

Entangling Bodies and Places: Material Agency in Urbanizing China*

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Abstract: China's fast urbanization takes place concomitantly with the drastic alteration of space. How do people respond to the changing physical forms of space and recreate rituals through the (lack of) material things? In Suzhou, where the current ethnographic research is conducted, rituals have emerged on the most unexpected spots: by a garbage disposal, package delivering station, and by the deserted riverbank. At all those locations stood former temples/shrines that gods and ghosts used to occupy but were demolished to make way for urban infrastructure. Despite repeated banning and purging of deities and temples, worshippers—the dispossessed former villagers navigating the uncertainty of urban worlds—burn incense and paper money, make offerings, and become possessed in those places. The gods' agency seems to be exercised even after their temples and bodies are destroyed. Rather than simply interpreting this as resistance

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against modern urbanism and sabotage against the urban infrastructure, this study focuses on the agency of gods and explores how bodies and places ‘intra-act’ to produce rituals of efficacy. Echoing the literature on materiality and entanglement, this study explores the relationships among physical space, the human body, and the materiality of agency.

Keywords: materiality, spirit mediums, body, place, entanglement

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Introduction

There has been a plethora of academic research on the changing religious groups and communities in China. Scholars from various disciplines of sociology, history, religious studies, anthropology, and Sinology have captured the historical continuity and contemporary transitions, the role of the state, community and individual actors, as well as the effects of market economy on the religious behaviours of people.¹ Building on such existing research, especially on the scholarship on popular religion in China, this paper aims to wrestle with the question of religion and materiality in Chinese popular religious practices.² Drawing on the debates on religion, ritual and efficacy in China and beyond, this paper situates itself within the social context of China’s urbanization and spatial transformation.

¹ See Bapandier, *The Lady of Linshui*; Chau, *Miraculous Responses*; Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question*; Kang, *Enchanted Revolution*; Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies*; Sangren, *History and Magical Power*; and Yang, *Re-enchanting Modernity*.

² Inspirational credits go to Michel Chombon’s *Making Christ Present in China* and Adam Chau’s forthcoming edited volume, *Chinese Religious Life in 100 Objects*.

China has experienced the largest scale of urbanization in the world in the past three decades. Hundreds and thousands of villages and their temples were demolished to make way for modern infrastructure. Often, there is little space for religious sites in the newly constructed urban areas. The Suzhou case is unique in that large official temples (often Daoist and Buddhist ones) are constructed to house some of the deities from former village temples and shrines, a process Wu translates into ‘Smashing Small and Building Big’ (拆小建大).³ Such official temples, under the leadership of Daoist or Buddhist associations, aim to better regulate religious activities and maintain clean, orderly, and official religious spaces. However, ‘unofficial spots of worship’ kept cropping up in the city, inside official temples, inside residential complexes where former temples stood, and even around tech companies (such as a spot near the Huawei Suzhou R&D Center).⁴ Though burning incense and paper money by the roadside, under bridges, and at crossroads is nothing new in Chinese folk religious practices, these spots are not random. They are carefully chosen or chosen as a compromise for the next best location. Why hang on to the locality? In her studies of materiality and magical power in Taiwan, Wei-Ping Lin asserts that the urban setting renders the religious practices to transcend the ‘the traditional ordering of local, regional, national, international, and global “arenas” as a concentric arrangement of progressively larger scale phenomena’.⁵ The ethnographic data from Suzhou show the opposite trend; that is, urbanization does not cause religious practices to go multi-scalar. Instead, locality and, we would argue, the *physical and material* aspects of the place continue to figure significantly in the sacred power of deities, so much so that former villagers go out of their way to carry out rituals and make offerings at physical sites of demolished temples and shrines that are no longer there.

Concomitant with urbanization, there has been a steady and robust growth of spirit mediums who channel the deities. Since

³ Wu, ‘Innovative State and Local Variations’.

⁴ Weller and Wu, ‘Religion in the Folded City’.

⁵ Lin, *Materializing Magic Power*, 168

one can always consult spirit mediums to have direct contact with the sacred power, why are people still so bound to locality? Why, furthermore, can the big, clean and orderly official temple not replace the unofficial spots of worship? What is so magical, or to use the words of David Morgan, ‘enchanted’ about ‘place’?⁶ Gordillo, in his study of Argentina, demonstrates that people’s memories are closely tied to physical locations, and that places constitute the materiality of memory.⁷ This research reveals that those sites are not just places where people commemorate their past lives in the villages, but also sites of efficacy, where the rituals can be properly conducted to enact reality. Researchers of Chinese religions have long noticed the importance of territory or locality to the deities. Terms such as ‘territorial cults’ or local cults have been widely used in describing the characteristics of deities, and especially in pilgrimages and *pujing* 鋪境.⁸ Such descriptive terms allow a fine-grained analysis of religion and governance in China. In his study of Nanyue 南嶽 in Tang China (618–907), James Robson innovatively uses a ‘place-based methodology’ that allows him to focus on a religious site rather than on one religious tradition, be it Buddhist or Daoist. In his analysis, place gains its efficacy not just by itself but by way of political power and a wealth of important supporters.⁹

Building on his long-term ethnographic research on the Black Dragon King Temple site in Shaanbei, Adam Chau coins the term ‘ritual terroir’ to refer to ‘the mutual constitution of a locale and ritual practices constructing that locale, highlighting both the locale-specific-ness of the ritual practice and the ritual-enhancing qualities of the locale’.¹⁰ Compared to locality-specific food practices,

⁶ Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*.

⁷ Gordillo, *Landscapes of Devils*.

⁸ See Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, and Wang, *Empire and Local Worlds*. *Pujing* is an administrative system based on locality and neighborhoods that began in the Ming dynasty Fujian Province. The territories of the local cults are often based on the *pujing* system.

⁹ Robson, *Power of Place*.

¹⁰ Chau, ‘Ritual Terroir’, 28.

Chau argues that the ‘magical power of Heilongdawang as a deity and Longwanggou as a place has a spatial dimension, residing in and emanating from the temple buildings (especially the main temple hall that houses Heilongdawang’s statue), the magical spring next to the temple, and the overall geomantic configurations of the temple surroundings’.¹¹ Such a concept is powerful in explaining the making of ‘power spots’ such as Mount Fuji and famous pilgrimage sites,¹² but it still does not explain the source of the power when the buildings and the statues are gone and the ‘geomantic configurations of the temple surroundings’ no longer exist. To better explain our case, we use the term ‘transcendental coordinates’ to refer to the enchanted places that persist despite the physical transformation of the landscape or the political transformation of the state system. Like Chau’s ‘ritual terroir’, transcendental coordinates produce ‘site-specific vitality’ through an ‘organic ensemble of inter-related and interlocking elements, now mobilised, now dormant, but always grounded in the very locale from which they have sprung’.¹³ Different from ritual terroir, the coordinates mark the territory as distinct even though the built structure on it is gone. The coordinates have achieved transcendental power through the relations that they have cultivated with the materiality of human bodies and objects. Thus, place alone does not make ritual efficacy (or *ling* 靈, as Wei-ping Lin explicates).¹⁴ Instead, it requires an entanglement of places, objects, and bodies (both statues of deities and bodies of spirit mediums), which we argue consist of the materiality of ritual becoming. Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) alerts us to the importance of both human and nonhuman actors, but those actors are still placed in relationality as if they are separate entities.¹⁵ Stepping on the shoulders of ANT theory, Barad proposes the concept of entanglement: ‘To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining

¹¹ Chau, ‘Ritual Terroir’, 31.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴ Lin, *Materializing Magic Power*.

¹⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence.¹⁶ In this paper, we will examine the entanglement of bodies and places in the ritual efficacy in this part of China.¹⁷

A Landscape of Deities, *Tudi* and Spirit Mediums

Famed as the ‘Oriental Venice’, Suzhou is an ancient city of south-east China boasting a plethora of rivers, boats and bridges, along with its exquisite gardens. However, anyone who visits Suzhou today would be despondent to see a metropolis, a smaller-scale version of its more famous neighbour Shanghai. With a few exceptions in the old city that were preserved for tourist purposes, the rest of Suzhou is studded with skyscrapers, subways, and shopping centres. Vast rural areas surrounding the old city have been undergoing urbanization for the past three decades. Swept away for the building of modern infrastructural clusters of Suzhou Industrial Park 蘇州工業園區 (SIP) and Suzhou High-Tech Zone 蘇州高新技術開發區 are the villages, with all the components of rivers, fields, boats, houses, temples, and deities. Weller and Wu have described the process of temple demolishing and building in this part of China.¹⁸ This study is carried out among the relocated housing complexes that we call Lotus and River in the contemporary administrative territory of SIP. The Lotus complex houses over thirty villages from the former township of Xia and the River complex houses seventeen villages from the former township of Cho.

‘Back then each village hosted at least three important annual rituals: birthdays of Guanyin 觀音, Mengjiang 猛將, and *tudi* 土地.’¹⁹ Xia

¹⁶ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 25.

¹⁷ In the understanding of materiality and religion, attention is often paid to visual objects such as paintings, pictures and artifacts.

¹⁸ See, Weller and Wu, ‘Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits’, *idem*, ‘Religion in the Folded City’, Wu, ‘Innovative State and Local Variations’, and *idem*, “‘Buddhification” and “Daoification””.

¹⁹ Those three are the most commonly worshipped local deities.

had over thirty villages and each village had a *tudi* and there was one large *tudi* [temple] for all the villages together', a spirit medium from Lotus told us. *Tudi*, literally meaning 'earth' (*tu*) and 'land' (*di*), refers to the Earth God, a tutelary deity that is territorial. Dell'Orto's study of Tudi Gong in Taiwan emphasizes the importance of place to such deities,²⁰ and Kenneth Dean's work on Putian villages shows that there are 'three levels of Earth Gods within each village—god of the local canton, god of a neighbourhood (Fude zhengshen), and protector tutelary god of each household (Tudigong)'. Though such hierarchies are not everywhere in China, his study demonstrates the prevalence and local importance of the Earth God in Chinese and overseas Chinese societies.²¹ In this paper, we use the local term *tudi* to refer to the Earth God. As Dean observes, the *tudi* is not the only local deity. However, the *tudi* is probably most important to the households, because each birth and death needs to be reported to the *tudi*, and each household has a representative (often the grandma) who participates in the annual rituals for the *tudi*. Furthermore, before urbanization, each *tudi* was in charge of twelve to twenty natural villages. These groupings compose today's ritual communities, and the Daoist *jiao* 醮 ritual is often organized around such communities.

What is special about this region is that many *tudis* and other gods take on 'daughters'—spirit mediums—as their ways of communicating with their people. There are three types of daughters: daughters who get possessed and serve the gods (*Tieshen Nüer* 貼身女兒), daughters who speak gods' words (*Kaikou Nüer* 開口女兒), and daughters who provide healing services to others (*Jiuwanren Nüer* 救萬人女兒). Another local term is Xiangtou 香頭, which literally means incense heads. Xiangtou can sometimes be mediums, but other times they can be those who organize religious events, such as pilgrimages and birthday celebrations for gods and goddesses, without becoming possessed. In contrast to studies in other parts of China, the spirit mediums here are mostly women, but Xiangtou, especially those who are only activity organizers, have more male

²⁰ Dell'Orto, *Place and Spirit*.

²¹ Dean, 'One ocean one temple'.

members.²² Besides *tudi*, the most common deities that possess those daughters are Guanyin 觀音 and Taimu 太姆. We argue that the spirit mediums and Xiangtous are important nodes of local social networks that go beyond households, kinship networks, or the natural villages. They also coordinate with Daoist and Buddhist temples by ‘prescribing’ Daoist or Buddhist rituals for the villages when fitting. Indeed, before urbanization, Daoist and Buddhist temples relied on spirit mediums to bring in ‘business’, because those big temples were often in the city, removed from the rural villages. The villagers would bring their concerns to the spirit medium, who served a role close to triage. If it was something small, the medium would prescribe some rituals that could be carried out at home or by making offerings at the local temple. But for a bigger issue, the spirit medium often would instruct the family to host a ritual in a Buddhist or Daoist temple in the city, such as Xiyuan si 西園寺 or Xuanmiao guan 玄妙觀, the most famous Buddhist and Daoist temples in the old city of Suzhou. Even today, after the village temples have been demolished, many spirit mediums continue to perform such roles in connecting specific households to the Daoist temples.²³

From 2003 to 2004, over a hundred natural villages (over thirty administrative villages) and their temples in Xia Township were demolished to make way for urban development. Villagers were relocated into the Lotus, one of the largest resettlement complexes in the SIP, consisting of eight compounds, with 653 total buildings. The resettlement complexes are normally minimally equipped with amenities, but the low cost attracted many migrants to move in. Now the Lotus houses over sixteen thousand households and a total of around one hundred thousand people.²⁴ While there are no longer signs of villages, Lefebvre remarks that no space disappears without a trace.²⁵ Even though temples are destroyed, former temple sites

²² Kang, *Enchanted Revolution*, and Chau and Liu, ‘Spirit mediums in Shaanbei’.

²³ See Wu, “Buddhification” and “Daoification”.

²⁴ See the Suzhou Municipal People’s Government, ‘Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP)’ for more demographic information.

²⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 164.

often remain places of worship that attract local residents (Figure 1). Different from rural migration to cities, the urbanization in SIP did not move people to a different location; instead, they stay more or less where they were, except the landscape in which they lived is entirely altered. Exiled at home, the villagers are faced with entirely different landscapes and infrastructure.²⁶ However, most people still have memories of what those places were. Such places play significant roles in the ritual lives of those who were transformed overnight from peasants to urbanites. Just as those descendants of the Armenian genocide survivors all over the world make pilgrimages to Eastern Anatolia, piecing together ‘memory-stories’ from real places that have been demolished, renamed, or repurposed, the former villagers were keen to point out to the researchers where things used to be: houses, temples, bridges, rivers, trees, wells, and even graveyards and empty grass fields.²⁷ Their ‘memory stories’ are inseparable from the places and locations that are beyond the visible infrastructure.

Among such place-based memories, *tudi miao* 土地廟 stood out. Former villagers used to use *tudi miao* to orient themselves both spatially and temporarily. Normally a dozen or two villages share a *tudi*, and the rhythm of the year is marked by *tudis*’ birthdays (including the birthdays of both Tudi Gong and Tudi Po, husband and wife) and other rituals that take place inside *tudi miao*. The *tudi miao* of Zhou village of Xia Township used to be grand, with nine rooms in two rows, but it was bulldozed to make room for the resettlement Lotus housing. The location of Lotus I used to be Upper Zhou Village and the location of Lotus II used to be Lower Zhou Village. In the middle of the current Lotus II is the parking lot, a power station, and garbage sorting station. According to the residents, that was where the *tudi miao* used to be. Soon after the villagers moved in, some started burning incense during the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month just as they used to do in the villages. Later, bricks were used to circle

²⁶ ‘Exiled at home’ is a term that Dongkun Lü used in personal communication when he was referring to the article by Yun Chen (‘Living without Assumption’) on displacement of Shanghai people in Dinghai Qiao.

²⁷ Bertram, *A House in the Homeland*.



FIGS. 1A AND 1B Incense Burning Spot by a Parking Lot and Garbage Station, photos by Wenxuan Yang.

out a spot like an incense burning pot. Despite repeated attempts by the property management of the Lotus compounds to clean it up, the incense burning keeps returning. A spirit medium named Zhou takes care of it, but she denies that she is 'in charge of' it, only admitting that she keeps an eye on it from time to time to maintain fire safety.

By the river, outside of the wall of Lotus II, there were clear marks of incense burning. The residents told us that it was the spot where the old temple for the Mengjiang of Zhou Village stood. The spirit medium who tried to revive the temple was named Pu. Though some other spirit mediums debated where the original temple should be, Pu insisted that was the right location of at least one iteration of the Mengjiang temple. She related that the Mengjiang temple was destroyed in the 1960s when all the village lands were combined to make the collective. Pu's family refused to join the collective and built a non-collectivized temple for Mengjiang in their field. After she was resettled into an apartment in Lotus II, Pu immediately found the location of the old temple by the river, right outside of the wall of Lotus II. However, according to another spirit medium Chiu, Pu 'lost the ability' to manage the temple site, and invited Chiu to help her manage it. When Chiu got to the site, Mengjiang immediately possessed her and ordered her to stick the flag in her hand into the right spot. From then on, Chiu, who was originally the daughter of an influential local deity called Taimu 太姥, took charge of the rebuilding of the Mengjiang Temple on this site. She hired construction workers to build a shrine and even have a statue of Mengjiang made. However, thousands of dollars and nine attempts later, the site was demolished. People were still not willing to give up and kept coming back to the spot to burn incense on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month as well as on Mengjiang's birthday.²⁸

²⁸ There are some contradictory reports regarding the details of this process among the interlocutors, but we know that most temples in the region were constantly destroyed and rebuilt. Before the village relocation, many Mengjiang temples were rebuilt in the 2000s, only to be demolished when the villages were bulldozed. We know for sure that a few spirit mediums were involved in identifying the current spot and Chiu is now in control of the worshipping spot in Lotus II.

In Lotus IV, next to the package delivery station, there was a pot that had clear signs of burning. Residents quickly pointed out that it was the original location of the Guanyin temple of Fengwei Village and that spirit medium Lu was in charge. Though the compound management constantly tried to get rid of it in the name of a fire hazard, a ‘nice and tall’ security guard set up a metal pot for the residents to burn the incense in so that there would be no fire hazard. As the spirit medium said, ‘[this practice] cannot be killed’. In fact, new incense-burning spots keep cropping up. Some compounds have given up eradicating them. Instead, they only try to cover them up during the time when the city government does safety checks on the compounds.

How do we make sense of this seemingly incessant holding on to the past? Weller and Wu have used the concept of ‘chronotope’ to analyze how timespace is ‘folded’ to make the distant near.²⁹ The distant past when/where the temples stood and the gods were honoured never ‘disappear’ despite all the urban infrastructure that seems to have overridden it and/or pushed it aside. Instead, the potency of the place is merely folded up and ready to unfold when evoked. When spirit medium Chiu became possessed by Mengjiang, she was compelled to go right to the spot, even though it was ‘folded’ into the marginal space of the compound walls. The mechanism of unfolding captures our attention. Unfolding is an act of agency of gods. The gods normally direct the unfolding by possessing the mediums, who are self-proclaimed ‘daughters’ of the gods. Among the three types of daughters mentioned earlier in this paper, only a small number of them are Jiuwanren Nüer, those who ‘set up the table’ (擺台子), the local term for providing healing for a fee. But ‘daughters’ who can channel the deities—*Tieshen Nüer* or *Kaikou Nüer* who become possessed—are numerous, and the number is increasing since the urban resettlement began. Some ‘daughters’ have one god speaking through them, but many have multiple gods taking over their bodies.

Conversations with such daughters in the resettlement housing

²⁹ Weller and Wu, ‘Religion in the Folded City’.



FIG. 2 Old Spot of Mengjiang Temple in Zhou Village, photo by Wenxuan Yang.



FIG. 3 Guanyin Temple Spot in Lotus IV, photo by Wenxuan Yang.

compounds often land on the unescapable theme of how their gods are suffering. One spirit medium daughter told us during the pandemic:

Pusa cried nonstop after they possess the daughters, saying that he was suffering so much.³⁰ Other big temples are open but this temple is still closed! Adie 阿爹 (a respectful term referring to *tudi*) has suffered so much that he had to drink the water from the river, and there was nothing to eat. There was nothing to use. His body is dirty. We were going to go wash his face, change his gowns, and sweep the floors for him, [but we couldn't]. ... Especially after the Guanyin statue was moved to the basement of Gaodian Miao, pusas all cried and cried. When it rained, the water got into the basement and even their shoes got wet.³¹

Such physical descriptions of suffering are abundant. Some gods complain that they have lost their temples, and some complain that they have lost their statues, and others complain that their daughters (spirit mediums) and followers do not spend much time with them. Some described in graphic details how their ears and nostrils are stuffed with dirt when they were being buried, and others scolded the followers upon possessing the spirit mediums how they were neglected.

Wei-ping Lin, in her detailed account of the gods' statues, points out 'the significance of materialization in terms of three interrelated aspects: its cultural mechanisms, social consequences, and material forms'.³² In the current case study, the way the spirit mediums describe the suffering of deities clearly demonstrates the cultural mechanisms at work. Because their communities are also suffering socially from the relocation and isolation, they cannot take good care of the material forms of the deities. Upon close examination, the gods and goddesses rely on several kinds of *material* things to *act*: bodies (gods

³⁰ Pusa 菩薩 is the general term used in this region to refer to gods. It literally means bodhisattva, pointing to the Buddhist influence in this area.

³¹ Notes from Wenxuan Yang, September 3, 2022.

³² Lin, *Materializing Magic Power*, 8.

and human bodies), places (temples), and things (such as incense, paper money, food offerings, and clothing and bedding for the gods). And each unfolding—repeated historical attempts to rebuild the temples—was very much the rebuilding of the above three material things. Such ‘thing power’, human and nonhuman, organic or non-organic, is where the enchantment lies.³³ In the interest of length, we will focus on the first two things that the gods rely on to enchant: bodies and places.

Bodies

Two types of bodies are prominent: that of spirit mediums and that of gods. In our fieldwork, the number of mediums—those who claim to be gods’ daughters—largely exceed our expectations. A very casual conversation often reveals that many people have had experience of being used as a medium by gods (or other dead ancestors). The common deities that possess human bodies are Taimu, Guanyin, *tudi*, city gods, and Mengjiang. There seems to be a rise in number, especially when the gods have lost their own material bodies. Many famous mediums have elaborate stories about their experience of conversion, and the experience is often very corporeal. One medium told us, ‘Adie wanted me to talk and I resisted, but my mouth was covered with sores and my lips started bleeding. So I had no choice’. A daughter of Taimu remarked, ‘Do you see my finger (showing a damaged finger)? If I did not do it [agree to be the medium], Taimu says, you will not be able to lead an ordinary life. So, she chopped off part of my finger. How could I do this to myself?! But magically it did not bleed and neither did it hurt. ... And it healed quickly after I agreed [to be the medium]’. This type of narrative is quite common throughout the world for spirit mediums.³⁴ The illnesses and other bodily sufferings are demonstrations of a god’s act experienced in a corporeal manner. At the time of possession, mediums often start

³³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

³⁴ See for instance, Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF*.

yawning and having hiccups. Some reported that they suddenly felt 'extremely cold'. Some of them sing and dance and others may smoke cigarettes nonstop. Such physical signs and 'sensory forms' are not just the manifestation of possession.³⁵ They also point to the materiality of the body as indispensably part of the enchantment.

Human bodies are not separate from god's bodies. Through spirit mediumship, gods can enter and act through human bodies. Furthermore, many gods were humans before they became deified. In many iterations of the famous Mengjing stories, the god was sometimes a boy who drowned and sometimes an official who helped farmers fight off locusts. Our research has also revealed many gods' wives and sons were former villagers/fishermen who had passed away before marriage. Gods will identify certain dead humans as being taken by them as wives, daughters, or sons through spirit mediums. Therefore, gods' bodies and human bodies are porous. The mutual materiality is also fluidity.

When village and temple demolishing happened in Cho and Xia, the government built two big Daoist temples, Yuhuang and Gaodian to house the local gods, but since the statues from the old village temples were of different sizes and styles, the Daoist Association decided to bury the old statues and remake new ones that are of the same style and organized in an orderly fashion.³⁶ However, disputes arose in several areas.

First, different villages had different statues for similar gods, such as Mengjiang and Guanyin. Some villages' *tudis* have the same names but different statues and temples. In a nearby township, two *Tudis*, one male and one female, shared the same name, but they are identified by villagers as two separate deities. In the new collective Daoist temple, gods with the same name and/or same origin are identified as one god and therefore get one statue, one place and one banner. However, many villagers complained that their gods were not the same, even when the Daoists considered them to be of the same divine origin. The Daoists rejected the importance of materiality as

³⁵ Meyer, "There is a Spirit in that Image".

³⁶ See Weller and Wu, 'Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits'.

the ‘essence’ of individual deities, and they dismissed the complaints as the ignorance of the peasants.³⁷ This has interesting parallels in other parts of the world. Writing about Eastern Orthodox village procession of icons, Webb Keane poignantly pointed out:

But why should different icons have different powers? Consider the idea of affordance. The material icon has all the characteristics of other objects: it has solidity, shape, size, weight, and is located in a particular place in a spatial world. ... As a physical thing, the icon also has at least the potential for being recognized as possessing a self-identity that distinguishes it from other icons, no matter how much they may resemble one another or derive from the same divine prototype. This, after all, is what makes it possible for the nuns to have a different icon from the purportedly more efficacious icon of the same saint that could have been sought in another village. Thus, in contrast to the unifying prototype, the material icon is manifestly different from others. You can tell it is not the same: it is in a different place.³⁸

Though the traditions are so drastically different, the parallel is ostensible. Like the Daoist clergy, the eastern orthodox priest attributes worshipping different icons of the same origin to the selfishness of the peasants. Like the Russian villagers, the Chinese peasants do not consider the god statues to be replicas of the same thing, but rather that each has different efficacies due to their material differences, with place being one of the key material differences. For instance, Weller and Wu gave a detailed account of a particular Guanyin Statue, called ‘Stone Guanyin’ that possessed a special efficacy for villagers originally from the village of Upper Clearwater. The effort in preserving and protecting this statue led to the fierce battles among Daoists, Buddhists, spirit mediums and different fractions of villagers.³⁹

³⁷ The Daoists also omitted most of the female deities (who are either the wives of gods) and those newly deified gods, who are often female as well.

³⁸ Keane, ‘Rotting Bodies’, S317.

³⁹ Weller and Wu, ‘Religion in the Folded City’.

Second, many spirit mediums try to keep unofficial spaces of worship for the gods even after their gods are given a nice new body and a position inside the official temples. In those unofficial spaces, villagers worship old statues of gods that the villagers were able to save, pictures of gods the villagers took before they were buried, or sometimes just the old gowns of the gods the villagers kept after their gods are buried. In the case of Gaodian miao, the Daoist masters decided that the most important local deity was Suiliang Wang 隨糧王, a god that had various origin stories but was given an official title by the Qing court. Therefore, a gigantic and splendid Suiliang Wang statue was erected in the main hall of Gaodian miao.⁴⁰ However, not everyone recognizes the legitimacy of the big statue. Some mediums believed that the big statue had not been properly prepared through the ritual called *kaiguang* 開光, equivalent to the ‘ensoulment’ of magical images described in detail by Laurel Kendall, who holds that this ensoulment allows the spirit mediums to act.⁴¹ Some mediums of Suiliang Wang occupied two side halls at the entrance of the temple, one displaying the clothing and a picture of Suiliang Wang and the other displaying their own statue of Suiliang Wang. Though the clothing, picture, and even the statue were in no way comparable in their grandeur to the Suiliang Wang statue in the official temple, it was much better attended to by the villagers. In this case, those who considered themselves as the daughters of Suiliang Wang were constantly by his side, taking care of material things, making offerings of colourfully decorated foods, burning incense, changing him into clean gowns periodically—just as they would for a very revered member of their family.⁴² The villagers regard the old body and

⁴⁰ Weller and Wu, ‘Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits’.

⁴¹ See Kendall, *Mediums and Magical Things*, especially 62–64, 179. Kendall put a lot of emphasis on the skills that are invested in the making of such images with ensoulment, instead of its ritual usage. In this paper, I focus more on the *use* of such ensouled images/statues, instead of the making of them. We could not get enough information on the craftsmen who make those images, but this remains an important aspect to explore for future research.

⁴² All of them were taken down to the basement of the temple in the name of

belongings of the god as much more potent than the grand statue in the main hall because they cannot take care of his body nor keep him company. Just as Wei-ping Lin points out, the divine power of the statue comes from the bond of obligations that is established between the statue and its people.⁴³ As far as the villagers are concerned, their gods can act because of the materiality in the ‘things’ that alone ‘consists of agency’.⁴⁴ Their potency and ability to act comes from such agency, and once the materiality is changed, their agency changes. Despite Daoists’ rejection of the unruly and irrational nature of such material objects, they are integral parts of gods’ bodies that they need to hold on to. The destruction of these ‘things’ is the destruction of the ‘essence’ (in Merleau-Ponty’s words) of the body, and the essence of its agency.

Third, destroying gods’ statues is considered a grave crime. However, none of the people who made the decisions about burying the gods were punished. Instead, in the tales told, those who physically destroyed the statues all met gloomy ends. In other words, those who tampered with the material aspect of the gods’ bodies were punished. The punishment matched the crime because the destruction of the material body is the destruction of its essence. The spirit medium Zhou told us:

Before, during the time of ‘destroying four olds’ 四舊, ... one man hammered down a god, then he had a stomach disease. ... a woman cadre knocked the head of a god, then she died. The other one knocked the god’s feet and he died too. I don’t know why these statues made of mud are so efficacious. Those who knocked down the gods all died of illnesses. The person who hacked the head of Guanyin died from disease in his head.

‘fire safety’ at the end of our fieldwork in 2019, see Weller and Wu, ‘Religion in the Folded City’.

⁴³ Lin, *Materializing Magic Power*, 66.

⁴⁴ Meyer and Houtman, ‘Introduction’, and Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, 6.

From such a narrative, we know that the villagers are not as ‘ignorant’ as the Daoists think. They recognized that the statues are ‘only’ made of mud, but they realize that the mud statues are still potent. This material connection between the enchanted things and the actual bodies is ostensible. Throughout history, the act of *chongsu jinshen* 重塑金身 (remaking the golden body) for gods is considered highly meritorious and to be a hefty promise to keep in exchange for the biggest favour from the gods. Since the imperial period, many waves of temple demolitions have happened in this region (such as the Confucian demolishing of illegitimate temples, *yinci* 淫祠,⁴⁵ Taiping Rebellion, Japanese occupation, and the Cultural Revolution), but whenever possible, people tried to rebuild the physical bodies of the gods and physical temples, no matter how small and shabby they were. Among the repeated destruction and rebuilding, the gods exercise their agency through the material bodies of their statues as well as the physical body of the people they possess and enchant.

As Arumugam eloquently puts it in her study of Hinduism in Tamil Nadu, ‘Material objects actively create meaning, effects, identity, affect and transformations. Here, these materials not only help to create the deities themselves but also theologies about their nature, presence, power and potential. Material objects can actually be loquacious.’⁴⁶ The loquacious aspects of the statues are especially evident in the way spirit mediums speak and sing in the voices of gods and goddesses. Their presence and potency are embedded in the statues of deities, not in a symbolic way, but in material with which they are made and the clothing they are adorned with; in the incense, cigarettes and food they are offered, and in the space they occupied. In a word, their materiality is not only loquacious but also relational. Going back to the relic/icon-filled Eastern Orthodox

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Wang, ‘Mingqing Jiangnan huiyinci yanjiu’. Wang translated *yinci* in the English abstract as a temple that is occupied by evil deities. In reality, most *yinci* that were targeted were just temples that worshipped deities that were considered illegitimate by the Confucian officials. The aforementioned deities, such as Taimu, were often in this category.

⁴⁶ Arumugam, ‘Laying Out Feast-Offerings’, 283.

Russian village, Keane remarks, ‘by treating relics or icons as having agency in themselves, villagers are insisting on the saturation of life with ethical implications. That is, the possibility of social interaction with divine actors is every where, and social interaction can always be construed as having ethical import’.⁴⁷ The ‘material properties as ethical affordances’ enable the villagers to bring to life the theology of the divine nature of humans. Instead of such ethical and theological significance, our research highlights the agency and power the gods exercise through the materiality of their bodies. Materiality is indispensable to agency, but the materiality of the physical statues alone is not enough. ‘The characteristics of materials are part of the matrix or network of conditions that coordinate the agency of the actors (human and otherwise) that compose it.’⁴⁸ Barad pushes it further. ‘Existence is not an individual affair.’⁴⁹ Not only are the bodies of people and gods entangled, but material bodies are also entangled with another physical existence: the place.

Places

Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate wrote in the mission of *Material Religion* that the study of material culture of religion should encompass bodies, things, places and practices. ‘Places are the fit between bodies and things, sites for their organization into theatres for the performance of self. And places are the flesh of social bodies, where people go to find themselves part of something larger.’⁵⁰ In comparison to the plethora of studies on visual images, places have received less attention. In Chinese popular religion, however, locality gods are the most common figures. Even though the worship of earth gods and city gods has a

⁴⁷ Keane, ‘Rotting Bodies’, S319.

⁴⁸ Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, 47.

⁴⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, ix.

⁵⁰ Meyer, Morgan, Paine, and Plate, ‘The Origin and Mission of Material Religion’, 219.

relatively short history (since the fifteen to sixteenth centuries), a locality god often occupies and oversees a particular territory. Most religious festivals involve parading the statue in his or her sedan chair around the territory of its sovereignty in an event called *raojing* 繞境, parade of the territory. In the townships of Xia and Cho, there are around forty *tudis* and city gods 城隍.⁵¹ To this day, the villagers still use the local administrative divisions set up in the Ming dynasty to mark their territories. According to Timothy Brook, *tu* 图, or ward, was the lowest level of administrative unit for tax purposes in the Ming dynasty in Southern China.⁵² Between one to two hundred households make up a ward, several wards make up a *du* 都 (township), and two or three *dus* make up a *xiang* 乡 or canton.⁵³ Based on the work of the Japanese historian Hamashima Atsutoshi 濱島敦俊, Chinese historian Wang Jian points out that in addition to the administrative units, in roughly the sixteenth century around ten to thirty families (from a specific locality; sharing a last name was not required) would form *she* 社 as worship units. Each *she* had a shrine for worshipping the earth god, thus making the connection between the administrative units and religious places.⁵⁴ Wang thinks that such a practice of worshipping based on locality continued even though the *she* unit and its related shrines have declined since the late Ming.

What did not decline was the influence of earth gods, who continue

⁵¹ Japanese scholar Hamashima Atsutoshi 濱島敦俊 has written about the development of commerce in Jiangnan region and how it led to the establishment of City God Temples in townships. Chinese scholar Wang Jian 王健 also pointed out the importance of large villages that are comparable and even transformable to towns and the heavy interactions between towns and villages in this region. Therefore, Wang argues that city gods actually act like *Tudi* or earth gods in this region. There was no necessary hierarchy as assumed by Hamashima.

⁵² Brook, 'The Spatial Structure of Ming Local Administration', 22.

⁵³ Ibid., and Wu, *Qingdai Jiangnan shizhen yu nongcun guanxi de kongjian toushi*.

⁵⁴ Though Timothy Brook thinks that *she* is the name for *tu* (ward) in northern China. Brook, 'The Spatial Structure of Ming Local Administration', 23.

to play important territorial roles. Indeed, in today's resettlement housing, after each person dies or the birth of each child, the family is required to sponsor a ritual in front of the correct earth god temple/statue that oversees their old village territory. Without notifying the earth gods, the dead cannot be appeased and a newborn cannot be protected. Everyone knows who their earth god is, as it is marked by the family's inherited location in the *dutu* (township and ward) system.⁵⁵ During temple festivals and rituals, the red paper on which each person's name and donation is recorded also lists very clearly their place in the *dutu* system to not to misplace their wishes and prayers. Each temple also has its place in the *dutu* system. This is enhanced by the practice of *jie qianliang* 解錢糧, which is a territory-based paper money-burning system that mirrors the location-based tax system.⁵⁶ Each family needs to burn paper money for earth gods and other territorial gods on important festivals such as New Year's and gods' birthdays. The *dutu* system has thus persisted, not through the state tax system that originally created it, but through ritual needs of locality gods. Such practices all explain the historical context within which all this importance is attributed to the place, or rather, the territory of place.

Similar to the *dutu* system is the *pujing* system of late imperial Quanzhou. Wang Mingming describes this system and argues that 'a place can be subjected to the supra-local political order, but at the same time it can also serve as the location and arena for grass-roots expressions of protests'.⁵⁷ Wang's argument was in response to the then prevalent understanding of space in China, which either focused on administrative space that explicates the relationship between centre and peripheries, or on a symbolic understanding of space as ritual communities. Wang demonstrates that a system that had formed well before the seventeenth century was well and alive two hundred years

⁵⁵ Though this is part of the *lijia* system (see *ibid.*), we use *dutu* system here to refer to the importance of the usage of *du* and *tu* in local setting.

⁵⁶ Wu, *Qingdai Jiangnan shizhen yu nongcun guanxi de kongjian toushi*.

⁵⁷ Wang, 'Place, Administration, and Territorial Cults', 71. Special thanks to Paul Katz for pointing this reference out to Keping Wu.

later, but its meaning had changed from social control to ‘an emblem of popular communal feeling’.⁵⁸

Relevant to the current research, we ask: what makes those practices related to place persist after the place is destroyed and transformed into urban infrastructure that serves mundane and rational purposes, such as parking lots, garbage collections, and package delivery stations? Arguing from a materialist point of view, Burchardt calls it ‘infrastructural religion’ in his study of religious sites in urban Cape Town, where church leaders often find ruins in the urban infrastructure to be the place of worship. The ‘production, maintenance, and working of mundane materials that link spaces into networks of provision and make possible the circulation of energy, goods, coded meanings, and bodies’ reminds us of the agency of such mundane materiality of places in this study.⁵⁹ Different from the ‘infrastructural religion’, however, the current study brings a historical depth into the space. The *dutu*-based temple territory system provides a set of coordinates first created by the state and then integrated into the temple system. It has formed sets of what we call ‘transcendental coordinates’ that persist despite the physical transformation of the landscape or the political transformation of the state system. However, these ‘transcendental coordinates’ can only act with the materiality of place. In other words, without the materiality of place, the transcendental coordinates cannot act, and will therefore lose their relevance.

Transcendental coordinates are material, and they are relational. Different from geographical or astronomical coordinates, transcendental coordinates do not exist independently from the context of social actions and social reproduction. They exist only in relation to the material bodies (and things) of gods and humans and the materiality of the place. Let us illustrate with the case of the Mengjiang temple mentioned above. The actual location of the original temple is debatable. Some villagers mentioned that the ‘real original’ Mengjiang temple, destroyed during the creation of the collective temple, was in a different location. Such disputes are not uncommon because

⁵⁸ Wang, ‘Place, Administration, and Territorial Cults’, 70.

⁵⁹ Burchardt, ‘Infrastructuring Religion’, 181.

all of the temples have been built and rebuilt multiple times, even within the past hundred years. In the resettlement housing complex, not all spirit mediums or the villagers agree on the specific location where others claim to be the original temple. Sometimes there are debates but they are settled by whether people come back to the spot despite repeated destruction. Moreover, when the spirit medium Chiu arrived at the site, she was immediately possessed by Mengjing. She ran toward the spot and stuck a flag into the ground. What was on the flag? The *Dutu* coordinates of the temple. Chiu did not even realize that she had a flag of the People's Republic of China, which was widely sold everywhere. All she wanted was a red flag onto which she could write the coordinates. In other words, these transcendental coordinates only exist in relation to the people, gods (whether potency was displayed) and their ritual activities. From the god's perspective, the relationality of coordinates allows them to re-enchant places through the places' materiality, which is the source of the efficacy. Burchardt has gone further by saying, 'These actors actually turned infrastructure into a form of logistics in which the necessary was assembled into a mobile toolkit to be used elsewhere if need be. These logistics allowed religious communities to develop new forms of urban nomadism.'⁶⁰ In the cases of Xia and Cho, such logistics allow people to develop new forms of 'religious nomadism' in the face of drastic infrastructural and political changes. As Gordillo mentions, 'estrangement ... is inherently tied to the making of places'.⁶¹ The space may be transformed, deserted, and marginalized in different times in history, and yet the transcendental coordinates materialize such religious nomadism with places of enchantment.

For the people and gods in this case study, place is not just simply a location or a space within which bodies act. It is infused with materiality and relationality happening through time. Space and time are never separable in that sense. Such 'chronotopes' never disappear with the physical transformation of the landscape. Instead, they are folded up into the new infrastructure and remain ready to be unfolded.

⁶⁰ Burchardt, 'Infrastructuring Religion', 190.

⁶¹ Gordillo, *Landscapes of Devils*, 257.

Their unfolding relies on the materiality of the places that are locatable through transcendental coordinates that are malleable and dynamic, constantly forming themselves through actions and what Barad calls ‘intra-actions’, ‘the mutual constitution of entangled agencies’.⁶²

Entanglement

Barad asserts that ‘[p]henomena are not located in space and time; rather, *phenomena are material entanglements enfolded and threaded through the spacetime-mattering of the universe*’.⁶³ The above account is an attempt to demonstrate this ‘spacetime-mattering of the universe’. The Ming court only saw the tax map when they organized the population into different wards, townships and cantons, but such maps enter an endless spacetime-mattering with other ritual and political spaces, god’s bodies, human bodies and other material things, forming ‘an ongoing performance of the world in its differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility’.⁶⁴ In this dance, gods’ bodies and human bodies, bodies and space, tax maps and transcendental coordinates, and past and present all become entangled.

Barad uses the concept of entanglement to characterize the lack of ‘an independent, self-contained existence’.⁶⁵ Instead, existence is always *relational* and constantly forming through intra-action. Places are not containers of social actions but are part and parcel of the actions while being constantly shaped by their participation. The spot by the garbage collection does not have any intrinsic quality that makes it enchanted but becomes one when it performs its ‘transcendental coordinates’ through the bodies of gods and humans alike. Gods are not self-contained entities either. Their agency is not ‘within’ them but ‘results of acting “outwards” vis-à-vis multiple

⁶² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

⁶³ Barad, ‘Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance’, 261.

⁶⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 149.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

fields of force'.⁶⁶ In other words, the agency of the bodies (humans and nonhumans) is acting upon and shaping each other through this process called 'intra-action':

The neologism 'intra-action' signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the 'distinct' agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements.⁶⁷

The 'mutual constitution' of the agency of gods, humans and places in this study makes their existence relational and mutually dependent. The gods cannot survive without their human daughters and followers, and places cannot assert their agency through coordinates based on a five-hundred-year-old tax map without gods' performance of enchantment. The ritual acts of worship are constantly transformed, both by the increasing influence of the big official temples, as well as the unofficial practices in those often-illicit places. In her study of contested usage of icons in Ghanian Protestantism, Meyer asserts that 'religions play a central role in creating the very possibility of excess by enveloping people and things, beholders and pictures, in a structure of mutual animation'.⁶⁸ This mutual animation is what gives rise to existence, agency and this universe that we experience and perform.

In the past three decades, on the rubbles and ruins of millions of rural peasants' social worlds, China has erected the proudest symbols of modernity: skyscrapers, highspeed rails, and commercial centres. However, the past is not entirely erased. The transcendental coordi-

⁶⁶ Gordillo, *Landscapes of Devils*, 256.

⁶⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

⁶⁸ Meyer, "There is a Spirit in that Image", 317.

nates not only exist in people's minds but also in material things that have taken alternative forms. This study is not a study of the past that wants to reemerge in the present. It asserts that the estrangements, the demolishing, and the new infrastructures are also entangled in the 'constant redefinition of the relation between persons, objects, and the divine'.⁶⁹ 'How are things such as objects, spaces, natural phenomena, or spiritual beings entwined in histories of political violence? And vice versa-how are histories of political violence implicated in nonhuman things?'⁷⁰ It is our purpose to demonstrate that the 'histories of political violences' of this region are intertwined with things (statues of deities, human bodies, and places) and that such human and nonhuman things are not passive receivers of the political processes, but agentive entities that are political in themselves. We argue that this posthuman or nonhuman perspective sheds light on the study of Chinese religions as dynamic processes that are constantly interacting and entangling with both human and nonhuman things. Scholars such as Wei-ping Lin, Wang Mingming, and Adam Chau are already paying attention to the material objects, places, and sensory aspects of Chinese religions.⁷¹ This essay is an attempt to follow in their footsteps. In giving a 'posthumanist performative account of material bodies (both human and nonhuman)', this essay demonstrates '*a relationality between specific material (re)configurations of the world*'.⁷² In this world, there is no forgetting or forgiving: there is a never-ending entangling of matter.

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⁶⁹ Meyer and Houtman, 'Introduction', 14.

⁷⁰ Navaro, Biner, von Bieberstein, and Altuğ, eds., *Reverberations*.

⁷¹ Chau, 'The Sensorial Production'.

⁷² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 139.

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