Devine Descent into Mundaniety: Spirit Mediumship in Asia

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For ages ritual has held a deeply ingrained place in Asian cultures, from the day to day ritual duties of Chinese emperors to the varied and diverse religious traditions of many other Asian societies such as in Bali and Singapore. Trance-mediumship in particular is a ritual practice that is still accepted and recognized in many Asian cultures, despite the increasing influence of modern medicine in today’s global context. Trance-mediumship can often be stereotyped in the West as a taboo practice with no tangible benefits to either client or interlocutor; assumptions that can mitigate the understanding of these people and thus the diverse character of humanity. This study was an attempt to analyze the trance medium role primarily in three groups found in areas of Bali, Singapore, Taiwan, and Southeast China in order to examine its efficacy and its various manifestations in these regions. Research was conducted through the analysis of various scholarly works on shamanism, trance possession, Asian mediums, mediumship itself, and the ritual process as well as various media found online documenting performances of mediumship in Asia. The results of this study expose and elucidate the roles, lives, and social standing of these various mediums within their communities, thus highlighting the various cross-cultural nuances in the practice of spirit mediumship. Similarities aside, there are a wide range of important contrasts among the mediums that reflect how the spirit-medium phenomenon has manifested, diverged, and transformed under differing cultural contexts. The findings of this study shine a light on the complexity and the persistence of trance mediumship while simultaneously emphasizing its efficacy and significance. This paper examines specific mediums in Asia and offers a deeper discussion concerning mediumship’s place in the existing scholarship on shamanism, folk healing, trance, ritual, and performance.