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Research article

"Possessing states"

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Abstract

Should the state be understood as an entity, something standing outside and in relation to society, or only a mystification hiding that the state consists of nothing more than people and paper? This article argues that these two positions are not mutually exclusive, but perspectival. The deeper one ventures to find the heart of the state, the more it disappears, but the further one ventures from the state, the more bounded and entity-like it appears. The article then investigates how the state entered a frontier, in the Zomian uplands of China. Finally, it investigates how analyzing ghost possession can provide tools for understanding the state as an entity. The article will show how the cadre's speech and "Chineseness" are both forms of state possession.

KEYWORDS: anthropology of the state, Blang, China, ghosts

In the last years of her life, Begoña Aretxaga began focusing on a strange aspect of studying the state: no matter how much the state is demystified there is still a ghostly remainder (Aretxaga, 2000, 2003). While the state might be completely fictitious, she argued, it still has a social life (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 401). As David Graeber has argued, there is a strange duality to the state: it looks very different from its own perspective to the perspective of those who retain some degree of autonomy from it (Graeber, 2004, p. 65). This article will examine the state's ghostly social life at its frontier, in order to develop a theory for understanding this remainder. I then investigate how a concept such as citizenship changes when the state is understood as agential.

I draw on fieldwork in a small Blang village in the mountainous, Zomian frontier along the China-Myanmar border.[1] This area is suitable for an investigation into the changing

[1] I first conducted fieldwork in the Blang Mountains in 2014. I then returned for a short visit in 2019. After the pandemic, I conducted fieldwork in the Blang Mountains in 2023, 2024, and 2025. In total, I have spent over eight months in the Blang Mountains.

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"ontic character" (Gupta, 2012, p. 55) of the state, because until 1953 it was beyond the direct control of valley kingdoms. It is a place where some surviving grandparents were born not having any inkling of being Chinese, and grandchildren have no inkling of not being Chinese. A place where life before the arrival of the state is part of living memory.

The article has three main parts. First, I will briefly outline how the state has been studied anthropologically. I will argue that comparing studies of the state from the inside and outside, highlights its perspectival quality. The state appears differently depending on where one is located in relation to it. The deeper one delves into the state the more it disappears, but the further away one is the more clearly defined it appears. Demystification and studies of the state as an entity, are thus not opposing theoretical positions, but reflect the state's perspectival quality. Second, I will trace how the state came to the Blang mountains and the changes the state has gone through in the last century. Finally, I will investigate how the process of becoming Chinese has been a process that can best be likened to Blang theories of ghost possession: people have come to see themselves as the state sees them. This highlights another aspect of the perspectival quality of the state. If the state disappears as one delves into it, but appears firmly agential from the outside, then having the state enter into a person also has perceptual and perspectival effects.

Perspectival states

The mainstream in the anthropology of the state is firmly rooted within the broad paradigm of demystification. One of its earliest formulations can be found in Radcliffe-Brown's preface to *African Political Systems*:

> [T]he state…does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers. What does exist is an organization, i.e. a collection of individual human beings connected by a complex system of relations…. There is no such thing as the power of the state; there are only, in reality, powers of individuals (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940/1964, p. xxiii).

This theoretical approach was further developed by sociologist Philip Abrams, who concluded that "the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is." For Abrams, the purpose of sociological analyses of the state would be to "demystify" the state and show that behind the illusion of ideology there is simply people. Unlike Radcliffe-Brown, however, Abrams suggested that the process whereby the "state-idea"

was produced, "projected, purveyed, and variously believed" was also a possible avenue of research (Abrams, 1977/1988, pp. 75, 79, 82). Thus, most contemporary anthropology has focused on either showing what goes on behind the mask, or how the state is made to appear as an entity (Das & Poole, 2004; Gupta, 2012; Hull, 2012; Krohn-Hansen & Nustad, 2005; Latour, 2002/2010; Sharma & Gupta, 2006). Yet as Aretxaga pointed out in a posthumously published review article, no matter how much the state is demystified, there is still a remainder.

> If the fictional reality of the state is socially powerful" Aretxaga wrote "then scholars must focus not only on those discourses and practices that produce this state form as real but also on the actual social and subjective life of this formation we call the state (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 401).

Abrams is clear that his analysis of the state as a mystification, draws on Engels, and although he does not cite it directly, it is clear that he is here in agreement with Lenin's exegesis of Engels' writings on the state (Abrams, 1977/1988, p. 76; Lenin, 1917/1974). The relational approach to analyzing the state as an addition to demystification, which Aretxaga suggested, can also be traced back to another former Young Hegelian, and reportedly good friend of Engels, Max Stirner. While Stirner derides all manner of concepts and generalizations as illusory "spooks," he never employs the term in relation to the state. Instead, the individual's interactions with the state are usually framed in relational terms. For example, Stirner writes that:

> [M]y thoughts are free only if they are granted to me by the state's grace, if they are the state's thoughts… My ways must be its ways, else it seizes me; my thoughts its thoughts, else it stops my mouth (Stirner, 1844/1995, p. 227).

As Leopold phrases it in his editor's introduction: "Stirner sees the state as a human product, albeit one that dominates its own creators" (Stirner, 1844/1995, p. xxvi). This dual character can also be found in the works of Peter Kropotkin, another of Engels' contemporaries. On the one hand, Kropotkin describes the historical emergence of the state as creating "new relationships between members of society which did not exist before" (Kropotkin, 1896/2019, p. 87). At the same time, he describes the state relationally as something which compulsively must insert itself between people:

> The peasants of a village have a thousand common interests…They are inevitably led to unite for a thousand different things. But the State does not want, cannot allow, that they are united! Since it gives them the school and the priest, the gendarme and the judge—that should be enough for them. And if

> other interests arise—they can be dealt with through the channels of the State and Church (Kropotkin, 1896/2019, p. 131).

A good contemporary version of this type of account would be James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998/2020), which not only traces the work of bureaucrats and planners, but also presents a theory for understanding how states see, and how this perception affects the world.

How then do we analytically come to terms with this dual nature of the state as both illusory and as having a social life? Demystification was proposed by its proponents as a solution to this issue: when the state is shown to be illusory, the mask will drop (e.g., Abrams, 1977/1988, p. 82). However, as Aretxaga has argued:

> [G]az[ing] into the labyrinthine "interiority" of the state being does not necessarily dispel its "magical" power. On the contrary, it seems to augment it… and… makes the state in late moder- nity more and more an all-pervasive ghostly presence (Aretxaga, 2000, p. 43).

One approach towards resolving this dilemma emerges from Graeber's analysis of the state's "dual character" in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004). Graeber wrote that states represent both "utopian projects" and "institutionalized raiding or extortion," and that the first is how the state appears in its own archives, while the latter is how the state is primarily experienced by people living on its margins (Graeber, 2004, p. 65). While Graeber's analysis is (as the title suggests) a fragment, it does offer one avenue for resolving the analytical problem of the state's "ontic" character (cf. Gupta, 2012, p. 55).[2] Just as the difference between the state as "utopian project" and "institutionalized raiding" is perspectival, so is the difference of the state as mystification and as entity. The deeper one delves into the heart of the state, the more one finds "only ordinary National School of Administration graduates with no other instruments than texts and words" (Latour, 2002/2010, p. 69). But in the state's margins, among stateless and formerly stateless societies, the state appears as something external to society, which interacts relationally with them. Such an analysis would appear to reflect ethnographic accounts from anthropologists working in communities that have recently become parts of states. Erik Mueggler describes this process among Lòlop'ò communities in Southwestern China as the state transforming "from a personified external Other into an abstract internal Other" (Mueggler, 2001, p. 8). Let me therefore begin by tracing the

[2] I.e. the question of the state's being

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arrival of the state to the Blang Mountains and how Blang communities perceive the state.

How the state came to the Blang Mountains

Blang communities are perhaps best understood as post-state societies. According to both Blang oral and written histories, as well as the historical chronicles of surrounding lowland Tai kingdoms, Blang communities used to live as lowland subjects to Blang and later Tai kings before moving into the mountains (Liew-Herres et al., 2012, pp. 113–114n4, 227; Sao Saimong Mangrai, 1981; see e.g., J. G. Scott, 1901, pp. 503–507; Yang Yucai et al., 2009, pp. 46–47; Zhang, 1988, p. 137; Zhu, 2009). We do not know when Blang communities chose to organize themselves in the form they had when Communist Party cadres and ethnographers first arrived in 1953, so it is best to confine ourselves to analyzing relations to the state during the last century.

Since its establishment in 1180, the most important state to which communities in the Blang Mountains were related was the Kingdom of Sipsongpanna. In Blang discourse, the pre-Chinese state is hyper-personified. For example, comparing the past and present, one interlocutor explained: "the *chao pianling* (the king of Sipsongpanna) and the Kuomintang (KMT) wanted money and things from us, but they didn't care about what we did." This was a direct relationship between villages and the king. Valley states were, to follow Mueggler (quoted above), perfectly personified and external—*L'État, c'est moi*. Interestingly enough, while this discourse is substantiated in the earliest Chinese ethnographic accounts from the 1950s, the descriptions of actual relations with the king, are not always directly conducted with the king, in several of the accounts there is an intermediary either in the form of a functionary called the *po lam,* who was responsible for journeying into the mountains to collect tribute, or through tribute missions to local lords (e.g., Yang Yucai et al., 2009, p. 73). The fact that many of the relations with the king happened through intermediaries does not seem to have affected the personification of the state. In this discourse the king is agential and the source of action, while his representatives are reduced to intermediaries (cf. Latour, 2005, p. 39).

At this point a caveat is in order. I should say that the Kingdom of Sipsongpanna was the most important earthly state that Blang communities related to. But the Tai king was of marginal importance to the village, compared with the divine kings that surrounded them in the mountains. While exact social organization and cosmology differs from village to village, all villages are broadly organized around the same foundational principles. Any decision that affects the entire village can only be made through general

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assembly (Blang: *pom yung*). All members of the village are allowed to attend, and each household is obliged to send at least one representative.[3] Any decision must be made by consensus; if the assembly does not reach consensus the subject has to be discussed further. The village general assembly also appoints a number of positions, whose number, responsibilities, and method of selection differs from village to village. The most common methods for selection are consensus or sortition.[4] Each of these appointed positions is responsible for certain village organizational tasks, but most importantly they represent the village in relation to surrounding powerful others. In Man La, the village I have spent most time in, there are currently only two such positions: the *daman* and *dazhan*. The daman oversees fining people who break the village rules and caring for the village heart (*hmul yung/zhei man*). At the village heart he represents the entire village in providing care for the village god and heavenly host and asks them to in turn care for the villagers. The dazhan oversees village relations with the temple, and of dispatching ghosts that wander into the village. The daman and dazhan are also jointly responsible for representing the village in relation to the local mountain god. Every Blang village is built on the land of a local mountain god, and when villagers open new land, they have to ask the god for permission. Before the People's Republic of China (PRC), banned swidden-shifting agriculture new land would be opened every year, while old land was returned to the mountain god so that its fertility could be restored. Today, Man La still presents yearly offerings and recites sutras for the mountain god, the *daman* and *dazhan* asking him in turn to care for the villagers.

Historically, relations with the state appear to have replicated the village's relations with ghosts and gods. When the *po lam* enters the village, he would be treated much like a ghost, he would be given wealth and produce, and then led out of the village (Yang Yucai et al., 2009, p. 73). Each village used to have an appointed position who oversaw housing and organizing the tribute presented to the *po lam*. Likewise, villages would appoint representatives to send tribute to the king or local lords, who in turn would offer his blessings for the village.

The first Chinese state to enter the Blang Mountains was the Republic of China. From 1943-1953, contingents of KMT soldiers would enter the mountains, first to stave off a potential Japanese invasion from Myanmar during the Second World War, and later as a

[3] Some villages restrict attendance to adult members.

[4] Even positions that are supposedly inherited (usually on the basis of primogeniture) ultimately rest on village consensus, inheritance being a standardized method for selecting a candidate for the general assembly to approve or oppose. Villages that employ the consensus based approach, usually resort to sortition if the assembly cannot reach consensus.

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base for resistance against the Communist forces following the Chinese Civil War. In popular memory, at least among those who stayed in the Blang Mountains, the KMT forces are remembered more like bandits and raiders than a state project. According to interlocutors who were alive at the time, the KMT soldiers would kidnap villagers for ransom, kill animals and people to menace the village into providing them with money, food, and labor. They were not a permanent presence, unlike mountain gods and kings, the soldiers ambulated: bothering a village for some time then moving on. The KMT was clearly fully external to Blang communities. It was also personified, in the sense that the soldiers were understood to be acting as members of the KMT not individuals, but this personification of the state is very different from that of the king. This difference is not so much discursive as phenomenological. As the above quote clearly shows, discursively, any statement about relations to the king are replaceable with statements about the KMT (or the current PRC government for that matter). The interactions with state representatives are the same—the person is speaking on behalf of someone else, but, in the case of the king, a person is available to human perception as the source of these actions. The KMT, however, cannot be found in the phenomenal world other than through its intermediaries. This is analogous to the phenomenological presence of ghosts and gods. Just like the state, gods and ghosts have a great impact on Blang lives, yet they are not available to the phenomenal world of human perception; humans can only see the effects of their presence. While a ghost can speak to them through a possessed person, the person available to perception is not the same as the ghost. The same is true for KMT soldiers. The soldiers are the KMT, but each individual soldier is not the same as the KMT. Likewise, a soldier can speak both as an individual and for the KMT.

The Blang word for the state is *chenfu*. The term derives from the local Chinese dialect pronunciation of the Mandarin word *zhengfu*. In Chinese, there are no terms that exclusively translate to the English word "state." The most used words are *zhengfu* which means both government and state, and *guojia* which means both state and nation or country. The Chinese word *guojia* is usually translated into Blang with the Tai loanword *pathet*, and its usage tends to overlap with the English use of nation or country. Usage of the term *chenfu* overlaps with the English language use of the state, the national government, the local government, and anyone representing the government. For example, an interlocutor recently explained that "*chenfu* came and told us that they will stop paying out the border stipend (Chinese: *butie*) if people gamble in the village." With the arrival of the People's Republic in 1953, the state also took on a locational meaning. After the People's Liberation Army (PLA) forced the KMT soldiers across the mountain

range that marks the border between China and Myanmar, they did something no state had previously done: establishing a permanent residence in the Blang Mountains. In its current form it takes the shape of a large walled-in compound where the cadres who make up the local township government live and work. In present-day usage, the term *chenfu* also refers to this compound and to the township center that has sprung up around it, now with a hospital, police station, school, as well as shops and hotels. A person saying: "I'm going to the *chenfu*" can thus both mean that they are going to the government compound or that they're visiting the township center. When people speak of "when we didn't have a *chenfu*" they are referring to the time before the first construction of a government compound in the mountains. It would be accurate to translate this as both "before we had a township government" and "when we were stateless."

It is not a coincidence that several English words overlap in the Blang concept of *chenfu*. When people speak of the *chenfu* coming to talk to them, they are highlighting the state's strange dual character. When the *chenfu* arrives in the village, it is simply a group of people. At the same time, it is not these individuals that are the state: other cadres could arrive in their stead, they can visit the village as individuals and not state representatives, and when they speak as the state it is not their own words being spoken. How should we conceptualize this being that is not really a being, yet acts like a being?

Blang has a concept which might help us conceptualize this. It is not a concept Blang people would use to conceptualize the state, but I think it might be useful to this end. The Blang term *jitta* (likely from Pali: *citta*), is usually translated into Chinese as "heart," but its use differs from the Blang term *hmul* which also refers to an anatomical heart and to the "village heart" (*hmul yung*) mentioned above. Plants, humans, animals, gods, ghosts, treasure, amulets, and many other things have *jitta*. It is what allows plants to grow, animals to walk, treasure to move underground, and amulets to act in the world. Unlike in what Descola would call animist and naturalist ontologies, where agency appears linked to having a subject position (Descola, 2005/2013, Chapters 6, 8; cf. Viveiros de Castro, 1998), not all things that have *jitta* have subject positions. For example, humans, animals, gods, and ghosts have souls (*gabu*) and therefore feel pain, have subject positions, and are reborn after death, while plants are generally assumed to have *jitta* but not *gabu*. Other categories of being are harder to know. Some treasures (*seng*) clearly have *jitta*, but whether they have *gabu* or not is unknown. Yet they are often spoken about as if they do. Although, the literal meaning of *jitta* is heart, it overlaps much more with the academic concept of agency. A full analysis of what translating between *jitta* and agency would entail, will require a separate future publication. For

now, saying that the state has agency or is agential, is a useful heuristic for capturing that sense in which it can act despite not having a clear essence of being. Like ghosts and gods, it acts but is not available to the senses. Unlike ghosts and gods, no one (neither Blang people, academics, nor cadres) seem to ascribe it feelings or a subject position, and yet, it often acts as if it possesses them.

The state's presence in the Blang Mountains remains external to the village community. It acts upon the community through its cadres, and through the village head (Ch. *cunzhang*) and vice village head (*fu cunzhang*). These two positions were established by the PRC and unlike the *daman* and *dazhan* they are elected through majority ballot and must then be approved by the township government. Like the *daman* and *dazhan*, they represent the village in its relations with a powerful invisible other, but unlike the *daman* and *dazhan* they also represent that other in relation to the village. However, the state is starting to transform itself into something internal.

Possessing states

If the state appears more solidly as a thing, a place, and an agency in its margins, how does that affect our analysis of people's relations to the state? In this section, I would like to focus on two aspects of state presence in the Blang Mountains which confirm Aretxaga's analysis that there is something ghostly about the state. The first question I would like to raise is: who speaks when the cadre speaks? The second question is: what does it mean to become a citizen of a nation state? As we shall see, both questions can be analyzed using Blang theories of ghost possession.

The cadre's speech

The ontology of a cadre is a strange thing. I am using ontology here in its existentialist usage as being and being-in-the-world (Fanon, 1952/2021, pp. 89–90), not as social reality (cf. Graeber, 2015; e.g., Henare et al., 2007). On the one hand, cadres are normal human beings, and on the other, they are representatives of the state. Sometimes this ontological division is clear-cut. When cadres arrive in the village in an official capacity, they clearly signal that they are not there as individuals but as representatives of the state. For example, when I attended a village meeting called by the township government to communicate the "laws of the nation" to the households, the cadres were seated at the front behind tables with the representatives from each household facing them on chairs. The cadres spoke and the villagers were supposed to listen (although most did

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not). Most of the meeting involved a cadre reading from a computer screen, reiterating laws that seemed out of place. He spent a long time discussing the rights of women who live at her future in-laws' house ahead of marriage, a practice common among Han Chinese people. But among Blang people, the husband-to-be is expected to live with his future in-laws before marriage (traditionally for three years, now usually shorter). The cadre also spent long explaining that women have the right to freely marry and divorce, a freedom Blang women have enjoyed much longer than Han Chinese women. The monotonous reading from the screen and the seeming disconnect between the topic and the audience made a strange spectacle: as if the speaker did not speak as himself and was not speaking to the people in front of him. The purpose of this performance was clear to all involved: the cadre was not there to speak as a person to other people, but to deliver a message from the state to the village. The words might be coming out of a human mouth, but they were not his own.

This ontological division is almost as clear-cut when the cadre is not in their official role. I have myself sipped tea, eaten dinner, gotten drunk on corn liquor, and sung karaoke with cadres. For the most part they are then just normal people. However, the ontological division is always at risk of breaking down. It can happen very suddenly. I have found it most often to occur in contexts where a cadre is invited to socialize with someone they know through their official position, but it can happen on any occasion where the cadre is supposed to just be a normal person. It is usually set off by someone questioning or mentioning something that goes against government regulations. Suddenly the cadre's whole demeanor will change: the posture becomes more rigid, the voice becomes lower, authoritative, and slightly aggressive. For example, I once found myself at a late-night dinner in a neighboring village at a friend-of-a-friend's house together with a visiting cadre from the county government. Everything started out amicable, but as libations kept being poured, a young man who had up to that point been conversing amicably with the cadre brought up a grievance that would transform the cadre from person to state representative. The young man had bought some land to build a house, so that he and his wife could move out of his parents' house, but the township government would not provide him with a building permit. The cadre's entire demeanor changed. Gone was the amicable smile and the relaxed posture. She grew rigid, her voice was low and dismissive: "these are the laws of the nation" she explained, the land was zoned as agricultural not residential land. The young man tried to reason with her: he argued that there was not enough residential land in the village, and that it is unfair that rich people can own multiple homes, but he is not even allowed to build a single home for himself. His appeals fell on deaf ears. The cadre growing

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increasingly annoyed and aggressive kept repeating: "these are the laws of the nation." Her voice said: it does not matter what is right; it is about what is correct. It was as if someone else was suddenly speaking, a voice from afar.[5]

In Blang communities, the only other time such transformations take place is during ghost possession. There is a clear similarity between the ontology of the cadre and the ontology of a person possessed, in that their actions only make sense in relation to that other invisible being. The similarity between ghosts and states was something Begoña Aretxaga briefly touched upon in her late writings (Aretxaga, 2000). For Aretxaga, the state's invisible presence "in a variety of social fields" is increasingly transforming the state into "an all-pervasive ghostly presence." However, for Aretxaga, the relation to the state is ultimately "imaginary," resulting from misrecognition of the self (Aretxaga, 2000, pp. 43, 53). In the Blang Mountains, relations with ghosts and states are much more precise than the spectral ever-presence Aretxaga describes. Analyzing Blang knowledge about ghost possession therefore offers a useful tool for analyzing the sudden transformation of the cadre's being, where the state has a sudden, very specific presence and relation to humans.

Possession is a rare feature of the most dangerous ghosts. According to the monks and *dazhan* I have spoken to who have experience with dispatching possessing ghosts, a strange transformation of the person's being is one of the telltale signs. Sometimes this transformation is easily captured in their behavior: a person who usually shows the proper respect to monks suddenly does not. There can be physical effects, such as bloodshot eyes. But often it is something you cannot put your finger on; the person just acts different. As one interlocutor explained it "you can just tell that they are different from a normal person. It's like when you see a crazy person—you just know." Perhaps the best way to translate this into academic theoretical language, is to employ Merleau-Ponty's notion of "style." Merleau-Ponty used the concept of style to help make sense of the phenomenological experience of constancy. Very simply put: why is it that we experience someone as the same person when we meet them at different times? Merleau-Ponty used the concept of style to capture everything about a person that makes them appear as themselves: their way of being-in-the-world, their life-experiences, their habitus and

[5] It is fruitful to think with a few concepts from David Graeber's "Dead Zones of the Imagination" (2012). The change in the cadre's "style" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 382) represents a shift to a "language of command" (Graeber, 2012, p. 114), while still speaking Chinese. It dictates that we are no longer in the realm of people speaking to each other at a dinner table. The sentence "these are the laws of the nation" effectively serves to shut down the conversation. The voice from afar here clearly draws on what Graeber dubs "structural violence" (Graeber, 2012, p. 8). It is the fact that truncheon-wielding police officers can be called to deal with the young man if he would still build a house, that makes it possible for the cadre to enforce an ignorance of his circumstances and ethics.

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hexis, etc. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 382). The possessed person is a reversal of this. It is a person who looks the same as we are used to, but their style is someone else's. The possessed is a human with the style of a ghost. Is this not what happens to the cadres when they go from person to official—their style changes? They are humans, but their words are someone else's and their style is different from when they are not in an official capacity.

This example also highlights the perspectival character not just of states, but theories of the state. If I had spent time with the cadres, the agency of the state would likely disappear, and I would see how these ways of speaking and the words originate in internal memos and self-criticism sessions. There would be nothing but people and papers. But from the outside, the agency of the state is key to the entire performance. The difference between the upstanding and the corrupt cadre is precisely the difference between the intermediary and mediator (Latour, 2005, p. 39). For Latour, the difference between a mediator and an intermediary is that the latter simply transports meaning, while the former changes the outcome. He argues that the purpose of analysis is to multiply the number of mediators (Latour, 2005, p. 61). However, to understand the social life of the state, to understand how the state is experienced from the outside, it is crucial to see the way cadres are dependent on appearing as intermediaries. The cadres' speech is only that, if the cadres themselves appear as intermediaries between the state and its interlocutors. Cadres that are mediators are corrupt; they act as individuals instead of representing the state. Thus, whether the state has a subject position or not, in fact, whether it exists or not, is rather inconsequential. What matters is that the state is invisibly present as the source of action, the source of speech; regardless of whether that source can be found or not.

Seeing like a state

In the Blang Mountains, some grandparents still remember when no Blang people considered themselves Chinese, while grandchildren cannot remember not being Chinese. The sociological factors that made this possible are rather predictable: the educational system was expanded into the mountains, and children are now socialized at a young age to consider themselves Chinese (Hansen, 1999; Yang, 2003). As noted earlier, Erik Mueggler, has described the same process among his Lòlop'ò interlocutors as the state transforming from external and personified to internal and abstract. This transformation of an "external Other into an… internal Other" (Mueggler, 2001, p. 8), is

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also what happens during ghost possession, and Blang knowledge can again provide us with a tool for understanding the state.

Perception, according to Blang knowledge, is ontological in the sense of categories of being (e.g., Descola, 2005/2013; Latour, 1991/1993). How beings perceive the world is determined by what type of beings they are. Gods and ghosts can see things that living humans cannot, including being able to see each other. Because perception is ontological, embodying another type of being changes how a person sees the world. Ghosts are unclean creatures and lack an understanding of the differences humans make. A person possessed by a ghost will be unable to tell the difference between clean and dirty; they might eat rotten food out of the garbage because it looks like a tasty feast for a ghost. Likewise, possessed people will not be able to recognize the difference between kin and stranger, or show proper respect to monks. Having a ghost enter one's body makes one see the world as a ghost sees it.

When the PLA first entered the Blang Mountains in the 1950s, they saw the people living there as Chinese: citizens to be liberated from the yoke of feudal landlords and KMT reactionaries. The state perceived Blang people as Chinese, but they did not see themselves as Chinese. Becoming Chinese has thus been a process of Blang people beginning to see themselves the way the state sees them. The state is ontologically different to humans: it is a different category of being—a being that is not a being, but acts as if it were;[6] it has a different form of being-in-the-world, in that it does not exist as a being and does not have an extension in the phenomenal world, and yet it appears as a being, extending its agency through beings-in-the-world. This ontologically different other going from external to internal transforms perception, in similar ways to ghost possession.

However, what it means to be Chinese in the Blang Mountains differs depending on who you speak with, and this difference highlights something important about the otherness of the internalized state. The way Blang people talk about Chineseness, can be roughly sorted into three generalized narratives. First would be Chineseness as external other. Before 1953 and in narratives about that time Chineseness appears as something external to Blang people. Second, Chineseness as a territorial belonging. In this narrative, Blang people became Chinese as a result of the front line between communist and nationalist forces moving past their village. Communities on the far side of the front

[6] Is the state not in a sense an inversion of Sartre's famous discussion of the waiter in his examination of "bad faith." Sartre writes that the waiter is playing at actualizing a "being-in-itself of the café waiter." The waiter is clearly a being-for-itself, someone who make decisions of their own, but is playing at being a pure role as if he was a thing (Sartre, 1943/1956, pp. 59–60). Using Sartre's words, we could say that the state is a being-(not-)in-itself playing at actualizing itself as a being-for-itself.

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became part of Myanmar and those within communist controlled territory became Chinese. This Chineseness is not so much a way of being, but of territorially belonging to the nation and party. In this narrative, love of the party and the nation is performative, and would have been directed to the KMT if their communities had ended up on the far side of the front. We might call the third form ontological or essential Chineseness, because it represents Chineseness as something a person is.

This last narrative is most similar to ghost possession, in that it represents an erasure of difference between the self and the formerly external other. In fact, it represents an even more radical transformation than that described by Mueggler. The state is transformed from external other into the self itself. Again, this is analogous to the relation between self and other during ghost possession. Possession is a characteristic only of the most dangerous ghosts that Blang people encounter. Most ghosts are external others. Some ghosts become embodied in people, but they do not possess them. These are internal to the body but other to the person's self. What is unique for possessing ghosts is the way they become indistinguishable from the self. The ghost begins as perfectly external, but during possession there is no difference between self and other. The person sees the world as the ghost sees it; their words are the ghost's words. The three narratives about Chineseness traced above are analogous to these three different ways ghosts relate to people, namely external other, internal other and self.

The possessing form appears to be linked to the emergence of the nation-state. As Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* the transformation from subject to citizen was accompanied in Europe with a transformation of criminal punishment, which was transformed from physical violence and destruction to a process trying to affect the criminal's soul and reform them. That is, from punishing violators to creating proper citizens (Foucault, 1975/1995, pp. 101–103). A similar transformation has taken place in relations between Blang communities and states over the last century. The Kingdom of Sipsongpanna mobilized the threat of force to expropriate wealth, goods, and labor from upland communities, but did not concern itself with how they viewed or governed themselves. The People's Republic does not concern itself with expropriating wealth (most Blang people are tax-exempt)—in fact it gives Blang people money and provides them with the labor of doctors—instead it is concerned with how they view and govern themselves. The Kingdom of Sipsongpanna was primarily concerned with "institutionalized raiding" (Graeber, 2004, p. 65), while the People's Republic is primarily concerned with creating the subjectivities of proper citizens, producing Chinese people. This is especially visible among the youngest residents of Blang communities. Since the township

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government began implementing preschool teaching in the last few years (see e.g., PGBBT, 2022), many children now have Chinese as their first language, and some do not appear to their parents and grandparents to be able to speak or understand Blang. These children represent the first generation of Blang people who think and speak in the state's language and not their own.

Conclusions

We began with a conundrum within the anthropological study of the state: is the state an entity or a form of mystification? I have argued that a perspectival theory, whereby states appear differently depending on the vantage point from which they are studied, allows for these opposing approaches to be made complementary. The deeper one delves within the state the more it disappears, the more it exists as a mystification of human action. The further from the state one ventures the more it appears as an entity. To illustrate this, I then traced Blang relations to the state and how it is a process of transformation from external to internal other, and finally beginning to become part of the self. Finally, I traced two examples of how the social life of the state can be analyzed through the tools provided by Blang ghost possession theories and practices.

Apart from resolving an opposition in contemporary anthropological theory and highlighting a theory and method for studying states in their frontiers, this article also suggests some conclusions about the ontology of the state—in the sense of its being-in-the-world (cf. e.g., Fanon, 1952/2021, pp. 89–90). According to these investigations, the state is an agency without subjectivity; it is a being without a source. Its being-in-the-world is not a being-in-itself; it has no essential extension in the phenomenal world except through other beings-in-themselves. Despite this, for cadres and government functionaries to appear as that, they cannot be mediators who affect the outcome but intermediaries between the state and humans. It is a being-not-in-itself appearing as a being-for-itself. The nation-state, however, appears predicated specifically on the possessing premise of dissolving the difference between self and other. The nation-state (and for that matter the people's state), is based on the paradoxical notion that the state is the embodiment of the nationality, of the people, of the citizens, while it can only exist by dissolving the difference between the person's self and their essence as citizens. This suggests that the nation-state is founded on a paradox: to exist it needs to disappear; it must stop existing as an external entity and become the self of the citizens. There is a clear difference here between ghosts and states. While ghosts possess people in order to be fed, showered in gifts, and then dispatched, the nation-state must possess its citizens

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in perpetuity. This suggests a future approach for anthropology of the state. Graeber suggested—posthumously, through Wengrow—the need for an anthropology of freedom (Wengrow, 2022). Perhaps as a part of such a development we need an anthropological theory of state dispatching or exorcism; not just a theory about the "strange intimacy between the state and the people" (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 403), but also a theory for how that intimacy can be broken.

AI Disclaimer

No AI was used in any part of the research, conceptualization, or writing of this article.

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Povzetek

Ali naj državo razumemo kot entiteto, nekaj, kar stoji zunaj družbe in je z njo v razmerju, ali zgolj kot mistifikacijo, ki prikriva, da državo sestavljajo le ljudje in papir? Članek zagovarja stališče, da se ti dve pojmovanji ne izključujeta, temveč sta odvisni od perspektive. Globje ko prodiramo v iskanje jedra države, bolj se ta izmika; bolj ko se od nje oddaljujemo, jasneje se kaže kot zamejena entiteta. Članek raziskuje, kako je država prodrla na obmejno območje v zomijskem višavju na Kitajskem. Pri tem se sprašuje, kako lahko analiza obsedenosti z duhovi ponudi orodja za razumevanje države kot entitete. Članek pojasni, da sta tako govor partijskega kadra kot »kitajskost« obliki obsedenosti z državo.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: antropologija države, Blang, Kitajska, duhovi

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