

Ritual and Space: The Therapeutic Function of the Recitations of the Hexi Baojuan

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Abstract: In the region where the Precious Scrolls of Hexi () are recited, people often use the Precious Scrolls () as a tool to pray for peace and happiness, to prevent plagues and calamities, and to heal ailments. By creating a sacred healing field, the rituals of Hexi Baojuan materialize, symbolize, and sanctify the space to expel disasters and cure illnesses. Through the mechanism of imagination and symbolism, its functions of averting disasters and curing diseases become apparent.

Keywords: ; rituals of recitations; sacred space; therapeutic function

1. Introduction

Wang Guowei, a scholar in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, proposed that “every generation has its own literature” (Wang 1996, p. 1); the same also applies to regions. Different regions produce different types of literary styles. Even foreign literary styles, when influenced by local people, become local specialties, as is the case with the Precious Scrolls (). The Baojuan is a type of script of recitations that spreads religious ideas, nurtured by “transformation texts” () and scriptures (). It primarily consists of verse and prose, among which the Baojuan used for various rituals is known as the Baojuan of rituals (). According to studies, the rituals described in the Precious Scrolls of Hexi () were not truly indigenous. Namely, they came with the influx of immigrants, folk sects, and refugees in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (Che 1999, p. 40). However, those people heavily adapted their Baojuan to align with the local customs, language, habits, folk beliefs, and cultural patterns, resulting in the emergence of Hexi Baojuan.

For a long time, there has been a great misconception in the understanding and research of Hexi Baojuan. According to the published collections of the Hexi Baojuan, the Baojuan of storytelling () appears to be in the majority, but in fact, there is also another tradition of the Baojuan of rituals. Recently, there has been research (e.g., National Social Science Foundation Project “Hexi Baojuan from the Perspective of Folk Religion”, hosted by Cui Yunsheng 2015) on the Hexi Baojuan of rituals from the perspective of folk religion. This paper focuses on the ritual function in the Hexi Baojuan. It should be mentioned that although some of the Baojuan cited are Taoist scriptures, the local Baojuan masters considered them Baojuan, as they recited these scriptures during their rituals. In the eyes of ordinary people, it really does not matter what the contents of the Baojuan recited are; rather, the construction of the sacred space of the ritual and the integrity of the ritual links matter. Here, we have adopted the view of the local Baojuan masters and included some of the Taoist scriptures that they used in our discussion of Baojuan. This can also be illustrated by the overlap of the identities of the local Baojuan master and the local Taoist priest; both recite the Baojuan of storytelling and utilize the Baojuan of rituals. The focus of this paper is to discuss the therapeutic function of the rituals of recitations and, in particular, to analyze the mechanism of this function, namely how the ritual functions. It is a theoretical study rather than a survey report of ritual practice (Sun 2016; Berezkin 2018, 2021).¹



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To discuss the related rituals and content of the Hexi Baojuan, it is essential to have a degree of understanding of the local history, geography, customs, cultural features, and even the natural climate of the region.

2. Recitations of the Hexi Baojuan

The use of the Baojuan is not limited to the Hexi region. Baojuan are produced and circulated in most parts of China. The classification of Baojuan is generally based on their content or the regions where they circulate. Based on content, Baojuan can be divided into a ritual type and a storytelling type. For the classification by region, they can generally be divided into Northern Baojuan () and Southern Baojuan () or directly named according to the name of the region or county, such as Jingjiang Baojuan , Jixiu Baojuan , Henan Baojuan , Hebei Baojuan , Qinghai Baojuan , Hezhou Baojuan , etc. In the case of Hexi Baojuan, it is somewhat complicated as the title “Hexi” actually encompasses several separate areas along the so called Hexi Corridor ().

There are several reasons why the Hexi Baojuan is unique. Firstly, the “Hexi region” has become an independent geographical concept. Although regions such as Wuwei , Zhangye , Jiuquan , and Jinchang —which are included in the Hexi region—have their different regional cultures, they generally have similar historical, geographical, and cultural attributes. Secondly, the cultural affinity among those regions results in consistency in the Baojuan found there. They have some similarities in the narrative style, and the circulated Baojuan texts are mostly the same. By comparing several collections of Hexi Baojuan, it is evident that there are many repetitions in the content (Y. Zhu 2015, pp. 65–79+166).² While the tradition of reciting Baojuan as a religious ritual is diminishing in various regions, the Hexi Baojuan has managed to preserve its distinct cultural ecosystem and maintain a unique living space.³

According to Li Yan (Yan Li

from the Qilian Mountains can be utilized for oasis irrigation and planting, and this way of production and life continues to this day.

Regionally, Hexi mainly includes Lanzhou City of Gansu Province (known as Jincheng County), Xining City of Qinghai Province, Ejin Banner of Inner Mongolia, and the “Four Counties of Hexi” (Wuwei (known as Liangzhou), Zhangye (known as Ganzhou), Jiuquan (known as Suzhou), and Dunhuang (known as Shazhou)).⁵ As early as the Western Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu established four counties there, namely Wuwei County, Zhangye County, Jiuquan County, and Dunhuang County. In the Western Han Dynasty, Xihai County in Qinghai was established, and in the Eastern Han Dynasty, Xihai County in the Juyan Lake Basin was established. At present, the Hexi region is mainly inhabited by Han, Mongolian, Yugur, Tibetan, and other ethnic groups.⁶ Located in the core area of the Silk Road, the Hexi region has always been the economic and trade center of Northwest China, as well as a transportation and cultural center.

In a sense, “ritual” is a universal cultural phenomenon and an important field of anthropological research. As it carries fertile social and cultural connotations, studying cultural cognition from the analysis of ritual is an effective approach to anthropological research. The anthropological study of ritual can be traced back to Durkheim, in the early 20th century, who regarded ritual as a means to maintain and extend society and enhance the cohesion of its members. He also explored the characteristics of ritual participants from a psychological perspective to distinguish them from their emotions in daily situations (Durkheim 2008, p. 517). In our field investigation of the healing ritual of the Hexi Baojuan, we paid great attention to the changes in and mutual influence of the participants themselves, especially the comparison between the states of the patient before and after entering the ritual space. The sanctity of the rituals of the Hexi Baojuan can be studied from the ritual’s source of origin, the use of religious musical instruments (symbols), and the therapeutic effects. Viewed from the origin, “telling scriptures” () for lay people in the Tang Dynasty and ashram activities () performed by monks for their followers in the Song Dynasty to some extent directly gave rise to the recitations of Baojuan. In the beginning, Buddhist sutras were spread orally among people, but in the process of spreading, because it was difficult for people to directly understand the teachings, preachers could only use vivid stories and popular languages (the vernacular) to preach. Therefore, in the early period, “transformation texts” and sutra preaching were also passed down orally, and the dictation was later written down for preservation. Still later, ordinary people made private copies and dictated them, leading to the gradual emergence of the Baojuan and the rituals. To disseminate the Baojuan, Baojuan compilers often promised readers a good vision for the future and regarded the Baojuan as a magic key for the accumulation of virtuous deeds, thereby sanctifying the act of the recitations of the Baojuan. This conclusion can be drawn from the full participation of deities in the ritual process.

In an interview, Dai Jisheng,⁷ an inheritor of the Hexi Baojuan, shared that during the healing ritual, he initiates the process by lighting incense (), presenting a petition (), and reciting incantations (). The incantations are the god invoking incantations (), and the main content is to explain what this ritual is for and which god needs to be invoked to give the master of the ritual a divine talisman () to cure the disease of the patient. Secondly, the master draws the talisman and utters specific brush pen incantations (), namely the incantations of a specific brush pen, specific paper, and specific ink. After the talisman is drawn, the god is guided to the proper position, and the corresponding divine package () is written, which generally states that someone who lives in a certain place will thank the god and pray to him/her for healing and blessing. He has specially prepared this stamped (Taoist seal) document package, which contains money for the gods

and the talisman, and he asks the god to take them. Thirdly, offerings such as fruits and flowers are placed on the altar table, with the written divine package in the middle, and then recitations of the Baojuan (scriptures) start. According to different causes of the disease, different Baojuan are recited, usually including the Precious Scrolls of Rescues () the Scripture to Eliminate Pestilence and Demons () the Precious Scrolls of Blood Pond () the Scripture of the Deity of Transportation () and the Scripture of the Earth God () etc. Sometimes, incantations are uttered before reciting these Baojuan, such as the Incantation for Pacifying the Earth God (), the Incantation for the Offering of Incense (), the Incantation for Purifying the Mouth (), the Incantation for Purifying the Heart (), the Incantation for Purifying the Body (), the Incantation of the Golden Light (), and the Incantation with Mysterious Connotations for Recitations (). Finally, when a recitation of the Baojuan is over, the person concerned kneels and kowtows, burns the petition letter, and bids farewell to the god. Normally, the master of the ritual is forbidden from eating beef or dog meat, and women who are menstruating are also not allowed to participate.

It can be seen that the ritual of recitations is complicated and there are numerous taboos. Moreover, water (for cleaning hands), portraits (pictures of the god), fragrance (incense), sacrifices (offerings), music (the music of religious musical instruments and Qupai and tunes for recitations of Baojuan), incantations, and a talisman are used at the same time for treatment. The key to the ritual is to repeatedly manipulate the same form that is endowed with certain meanings, and the metaphorical text of the ritual is read repeatedly in this process. Through repetition, the symbolic forms have the chance to be internalized and encoded into the subconscious through the senses, ultimately becoming ritual symbols (Xiaoming Zhao 2011, p. 24).

2.2.1. Supernatural Beliefs in the Healing Ritual

Zhang Xun , in the study of the Taoist Sacrificial Ceremony (), once asked why among local folks, there are many who still claim that ghosts disturb people and make them sick. It was thought that people would turn into ghosts after death, living in the netherworld isolated from humans; so, how could ghosts easily cross the boundary to disturb humans? For this problem, Poo Mu-chou's study of ghost culture can provide some enlightenment. He believes that the causes of the concept of ghosts, the origin, the nature, the relationship between ghosts and human beings, and the distinction between ghosts and gods vary from culture to culture. Once the imaginary world of ghosts is created, it becomes a cultural and social experience with real power, which can concretely influence people's behaviors and thoughts (X. Zhang 2008, p. 397). It can be said that the world of ghosts and gods is a kind of cultural existence from a symbolic perspective.

From a philosophical perspective, the existence of the world of ghosts and gods as an entity is not limited to the fictional world; in-depth research assumes the full acknowledgment of the existence. In the healing ritual of the Hexi Baojuan, the Baojuan master first invokes gods and admits that it is difficult to achieve therapeutic effects by relying on his/her own strength, because the cause of the disease is likely to be the haunting of some evil spirits.⁸ The imagination of ghosts is actually the patient's fear of the unknown or the inner unease after doing something wrong. Invoking gods and offering sacrifices can exorcise evil spirits, namely symbolically dispel inner fear or unease. When ghosts inflict disasters, the human-god/ghost boundary is crossed, and the liminal state comes into being. The liminal state is typically characterized by the existence of ambiguity, impurity, filth, immaturity, or danger (Zhou 2015, p. 6). As beings from another realm, ghosts should not live with people; otherwise, they have to be driven away or even subdued (Yongping Li 2020, pp. 227-51), and the way of driving away or subduing demons is to pray for help from higher level gods and Buddhas. It is worth noting that in the process of

the recitations of the Hexi Baojuan, in addition to the common Taoist and Buddhist deities, such as the Great White Planet (太白金星), Lv Dongbin (吕洞宾), Han Xiangzi (韩湘子), Arhats (罗汉), the Victorious Fighting Buddha (毗舍遮佛), etc., there are also a considerable number of local deities, such as the Immortal Maiden Equal to Heaven (太白金星), the local Earth God (土地神), etc. This is the result of localization in the spread of the Baojuan.

2.2.2. Incantations in the Ritual

There are myriad incantations in the healing ritual, and they are kept secret. According to the Baojuan master, the incantations are given by gods, and if they are revealed, they are no longer effective, and the gods exact punishment. As we know, incantations are part of magic arts (咒语), and the original meaning of incantations is for blessing or praying. It is to use a mysterious language to control some power and make ordinary things have the function of magic arts. Reciting incantations is a spiritual revelation that can ward off diseases and bad luck and turn bad luck into good. In other words, reciting scriptures and incantations not only meets the physical and mental needs of individuals but also serves an important cultural function (Zhuang 1991, p. 129).

From the perspective of both faith and healing, the incantations used in the ritual can increase the patient's confidence and improve the healing power of the Baojuan master. In the healing ritual of the Baojuan, incantations are used many times, and the power of words is also repeatedly emphasized, which reflects the concept of a divine source in the language of ancient people. When ceremonies become lost at the court, it is necessary to search for them in the folk population.⁹ The folk customs, beliefs, and cultural ecology of the use of incantations in the healing ritual and its customs,

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The therapeutic power comes, on the one hand, from the sacred space of ritual, and on the other hand, from other sacred symbols, such as the Baojuan texts, of erings, portraits, music, fragrances, talismans, and incantations.

3. Sacred Space for the Recitations of the Hexi Baojuan

Like the Precious Raft () preached in Baojuan, sacred space has an effect of protecting and delivering people through troubles. The most important thing in the ritual of the recitations of the Hexi Baojuan is the construction of a sacred healing space. Only in this space can the patient relax, can the master of the ritual obtain divine help, and can the participants gain the power of collective inspiration.¹¹ Ultimately, it is through the creation of this sacred space that the desired therapeutic effects can be achieved. The construction of sacred space requires the master to perform a great deal of preparatory work and construct it in strict accordance with the requirements of the ritual procedure. The process is similar to the practices for building the altar () before Taoist priests conduct religious rites, preparing paper models () and establishing the Fengdu City before Taoist priests conduct Dajiao (a Taoist ritual) (S. Zhao 2021a, p. 125), and the practices of torch sending, torch dancing, and Dafengtan Gathering () before wizards dance the Playing Tartars () (Zhao and Luo 2020, p. 266). Then, what exactly is sacred space, and how does the Baojuan master construct sacred space?

The ritual field, as a healing space, has two levels of meaning. The first one is the meaning of container. The ritual space can serve as a container to accommodate the participants and help the person concerned (the patient) recover. The concept of the “container” is often likened to a mother’s womb or to a cave with restorative power that has the function of creation or regeneration. The container possesses a “divine” attribute. The second is a composite space in which a variety of symbol systems are crossing over, such as text symbols (the Baojuan and talisman), sound symbols (the reciting sound of the Baojuan master and the Buddha worshiping () sound of the Baojuan listener), musical symbols (the healing music produced from holding and playing religious musical instruments, as well as the music of the Qupais and tunes used by the master), metaphor symbols of motions (the ritual display and fixed hand gestures of the master and the body movements and echoing of the listener), archetypal image symbols (portraits, lights, candles, incense, yellow paper, and joss paper), etc. The transformation between these different symbol systems on its own also activates the party (the patient) to restore his/her sick body to health.

In this space, the conversion of the symbol systems is realized through the different representations of the bodies of participants (the doctor and patient), such as the symbols for standing, lying down, sitting, and deity possession. Meanwhile, it also includes the position change of participants in the ritual space, e.g., the participant being outside the ritual space, the participant being inside the ritual space but outside the symbol, and the participant being inside both the ritual space and the symbol. The ritual space serves as a bridge between heaven and earth. Here, heaven and earth or the upper world and underworld refer to their archetype images. Heaven can be collective wisdom and the existing spirit, and Earth can be the prototype of the Great Mother Goddess and the source of security (Xiaoming Zhao 2011, p. 34). The patient completes the healing process in this sacred space by projecting his or her emotions into the ritual space and the Baojuan text space through the ritualistic work of the body, to accept the warmth and order adjustment of the space, and to realize spiritual redemption and perfection.

The construction of the sacred space is crucial for the effectiveness of the rituals. For the party, it may not matter what kind of Baojuan is recited, and the Baojuan only act as a placebo. What really matters is the various symbols used in the healing space and the

symbolic meaning of the whole space to the party. The construction of the sacred space sometimes takes longer time and more energy than the ritual itself; the key to the success of the ritual is whether the preparatory work is complete. Following are the key elements of constructing the sacred space.

3.2.1. Symbols in the Sacred Space

Before the ritual of reciting the Hexi Baojuan, the steps that the master has to take, including lighting lamps (), of ering incense (), hanging portraits (), drawing magic signs (), invoking deities (), and burning joss paper (), are all to construct a sacred healing space, and these objects also become symbols, with important prompting meaning to the party (the patient). When the symbols are presented to people, they have an intuitive experience with such types of symbols in a phenomenological sense. The key to symbolic therapy is the communication of people's emotions and symbol forms in the ritual space, and the process of this communication is essentially the mechanism of the "interaction ritual chains" (Collins 2005, pp. 102–40)¹² or the construction of linguistic meaning modes. The difference from other types of art therapy is that symbolic therapy is performed in a sacred space (including the physical space) rather than in the human brain.

In a more concrete sense, the lamps lit in the ritual space are candles or oil lamps. Even though electric lamps are now available, the use of oil lamps still holds symbolic significance. The lamplight serves three functions. Firstly, to the visual sense of people, a lamplight is a kind of guide on the journey. Its function is equivalent to that of the leading light () in the funeral ritual,¹³ which guides the spirit to find the way out and exit and then to safely pass through the liminal stage and transition zone. Secondly, lamplight gives out brightness and heat. For the whole ritual space, it also has the effect of heating. Being in the space, the participant feels warm and relaxed. This is also where the healing effects start. Thirdly, in folk sacrificial ceremonies and religious activities, lighting lamps is usually a necessary step. According to the master of rituals, lighting lamps also have the function of communicating with deities. Among the gods of folk religions, there is Dipankara Buddha (). In Baojuan rituals, there is a kind of Eliminating Malefic Planets with Lamp Lighting () where the malefic planet is replaced with a lamp. The rituals for warding off calamities and prolonging life through setting up lamps are quite common in ancient Chinese novels (Luo 1973, p. 861).¹⁴

After offering incense in the ritual, the smoke from the incense connects this realm and other realms (like heterotopia), serving as an intermediary between the visible and the invisible. The diffusivity of the smoke can link the metaphysical world (invisible) and the physical world (visible), and the aroma can attract ritual objects (e.g., deities and ghosts). Moreover, the aroma can unite and unify the party in the ritual, and the cross border characteristics of scent can lead the party into another world (the sacred world). Due to the characteristics of diffusion and continuity, the aroma causes unclassifiability and fuzziness to the sense of smell, which makes it the best intermediary in consciousness that temporarily disables all classifications (such as life and death) to re-enter the next stage (i.e., from

The characteristics of incense smoke or aroma, as well as the calming effect of its physical components, determine its important position in folk rituals—incense is used in almost all rituals of sacrifice, prayer, and rituals for averting disasters and healing. Sometimes it is used more than once. In the reciting ritual, incense (smoke) is the transcendence of the visible/invisible worlds of the universe. It has the power to evoke fantasies and divine feelings, which give people the sense of real experience, even though such fantasies themselves are not real. The haze of smoke slowly opens the curtain between the underworld and this world, similar to the widely known practice that the Native Americans use tobacco to attract the attention of deities. Of course, in many cultures, scented weeds, wood, and resins can all serve as intermediaries for connections and conversations with the supernatural. Incense, therefore, can link and combine incompatible elements, candles and food and, more obviously, the worshipers of physical beings and the dematerialized spirits, whose corresponding spirits and divinities will ingest the fragrance of life. It is often said that incense is the provision for the deities, and ashes—in this case, the ashes are the leftover of the burned incense—are seen as an element that is conducive to recovery and regeneration (Blake 2011, pp. 76–93).

The portrait of the god or the founding master () hung in the ritual or the picture of the god inserted in the front matter of Baojuan is a serious reminder to the participants that the invoked god is watching all the time, so that the participants can stay focused and at the same time feel the presence of the god, thus enhancing their confidence in the healing rituals. For the Baojuan master, reciting in front of the portrait also has a connotation of talking about the picture.¹⁵ Namely, the portrait plays a role equivalent to a teleprompter for the master.

In general, the various symbols in the ritual (such as the flickering candlelight, curling smoke, vague images, burning flames, and food for the gods) all have different modes of meanings, which jointly construct the sacred healing space. In these rituals, widely used materials are often endowed with tangible characteristics, which can be transformed into binary symbolic structures (odd/even numbers, rough/delicate, hard/soft, bright/dark, whole/part, quiet/noisy, etc.) (Blake 2011, pp. 76–93). This is why folk rituals seem so simple that everyone could perform them, but they are actually incredibly complicated. Many ritual performers, let alone ordinary people, have no idea what these symbols mean, but it does not stop them from performing the rituals.

3.2.2 Motion Metaphors in the Sacred Space

Behind every motion of the body, there is a corresponding mood or emotion associated with it. In English, the word “emotion” itself contains a morpheme “motion”. A movement, a pose, and a posture of walking all form part of a system of bodily symbols. It can be said that the body posture reveals the close relation between the quality and nature of body movement and the available space to the body. From the flow, direction, and the form of body movement, one can see how an individual views his body posture (Xiaoming Zhao 2011, p. 76). Symbols are also physical memories, while motion metaphors can be regarded as a form of nonverbal communication. Body language is often ineffable, but it can be visualized by people, and the expected answer and result can also be obtained through the metaphorical way of body movements.

Participants in the reciting rituals (the doctor and patient) perform body movements in the ritual space and gain a deeper understanding of the ritual through the extension and experience of body movements. As one researcher has pointed out, extraordinary actions such as magic figures or incantations and handprints, combined with a world of gods and Buddhas, create a source of power. Such rituals can stimulate the imagination and potential of the patient, so they can gain a source of confidence and strength in the fight against ghosts (C. Li 2005, p. 72). Of course, the body movements as performed in the ritual of the Hexi Baojuan are not strong, not as obvious as magic dances or ritual dances, but their subtleties are also strongly metaphorical, such as the motions of worshipping and pacifying gods of the master and the motions of worshipping Buddha of the participant. Moreover,

the body sense and emotion in the ritual space are also a topic well worth discussing, but due to space, they cannot be fully discussed here (Boddy 1994; It hak 2018; Tooker 2019; Wilson 1967).

4. Healing Principle of the Rituals of the Hexi Baojuan

It has always been difficult to study the mechanism of any therapeutic action, especially folk therapy (S. Zhao 2021b, pp. 134–40). Despite some dissertation work and research on the principles of literature therapy (), the viewpoint and perspective have been mostly from the Western tradition (Tang 2013, pp. 6–13). Most studies in medical anthropology and public health affirm the social–psychological effects of indigenous healing methods in the treatment process. In particular, indigenous healing methods provide etiological explanations and relieve the psychological pressure of the patients and their families. Many scholars have also pointed out that indigenous healing methods not only have significant effects on the psychological and social levels but also have good therapeutic effects in the treatment of diseases.

However, it is disappointing that although the therapeutic effects of indigenous healing methods are acknowledged, they are often labelled as “superstitions”, a hindrance to medical treatment, only psychological effects, utilitarianism, and money accumulating, etc.; so, the medical resources provided by indigenous healing methods have not been taken seriously for a long time (Y. Zhang 1996, p. 4). We surely must strictly distinguish the fundamental difference between indigenous healing methods and the quack techniques of scamming for money. On the one hand, we should not give up an undertaking on account of a small obstacle and deny the effect of indigenous healing methods because of some deceptive techniques such as hand touch healing. On the other hand, we should also be vigilant to avoid being brainwashed by evil skills and crooked ways under the banner of religious medicine and folk medicine.

According to Qiu Huiying (), the period from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic China was the heyday of the development of the Baojuan. In Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province (), people would invite Baojuan preachers to recite whether they were getting married, conducting funerals, celebrating birthdays, praying to have babies, getting sick, suffering disasters, having a full moon celebration for children, celebrating the completion of a new house and other festivals, or holding other folk activities (Qiu 2017a, p. 97). The connotation of preaching the Baojuan to suppress evil spirits and cure diseases is nothing more than to entice people with benefits, suppress evil spirits with power, provide professional ability, and persuade people to do good deeds and cultivate themselves according to religious doctrines. These prescriptions are faith based. With the means of preaching rituals and through the power of words, people perceive and respond, which is a kind of psychic healing at the spiritual level (Qiu 2017b, p. 287). It should be pointed out that, according to Qiu, the therapeutic effect of the Baojuan relies more on the text and content, rather than the power of preaching ritual and space.

From the perspective of etiology, according to the surveys and interviews of the masters, the causes of diseases can be put into three groups. First, one cause is the problems arising in the relationships between people. People, especially relatives, need to assume the agreed responsibilities and obligations and play appropriate roles in the kinship network to maintain a harmonious relationship. When a conflict occurs, the harmonious relationship between people is disrupted, and diseases come. This is the opposite of the so-called saying that “harmony at home brings prosperity” (). A second cause is the problems arising in the relationship between humans and nature. When a natural disaster occurs, or when people are at odds with nature, epidemic diseases such as plagues and influenza often break out. A third cause is the problems arising in the relationship between humans and the supernatural. In particular, the problems in the relationship between humans and ghosts/gods are the common etiological explana

tion used by Baojuan masters. These three explanations are derived from the concept of the functioning and constitution of the cosmic order in traditional Chinese thoughts. In the integrated and balanced system of cosmic problems, disasters (including diseases) occur when people are unable or unwilling to play their roles in the functioning of the system, or when the functioning of the system itself goes wrong. The healing method is primarily to maintain harmony among the functioning components of the system, restore order to the universe, and avoid confrontation or compromising the functioning of the system (Y. Zhang 1996 p 38).

Sacrificial activity and ritual started to emerge at the dawn of the formation of human settlements. The main purpose of these activities was to hope that Heaven or gods could maintain the stability of the universe and make the world favorable to avoid natural disaster (N. Zhu 2012, p. 191). From a sociological perspective, ritual therapy deals specifically with disorders and abnormal events and provides socially practical maintenance through treatment. Every culture has its design for avoiding or reversing the ravages of diseases to reduce unnecessary anxiety and prepare for emergencies (Y. Zhang 1996 p. 64). Meanwhile, to create meaning in life, humans keep building up sequences of events and experiences to develop consistent views of themselves and the world around them (White and Epston 1990, p. 10).

Order and meaning are produced in the process of interpreting the Baojuan ritual. Through the Baojuan ritual, the damaged order is restored. Through the master's interpretation, the patient understands his or her problems, regains a sense of the meaning of life, and this is where the therapeutic effects come from. Baojuan rituals often combine with the folk Taoist talisman, religious musical instruments, and skills to exorcise evil spirits (namely the intruders to the stable order and balanced world), to realize the social cultural therapy in the symbolic sense (Li and Wang 2020, 6th ed.).

As the saying goes, "seeing is believing" (), and the various cultural systems of human beings have strong belief and faith in evidence that can be seen. This is reflected in many adjectives in our language that attribute the ability of being capable of understanding to human beings and to appropriate ideas (White and Epston 1990, pp. 33-34). Through the visual sense, our mental states, including emotion and reasoning, are being constantly stimulated. Visual art had been an invaluable asset to humankind long before history was recorded, and people are constantly trying to visualize their world. When people are confronted with images, they are often awakened to address their unresolved issues and to fix them in symbolic ways (Gladding 2016, pp. 91-122). Whether it is a portrait hanging in the reciting ritual, an illustration in the Baojuan, or a talisman created by the Baojuan master, it is a strong visual stimulation for the patient. This stimulation awakens the patient's self-perception and makes him or her believe that there are gods involved in the ritual, where the master is the servant of the gods, and his or her illness can be cured.

In addition, imagery is also used in many different ways in rituals. According to the study of Samuel T. Gladding, Freud was the first to pay close attention to imagery and its meaning in the contemporary treatment of mental health disorders, particularly the role of dreams. Freud emphasized the explicit and implicit meanings of dreams and described them as the royal road to the unconscious (Gladding 2016, pp. 71-90). Based on interviews with participants in the rituals, the patients said frankly that entering the healing ritual was like entering dreams. After entering the sacred healing field, they remembered nothing and only felt things like the symbols and images provided in the ritual space. Obviously, the mechanism of action is similar to modern art therapy.

A placebo is an inactive substance known as a dummy pill that is given to the patient, which is often shown to be as effective as the active agents. In trials, placebos were used

instead of aspirin or morphine to reduce pain, and in more than a third of cases, they were as effective as the pain reliever (Dorling 1995, p. 62). Baojuan healing rituals not only use substances such as incense ash or paper ash that are commonly used in folk healing but also use the prescriptions attached to the end of Baojuan.¹⁶ It is not known how effective such prescriptions are; but, after the ritualistic blessing and taking some magic medicine in the prescription, there is no doubt a placebo effect.

More broadly speaking, the recitations of the Baojuan can allow individuals to empathize with and express their symptoms or personal worries. According to our field study, we found that most symptoms or worries came from internal anxiety rather than some diseases or pains. Through the ritualized performance and work of the body, the patient projects his or her feelings into the sacred ritual space and the Baojuan text and realizes spiritual self redemption and perfection. This is the real reason why Baojuan play a role as a placebo.

The term “liminality”, derived from the Latin “limen”, refers to the state of intermittency or ambiguity. It is originally a psychological term, used to refer to the minimum amount of external stimulus that causes an organism to feel. Later, the term was applied in the field of anthropology to establish the so called theory of liminality. The theory proposes to call a special zone that exists between two structures or two stages a liminal stage. The French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep pointed out in his *Rites of Passage* that important rituals in the course of human life are composed of three stages, namely separation, transition, and combination, and the liminal stage is equivalent to the transition stage (Van Gennep 2011, pp. 1–18). Victor Turner renamed Van Gennep’s three phases of life rites as the preliminal, liminal and postliminal phases and focused his research on the core of the ritual process, liminality, which is the transitional phase. According to Turner, liminality is not a “state”, but it is at the junction of the structure, a transition between two stable “states” (Turner 2017, pp. 94–130).

In the Hexi Corridor, an important use of the ritual of the Baojuan is the funeral ceremonies. Baojuan masters (or folk Taoist priests) are often invited by people to recite scriptures, such as the Scripture of the Lingbao Blood Pond (灵宝血池经), the Precious Scroll of Invoking Shangqing God (上清请神咒), the Dragon King Praise (龙王赞), and the Scripture of the Ten Kings (十王经) to help people pass through the liminal stage. In funeral ceremonies, the transition stage between life and death of the dead has a typical attribute of liminality and is full of danger and power. Due to the influence of traditional culture and the shaping of local knowledge by people, funeral ceremonies not only have the characteristics that local cultures/customs vary over even small geographical distances, but they also share some common features.

In people’s minds, when the dead pass away, they become ghosts that should enter the underworld as soon as possible, rather than lingering in the human world. The dead no longer belong to the human world. They have become what people call unclean things that need to be released, separated, expelled, and purified, using tools such as scriptures (or Baojuan), rooster’s blood, and fire. Namely, when a person passes away, he or she becomes an outlier and can no longer live with the living; the purpose of cleaning the environment of the deceased is to prevent them from returning to the human world. Most outliers or anomalies, because they violate or escape the bottom line of social cognition and cultural classification, are regarded as the existence of ambiguity, impurity, filth, immaturity, or danger (Zhou 2015, p. 6). And then, through the cognition and classification by local knowledge, people can distinguish between order and disorder, internal and external, and clean and unclean. Ambiguous boundaries, abnormal situations, etc., are all considered unclean, dangerous, and filthy (Douglas 2001, pp. 123–24). In the context of funeral ceremonies, concerns such as the presence of a living corpse, an evil man, or an

evil ghost reflect the imaginative fears and explanations that extend beyond one's familiar understanding of the self.

When faced with dangers, the response of people is to invite monks, folk Taoist priests, or other religious figures to release the spirits and at the same time to invite masters (sometimes acted by folk Taoist priests concurrently) to recite Baojuan. When a reciting ritual is held, crowds of people tend to watch and burn paper to worship. The folk Taoist priest holds religious musical instruments in his hand and recites and dances, which is highly lively. Its nature is similar to the sacrificial ritual of social fire Niuduye () in the Lantern Festival (), in which all people, men and women, young and old, can participate. Hidden behind the lively scene are the ritual activities of subduing demons, which have evolved into a lively and noisy social aesthetic psychology that permeates various kinds of cultural texts (Yongping Li 2018, p. 116). Namely, through the reciting ritual, on the one hand, it releases the spirit of the dead; on the other hand, it also has an implied meaning of subduing demons and driving away ghosts, highlighting the function of averting disasters and healing. On the one hand, a series of cleaning practices are conducted to release the spirit of the dead, ward off evil spirits, and avert disasters; on the other hand, reciting rituals is used to soothe people and treat their anxiety so that they can pass through the liminal stage safely.

From a functionalist perspective, funeral anxiety is a prominent liminal anxiety, and the transition ritual tries to make the dead, an uncertain and fuzzy liminal subject and anxious object, acquire logical meaning and transformation form (S. Li 2015, p. 122). For the deceased, on the one hand, they are the subjects of the liminal stage, and on the other hand, they are the anxious objects of the deceased's children and neighbors. Through the cleaning ritual and the ritual of reciting, the uncertain factors of the transition zone become logical and routinized, so the function of averting disasters and healing are maximized. In this process, the folk Taoist priest first guides the dead to realize that they have passed away and become ghosts who cannot live with the living. Then, through the rituals of crossing the Naihe Bridge () and the Blood Pool () the folk Taoist priest escorts the spirit of the dead smoothly into the underworld. Finally, through the step of crying to paper () the folk Taoist priest confirms that the spirit of the dead has left this world and then completely eliminates the fear and concern of the living.

5. Postscript

This paper focuses on the therapeutic function of the Hexi Baojuan. Similar to reciting major epics and early literary forms in various cultures, the recitations of the Hexi Baojuan often serve the purpose of averting disasters and healing diseases. Compared with the healing ritual of reciting King Gesar (), which frequently lasted for several days, the ritual of reciting the Hexi Baojuan, although sometimes lasting for two or three days, is mostly conducted within a few hours. Due to the sacred status and important function of Baojuan in the Hexi Corridor, the ritual of reciting the Hexi Baojuan has become a cultural tradition and a standard reciting format. No step of the ritual can be omitted, and the conduct of a ritual needs to be presided over and guided by the master. In many cases, it does not matter much which Baojuan is recited; more important is the ritual procedure and the construction of the sacred space, which are the focus of this paper.

The author's main focus has been on understanding the mechanism of the healing ritual of reciting the Baojuan. Whether it is a series of preparatory activities before the ritual or the construction of the space, the purpose is to give a full display of the therapeutic role of ritual. The combination of symbols in the sacred space and the performance of the master work not only to rebuild the cosmic order but also to provide a reasonable explanation of the cause of diseases. Once the patient has gained the confidence, good results can come with some help of medicine. In the eyes of most people, rituals are sacred. In the author's view, rituals actually have a placebo effect, also known as a dummy pill effect. The ultimate effect of the reciting rituals prescribed in the Hexi Baojuan is to make the patient safely pass through the so-called liminality, a stage of a rite of passage, most

evident in funeral ceremonies. Finally, in terms of the relationship between the rituals of healing in the Hexi Baojuan and the shamanism in many archaic cultures, they both share similarities in dealing with spiritual healing. However, they differ in specific and concrete forms, such as whether there is spirit possession involved.

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Notes

- ¹ Daniel L. Overmyer was a pioneer in the field of Baojuan research. His [redacted] is the representative work of the study by Western scholars on the relationship between Chinese Baojuan and folk religion. Several articles [redacted] by Russian Sinologist Rostislav Berezkin focus on the Baojuan texts used in the preaching rituals in Jiangnan region [redacted] and the study of ritual practices, rather than the study of the mechanism of the ritual functions, as are Sun Xiaosu’s articles.
- ² Related research results that have not yet been published, the [redacted] ([redacted]), which was co-authored by Guo Yulie [redacted] and Zhang Xiping [redacted], studying the same Baojuan or different versions of the same Baojuan, have provided detailed statistics on the existing collections of the Hexi Baojuan, mainly on the version information, form, compilations of published and nonpublished versions, and the current state of public and private collections. According to the available information and the author’s statistics, there exist about 200 kinds of Hexi Baojuan (including copies and carving copies), excluding different versions of the same Baojuan (lit le change in the content).
- ³ The so-called “ecocultural circle” refers to the ecological humanistic sphere formed naturally among living things in a specific time and space. According to the local climate, landform, culture, and other factors, different ecocultural circles are often formed. Different local climates, landforms, and cultures often lead to the creation of different ecocultural circles.
- ⁴ In this Appendix, Li Yan described the detailed geographical distribution, preservation, and interviews of the inheritors of the Hexi Baojuan. Other relevant research findings: (Huang 2020, and Wu 2010, on the overall ecology of Hexi Baojuan; Xufeng Zhao 2014, on the distribution of Baojuan in Wuwei region [redacted]; He 2003, on the distribution of Baojuan, especially Yongchang Baojuan, in Jinchang region [redacted]).
- ⁵ There are also Guazhou [redacted] and Shanzhou [redacted], which are not included in the Four Counties of Hexi but belong to the Hexi region.
- ⁶ The history, geography, climate, ethnic distribution, and other information of the Hexi Corridor are mainly seen in the Pan (2010).
- ⁷ Dai Jisheng [redacted] is a local master who recites scrolls and is also a folk Taoist. Between 2018 and 2020 the author conducted multiple interviews and onsite observations on Dai’s rituals related to the scrolls.
- ⁸ Depending on the condition and living environment, the Baojuan master will tell the patient what kind of evil spirits caused the disease.
- ⁹ This sentence comes from the [redacted] ([redacted]), and it is Confucius’ [redacted] words.
- ¹⁰ The Scripture to Dispel Disasters by the Xiayuan Water God ([redacted]) is collected by Dai’s family in Zhangye, Hexi region.
- ¹¹ Agitation refers to the state of shock caused by the excitation of things or shock and turbulence. Here, the term of collective agitation used refers to the wisdom and kinetic energy of healing triggered by the collective power, so as to achieve the purpose of healing.
- ¹² The term of “interaction ritual chains” was proposed by Collins, an American sociologist, to connect the macro and micro concepts. It refers to the development of different interactive rituals through constant contact and their combination in complex forms. Collins believes that people have common emotional impulses based on common psychology and concerns. When people use the same symbols to express their common concerns and emotions, interaction rituals are generated. Different levels of

encounters form different interaction rituals, and with the extension of time, they combine in complex forms and then form an interaction ritual chain. Its continuation depends on the strengthening of emotional energy and reward of the two sides. He also believes that the whole society can be seen as a long interaction ritual chain through which the macro social structure is established (Randall Collins 2005).

- 13 The leading light that appears in the funeral ceremony in some areas (such as Linze of Zhangye , Yadang of Hezheng , Gangu of Tianshui in Gansu , and Sangyuan of Juxian in Shandong) is also known as the ever burning lamp. The purpose of the lamp is equivalent to the stars in the sky, mainly for showing the way. Among them, the most representative one is the Seven Stars Leading the Way (), in which copper coins are placed in the shape of the Big Dipper (), meaning the dead will go to the underworld. The Big Dipper is composed of the seven stars of Tianshu , Tianxuan , Tianji , Tianquan , Yuheng , Kaiyang , and Yaoguang . In ancient China, the seven stars were thought to be linked together and imagined as a dipper for scooping wine. In Taoism the Big Dipper is called the Qiyuan Jie'e Xingjun , who live in the seven palaces of the Big Dipper, namely, Tanlang Xingjun in Tianshu Palace , Jumen Xingjun in Tianxuan Palace , Lucun Xingjun in Tianji Palace , Wenqu Xingjun in Tianquan Palace , Lianzhen Xingjun in Yuheng Palace , Wuqu Xingjun in Kaiyang Palace , and Pojun Xingjun in Yaoguang Palace .
- 14 A typical example is the one in Chapter 103 “ ” of the (). When Zhuge Liang scanned the sky at night, he found his life might end at any moment. Then, he wanted to use the magic of expelling evil stars to extend his life, “I am in the habit of praying, but I don't know the will of God. However, prepare me forty nine guards and let each have a black flag. Dress them in black and place them outside my tent. Then I will pray for the Big Dipper in my tent. If my master lamp remain alight for seven days, then is my life to be prolonged for twelve years. If the lamp goes out, then I am to die.” His specific practices were as follows. Zhuge Liang prepared incense and offerings in his tent. On the floor of the tent, he arranged seven lamps, and, outside these, forty nine smaller lamps. In the midst he placed the lamp of his own fate. All day he labored at his military plans, and at night he paced the magic steps—the steps of seven stars of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Zhuge Liang was loosening his hair, his hand holding a sword, his heels stepping on Ursa Major and Ursa Minor to hold the leadership star.
- 15 Part of the Baojuan appears in the form with images on the upper half of the page and text on the lower half, which is very close to the style of talking about the picture, e.g., the collection of the (), also known as the (), in the Asian-African Library of the University of London.
- 16 Such as the . At the end of this Baojuan, there are references to planchette writing, such as the , the , the , and several prescriptions.

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