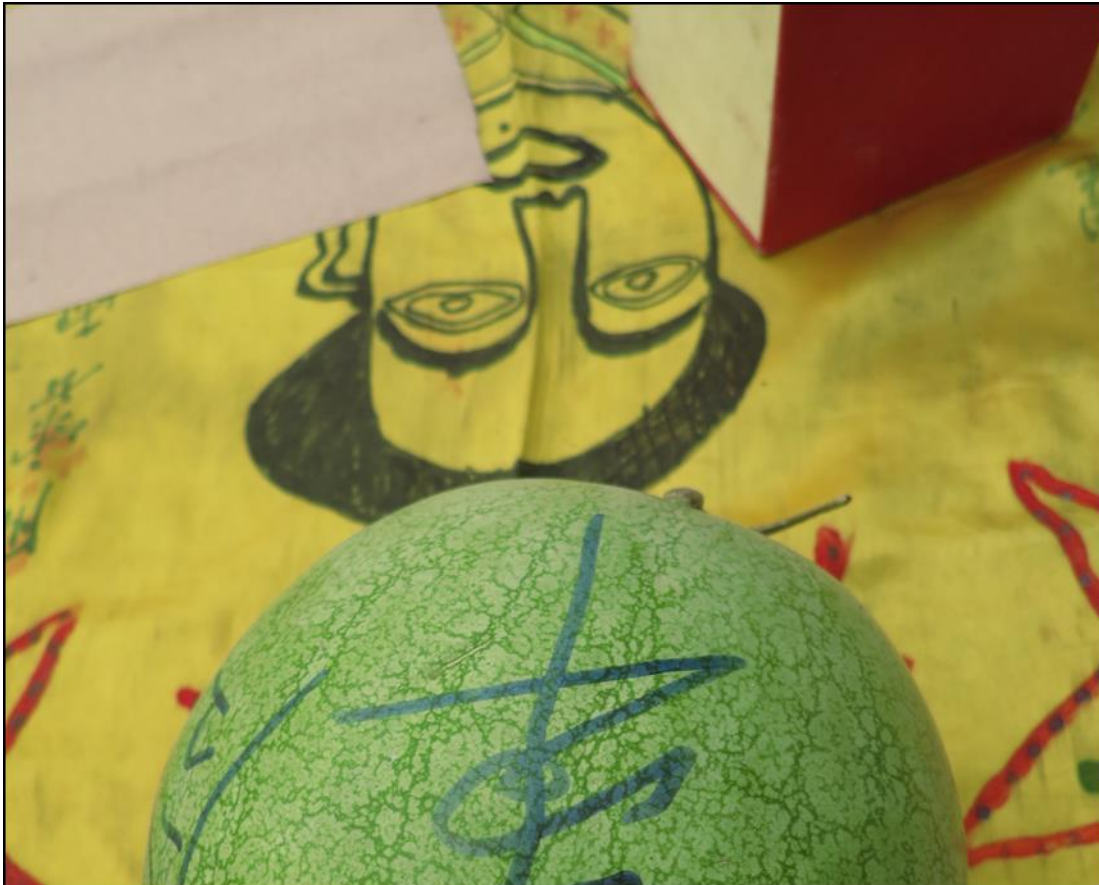


China Research Seminar Series (Lent 2021)
FAMES, University of Cambridge

A Million Madmen Storm the Palace

**Psychiatry, Mediumship, and Maoism
in Contemporary China**

Dr Emily Ng
(University of Amsterdam)



5pm (London time), 10 March, 2021 (Wednesday)

Please register in advance for this seminar:

<https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJYkdO-vpjsuH9USaOOweNT2R1DYbJOhZzMR>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

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Abstract

The story of religion in China since the market reforms of the late 1970s is often told through its destruction under Mao and relative flourishing thereafter. Drawing on fieldwork from rural Henan province, this talk describes a different history of the present as told through the cosmological accounts of spirit mediums. Rather than a return of religion, spirit mediums speak of the post-reform present in terms of a return of spirits—corrupt, madness-inducing spirits by and large. As one medium put it, in a poetic transfiguration of Mao’s poetry, the present is a time of chaos in which “a million madmen storm the palace,” as humans and spirits drive one another toward further greed and delusion. Rather than an atheist, anti-religious autocracy, Mao’s reign was described as one ordained by heavenly command, which kept demonic spirits at bay.

The talk will unfold around ethnographic scenes from a temple and a psychiatric unit in Henan, in order to rethink broader questions of religion and medicine, as well as secularism and sovereignty. As a province caricaturized as a rural backwater in the post-reform regime of value, in which wealth and futurity are grafted onto the urban metropolis, I consider the symbolic geography of Henan as a collapsed former center, where ghosts of reform and revolution swarm. As Maoist-era images of a heroic, revolutionary peasantry are inverted through the haunted postsocialist subject, spirit mediums carry on their ritual work, engaging with madness and possession in the name of a spectral polity.

Speaker

Emily Ng is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam. She is author of *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost after Mao* (University of California Press, 2020). Her interests pivot around themes of madness, sovereignty, religiosity, and political-aesthetic figurations of the rural. She has conducted ethnographic research among various communities in China, from spirit mediums and charismatic Christians to those diagnosed with psychiatric disorders in Shenzhen and in Henan.