will interest tourists and scholars who are curious about this well-known but little-understood part of the world.

Karunesh Tuli