Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits

Disturbed Ecosystems in Southern Jiangsu

Robert P. Weller and Keping Wu

Three Chinese cases involving ghost attacks, the increase of spirit mediums, and innovations in the forms and objects of temple worship suggest how nonequilibrium ecology, broadly conceived, can clarify processes of urban change. They extend Ingold's call for "ecologies of life" by clarifying how latent potentials become manifest and how new symbiotic assemblages can be created in disturbed ecosystems. These cases arise from the rapid urban expansion in wealthy parts of China, accompanied by the resettlement of many villagers into high-rise buildings, wiping out farms, village temples, and rural graves and making earlier forms of social organization impossible. The territorially based religion described in much of the anthropological and historical literature has thus become increasingly untenable. Contrary to many expectations, the expanding urban edge at our field sites in southern Jiangsu cities has fostered an especially creative zone of innovation.

China's urban population increased by 38% over just the first decade of the twenty-first century, but urban population density increased by only 1.5% (World Bank Group 2015:146–147). This could only happen because China's cities rapidly occupied and utterly transformed the rural landscapes on their edges. Several hundred million new migrants from around the country account for much of the influx of urban population. At the same time, however, this process has created many millions of displaced nonmigrants—those rural people who lived at the urban edge but suddenly find themselves resettled into high-rise apartment complexes and surrounded by an unfamiliar urban world. They may still live very close to where their ancestors long settled, but their ways of life have been utterly and rapidly transformed. There has been almost no scholarly attention given to such people or to the characteristics of the new environments in which they live.[1] Here we address only one small aspect of the issue: the ways that such disturbed ecosystems have created unexpected innovations in local relations to temples, deities, and the dead.

We have two primary goals in this essay, one more empirical and one more theoretical. Empirically, how have village-based interactions with deities been transformed as their physical infrastructure has been destroyed and their social foundation has been uprooted? Theoretically, our primary concern is to understand how such processes of rapid change take place. We have found it most useful to think of our cases as disturbed ecosystems.

We draw on the concept of "ecosystem" as the sum total of the changing set of interactions between human and nonhuman agents, with no assumptions about equilibrium or about the separation of nature and culture. As we explain below, we are not taking this use of "ecosystem" from an earlier ecological anthropology, which drew a strong separation between nature and culture, or from even earlier uses like Wirth's (1938) "urban ecology," which retained a strong equilibrium assumption. Instead, we have been inspired by more recent calls for an "ecology of life" (Ingold 2000, chap. 1), "plural ecologies" (Sprenger and Großmann 2018), or an "ecology of practices" (Stengers 2005) and suggest how this might enhance our understanding of processes of change.

Our cases come from the newly urbanized outskirts of three major cities in southern Jiangsu Province: Changzhou, Changshu, and Suzhou. These three cities and their rural hinterlands occupy the northeast quadrant of the land around Jiangsu's enormous Lake Tai and are currently only about an hour away from each other. They are linguistically, historically, and economically closely related. Arrayed across the sprawling wetlands created as the Yangzi River approaches the sea, rural areas in all three places were known for their water crops and fish. Now each has a population of a million or more; the urban core of Suzhou, the largest, is about three times the size of Changshu, the smallest.

This is one of the regions that has benefited the most from China's rapid economic growth, and each city has expanded to take over and reconstruct nearby rural townships. Unlike the pattern of "villages within cities" (城中村), which characterizes some other wealthy cities like Guangzhou and Shanghai, villages and townships in this area have usually been dismantled

1. Most Chinese scholarship focuses on rural migrants in the cities, with only a few exceptions that attend to the urbanization of rural areas, like Zhou (2015). Most such studies focus only on the Pearl River delta region, the urbanization pattern of which is significantly different from that of southern Jiangsu. Almost no research on rural urbanization mentions religion, temples, or deities.

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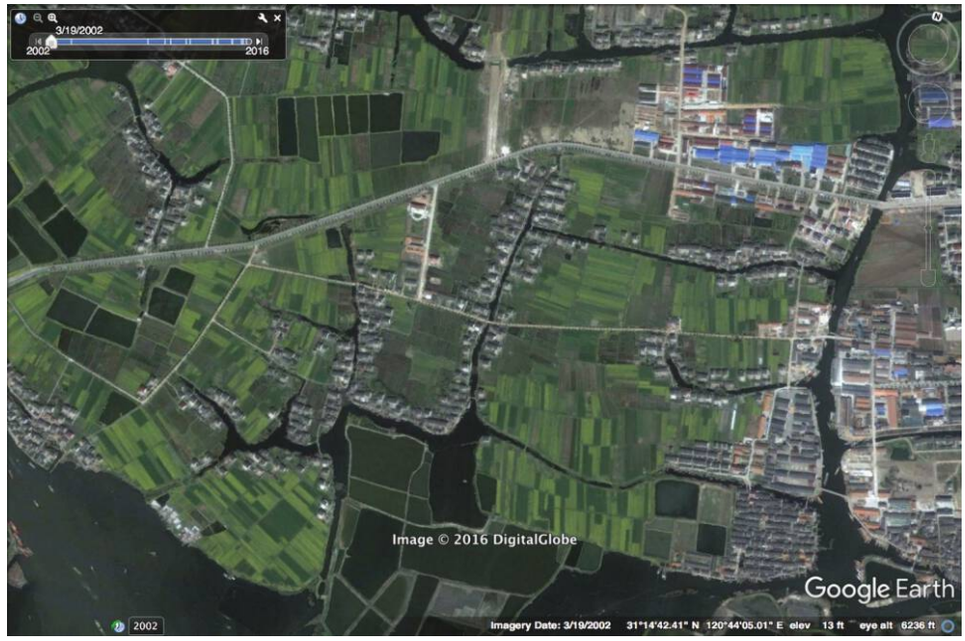

Figure 1. Chefang, 2002. Google Earth.

as political units and fully merged into urban political hierarchies. Thus, unlike the "villages within cities," the areas we are examining have not been able to maintain ownership rights over their original property or any of the institutions of local politics like village committees.

As a result, earlier structures have been demolished and the people have been resettled into new housing developments (figs. 1, 2). The irrigation canals that were so characteristic of this region have mostly disappeared, as have most of the agricultural fields that they supported. High-rise buildings have replaced villages that aligned with the waterways because everyone needed boats for transportation, just as roads, highways, and high-speed rail have replaced the old canals. Temples and graves have been bulldozed along with

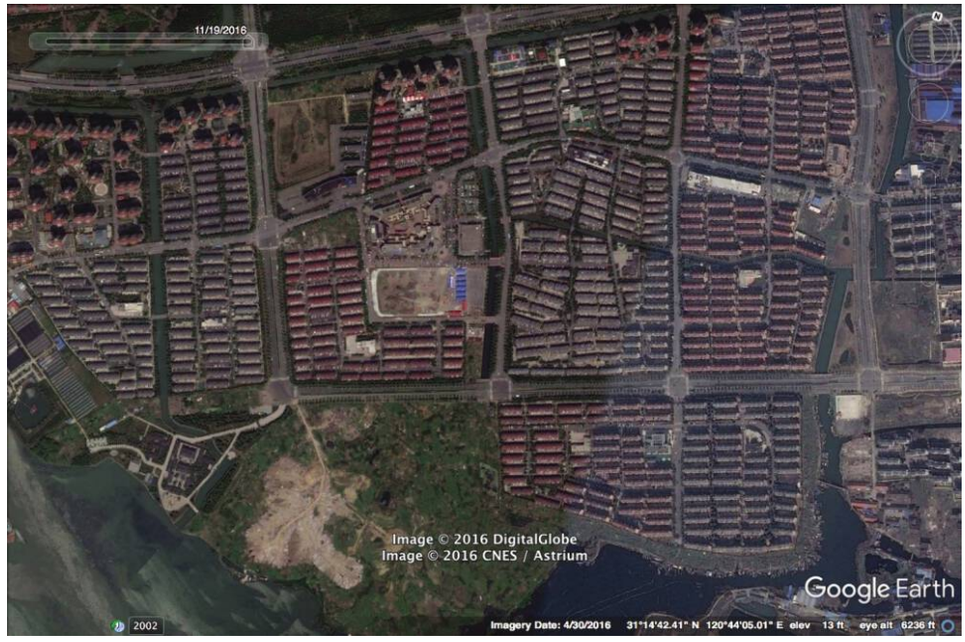

Figure 2. Chefang, 2016. Google Earth.

the houses.[2] At the same time, the old social spaces have been dismantled, so that people no longer meet their friends while sitting in front of their houses on warm nights or hang out in the open spaces in front of temples or on old rice threshing grounds. People see each other now on stairwells instead of village paths and live in completely new environments even though they may never have left the land where their ancestors lived. In a sense, however, they are even more uprooted than the migrant workers who travel to the city, because they have no rural homes to return to. Instead, everything that was familiar to them was dismantled in front of their eyes, and they found themselves in a completely new world almost overnight, with their memories of the old places still fresh. It is easy to see the utterly different logics of the older rural and newer urban systems from these images of our Suzhou field site, the first taken in 2002 and the second in 2016 (the bulk of the changes took place very rapidly, primarily between 2005 and 2009).

The cases described here are based on fieldwork between 2010 and 2018, in places that had been rural farms just a few years earlier but were densely settled and highly urban at the time of our research. We had open access to temples, and it was quite easy to make connections to spirit mediums from there. Wu has worked for several years on this and other projects in Changzhou and Suzhou, where she has had extensive contact with religious experts (including mediums) and temples. The Changzhou case stems from her work. Weller made connections to the Changshu case, which is based on multiple long meetings with and observations of the medium we discuss, along with some of his followers and contacts. The Suzhou case is based on joint fieldwork conducted by both authors together beginning in 2014. It is based on repeated meetings with dozens of spirit mediums and repeated visits to all the temples in the area.

Disturbed Environments, Nonequilibrium Ecosystems, and Social Change

Ecology may at first glance look like an unlikely way to understand change. Anthropologists began to talk about the ecological adaptations of the people they studied relatively early, for example, in the classic work of Evans-Pritchard (1940) or Steward (1955). It became especially popular with the rise of ecological anthropology in the 1960s, which expanded the study of human adaptations to take the broader environment seriously. Strongly influenced by ideas of negative feedback loops and equilibria, this movement led to some insightful studies of religion, among other things (e.g., Lansing 1991; Rappaport 1968). In retrospect, however, the entire movement looked like a late-stage revival of functionalism. The emphasis on people living in equilibrium with a "natural" environment, like all functionalisms, had the advantage of drawing our attention to systemwide effects. It also quite properly expanded the notion of what that system should include from earlier forms of functionalism.

As a theory of change, however, it had little to offer. Like earlier functionalist theory that grew out of the Durkheim/Radcliffe-Brown tradition, ecological anthropology was so wed to the idea of equilibrium that any disturbance could only send the system crashing down.[3] The most common narrative of change thus became a version of the ecological "noble savage" or an ecological expulsion from the Garden of Eden.[4] In addition, as with other versions of functionalism, this equilibrium was seen through the interaction of separate spheres, in this case above all the spheres of nature and culture, of physical environment and human society.

Even at the time when ecological anthropology began, however, the view that succession creates a predictable and stable climax equilibrium had long been largely abandoned by ecological science. Instead, ecologists now usually discuss the problems of succession as a nonequilibrium dynamic where the results depend on context and local history and are never stable.[5] We follow this usage to see an ecosystem as a complex assemblage of interconnected systems in the process of change. This definition makes no assumptions about the separation of nature and culture. The utility of such an ecological concept is not simply that it requires us to think about how all parts of a system interact or that it sees change as inherent and normal but that it also leads us to remember that the possibilities for growth and diminution change as the system itself is modified. Thus, as we will suggest, changes in the urban ecology have transformed possibilities of worship in southern Jiangsu, and the new adaptations will themselves enable more change.[6]

2. Thomas Mullaney's (2019) research estimates that roughly 10 million graves have been destroyed nationwide in the past decade, primarily through this process.

3. In the most creative hands, it offered a vision of a moving equilibrium, as in Rappaport's (1968) analysis of alternation between peace and war in highland New Guinea or Leach's (1973) discussion of *gumsa*/*gumlao* dynamics in Burma. Nevertheless, these systems never allowed for fundamental change.

4. For an early critique of the Garden of Eden narrative in American history, see Worster (1994). For a specific critique of the equilibrium assumptions of succession/climax ecology applied to the Dust Bowl, see Worster (2004:199–202).

5. We have also been influenced to some extent by sociological uses of the idea of an "urban ecology," especially the so-called Chicago School (e.g., Wirth 1938). They too, however, relied too heavily on the concept of equilibrium and climax states.

6. Note that we are not following the usage of "religious ecology" as it has recently appeared in Chinese scholarship, exactly because of the equilibrium assumption at the heart of that usage. For an overview, see Clart (2013), who also points out this movement's affinity with structural-functionalism, as opposed to the market-based understanding of religion that has been its main competitor in Chinese scholarship. For a critique that moves partially in the same direction as we do, see Goossaert and Palmer (2011:12–13).

As Ingold (2000) puts it, the point of departure for a new environmental anthropology is "the developing organism-in-its-environment, as opposed to the self-contained individual confronting a world 'out there'" (4). Note that this concept does not require us to separate "nature" from "culture," and that it sees both organism and environment as intertwined in mutual and localized change. In that sense, it differs as well from standard biological ecology, which often discusses events like contemporary fire recovery as if humans were not a crucial part of the process. Nevertheless, foresters, campers, hunters, government administrators, and timber companies are fully implicated, even if they decide to do nothing.

The idea of an ecological approach for us is thus emphatically not a metaphor, because a metaphor would imply that a distinct social world was somehow "like" the natural world in its interactions. In contrast, our point is that these worlds are one system. Overnight urbanization is thus an example of a disturbed ecosystem, and that disruption enables particular kinds of changes. There is no reason to limit an ecological analysis to the world of "nature." Recall that even the completely rural world in the satellite image shown in figure 1 was an utterly man-made environment. Following Ingold (2000), we "attempt to replace the dichotomy of nature and culture with the synergy of organism and environment, and thereby to regain a genuine ecology of life" (9).

Nor need we be limited to the world of the tangibly real. Instead, we are concerned with all the main actors in this story, from local resettled people to urban planners, from highways and canals to gods and ghosts.[7] As Latour (1993) put it: "All natures-cultures are similar in that they simultaneously construct humans, divinities and nonhumans" (106). That is, in this case, the gods and ghosts are as real as the urban plans, in the sense that all of them limit and shape the kinds of choices that people make about their lives.[8] All, that is, are part of the ecosystem.

We will argue that this approach helps to reveal two mechanisms of change under disturbed conditions: a manifestation of potentials that had previously lain latent and the creation of new forms of synergy and interaction. Both of these occur in the biology of disturbed ecosystems as well. Avoiding the nature/culture binary allows us to see that they are outcomes of complex nature-culture systems under sudden disturbance, rather than the result of processes we normally think of as purely biological.

We can see the manifestation of latent potentials first in two of our cases (Changzhou and Suzhou), which involve spirits that had lain quietly in the earth for decades but that suddenly began to attack people after their environment changed. One will be exorcised and the other will become a deity. This sudden eruption requires specialists to deal with them—in this case, spirit mediums—who also lay dormant for a while before they began to multiply rapidly again, increasing in both numbers and scale of operation in all three of our sites. Latent potentials also become realized in disturbed biological ecosystems, of course, as with fire poppies or giant sequoias, both of which germinate only after a fire.

The creation of new synergies and assemblages is clearest in our Changshu and Suzhou cases and is especially remarkable for the new symbiosis between spirit mediums and official temples in ways that were unintended and unexpected by both the mediums and the Buddhist or Daoist temple managers. Here we see something parallel to the new ecological interactions that occur as organisms resettle a disturbed landscape, creating a new kind of community that may differ from what existed before, and that may in turn create conditions that lead to further changes.

What we are calling an ecosystem can thus include more than one ecology, that is, more than one way of understanding what constitutes an ecosystem. Here we draw on recent work that, like ours, combines ecological and ontological interests—not removing nonhuman actors from the realm of the social but also not assuming that ontological worlds are unified and shared. The synergy we identify between official temples (and the urban planners who fostered them) and spirit mediums is an example of what Blaser and Cadena (2018) call a pluriverse: "heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity" (4). Sprenger and Großmann (2018) prefer the term "plural ecologies," which, they write, "exist in parallel, and inclusion or exclusion is thus a matter of practice, sometimes even of choice. It is also a matter of hierarchy, power and value" (x). They suggest that the differences between plural ecologies "become salient and often clearly defined in moments of conflict" (Sprenger and Großmann 2018:x). We suggest broadening this notion to a more general understanding of disturbed ecosystems, instead of the more limiting concept of conflict. Our focus is thus on such practices as they lead to both the manifestation of latent potentials and the creation of new synergies at moments of ecological disruption.

Much of what occurs in these cases is not completely new in Chinese life. Instead, the newly disturbed environment creates the possibility for a reproportioning, for the realization of potentials that might not have been possible under earlier conditions, and for new kinds of interactions. There are continuities but not without change; the changes are what made the continuities possible. Understanding these cases as disturbed

7. We are loosely following Latour's (2007:70–71) idea of agency here, where an agent is anything that makes a difference in some other agent's course of action.

8. Note that there is some resonance here with Peter van der Veer's idea that there are no "secular" cities because religious groups and urban planners share an underlying utopian vision (van der Veer 2016). His analysis recognizes that these projects are never complete, but it stops short of looking at the new kinds of assemblages that forces outside the project plan create. Here, we would suggest, an understanding of these cities as disturbed ecosystems focuses our attention more clearly on those processes and their unintended consequences as they allow the latent to become manifest and as they create new interrelationships.

ecosystems, we will suggest, offers new tools for understanding how change occurs.

Ghost City

When China Central Television (CCTV) did a story on the country's largest "ghost cities" (鬼城) in 2013, Changzhou was number two on the list. The story featured an urban expansion into the rural periphery that was so rapid, so colossal in scale, and so far beyond market demand that street after street of tall, modern buildings stood almost entirely empty. Their use of the term "ghost," like the English use of "ghost town," was entirely metaphorical. Ours is not.

The dead have always been part of the rural landscapes of China. Bodies are frequently buried in agricultural fields, often with just a mound of earth to commemorate the spot. Lakes and streams are also notorious as the homes of the less fortunate dead—drowning victims who will sometimes pull the living down with them. This was especially true in the Lake Tai region of southern Jiangsu, where all of our cases took place. This is one of the wettest parts of China, where the complex flows of the Yangzi River delta have been channeled into myriad fish ponds and irrigation canals (as the photograph in fig. 1 shows). All of these dead souls have been uprooted or crushed down by exactly the processes of overnight urbanization that have fostered ghost cities.

The dead in China have always had the capability of haunting us as ghosts. Almost always, these were the spirits of "bad" deaths of one kind or another: soldiers who died with their bodies abandoned on the battlefield, murder and suicide victims, travelers who died unknown and far from home, children or young women who died without creating descendants of their own, or anyone whose unfortunate death left them outside the usual rituals of respect for ancestors. A few were out for vengeance, but many simply wanted our attention. They wanted offerings because no one worshiped them as ancestors. The only way they could do this was by bringing illness or misfortune to the living. The vast majority of the dead, however, simply lay quietly in their graves. Even the unfortunate dead, with no one to worship them, only occasionally caused trouble and had to be exorcised.

The overnight urbanization of rural areas, however, has greatly disturbed the ecosystem that unites the living and the dead. The thousands of bulldozed graves, the kilometers of buried irrigation canals, and all the other transformations of the physical environment have driven the quiet dead to become unquiet. One tangible result is that spirit mediums, who can diagnose and help heal these problems, are thriving. Although there are no useful statistics, many local people feel that the number of spirit mediums and the work they do has increased significantly in this region. Spirit mediums in nearby suburban Suzhou, for instance, reported to us that there had been a rapid increase in the number of mediums over the past decade (roughly 2005–2015), because this was exactly the period of overnight urbanization for them. The gods, as we heard multiple times, had lost their homes and now had no choice but to take over bodies. At the same time, the changes had thrown the yin world of spirits into chaos (阴间乱了), as several of the mediums phrased it. Gods thus needed mediums more than ever, because their temples had been bulldozed, and people needed mediums too, because the newly chaotic spirits were upsetting their lives.

Let us illustrate this with a single example from Changzhou.[9] Mrs. Yan was plagued by constant headaches. Perhaps these are what caused her to fight more with her husband, or perhaps it was the other way around. She eventually became worried enough by these headaches to go visit a Western-style medical clinic. The doctors, however, told her that they could not find anything wrong and sent her home again. Increasingly anxious and unhappy, she decided to seek help from another woman she had heard about, a middle-aged spirit medium named Mrs. Gu.

Gu had been a factory worker. As with most spirit mediums in the region, the gods had pushed her into serving as their agent, and she felt she never had a choice about it. When she first began, as a young woman, people had very little money to pay her for the healing she provided, and the Cultural Revolution memories of repression of such "feudal superstition" were still fresh in people's minds. She thus practiced only during her time off. By the time Mrs. Yan came to her, however, her business as a spirit medium had expanded rapidly. People were able and willing to pay more, and demand for her services (as for other mediums) had ballooned. When one of us saw her treating Mrs. Yan, Gu had been able to quit her factory job completely and work entirely as a spirit medium.

During the session, Gu quickly fell into a trance, possessed by a deity called the Second Lord (二老爷). Communicating through song (which is common in this region), the Second Lord asked Mrs. Yan where she lived. She named one of the new apartment complexes on the edge of the city. At this, the Second Lord immediately knew what the problem was: the building was crushing down the grave of a young woman who had been killed at the hands of occupying Japanese troops over 70 years earlier. This unfortunate spirit had lain quietly for all these decades, not bothering any of the innocent people around her. Now, however, her home had been destroyed by the new construction. She rose in anger and attacked, at random, a resident of the apartment building. Like most ghost attacks, it was both a threat and a cry for help.

With her problem diagnosed, Mrs. Yan was sent on to a woman who specialized in ridding people of such baleful spirits. This ritual specialist told Mrs. Yan to purchase some necessary items, including paper spirit money and clothing, which are typical offerings to the dead. They agreed on a day when Mrs. Yan would go to bed at night but make sure the door to the house was left unlocked. Very late that night, with a knife in her

9. For a brief description of several other Changzhou cases, see Wu (2015). Roughly similar cases have been reported in many parts of the world (e.g., Morris 2000:305–312).

hand, the ritualist walked quietly into the apartment and into Mrs. Yan's bedroom. She crashed the knife loudly against the bed, over and over. Combining the threat of the knife and the offer of money and clothing, she induced the dead spirit to follow her out of the apartment, into the street, and down to a crossroads near a bridge—a classically yin place. There she burned the paper money and clothing, thus transferring it to the ghost and sending her away. Mrs. Yan would not be bothered again.

By itself, there is nothing unusual about this story. Ghosts have attacked people for longer than we know in China, and this method of exorcising them has long been typical for the region. The difference is that we suddenly have an epidemic of ghost illness, to the extent that a medium like Gu can retire from her day job.[10] It is as if the entire rural world of just a decade or so ago had been folded into the ground and crushed under the weight of new buildings and roads, occasionally erupting angrily up from the depths.

This ghost, like most such spirits, lay quietly in the ground—she would burst to the surface only after a major ecological disturbance.[11] We can only understand the timing and scale of the epidemic of ghost attacks by considering the drastic ecological changes of the region—changes that include the physical excavation of the rural earth to create new cityscapes, as well as altered roles for spirit mediums and for the dead. This approach helps us understand how the manifestation of the latent potentials of the ghosts itself changes the ecosystem, in this case by causing an increase in the numbers of spirit mediums and their clients.

A Network of Mediums

Mr. Chen lives in a beautifully appointed mansion on the outskirts of Changshu.[12] As in all of our cases, this was agricultural land just a decade or so earlier, and many of the original villagers, like him, have been resettled into new housing. Just to the right of his house stands what appears to be a two-car garage, at least if the doors are closed. The open doors, however, reveal an elaborate altar dedicated to the Sakyamuni Buddha, with heaps of ritual paraphernalia piled around the side walls. The little temple receives a steady stream of visitors, some of them Chen's disciples or other members of his large network, and some of them clients looking to be healed.[13]

Chen (like Gu in the Changzhou example) is what the local people call an "incense head" (香头). Incense heads in this region combine one or more of four functions: they serve as spirit mediums for people, they arrange pilgrimages to important temples, they serve as middlemen who can organize important rituals for people by hiring from their network of Daoist priests, sutra-singing groups, and any other specialists that might be needed, and they play crucial roles in local temple (re)construction. Chen performs all four roles.[14]

Like many spirit mediums, Chen struggled during his youth. He was frequently sick, starting at age 8, and began to grow healthier only as a teenager when he started attending to visions and dreams of Sakyamuni and other deities, who would appear to him regularly. Over the course of many years, they gradually taught him everything he needed to know. Chen stressed that all of his knowledge came directly from the gods. He had no family tradition of mediumship to draw on, and he had no human teacher. Unlike other parts of China where local temples may have extensive training programs for mediums, Chen's story is typical for contemporary mediums in southern Jiangsu.[15] All of the ones we have spoken to stress that the gods chose them directly and that they never learned from family members or any other spirit medium. Of course, this may not be entirely true in practice. As we shall see, Chen himself builds a sort of institution; in addition, as we see anywhere that spirit mediums are widespread, there are always challenges to their legitimacy (e.g., Wolf 1992). Nevertheless, it is still crucial for mediums in this area to assert that only direct inspiration from the deities matters. The claim insists that there can be no possible institutionalization of the charisma of spirit possession. It guarantees that spirit possession can always be understood as a fount for creativity and invention by rejecting any human institution of control.

In Chen's case, this creativity has taken two forms. First, he almost always diagnoses problems as having been caused by animal spirits: fox fairies, monkey spirits, and even very unusual ones like toad or fish demons. This is somewhat different from many of the mediums in the area, who frequently blame ghosts instead. More importantly for our purposes, he has established a network on a far larger scale than other mediums we know about. Even though most mediums in the region, including Chen, claim to have no teacher outside the gods, he has actually built up a network of about 30 formal disciples, all of whom are patients he has healed. Most of these people have set up independently as healers, but about six or seven, he says,

10. It is not simply Gu's experience that leads us to speak of an epidemic. Many other mediums in the area have had similar increases in business. Chen, the medium we discuss in the following section, for example, told us in 2014 that "evil things" (邪东西, meaning ghosts and demons) had increased during the urbanization of the past dozen years. Scholar Wang, whom we discuss in the section on Suzhou, is another example.

11. For a somewhat similar case of urban development and haunting spirits in Taiwan, see Hatfield (2011). He describes the conversion of a cemetery into a park and the resulting concerns about the spirits of the dead.

12. We are grateful to the anthropologist Yang Der-ruey for the introduction. He also joined us on visits in 2014 and 2015.

13. We have described an example of one of his healing sessions in Weller and Wu (2017).

14. For a similar classification of incense heads in the region, see Li (2015).

15. For a description of one such tradition in rural Taiwan, see Lin (2015).

continue to collaborate closely with him. Some of these disciples now have disciples of their own.

Beyond the spirit mediums, his network includes several dozen Daoists, groups of people who recite Buddhist sutras (locally called "big Buddhism" [大佛]), and groups who chant "precious scroll" scriptures (宝卷, locally called "little Buddhism" [小佛]). In addition, the half dozen pilgrimages he organizes every year draw on a far larger network of lay followers. For the more local pilgrimages (like the ones to Hangzhou), he will typically fill three to five tour buses (roughly 150–250 people). His network is thus enormous by local standards, and although historical records on such things are poor, we think that this scale is quite a new phenomenon. In a slightly different way from Gu in Changzhou, he is also an example of how a disturbed ecosystem allows previously unrealized potentials to surface and thrive. In his case, we see it most clearly in his greatly expanded network and sphere of influence as an incense head. This is the same as the process allowing certain species rapidly to reoccupy a territory opened up by fire or some other major disturbance. The widespread disturbance of these rapidly urbanized areas has not only increased the numbers of spirit mediums (as we saw in the previous case as well) but also allowed someone like Chen to spread over the territory in an unprecedented way.

Of course, Chen's network is not the only thing to have taken advantage of the altered environment to expand rapidly. The most obvious other players were the urban planners who imprinted their grids of roads and erected their towering buildings on the landscape, along with the state apparatus that supports them. They too shape people's patterns of worship, in part by destroying the hundreds of tiny village temples that spread through this region and in part by constructing a new image of religion that fits their modernist agenda.[16] In Guli Township, where Chen lives, both sides of this equation were obvious.

In general, of course, this modernist agenda has not been good for people like incense heads and spirit mediums in China, who have been criticized, harassed, and sometimes actively repressed. Chen's own altar received a visit from public security officials sometime around 2010. Someone had told the police that he was conducting "feudal superstition" at his house. In fact, Chen has quite good relations with the police in general, as he does with all kinds of different people. As a successful incense head, he is a master of relationships, both human and divine. As Chen told it, the officers felt somewhat awkward about coming to see him, but they explained that after an official complaint had been filed, they had no choice. At the time, his temple was housed in the same building as when we visited, but it was far more elaborate inside, with statues of dozens of different deities offering a kind of department store for divine services—whatever you needed, he had the right god. The police made no attempt to shut down his business but asked that he simplify his altar enough that they could consider it just as a private shrine for personal use. That is when the temple took on the form that we saw, with a straightforward altar to his primary deity, Sakyamuni.

What did he do with all the old statues, we asked? Chen explained that they had been moved to his new temple. This new temple turned out not to be his at all, or at least not in any formal sense. If the police showed the repressive side of state policy by making sure that Chen's temple never grew very large, the new temple showed an image of religion that the state preferred. Changshu has adopted an urban planning strategy that includes a goal of having one temple for each of the city's 32 townships. Their idea of a temple, however, is quite different from the village altars and spirit medium shrines that we regularly saw. A proper temple would need to belong to a proper religion (meaning, in this context, direct control by licensed Buddhist or Daoist clergy) and be large and beautiful. In the township where Chen lives, this meant a huge, brand new Buddhist temple (finished in 2012), built at a cost of about 40 million yuan (roughly US$6.5 million). The monk in charge told us that about half of this had been raised locally, and the other half came from the township government. That is, the urban planners had taken advantage of the disturbed environment just as powerfully as Chen and his network.

The monk in charge was happy to claim Chen as a friend for more than a decade. "But," we asked, "you know what he does, right?" He said, "Of course! It's no problem! I'm not in charge of him. He just does his thing and we do ours." The explanation for the monk's comfort with the spirit medium, and the medium's claim that the temple was somehow "his," gets to the heart of a new synergy between the two very different adaptations to the changes wrought by Changshu's overnight urbanization. For Chen, ties to the temple give him some political legitimacy as well as some religious credibility.[17] They allow him to extend his network to the largest religious actor in the township. For the temple, Chen offers crucial organic ties to the local community. He had been central to its fundraising efforts. Probably even more importantly, as a major incense head, he leads large numbers of people to the temple on ritual occasions. Without him, especially because public transportation to the temple was still not well established, the temple would have been almost entirely empty.

16. Except for reference to the broader anthropological or sociological literature, we are using the term "religion" carefully here to refer specifically to the institutions that the Chinese government formally recognizes as religion, based on a modernist agenda for what religion should look like—rationalizing, voluntary, belief centered, text based, and so on. This includes the official Buddhist, Christian, and Daoist temples and churches that we mention here but emphatically not village temples or incense heads. The local people do not use the term "religion" to describe their activity and sometimes even adopt the government's pejorative term of "superstition" to describe their practices, but with no apparent negative meanings. See especially Goossaert and Palmer (2011) for an extended discussion of the problem of "religion" in China.

17. For a rather different sort of example of a synergy between a temple and the local state, see Chau (2005*a*).

The transformed environment thus stunted the growth of village temples but encouraged the growth of two other forms: Chen's large network of spirit mediums and a massive new Buddhist temple in which Chen plays a large role. In spite of the People's Republic of China's constant criticism and occasional harsh repression of spirit mediums, in Changshu the relationship between local government and Chen turned out to be unintentionally symbiotic, with each using the other in ways that has helped it grow. The newly emerging ecosystem has made space for plural ecologies that continue to negotiate with each other in spite of their mutual tensions and misapprehensions. It is an example of the new relationships and dependencies (with their own sets of new opportunities and tensions) that can develop as a disturbed ecosystem adjusts to the transformations in its environment. Note that this new ecological moment involves changes in the physical world (like the new forms of transportation and communication that enable networks like Chen's to expand), the social and political world (like Chen's relationship to the Buddhist establishment or to the police), and the divine world.

A New Ordering of Gods

Our third case comes from the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), to the east of the old city. This is the fastest, most thorough, and largest-scale urbanization of our three cases. It involved the wholesale flattening of five townships, resettling all the residents, wiping out agriculture, and constructing a new urban region with a planned population of 1 million people—10 times higher than the original population. Even more than we saw in Changzhou or Changshu, urban planning offices were able to trace their straight lines and concrete elevations on a blank slate. For religion, their project has included one huge Protestant church, two Buddhist temple complexes, and two large Daoist temples. The church seats a thousand, built to showcase the modern image of the industrial park that houses many Western companies and caters to a new and well-off urban population, because nearly none of the local people are Protestants. The temples have been given over to the government-affiliated Buddhist and Daoist associations to manage. Just as in Changshu, we can see how the disturbed ecosystem opens a niche for state-planned religion to thrive. It was Buddhist in Changshu, more mixed in this part of Suzhou, but the differences are not very important to the planners.

Unlike the church (which serves almost entirely the newly arrived population of upscale outsiders), the SIP Daoist temples tie very closely to the original rural population, which has now been resettled into huge apartment complexes. Temples in other parts of China sometimes become centers of opposition to urbanization projects like this.[18] Perhaps for that reason, the urban planners (with the urging of some Daoist Association leaders) decided to build these new temples to house all the local gods who had been displaced from their original temples, now bulldozed beneath the foundations of the new construction.[19] The temples thus take an unusual and innovative form. Instead of centering on a single deity, they feature one statue after another, each with its own incense pot. According to the Daoists, they carefully standardized (规范化) each image by researching and recording its "true" name and by recarving each of them so that the new images are all the same size and style. This was necessary, they claimed, because the villagers often did not know the proper names of the gods in their temples, and because villagers often demanded that their own gods needed their own images, even when it was the same deity as that of some other villages. The Daoists scoffed at this, saying it showed the ignorance of the villagers, because really there could only be one of each god. In addition, the priests did not want the chaotic aesthetic that would have resulted from the large numbers of small, indifferently carved, and incense-stained statues from the original temples. In its own way, this standardization project of the Daoists was just as modernist, just as concerned with drawing straight lines, as that of the urban planners.

Nevertheless, just as urban plans are not cities, the Daoists' standardization was compromised in practice. The temple we know best, called the Gaodian Temple (高垫庙), was riddled with alternate spaces that the Daoists could not standardize because they were actually controlled by local incense heads, rather than directly by the priests. Despite the unifying and standardizing efforts of the Daoists, the alternate spaces in this temple range from large rooms with new images carved to match those of the Daoists, to basement rooms filled with small altars of mixed statues, and even to storage closets with incense pots and crudely painted scrolls showing various deities.[20] The photograph in figure 3 shows some of the standardized images; the one in figure 4 shows one of the small altars controlled by an incense head and is located in the basement.

That is, although the form is not exactly the same as the Buddhist temple in Changshu, this temple is another example of an innovative synergy between a state-sanctioned temple and local incense heads that has evolved in the new environment. The reason the Daoists are willing to cede so much power over their space to the incense heads, just as we saw with the Buddhist monk in Changshu, is that the temple will be an empty husk without the incense heads to bring people in. Both

18. See, for instance, Yang (2004).

19. Before the establishment of those new temples, the villagers built about three dozen small single-room temples side by side on the site in the 1990s when the urbanization projects started. This cluster of unofficial and "disorganized" temples became an eyesore for the urban planners, and they needed a solution both to pacify the incense heads who had played crucial roles in the temple building and to clean up the space for "modern" urban infrastructure. With the construction of the new Daoist temples, most of the images in those transitional temples were buried in the ground.

20. This was the case until early 2019, when the Daoists in charge moved all the informal altars to the basement, which they kept locked. The disputes over this are ongoing as of this writing. Our description in what follows is based on the situation up through 2018. Changes are ongoing, which is what we would expect given our approach to disturbed ecosystems.

Figure 3. Standardized gods. Photograph by Emily Wu.

spirit mediums and urban-planning temples have moved opportunistically into the open spaces of the disturbed environment, and they have developed an unexpected and unplanned symbiosis, creating a new ecosystem out of their plural ecologies.

Spirit mediums have increased in this district too, according to local informants, although we know of no network on the scale of Chen's. We can see their power to innovate, however, quite clearly in the temple. For instance, the image at the far right of figure 4 is completely unknown outside of this altar. We were curious about the haircut and dress of the deity embodied in that statue, which seemed to indicate the early twentieth century, in combination with a name that pointed to an earlier era: he is called Scholar Wang (王秀才), using a title reserved for those who had passed the lowest level of imperial exams. The incense head who controls that altar said that the image had only been carved a few years earlier. Scholar Wang was actually a small boy who had drowned in a village pond in the 1950s; his sisters are still alive. Just a few years ago, however, he began appearing to the incense head while she was acting as a spirit medium, demanding an altar. His unusual clothing, title, and haircut are all because that is how he told the medium that the image should look. That is, much like the ghost in Changzhou, who bothered no one until a huge building was constructed on top of her, the spirit of this boy appeared only in the midst of the massive local construction effort—his seed sprouted only because the environment had changed. He was powerful enough to demand an altar of his own and could not simply be exorcised.

We can see another sort of manifestation of the latent in the use of tobacco. Unlike most of China, cigarettes are everywhere on the altars of these two new temples (fig. 5). Methods of using them as offerings have not yet become very conventional. Some people place an entire pack on the altar table. Some stand a single lit cigarette on end, as if it were a stick of incense. Some balance the cigarettes—just a single one or sometimes the contents of an entire pack—on the edge of the table and set them alight. A few people stand them in antique water pipes while they burn down. Some spirit mediums smoke five to

Figure 4. Incense head altar. Photograph by Emily Wu.

Figure 5. Altar with cigarettes. Photograph by Emily Wu.

10 cigarettes before getting possessed, and others have to burn a whole pack as offerings to their deities daily. No informants could give us a clear idea where and when this use of cigarettes started. Most of them just claim it was a demand from the deity. Cigarettes as offerings have occasionally been reported elsewhere in China, although they are used in rather different ways (usually for ancestors or ghosts).[21] That is, drawing some kind of parallel between cigarettes and incense seems like a latent possibility in Chinese practice, but one that is only occasionally realized, just as certain phenotypes will not appear unless environmental conditions change.

Another innovation appeared at the largest of the altars controlled by incense heads. When we first went, in 2014, the Daoist urged us not to go into one room, because, as he said, it had not been standardized and was therefore not worth looking at. It was, in fact, an independent altar set up by several incense heads. When we went in anyway, we were surprised to see most of the god images wearing eyeglasses (fig. 6). When we returned for more extensive fieldwork in 2016, the glasses were gone. This also turned out to be the result of spirit mediums. One, in trance, had demanded glasses to help them see more clearly. Another, 2 years later, had said that they were pointless and demanded their removal. Unlike the cigarettes, some innovations die out again quickly, just as not every plant that germinates in a disturbed environment will propagate successfully.

All of these innovations have been encouraged by the disturbed ecosystem. This does not mean that anything at all is possible, of course—the police visit to Chen's temple shows the limits on certain kinds of growth and the disappearance of the eyeglasses shows that some innovations many not adapt well to the changing environment. Nevertheless, all are examples of changes enabled by the disruption to the older ecosystem. All represent latent possibilities that have only been able to grow and thrive under the new conditions. Even the Gaodian Temple, with its deities from multiple villages arrayed in neat lines, is itself an innovation.[22] None of these things are unrecognizable within the context of Chinese temple practices, and some, like the cigarettes, have made occasional appearances elsewhere. In most conditions, however, we have not seen them develop. In these cases from southern Jiangsu, spirit mediums have been able to innovate more freely after the destruction of the villages, with no one else to challenge their authority.

Just as we saw in the other two cases, the new environment has encouraged the spread of mediums. As several of the local incense heads said to us, the gods have to possess bodies now, because they have lost their houses. Even though many of them got new images made and properly placed in the newly

21. For example, Adam Chau (2005*b*) discusses their use for the spirit of Chairman Mao. In Taiwan, they have occasionally appeared, but only as offerings to dangerous yin spirits (Weller 1994).

22. It is not a unique innovation, however. We know of several temples in Suzhou that have similarly taken in large numbers of deities from destroyed temples. Some cases have also been reported from nearby Shanghai (Long 2014; Yang 2005), although only as additions to existing temples rather than new construction. In every case there is a similar disturbance of the ecosystem involving rapid urbanization and village temple destruction.

Figure 6. Deities with eyeglasses. Photograph by Robert P. Weller.

erected temple, most of the deities' former bodies were buried underground and their previous abodes were destroyed. They now have to share their space with other deities or, worse still, suffer being crammed into the basement of a temple. As a result, the spirit mediums became all the more prevalent as channels through which those gods communicate with the people. At the same time, temple-based clergy rely on incense heads, because they lead followers to the temple. This interaction has fostered an unusual new symbiosis that has become possible only because these highly disturbed ecosystems have created new environments with new opportunities for the interaction of plural ecologies—the spirit mediums' practical interactions with gods and ghosts, and the orderly religiosity fostered by the urban planning process. There had been earlier forms of symbiosis, in this region especially between Daoists and local incense heads, but its specific forms are now very different due to the combination of the destruction of the village communities and the remaking of Daoism under Communist political control (Goossaert 2015). This is the same process that we see when biological studies of disturbed ecosystems talk about one succession state replacing another.

Conclusions

Ecosystems are a complex combination of equilibrating processes (adaptations) and pressures toward change. After a fire, for instance, ecologists might expect to see an environment dominated by annual plants, followed a few years later by grasses and perennials. A century after that, this might be replaced by a pine forest mixed with oak and hickory, which will eventually replace the pines almost completely. At each time, new organisms are taking advantage of the changed environment, but they are in turn changing the environment in ways that will eventually lead to new relationships. This succession of new synergies is made possible, just as we have seen in these three cases, because hidden possibilities could be realized in the new environment (dormant seeds will eventually rise from the ground, new seeds will blow in from outside, and new phenotypes may appear out of the older gene pool).

Much of what is happening with people, temples, and deities is not new in southern Jiangsu or in China more broadly, but the ecological disturbance here is more drastic than ever before, making these changes more than just a return to earlier ways of life after a crisis passes. The ecosystem itself has changed permanently. Thus, for example, temple destruction is not new in this region of China. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries at least 37 such incidents have been documented in Suzhou and the nearby Songjiang region (Wang 2010:203–208). Nor are attempts to bring people like incense heads and spirit mediums under the control of licensed clergy. Nevertheless, we do not have a simple oscillation that continues an old pattern, a return to the steady state. Crucially, the villages that supported the old temples and their reconstructions in the past no longer exist as physical or social communities or as biological/agricultural ecosystems. Bulldozing those water-based villages and replacing them with an urban grid has had some obvious direct effects on religious practice. Purely agricultural deities like the Lord and Lady of the Fields (田公田母), for instance, have disappeared. In addition, new transportation and communication networks have allowed incense heads to expand beyond village temples, as has the resettlement of many villagers into urban relocation housing, where the villages are no longer separated.

The less obvious effects are perhaps even more important. Thus, we now have an urban planners' attempt to replace the old pattern with what they consider to be appropriate religion, housed in very large Buddhist and Daoist temples and controlled by licensed clergy. State attempts to control clergy are not new in China, but this modernist pattern differs significantly from what existed in imperial times. That is, there have been fundamental changes to the ecosystem, juxtaposing two different understandings of ecology (one oriented to intertwined

gods and residents, the other to visions of religious and urban modernity). Just as the utter transformation of the earlier ecosystem has created a space, at least for the moment, where spirit mediums spread and thrive (as in all three of our cases), it has also fostered a symbiosis between incense heads and a new species of large temple. The result of these plural ecologies so far is not a direct conflict between state-sponsored religion and village practices like spirit possession, although there are certainly tensions. Instead, the two forms have developed symbiotically, as we have seen in both Changshu and Suzhou.[23]

The usual ecological discussions of fire or other disturbances, of course, do not include planners (like foresters) but instead usually offer a "natural" system reconstructing itself. Yet this does not reflect a difference between "real" ecosystems and what we are describing here. The fault in this case lies with a biological ecology that does not take seriously enough that humans are part of the environment, in which people sometimes purposely disturb the ecosystem (as when some natives of New England periodically set fire to the woods to encourage plants that deer would eat), or when foresters replant disturbed areas with "more desirable" species (like trees suitable for lumber, "native" species, or plants to serve whatever human goal they have in mind). Humans have been part of ecosystems as long as we have existed, and that is as true of urban planners as of slash-and-burn agriculturalists.

We are not trying to suggest that these changes in southern Jiangsu mark the beginning of a new form of equilibrium any more than they can be a return to a status quo ante. Seeing this suddenly urbanized world as part of an ecosystem with plural ecologies points us toward the constant potential for change (Sprenger and Großmann 2018). Roads have replaced waterways, high-rise buildings have replaced rice paddies, ghosts have been uprooted, and gods have lost their homes. Many aspects of an earlier life with deities and ghosts survive, but the social base in village structures and routines is gone, probably permanently in this region.

The resulting burst of creativity is perhaps only surprising in light of older expectations that a move from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* could only spell the death of strongly territorial and community-oriented practices like Chinese temple worship and would be part of a general weakening of urban religion. Such expectations have been misleading in part because they do not allow enough room for agency—both the agency of the people involved and of the gods and ghosts who make them ill, or grant their wishes, or compel them to serve as mediums. In fact, such creativity may not be unusual at all with urbanization, as when Robert Orsi (1999) writes that "[m]uch of what is characteristic of modern American religion has developed in cities. Pentecostalism, settlement houses, Christian Science, the various modern forms of American Judaism, gospel and soul music, immigrant street shrines and festivals . . . are all phenomena of the cities . . . Religious practice in the cities recasts the meanings of the urban environment as the city recreates religious imagination and experience . . . The world of the modern city has necessitated, encouraged, or simply made possible a tremendous explosion of religious innovation and experimentation" (43–45).

For now, we have a creative zone in constant flux. We do not expect to see a return to some earlier "climax state," but for similar reasons, we also do not expect to see a complete triumph of the state model of "modern" religion. Gods and ghosts, spirit mediums and state regulators, new media and rapid transit, paved roads and high-speed trains, and myriad other agents are interacting to create a new ecosystem. The new adaptations (from thriving spirit mediums to eyeglasses for gods) themselves, however, alter the environment and will thus lead to further change.

As a way of understanding rapid changes, a disturbed ecosystem analysis offers two advantages. First, by moving past a distinction between natural and cultural conditions, it enables us to understand the assemblage created by the combined agency of deities and temples, urban planners and Religious Affairs Bureau officials, local ex-farmers and new migrants, and altered land uses and built structures. It does so without making assumptions about the primacy of one arena over another or even about the naturalness of seeing fundamental differences between things like urban planners and deities. It shows one of the directions we might follow in pursuit of Ingold's idea of an "ecology of life" and benefits as well from Latour's (1993) insistence that we not accept the "crossed-out God, relegated to the sidelines" of the modernist project (13).

Second, thinking about our cases as disturbed ecosystems suggests two specific mechanisms of change that may apply in other contexts altogether and may serve to enrich Ingold's "ecology of life" by considering the specific dynamics of disturbance: disturbance creates spaces where previously latent potentials can become manifest, and it leads to new synergies, interactions, and assemblages—plural ecologies—that may themselves foster further changes. While Sprenger and Großmann (2018) correctly point out that conflict tends to delineate the differences among these ecological views more clearly, expanding the notion to deal with disturbed ecosystems of all kinds, instead of just conflict, enables us to see how all kinds of negotiations and compromises are possible along with the inherent tensions.

These processes help explain broader phenomena, like the growth and transformation of spirit mediums that have accompanied rapid urbanization in much of Asia, including Korea (Kendall 2009), Mongolia (Humphrey 1999), Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere 1977), Taiwan (Lin 2015), and Thailand (Irvine 1984; Johnson 2014). In each case, the institutional structures of village life have been disrupted and replaced by new kinds of urban networks. Spirit mediums, who had been integrated in village settings in the past, suddenly were able to realize a potential to grow in new directions.

23. In Changzhou, we also have cases not cited here confirming the same pattern. The spirit mediums rely on the temples to give them legitimacy, while the newly constructed large temples rely on the incense heads/spirit mediums to bring in worshipers.

Let us briefly mention just two such studies—one involving urbanization and the other postsocialism—to suggest how they might mesh with our approach to disturbed ecosystems. Lin Wei-Ping (2015) documents a rural Taiwanese spirit medium who migrates to the city. Separated from the strict training regimes and close ties to the community-run temple in the village, he becomes free to set up his own altar and to innovate many new ways of treating people, including new techniques for the rapid production of healing talismans and creative uses of phones and social media to expand his network far beyond his new home base. Like our mediums in Jiangsu, urbanization (in his case through migration) has freed him to develop potentials that would have instead lain dormant. On the other hand, by thinking of the ecological contexts more broadly, we can also see how Taiwan's very different political constraints on religion alter the possibilities for ecological change. For example, Chen in Changshu in some ways resembles Lin's case as an entrepreneurial medium building a large following, but his development of a separate shrine was curtailed by the police, and he moved instead toward synergy with a Buddhist temple. The resulting pattern is thus quite different from what happened in Taiwan and reminds us that ecosystems are inherently local and can thus change quite differently even given similar starting points.

In contrast, Morten Pedersen (2011) gives us a case where the primary disturbance to the ecosystem is postsocialism rather than urbanization. Writing about rural northern Mongolia, he shows how socialism and its aftermath have led to the near total disappearance of "true" shamans and instead to a flood of drunken, joking, cursing (in both senses), and sometimes dangerously violent "half-shamans." He points to the drastic changes initiated by the political transformations of the 1990s and argues that "precisely because people in northern Mongolia experience the transition as a disintegration of stable religious, political, and economic forms, . . . theories concerned with the lability and capriciousness of forms offer a useful framework for an account of what it means to live in a world invaded by a multitude of half-baked beings and entities" (Pedersen 2011:36). We are inspired in part by some of the same ontological ideas that he is but would suggest that seeing the case as a disturbed ecosystem might also help to reveal the possibilities of change that were already in the system, rather than seeing only a precipitous transformation after the end of socialism, with an apparent assumption of something more equilibrated in the past.

Our focus on the specific processes of disturbed ecosystems thus may let us specify Ingold's insights further. Like us, Ingold (2000) sees an ecosystem as something in constant flux: "The most fundamental thing about life is that it does not begin here or end there, but is always going on. And for the same reason . . . environments are never complete but are continually under construction" (172). Building on that, the specific analysis of disturbed ecosystems reminds us that "continuous" need not mean "steady" and that sudden changes can alert us to their own dynamics—not just revealing the latent and constructing new assemblages at moments of crisis, but reminding us to look for those potentials at all times.

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Comments

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> *Wanderer: I came to this place alone, uprooted, and hungry. I had lost my sense of direction. The rain infused me. The river tugged at me. I had no house to rest [in] and no kin to feed me. They called me "lonely spirit, wandering ghost"* (孤魂野鬼; guhun yegui). *No one noticed me. I crept up behind you until you felt my nudge. "Caught you," I cried, but you never heard . . . I tossed the civet cat in front of a car; I swerved that truck into your motorcycle.* (Tsai et al. 2016)

> *In this case, the gods and ghosts are as real as the urban plans, in the sense that all of them limit and shape the kinds of choices that people make about their lives. All, that is, are part of the ecosystem.* (Weller and Wu 2021)

Spectral Resilience—A Response to Weller and Wu's "Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits: Disturbed Ecosystems in Southern Jiangsu"

Do hungry ghosts, local gods, spirit mediums, prayerful supplicants, and the instant cities where their lives unfold comprise the biotic and abiotic components of an ecosystem? Weller and Wu apply ecological theory to urban transformation and religious change in southern Jiangsu by embracing several axioms of disturbance ecology. First, there is no climax state

indicating systemic equilibrium. Second, disturbance opens up sites of opportunity for the growth of organisms that were previously dormant. Third, new assemblages and new agents emerge during post-disturbance regeneration, opening new possibilities for systemic development. The capacity for renewal, change, and adaptation is known as resilience (Folke et al. 2004).

Rejecting the functionalism of classic ecological anthropology, the authors make "no assumptions about the separation of nature and culture." Citing Ingold, they call for an ecological approach to the social world in which the organism is simultaneously imbedded in, and partially constitutive of, the ecosystem, rather than an individual agent confronting a rigid set of environmental constraints. They develop a seamless argument with compelling examples to foreground the resilience of local beliefs and ritual practices threatened with potential obliteration. Before the recent wave of urbanization, local gods and the spirits of the dead held pride of place and ecological dominance in Changzhou, Changshu, and Suzhou, where the everyday ideational and ritual worlds of rural villages assured their transcendent authority. Their dwellings fit neatly within the communal ecosystems of rice paddies, fish ponds, irrigation canals, earth god shrines, and ancestral halls. Under current processes of *chengzhenhua* ("town-and-city-fication"), tutelary deities and benevolent spirits have faced a double catastrophe. First, their dwellings have been pulverized and submerged beneath a sea of concrete. Second, government planners and officially recognized Daoist and Buddhist ecclesiasts have moved quickly to produce religious infrastructures that serve state-sanctioned institutional and spiritual practices more than they do existing gods, ghosts, and worshipers.

These disturbances have generated immediate responses: wandering ghosts seek revenge, recognition, and the restoration of proper ritual veneration by attacking unsuspecting humans; cases of spirit possession have dramatically increased. *Xiangtou* ("incense heads"), local spirit mediums previously lacking formal recognition beyond village boundaries, have emerged to mediate between the living and the dead. State-sanctioned Daoist and Buddhist organizations have embraced these charismatic mediators to safeguard their own credibility in a changing habitus. This diverse assemblage of actors have converged to form new relationships, giving rise to new forms of resilience in an "ecosystem that unites the living and the dead." A new stage of ecological succession emerges, and it will not be the last.

So what are the internal dynamics of this ecological succession? What flows of matter and energy can simultaneous generate new life and sustain original biota within new relational configurations? What are the sources of ecological resilience? These questions are left open for speculation, and I offer a few ideas for consideration.

In the biological paradigm of disturbance ecology, it is biodiversity that enhances ecological resilience; the greater the number of species (or heterogeneity of habitats) the more potential for post-disturbance regeneration (Folke et al. 2004). In the present study, however, a diversity of belief and practice is the key to resilience, and the most potent regenerative factor is spectrality, which is equivalent to matter and energy in a more strictly biophysical ecosystem. The dual material-ethereal souls of the dead and the deities' capacities for emanation exist for the purpose of crossing ecosystem boundaries (the "ecotones" of classical ecology) and generating new relationships between organisms. Unimpeded by material constraints defining the secular world, gods and spirits possess *ling* (靈), spiritual efficacy—the power to mediate between the living and the dead, the material and the nonmaterial, order and disorder, the active and the passive. The ecological dynamics of yin/yang (陰/陽), *po/hun* (魄/魂), and *gui-shen* (鬼/神) catalyze continual ecological transformation by alternating between matter (and material forms) and energy (invisible forces). As the bereaved ghosts of the dislocated dead besiege the world of the living through classic acts of "possession"—the power to reside, own, sit, endure, and return on short notice, even after being unseen and unknown for long periods of time—the worldly reach of a pantheon of dethroned tutelary deities is made manifest through the mediation of once subaltern incense heads. The xiangtou intermediaries are ling specialists, negotiating with spirits residing within liminal ecotones, more-than-human beings who wield increasingly destructive forms of spectral matter-energy, threatening to make the ecosystem uninhabitable. The sensitivity and creativity of the xiangtou—their acts of translation, interpretation, and communication—usher in the material forms of a new religious ecology. This marks another successional phase in a long-term, dynamic, and open-ended continuum of change.

Can an ecological perspective bring greater precision to our understanding of religious transformation in places undergoing rapid urbanization? The answer is yes, because humans not only are not only territorial animals but also the imaginative species for whom space must hold meaning that provides a sense of common direction and mutual recognition. The spectral ecosystem is a zone of contestation for the impossible dream of evolutionary immortality, and spectral ecology always involves multiple scales and sources of power. By its nature, it remains a highly political ecology. Thus, spectral geography exceeds the limits of religion, and we see it most clearly where psychic trauma demands of social memory a reconfiguration of the *oikos*.

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On "Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits: Disturbed Ecosystems in Southern Jiangsu"

"The gods have to possess bodies now, because they have lost their houses." This is the explanation given to Rob Weller and Keting Wu as they investigate a proliferation of spirit mediums

in three newly urbanized parts of Jiangsu. On the face of it, this is a logical explanation; certainly it makes sense to anyone who has followed the rich literature of religious studies of China. But it raises questions for a contemporary anthropology, questions that Weller and Wu both answer and leave in play, unanswered, in their wonderful article.

In these districts of the Yangzi River wetlands, where houses, fields, shrines, and canals have been razed and replaced with forests of high-rise apartment buildings, it is not only the gods who have lost their houses. Former villagers, rural producers, and small businesspeople have been almost universally dispossessed and resettled into nuclear family–sized cells in massive apartment blocks, built over the bulldozed farms, graves, and "hundreds of tiny temples" that once occupied these spaces. This state-mandated style of urbanization is familiar to all of us whose research home is China. Such new urban zones are the most visible change in a China where policy-makers seek to eradicate rural poverty and produce the largest middle-class population in the world.

Most anthropologists and sociologists have focused on the consequences of urbanization for people. This fascinating article, however, extends anthropological concern to a broader network of changed lives: not only fisherfolk but ancestors, not only "incense heads" but the gods and animal familiars whose powers they help to release. All these populations are now negotiating a new relationship to space, time, and meaning.

To read this study as a mere anthropology of religion would invite a fallacious understanding of the scope and depth of social change in China. Weller and Wu resist using a Durkheimian sacred/profane distinction to describe a landscape where gods, ghosts, and ancestors cohabit with the faithful who rely on these invisible kinfolk for lucky benefits and who fear the "evil things" they can release. The anthropology of coastal East Asia long ago showed us that in these parts, sacred and profane intimately intertwine, the local gods are neighbors, ancestors look after us every day (unless we forget to feed them), and the consequences of ghost attack are mundane indeed.

Working through a materialist ecological model, Weller and Wu describe what we once might have called a sacred landscape as "physical infrastructures" that have been transformed to produce "disturbed ecologies." When cosmology is taken seriously, a temple is as infrastructural as a road, a cemetery is as real a force as a water main. The yin world, "thrown into chaos" by rapid changes, is real and must be accommodated. The houses lost by gods and ancestors were real places where human and nonhuman villagers managed their social relations to keep evil agencies at bay.[24]

In effect, this paper asks us to reconsider what a god is or can be. In southern Jiangsu, where in-migrants fill new urban spaces and villagers no longer have control over their common places through village committees, what good fortune and evil things can the gods still rule? Even resettled, they still have powers and must be consulted, via direct address in the new temples or through incense heads. Embodied now in niche-bound and standardized statues in the main halls of new temples, these gods might be on their way to doing more than just visually representing a celestial being with a singular identity. Much depends on how effective (the word is *ling* 灵) they are as they receive prayers and incense, cigarettes, and wardrobe additions over the coming years. Some things have not changed: gods can still make people ill, grant their wishes, compel them to serve as mediums, ask for cigarettes or eyeglasses, and become offended if the flow of gifts dries up. In a heterogeneous ecological field, there are so many agents: incense smoke itself is an agent in Chinese temples; urbanization notwithstanding, animal spirits still growl through Mr. Chen's spirit medium practice, and the wartime violence of occupying Japanese troops still has consequences for the living by way of displaced ghosts.

Weller and Wu refuse all nostalgia for the rural lives transformed by large-scale urban construction, preferring to help us envision new syncretic forms and creative innovations in social/religious life. I am more sentimental about the communal virtues that have been lost. But I am sure we agree on some question that should stay in play for anthropology: What kinds of people are being cultivated through relations with standardized gods in massive new buildings? What are the social-constructive powers of those yin-world agents who, in being officially recognized, have been secularized as symbols and abstracted into "the sacred?"

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These three case studies of change in religious practices in the course of rapid urbanization offer a new way of thinking about continuity as change, and vice versa, through a notion of ecology as ever-changing mutual relations between agencies and the realization of selected potentialities. The potentialities in this case are those of ghosts and gods adopting new forms of manifestation and acquiring new kinds of expertise for their manifestation. They also present a regional case study in China quite different from the other studies cited, in the Pearl River Delta and in northern Shanxi. In the Quanzhou and Xiamen

24. Indeed, when we consider the willingness of managers of the new consolidated temples to accommodate a few incense smoke-stained local gods in the basement, this need not be explained mainly as a market phenomenon, Weller and Wu's emphasis notwithstanding. That is, these diverse and rather tatty deities do not just bring in a human clientele via the entrepreneurial incense heads. Locally, they will be known as still guarding and serving a place, still needing to be recognized with incense and placated with gifts. The state-religion functionary who ignores these powers does so at his or her peril.

regions in southeastern China, with which I am more personally familiar, some absorbed villages were able to keep their temples, and in the city of Quanzhou, where most temples were destroyed in the course of development as elsewhere and I presume in Suzhou, as in Shanghai, many were then unusually rebuilt under the pressure of residents (Feuchtwang, forthcoming).

I like the notion of symbiosis as an unintended outcome of negotiations between urban authorities and displaced residents. But there is a problem with the idea of disturbance that Wu and Weller use throughout. It is built into their guiding conception: disturbed ecosystem. The analogy of old seeds coming to life after a forest fire, with ghosts coming to life after their graves have been destroyed or gods after their images have been buried in urban development is delightful. Ghosts are poppies. Gods are pines. But disturbance downplays the question of differences of agency, differences in the powers and intentions of agents.

The initiating "disturbance" was action taken by urban policy-makers, planners, and developers. Yet they are portrayed as similar to the other actors in "taking advantage" of the new "disturbed" condition and its sites, as if it were not they who created them.

We need better acknowledgement of their powers, instead of attributing them to their bulldozers. We are told that they were motivated by a general vision of modernity—straight lines, standardization, high-rises. But what was the idea behind their planning a large temple in each administrative district, besides tidying up the mess of ex-villagers' lines of mini-shrines to replace the temples that the developers had destroyed?

Studies of residential committees by a team of researchers under my direction in the redevelopment and expansion of four cities, Shanghai, Chongqing, Kunming, and Huangshan, 2011–2015 (Gipouloux 2015: chap. 13) suggest an answer. Large temples were preserved as heritage and as having exceptional cultural interest. All other temples were destroyed and not rebuilt. Each city had its own variant of a common condition: destruction of all the untidy places for socializing, such as street markets and temples, and their replacement by "communities" of self-management centered on the office and cultural rooms of a residential committee. These were sites of symbiosis between the spontaneous activities of the residents for themselves, such as their recreational exercises and play, and the organization of representatives and volunteers by the local Party and Youth League. In all of them, planners, policy-makers in the urban districts, and secretaries of residential committees whom we interviewed stressed the tasks they were set by the greater community or the "street," their mandates or performance indicators. Among them was fostering a sense of self-management or simply "small community." In the symbiosis between this top-down effort and local residents' own activities, when, unlike Quanzhou city residents, they were an interspersed population from various origins, loose associations were formed and places were made, including cultural rooms but also new open spaces, where they performed their activities. Was that not also in the minds of the planners and developers in their design of temples in Suzhou and the other two case studies, in which the central ideas of culture and top-down fostering of territorial community were symbiotically linked to the associations and networks of incense heads and the clienteles of spirit mediums?

More attention to agency would have pointed to the importance of interrogating the more authoritative and powerful side of the symbiosis, to what we might call the institutionalized and mediated intentions of the agencies of various government departments, those of planning, administration of religious affairs, culture, and tourism, as well as those of the Party.

A distant relation to "ecosystem" is Dan Sperber's notion of culture as an epidemiology of practices and their transmission (2001). I invoke it to point to the absence of attention by Weller and Wu to the seedbed of continuity and change in the heads of the ex-villagers. What was the knowledge on which they could draw for their innovations? What did they remember of the general local phenomenon of spirit mediums? What did they hear about spirit mediums elsewhere, particularly the women mediums and their temples in Pudong, Shanghai, for instance (Yang 2005)?

In addition, isn't it worth considering the medical epidemiology of the symptoms of distress and anxiety caused by dislocation and the destruction of sites of memory, socializing, and cultural transmission? I mean symptoms that prompted at least some to seek the medical help of spirit mediums.

What part did the elderly play in forming the seedbed and the networks and pilgrimages of spirit mediums and incense heads? Destruction of temples heightens the anxieties of an aging population. Temples are places where the elderly in particular gather to gossip, play májiàng, and take their grandchildren. Now the rooms of the residential cultural center and the developers' open spaces are a good enough substitute. But absent or dispersed children through migration still generate anxiety in some, while others in need owing to infirmity are looked after by organized volunteers.

Such considerations supplement these excellent case studies. But they also suggest reconceiving the "disturbed ecosystem" and the symbiosis between a plurality of ecosystems so as to heighten attention to agency and to the working of transmission as bases for change and continuity.

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Reading "Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits" offered me two pleasures: learning from in-depth ethnography about a place I have been studying for years, mostly historically, and discovering an ecological model of religion that is not mired in nostalgia or, worse, nationalism (as equilibrium paradigms tend to be). This model works well because it

includes gods and spirits as actants, which is necessary as ecology requires to take all elements of a biotope into account and yet is not usually done in religious ecology. It is a welcome alternative to salvage anthropology, which remains prevalent and necessary in this area as elsewhere, but can blind us to certain processes.

Where do we go from here? I propose that one direction is a systematic reflection about the timescale and magnitude of changes in disrupted ecosystems. While Wu and Weller's case studies clearly show how local disruptions unleash potentialities and provoke immediate change and innovation, how can we apply this model on a macro level to think social and religious change over decades or centuries in a whole region?

That destruction and disruption create opportunities and spaces for innovation is in fact self-evident but not always apprehended. The field of Chinese religious history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which has really taken off during the 1990s, started by documenting destruction as a historical fact worthy of study (which was not obvious to many scholars) before realizing the sheer amount of vibrant innovations during this period, especially in Republican times (1910s to 1930s) and since the late 1970s, many of which were facilitated if not made possible by the very destructions. The partial demise of territorial and lineage cults freed resources (time, space, money, energy) for other forms of interaction between humans and spirits. But the destruction itself was a complex mix of events, some of which created deeper, longer-lasting, and less reversible disruptions than others. So what types of disruptions and innovations are really game-changers?

In the case of the core Jiangnan region studied by Wu and Weller, today is not the first time that radical and violent change has spurred religious activities and innovation: the massacres and destructions of the Taiping war (in this area, 1860–1864) generated spirit activity (including massive ghost manifestations), which is all over the records of local life then and in ensuing decades, and so did the Japanese invasion, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. Armies of spirits fought the wars, and gods whose temples were destroyed intervened in various ways, often through mediums but also through visions, dreams, spirit-writing, and more. The massive migration to the cities over the last century also resulted in thriving urban spirit-possession cults (already in 1870s Shanghai), some of them entrepreneurial and sometimes on a large scale; this phenomenon in fact can be observed throughout East Asia. So should we consider what Wu and Weller describe as an iteration in a long history of cycles of destruction and innovation, or as something unprecedented? They argue for the latter hypothesis, showing that bulldozing villages is not comparable to temporary destruction during a war or economic migration, in which cases people have a place to return to or rebuild. I would like to add a second aspect of radical and seemingly irreversible disruption: the demise (since the early twentieth century) of local regulations that used to prescribe very precisely the relations between humans, ritual specialists, and spirits (Goossaert 2013).

I also read Wu and Weller's remarks on the burying or drying of the canals (and, I may add, their poisoning) that structured Jiangnan society until a few decades ago as an invitation to look more systematically at the landscape as the locus of religion and how it may change radically and forever. One thinks of course of the boat people (*yumin*) so numerous in this area whose recent forced settling on land creates religious hybridization between their rituals and cults (where deceased spirit mediums feature very prominently) and those of the land-dwelling locals (Zhu 2019). But the ritual consequences of landscape alterations go much further; we are after all talking of a society when one has to read a village (walking through it) to understand its ritual and symbolical life, with flows (of water, energy and resources) controlled by buildings (temples, pagodas, bridges, graves) but also rocks, mounds, and groves that are home to gods and spirits (on village *fengshui* groves and the people's fight to keep them, see Coggins et al. 2018). Trees are as much actants as animals, humans and gods. Villages being urbanized overnight lost their trees along with their temples (the former were often in the courtyard of the latter). Of course, urban planners—the apex predators in that socioreligious ecology—create parks as well as new temples; one of them (replacing what was previously a Buddhist monastery) at Shangfangshan in suburban Suzhou (Berezkin and Goossaert 2020) is actually one of the most active places of worship in the whole region, with dozens of spirit mediums bringing their clients every day. Like other thriving pilgrimage sites in this region, Shangfangshan has a long history of serving as a nature sanctuary as well as cult center, but because it is a sanctuary of things uprooted elsewhere (icons, trees, and more), it is a place of ritual innovation.

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5 IX 20

Urbanization is one of the most typical manifestations of modernization in China. Urban space is rapidly encroaching on adjacent rural areas and the traditional lifestyles of village communities in them. The practical problem and social consequences led by this process, as well as its potential theoretical challenges, have attracted the attention of scholars from different disciplines. Most studies have focused on the "explicit" aspects on macroscopic scale, such as environmental conservation, population mobility, class differentiation, and social anomie. Few notice the details of daily lives, for instance, how people embody and adapt to such unexpected or accumulated changes of their living environment, and situate their individual consciousness inside the tense of state development progress, let alone the "implicit" world inhabited by the gods and ghosts living with them for generations. Weller and Wu's article sensitively noticed this aspect. Based on intensive field

works in three cities in Southern Jiangsu, they rediscover the multilayered interactions among modernization, humans, and spirits. They also attempt to overcome the limitation of discussing social questions by unveiling and understanding the reconstruction of ecosystem in China's contemporary transformation and the potential of various cultural creations.

This article provides new perspectives in many ways. Usually field researchers would set up a precondition of "society" (or "local society"). However, by applying Ingold's "ecologies of life" concept and taking Latour's position of ontological anthropology (Kohn 2015), Weller and Wu directly jump from phenomenon to ecosystem and skip the constraints of intermediate categories like "society," "culture," and "religion" from the very beginning. They suggest that the proliferation of spirit mediums and their clients in Changzhou, Suzhou, and Changshu since the 1990s has been in fact a direct consequence of the disturbance of ecosystems by rapid urbanization. Ghosts beneath the ground and gods in temples have become "homeless" as victims of large-scale land expropriation and demolition. They then begin to attack and harass human beings frequently, by either making them sick or by taking over their bodies to seek solace. Here ghosts and gods exist as subjective actors of the ecosystem rather than as "religion" objectified by social practice or as "symbols" dichotomized and corresponding to secular "society."

Another more important and significant discovery of Weller and Wu is the new symbiosis formed by official temples and gods, ghosts, spirit mediums, *xiangtou* (incense heads), and Taoist priests. In particular, the authors point out that the official action of rebuilding temples and recruiting gods led by authorities, who are the urban planners and executors, should be considered as an ecosystem that is "heterogeneous and paralleled" rather than "isomorphic and balanced." However, from the perspective of ANT (Latour 1999), the appearance of ghosts, the prosperous spirit medium businesses, and the weird worship methods, such as sacrifices with cigarettes, putting glasses on gods, and more, intertwined with official planning and management, standardization of temples, and spirits and rituals, form a new ecological order based on interdependences, mutual support, and close cooperation. As for how this "unplanned symbiosis" is achieved, the multiple identities and social functions of incense heads may provide key clues. Unlike *fushou* (felicity heads) and *luzhu* (stove heads), who take turns representing communities or lineages to organize and host rituals, incense heads stand on the "ruins of villages" and play a role of "agent" or "middleman" between the human-deities and individual-state relationships. In other words, incense heads actually become professional brokers of a religious market. In some way, they fill in the emptiness after the bulldozers and happen to be the replacement of the collapsed communal rituals and the successor of the failed traditional local elites, who have always been the effective agency between the human-deities and individual-state interaction.

Undoubtedly, this article is a novel study that attempts to break away from classical models and routines of Chinese religions and, therefore, is theoretically and empirically inspiring. The authors choose the concept of "ecosystem" over society, and hence jump out of Durkheimian hypothesis of the integration of religion and society, as well as the paradigm of "sacred/profane." It also effectively avoids the petrifying understanding of Chinese religions and the dichotomy and opposites of bureaucratic and "nonbureaucratic models (Hymes 2002) after Marx Weber. Therefore, the paper liberates the relationship among humanity, the supernaturural, and the state from the "structural-functional" paradigm and places it into a practical process that allows equal subjectivities. Weller has previously proposed a concept of "weak states and strong spirits" to illustrate the significance of the nonbureaucratic religious factors against the bureaucratic pantheon (Weller 1996). While in this case it is the state that tried to strengthen control, the potential spiritual power and heterogeneous worship styles appeared, interacting with the state and constructing a new religious ecology. This finding not only vividly demonstrates the trend of contemporary religion development, in which "embodiment" and "religionization" (Weller 2017) are both opposite and complementary to each other but also provides us a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the diversity and vitality of Chinese religions. At one end of the distribution axis of the plural ecologies of Chinese religions can be "making saints" (Ownby, Goossaert, and Zhe 2016) under intensifying state power, and at the other end can be the occasional and flexible "practicing spirits."

However, perhaps because of the attempt to break the constraints of "society," the authors do not provide the necessary context of the social basis of the presumed "original undisturbed ecosystem," and thus readers may fail to understand the specific social roles of Ms. Gu, Mr. Chen, and the Taoist priest in these three cases, as well as the "actor network" in which they are embedded. For example, the article only introduces the noninstitutional character of Mr. Chen, which makes him a spirit medium, but ignores other factors that shaped him as a complete "rational person." Hence the reader can only see him as a contextualized product of "the yin world of spirits in chaos" (阴间乱了), but it is difficult to realize that besides the fact that he makes full use of multiple identities to achieve "action maximizing" (Ke 2020), he may be more complicated practical motivation. In addition, in a longer historical perspective there is continuity in changes, which the authors also admit. The essence of these changes showed in this research, including the categorization of ghosts and gods and their relationships to humans, are still in the categories of "tradition." No matter how the methods of worshiping change, the targets always include resistance, obedience, and reconstruction of orders. Furthermore, from the view of "continuum" (Ke and Derui 2017) of Chinese religions, besides spirit possession and personal shaman healing, rituals surrounding the new temples are very likely to recreate new communality (Goossaert and Palmer 2011:241–270), which could be a new social organization, even a new society.

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The Strangest of Strangers

Dislocation and the disruption of preexisting lifeways are not a bug in high-modernist urban planning, they are a feature. By transforming the environment in which people live, the planner seeks to reshape the individual into something new, a citizen of tomorrow.

But as urban theorists (De Certeau 1984; Holston 1989) repeatedly point out, the truth of the matter is not so simple as placing people in deluxe apartments in the sky and watching them move on up. People live in complex interconnected worlds, and alterations spark a cascade of unexpected changes—anxieties and hopes, to be sure, but also the death and birth of a host of other, interrelated beings with whom they share a world. It is this change, and what it engenders, that Weller and Wu examine here.

Urban ecology has long pointed out the unexpected intrusion of different nonhumans into the planned environment: foxes in London, boars in Berlin, and, of course, rats everywhere. Walking my dog in a highly manicured Singaporean public park one morning, the two of us nearly blundered into a cobra, hood raised, standing like a black flower on the pavement. Such urban ecologies are only surprising to those who assume that the urban is somehow exempt from nonhuman intrusions. Anne Rademacher and K. Shivaramakrishnan (2017), along with a host of other scholars (Harms 2016) call on us to examine critically ways of seeing nature in the city, and especially the blind spots that such ways of seeing bring about.

Along with these studies comes a new body of literature that also calls on us to see how we intersect with other beings in the wake of the changes and, often, devastation that our world faces. Here, new life emerges in the ashes of an old—a postindustrial "blasted landscape" is not entirely a wasteland, but rather a place that offers the possibility of new connections, if not restoration (Tsing 2015).

But in pointing out the blind spots of planners and urban theorists, the notion of "human and nonhuman" nonetheless often contains its own blind spots. What connections need reforming? Here is where Weller and Wu make their intervention. As formerly rural residents relocate to seemingly sterile urban high-rises, they discover their "new" housing to be already occupied—by ghosts, what elsewhere I have termed "the ghosts of the new city" (Johnson 2014). In Weller and Wu's argument, these ghosts are not metaphors for the anxieties of a transformed life or the haunting longing of a life past, rather, they are a new part of a new ecology. By pulling from theoretical models that extend the notion of ecology beyond either the biological or the political, Weller and Wu incorporate all the beings that inhabit our ontological worlds, whether they themselves coexist with them, and rightfully integrate these new spirits into the ecology of these new urban zones.

They do so via looking at urban mediums. Elsewhere in Asia, urban spirit cults are thriving (see Morris 2000; Salemink 2007; Taylor 2004), and we can decisively put to bed the often-repeated myth that modernity disenchants. But often discussions of modernity's enchantments present us with a too-functionalist narrative: spirits are anxiety, modernity, capitalism, anomie, isolation. In the Comaroffs' (1999) "occult economies," for instance, all the richness of the South African occult turns out to be the ordinary Moloch of the neoliberal market.

Such approaches run the risk of reducing the lived worlds of our interlocutors to our own. Weller and Wu, on the other hand, show how ghosts are caught just as humans are in the grip of history and modernity, resentment and desire, and the arm of the state. Here, experience is not reduced to a ready-made story (with its ready-made villains: the economist, the planner, the state, the war), but rather history, displacement, and the lived environment are something that affects us all. Indeed, ghosts point toward this history and its assumed lack in the planner's view: one's neighbor is no longer the mother of your childhood playmate but someone new and strange. So it is with ghosts—in the wake of a history-free, future-oriented urbanity, new ghosts emerge to put the myth of the blank slate to rest. And they do so violently. As "invasive species" emerge into altered landscapes with dramatic effect, the "new" ghosts of the new city clash and conflict with the new residents; new forms of coexisting must be made. Here, I am reminded of Heonik Kwon's (2008) strikingly sensitive look at ghosts in Vietnam. For Kwon, ghosts are a variety of stranger; they may come from afar but have ended up here, like us. And like expatriates or strangers, they must be accommodated. This is in a sense what I see Weller and Wu's spirit mediums as doing, as acknowledging a new environment in which all are strange and in which we all must learn to get along in ways that we did not when we lived under different circumstances. Couples should not argue so loudly in adjoining apartments, smoky stoves must be aired out, and dogs should be picked up after. In Kwon's case, a ghost of an enemy soldier haunts because its resting place has been urinated on; in Weller and Wu's case, the very weight of a high-rise building disturbs the wartime dead.

One challenge and question to put to Weller and Wu would be the nature of certainty and barriers to knowledge. Strangers and ghosts are both things that hide behind a veil (Kwon 2008). They speak strange languages and require translators, and their words are always subject to (mis)interpretation. A network often implies an interwoven whole, but networks that contain the otherworldly have strands that extend into darkness. Elements of Weller and Wu's account suggest this—eyeglasses are called for, then not, for instance. Where are spirits doubted, reconfigured; when do they lie, deceive (in Thai, spirits *lohk*, trick)? What other things are like spirits (e.g., strangers), and why?

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"Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits" presents a powerful new framework to map the shifting ecological-cum-spiritual landscapes of contemporary China. Most distinctly, it captures the third dimension of life often forgotten or dismissed by people living in WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies. Jonathan Haidt (2006:181–184) likens such societies to the fictional Flatland—a two-dimensional world composed of the horizontal axis of closeness and the vertical axis of hierarchy, but missing the third axis of divinity. The people Weller and Wu study, on the contrary, seem to operate fully in all three dimensions. Fancy French theories about actor-networks or distributed agency, if plainly rendered, would make a lot of sense to them, whereas they would be quite puzzled by the pronouncement that modern life spells disenchantment.

Weller and Wu stress that the framework of "disturbed ecosystems" does not hold humans to be uniquely blameworthy for disrupting the equilibrium of nature. To do that not only pits humans against nature but also grants them exclusive claim to agency. Instead, all ecosystems are in flux, although some are "disturbed" more rapidly than others. In the region where they conducted their fieldwork, "gods and ghosts, spirit mediums and state regulators, new media and rapid transit, paved roads and high-speed trains, and myriad other agents are interacting to create a new ecosystem." What came before this onslaught was also new, albeit involving a different mix of agents. The hundreds of village temples that have been bulldozed to make way for roads, high-rises, and even shining new temples probably had not all been ancient structures, for there have been too many upheavals in modern Chinese history to allow too many village temples to escape unscathed (Duara 1988; Nedostup 2009).

The authors highlight "the manifestation of latent potentials and the creation of new synergies at moments of ecological disruption" in China's prosperous eastern seaboard in the last two decades. Historians of modern China may profitably extend this method to earlier times to account for certain surprising continuities in a century marked by epistemic breaks, such as the persistence of folk beliefs and practices throughout the Mao years (1949–1976) and their dramatic resurgence in the reform period. There is perhaps no greater ecological disturbance than the Great Leap Forward of 1959–1961 that ended in a devastating famine. While the scholarly attention has been trained on the human and, more recently, environmental tolls, Steve Smith's (2006) study of superstitious rumors reckons with disturbances along the third axis of divinity. He argues that rumors about bizarre, supernatural occurrences were common people's way of registering fear and anxiety about the official proscription of rituals of propitiation and exorcism in the wake of mass deaths. A retailer of rumors was both a furtive critic of disastrous state policy and a guerrilla carrier of a way of life that had been driven underground.

If with approximately 30 million "excess" deaths the Great Leap Forward threw "the yin world of spirits into chaos" and spawned ominous tales of talking toads and chinless ghosts in its wake, then less than 10 years later, whatever latent potentials that were still bottled up would unfurl a terrible beauty: the Cult of Mao. Decades of suppressing "feudal superstitions" coupled with a staunchly atheist ideology spurred a burst of spiritual creativity around the godhead of Mao. As Daniel Leese (2011) and others have documented, the Cult grafted eclectic religious symbols and rituals (including Christian imagery) onto communist doctrines, spread via modern communications technology, and fed on the seemingly limitless resources that only a command economy could muster.

When the Party retreated from radical politics and permitted popular religion to minister to plebeian yearnings for human flourishing, elements of the Mao Cult entered into new synergetic configurations and cross-pollinated with newly revived mantic arts. Visitors to China in the 1990s, for example, were astonished to find talismanic images of Mao dangling from taxicabs' rearview mirrors. In the documentary "Belief" (2006), a village in a remote corner of Gansu rebuilds a temple on the heels of a concatenation of deaths, with communally pooled funds and greenlighted by the county Buddhist association. It is immediately clear that we are witnessing a new species of places of worship coming into being. Above the altar is an enormous garlanded portrait of Mao side by side with smaller ones of the Buddha, Laozi, and a mother goddess. During the desultory opening ceremony that spills out of the temple into shabby tents and open-air shrines, hired Daoists play ritual music, shamanesses chant Buddhist-themed hymns, and the villagers kowtow and burn spirit money and set off firecrackers. No one seems in charge, yet everyone is fed and blessed and entertained. The highlight is a shamaness's recitation that freely mixes Buddhist scriptures, Maoist shibboleths, and marketing patters. The documentary is part of a series called "Italy, Gansu Province." By nicknaming a hardscrabble Chinese village "Italy," director Cong Feng seems to be marveling at a dazzling new growth from the ancient soil of Gansu.

In the disturbed ecosystems of authoritarian and developmentalist China, folk religion has made a comeback in the forms of improvised rituals, syncretic pantheons, and self-styled mediums. Among the last category are also freelance entertainers who routinely impersonate Mao at gala events and wedding banquets, fueling a "rent-a-Mao" cottage industry (Lee 2016). In the United States, religiosity has long thrived in an ecosystem dominated by individualism and consumerism. This is where televangelists, megachurches, and New Age spiritualists have made manifest whatever has lain dormant in the American bloodstream. This is also where a worshiper could imagine herself sitting down for a cup of coffee with God (Luhrmann 2012), with a kind of casual familiarity unimaginable to a Chinese worshiper, although the latter might have no problem with lighting a cigarette for a god.

I may have taken "disturbed ecosystems" in a direction too metaphorical for Weller and Wu, but perhaps I too am only making manifest a latent potential in their theory.

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The dizzying transformations of religion in China in recent times are maze-like in complexity. Faced with a disorienting flux of changes, anthropologists sometimes find themselves at a loss to account for them, both in the actual world and in the theoretical realm. Even our interlocutors on occasion run out of words to explain these complicated religious phenomena.

Weller and Wu's account of the overnight urbanization of displaced nonmigrants, who lived for long on the urban edge, describes transitions on an even larger scale than anthropologists usually encounter. In a series of urban plans and spatial governance policies executed in the current century in southern Jiangsu, their old houses, neighborhoods, and, indeed, the whole community, were demolished, and residents were relocated to modern high-rise condominiums. Instead of old canals, there are now new highways connecting them to places they hardly ever visit. Their religion, in its communal, temporal, and spatial forms, faces unprecedented ruptures brought about by modernity and urbanization. How do we understand this transformation?

Weller and Wu tellingly analyze this change through a framework of "disturbed ecosystems" rather than of "ruptures." Based on theories of an "ecology of life" (Ingold 2000), "plural ecologies" (Sprenger and Großmann 2018), or an "ecology of practices" (Stengers2005), religious change is conceived as a complex assemblage of synergies and interactions intertwined in human and nonhuman agents with no assumptions about equilibrium or about the separation of nature and culture. The authors deftly navigate the urbanized outskirts of three cities in southern Jiangsu to provide a general portrait of popular religion there today. They show how, following a process of abrupt urbanization, "latent potentials" (spirits) were summoned or reappeared, new networks of temples and spirit mediums formed, and novel orderings of deities evolved. The captivating ethnography illustrates how the visible and invisible are intertwined. Their new ecological approach contributes to a valuable and long-overdue understanding of a complex web of religious phenomena in China, which are inseparably bound and difficult to unwind.

I would like to raise two points about this rich article. The first is a question, the second a comment. Most studies on religious change in China (Chau 2005*b*; F. Yang 2006; M. Yang 2007, to name only a few) emphasize the dominating role of the state. Weller and Wu do not seem to hold this view: they consider that "a disturbed ecosystem analysis . . . enables us to understand the assemblage created by the combined agency of deities and temples, urban planners, and . . . officials, . . . ex-farmers and new migrants. . . . without making assumptions about the *primacy* of one arena over another" (emphasis mine). However, even from their description, it is difficult to deny that the strong state either provides an ordering frame or exerts, covertly or overtly, its power in the background. As the authors show, the synergies between the mediums and the Buddhist temples, and the new order of statues on the temple altars, are encouraged or arranged by the state. I wonder how the importance of state power can be situated within the authors' ecological framework.

Second, and more importantly, I consider that this article epitomizes a changing picture of contemporary religion that is applicable not only to Jiangsu but also to many other places in China and perhaps the world. Traditional religion usually has its coherent cultural values and commemorates historical and community events. It maintains social order and hierarchy. Religion in Weller and Wu's article, however, does not seem to hold fast to eternity anymore; it breaks out of the old social order and reconfigures new networks. For example, the statue of Scholar Wang, a drowned ghost-like deity is, in the article's figure 4, larger than the carvings of the other traditional deities. The religion the authors revealingly depict is marked by malleability, transience, and even ephemerality. As we see, people now worship deities with cigarettes, which are usually offered to ghosts, put glasses on the faces of the deities one year and remove them the next for no clear reason, and readily rearrange the sequence of deity statues following some minor disagreements. Religion now conveys a sense of immediacy and evanescence. Confusing and fragmentary as it may seem at first glance, it is probably consistent with the world we inhabit now—a transitory world selected by government officials' volatile whims, disordered by rapid changes of infrastructure, and flooded by fast-moving images and newsfeeds from digital media and an ever-evolving array of new technologies. These fractured religious practices are closer to what we experience every day. They signal not only that we have become gradually distant from the past but also a shift in the way that we look at ourselves and at our relation with the world in the twenty-first century—subjects that must increasingly command our attention in the future.

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In their paper, Weller and Wu showed us the changes and innovations occurred in Chinese interaction with deities and ghosts in suburb area under overnight urbanization in southern Jiangsu province of China. Inspired by some insightful ecological anthropology works, the authors developed the theoretical concept of "a disturbed ecosystem," which they used to

analyze how these changes and innovations happened under China's rapid urbanization. According to the authors, in a disturbed ecosystem parallel plural ecologies exist with nonequilibrium relationships. The ecologies and their relationship would change when sudden and drastic changes happen in the ecosystem, and innovations would be created from these changes. Finally, all those changes lead to the ecosystem's change. With three cases from their field site, the authors showed us two mechanisms of change created in the disturbed ecosystem: one is that some previously latent potentials would be realized in new environment. Another is that new synergies would be created after a drastic change of ecosystem. In the first case, a local spirit medium helped a ghost-attacked woman with diagnosis that her illness was caused by a ghost whose tomb was destroyed under the city's urbanization construction. In the second case, a medium established a big network consisting of his disciples and other ritual specialists as cooperators, which relied on modern convenient communication and transportation. In addition, some mediums created some new forms for worship under new conditions. Through the two cases, Weller and Wu suggest that "a disturbed ecosystem allows previously unrealized potentials to surface and thrive." The third case, as also partly with the second case, showed that how, under local government's modernist agenda for urbanization, the newly emerging environment made space for symbiotic cooperation and interaction between the local mediums and the official temples.

Obviously, the authors focused their attention on the "change" aspect of an ecosystem—the change of the system, the change of each ecology, and their relationships. Theoretically, they avoided assumptions of equilibrium or stable state in any forms, not only the binary of culture and nature in early enological anthropology, or a moving equilibrium with a climax state, like Leach's theory, but also that they are not limited to the concept on the conflict between ecologies in a system, like Latour's theory, since that cannot show the change of each ecology itself along with the system's change. Weller and Wu developed the "change" theory of ecology further by establishing the new concept of "a disturbed ecosystem" with constant change, negotiations, and compromises. Finally, I would like to share a few words about my confusion on the theory, especially on the dynamic of an ecosystem. I wonder what essentially makes potentials be manifest and change happen? Potentials, in the paper, could be realized under new conditions. Seemly, both potentials and conditions are random or accidental, like a disturbed ghost, usage of some new worship forms with cigarettes as offering or the eyeglasses for the deities, or the better modern transportation. Even the realization of potentials seems random. For me, there may exist two kinds of potentials: one is at random, another is necessary. And the two kinds of potentials are not mutually exclusive but coexisting. Then, we may furthermore say that ecology theory could include structuralism, as things could be both changing and stable, or both historical and structural. I would like to supplement this idea with a few facts from my field site in Shanghai suburbs, which is not far from Weller and Wu's site. The situations of two areas are almost the same, like the environment of overnight urbanization, the spirit mediums, and their interaction with official temples, and more. But in Shanghai, all these are based on the worship of Tata. "Tata" is a word from the Shanghai dialect; it originally meant an ancestor of a family. But in fact, Tata simultaneously has at least three meanings for the local people: Tata is an ancestor, a god, and a medium who is often possessed by god. In the ritual documents of early time, Tata always was a family surname, like Tata of the Zhu family, 朱家太太, which means this Tata was once born in the Zhu family in history. So Tata is recognized both as a god and a historical human being for the locals, not like transcendental God in Christianity. The Tata concept reflects that local people pursue a kinship or close relationship with god, which makes the family or village community protected. Even after the statues of Tata have been moved to some official temples and standardized by the Daoist or Buddhist clergies, the locals still call these gods Tata and believe that Tata can constantly reincarnate in the local community history forever, from generation to generation. In some official temples, Tata's birthday constitutes the annual ritual days of the temple. Precisely because of the worship for Tata, all things (ordinary believers, mediums, rituals, building statues and temples for Tata) are related and happen. And at the same time, the local worship structure is compatible with all kinds of innovations and changes.

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What are the stakes and what are the costs of placing relations among humans and ghosts in the framework of an "ecological system?" We might as well ask what are the costs of the procedures, in place since the eighteenth century, of placing social relations within totalizing systemic frameworks: society, politics, and religion. The advantages for Weller and Wu's ethnography seem obvious. Framing lightening-fast urbanization and large-scale spiritual innovation within the systematic whole of an "ecology" allows the authors to posit a correlation between disturbance of the system (replacement of villages with clustered high-rises) and innovation to the system (transformation of populations of spirit mediums, temples, and god statues). This analytic allows the ethnographers to consider very diverse circumstances within a single frame: the ghost of a woman killed during the Sino-Japanese War, the emergence of a new network of spirit mediums, the reconsolidation of hundreds of small temples into large complexes dominated by a modernizing ethos, the reorganization of a population of god statues. The unifying power of this analytic—disturbance on one level of the system creates "niches" for innovation on another level—is evident.

Reading on, however, one begins to wonder what kind of analysis this is. Weller and Wu create a generalized correlation between features bundled under "disturbance" and features bundled

under "innovation," this procedure absolving them from working out any specific relational links. The story of the ghost from the Sino-Japanese War is instructive. "There is nothing unusual about this story," the authors observe. "Ghosts have attacked people for longer than we know in China, and this method of exorcising them has long been typical for the region." Rather than lingering on the specifics of the case, Weller and Wu say they are interested in an "epidemic" of ghost attacks. "It is as if the entire rural world of just a decade or so ago had been folded into the ground and crushed under the weight of new buildings and roads, occasionally erupting angrily up from the depths." There is so much here that is promising. Ghosts themselves can be used as analytical tools—independently of totalizing concepts like "ecology" or even "society"—because ghosts signal hidden links between shared histories of loss or trauma (such as genocide perpetrated by Japanese invaders) and personal histories that inspire anxieties and aspirations (such as those that spurred Mrs. Yan to seek out a spirit medium). The ghosts might not be "unusual," but they can illuminate specific links between histories of violence, disturbed landscapes, and personal traumas that shape relations among humans in the present situation of massive transformation. Weller and Wu are both superb ethnographers, and their instinct seems to be to bring such possibilities to light. In their hands, the systematizing framework of "ecology" does not hide these possibilities, but it does glance past them. Instead of the specific relational forms that connect histories, materialities, and psychical processes, this framework fixes on species and populations: of ghosts, of mediums, of temples, of god statutes. In consequence, we are left without a specific analytic that can link the world "folded into the ground" with the world that seems to be erupting from its depths.

"The idea of an ecological approach for us is . . . emphatically not a metaphor," the authors write, "because a metaphor would imply that a distinct social world was somehow 'like' the natural world in its interactions." This denial is important for the authors because it allows them to think of biological processes and social processes in one system, thus overcoming the nature/culture divide—as though inflating one of the key concepts from our understanding of nature into a totalizing whole to is enough to displace the wide-branching and deep-rooted conceptual forest of nature/culture. It soon becomes apparent that while Weller and Wu might not conceive of ecology as a metaphor, it repeatedly functions as a metaphor in their arguments. This is true when speaking of latencies, such as the possibility of drawing parallels between incense and cigarettes, which is "only occasionally realized, just as certain phenotypes will not appear unless environmental conditions change." "Unlike the cigarettes, some innovations die out again quickly, just as not every plant that germinates in a disturbed environment will propagate successfully." And it is true when speaking of one population replacing another, such as a synergy between spirit mediums and temple-based clergy replacing an earlier alignment between of spirit mediums and Daoists: "This is the same process that we see when biological studies of disturbed ecosystems talk about one succession state replacing another." Despite the authors' intentions, the concept of ecology clearly works out in practice as a metaphor for the ecological disciplines that focus on biological processes. This is a clue that "ecology" in this article, severed in practice from specifiable connections to biological relations, is a proxy for another even more familiar concept. Other clues also emerge. A reader hoping for a thoroughgoing revision of the received conceptual foundations of our analysis of social relations will be disappointed to find all the familiar cornerstones—politics, religion, the state—slotting into their assigned places. In the end, it appears that the totalizing system of "ecology" is another name for the totalizing system of "society," of which these other concepts are building blocks. Why should this be disappointing? For reasons that are well known and frequently attested. The concept of society and the concept of the individual work in synchrony to privilege entities, groups, and populations over relations: the specific, differentiating, generative soil of the discipline of anthropology.[25]

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> *Living humans are* yang*, ghosts and spirits are* yin*. . . . Therefore, when* yin *triumphs, the ghostly creatures join together to create horrors so profound that no words can describe it. This is called the arising of the* yin*, and the decline of the* yang*. It causes rule and order to be lost and endangers the living.* (Wang 1992:46.50–51)

The authors believed themselves to be living in such a moment. The yin energies of the ghostly world were triumphing over the yang energies of the living; the world was being overrun by ghosts.

With relatively minor alterations in wording, these sentences could have been uttered in parts of contemporary China. But this particular quotation dates to the second century of the common era in China. Another period of radical social upheaval. And another time when ghosts were seen to be overwhelming the living (Puett 2019).

In an earlier anthropology, focused on functionalist frameworks, the kinds of upheavals seen in the second century of China would have been understood as the breakdown of an earlier order in which institutions had functioned properly to maintain an equilibrium. The same model was used to discuss the shift from "traditional" societies to "modern" ones. And, of course, the same model has been used as well to describe the kinds of rapid urbanization seen today in China.

This brings us to the outstanding article by Weller and Wu. Weller and Wu are asking how we can understand change—including dramatic change—without falling back on a functionalist

25. Recent iterations of this point include Strathern (2020) and Lebner's (2017) synthesis of Strathern's previous work.

paradigm based on assumptions of equilibrium. In the approach proposed by Weller and Wu, everything should be seen as interrelated and in a dynamic flux. But this dynamic should not be explicated in terms of an assumed equilibrium. Once we begin thinking in terms of such nonequilibrium ecologies, Weller and Wu argue, we can explore change in terms of the ways that latent potentialities come into play and the counterintuitive trajectories that these emerging configurations take.

There are, of course, indigenous ways of talking about these issues. We have already encountered a bit of the wording from China above—a wording that echoes many of the quotations offered by Weller and Wu. Everything that exists does so in a web of interrelationships, and the dynamic of these interrelationships can take on particular trajectories. These dynamics are often spoken of in terms of energies (qi), which can be mapped as various interrelations between yang and yin energies. As our second-century actors articulate, and Weller and Wu's mediums reiterate, a world overrun by ghosts is a world overrun by the energies of yin—the dead overwhelming the living. And in such circumstances, work must be undertaken to alter the trajectories.

But what is the source of the problem, and what sorts of trajectories are being sought? Radcliffe-Brown (1965:158–160), the theorist Weller and Wu are critiquing, famously saw indigenous ritual theory from China as being functionalist avant la lettre. I have argued that this is a mistaken understanding (Puett 2005), but the mistake is telling. Radcliffe-Brown too saw the world as a series of endless interactions and constant change, so the problem for him was to explain why there was still stability in spite of this change. One of the answers, he thought, must be that in traditional societies institutions functioned to maintain that stability—exactly, as he read it, indigenous ritual theory from China was arguing as well.

But as we have already seen hinted at above, many of the second-century actors saw stability as the problem. Stability would be seen as blockage, preventing the yang energies from responding to the yin. Seeing the world as one of constant interactions hardly implies a functionalist conclusion. The mistake of Radcliffe-Brown, as well as the many approaches in his wake, has been to assume that functioning institutions will inherently lead to stability.

As Weller and Wu are arguing, that is the wrong assumption. It presupposes what should be defined as order and stability and thus prevents the analyst from seeing the complexity of the dynamics in play. Weller and Wu, by emphasizing emergent potentialities, take away the assumptions of equilibrium and its loss that otherwise haunt our understandings.

To return to the second century: the text I quoted above was associated with a millenarian movement known as Great Peace, which led a major revolt against the Han empire. A relatively contemporaneous millenarian movement was the Celestial Masters, which formed an autonomous community based on the revelations of the high god Laozi. Both sought a rejection of existing institutions and rituals, which were seen as the cause of the proliferation of the ghosts. The movements played a significant role in the fall of the empire. A functionalist would label this as disorder; for the Celestial Masters, it was the opposite.

Turning to the contemporary world of China: for all of the extraordinary dislocation of the past two decades in the southern Jiangsu region, the response is thus far, from the point of view of many of the actors, working. The yin energies are being contained, and the state is successfully (even if often behind the scenes) supporting the specialists in their work of containing the ghosts. There are no major millenarian movements emerging, and the state appears relatively secure, so far. But at what point does one see the emergence of movements like the Great Peace and Celestial Masters calling for a rejection of existing institutions and rituals?

The power of Weller and Wu is that they have developed an approach that does not presuppose the trajectories of change. This is an approach that allows us to understand the complexities of activities in the southern Jiangsu region, just as it does the activities of the second century. And in both cases to explore trajectories that break from our assumptions of what constitutes order and equilibrium. One person's yang is another person's yin. And ghosts are never easily controlled.

Reply

We are grateful to *Current Anthropology* for having compiled these very thoughtful comments from a set of accomplished scholars in geography, history, literature, and religious studies, as well as in anthropology. We were especially pleased to see how many of the commenters have chosen to explore various directions inspired by our analysis of changes in contemporary urban Suzhou as disturbances in a nonequilibrium ecosystem. The questions they raise and the ideas they explore go well beyond what we have been able to address in our article. In the latter part of this reply, we will try to walk some of the way with the commenters to continue the process of thinking through the issues and possibilities that our approach might open up.

Before we turn to those lines of possibility, however, we want to discuss several of the comments that raise important issues of disagreement. All of these address our underlying project (in which we are far from alone) of trying to move away from the Durkheimian approaches that have long dominated in the social sciences and especially from the key concept of "society." As we read them, those critical comments fall into two broad camps. The first suggests that we may have been too radical and have thereby given up some of the strengths of earlier approaches. They ask how our nonequilibrium ecological approach might more directly address issues of political power or social structure, for instance. The second camp reads us in just the opposite way, as not having done anything new at all beneath the surface but just to have snuck "society" back in using other words. Let us take up each of these in turn, before returning below to the broader group of comments that suggest new directions.

Let us begin with Huang Xiangchun, who recognizes that we are offering what he calls a new perspective that suggests

alternatives to the old categories of society, culture, and religion. Nevertheless, parts of his comment call for a return to those very categories. He points out, for instance, that rituals surrounding the innovative temples we document often create new forms of communality that could constitute a "new society." This is a classic Durkheimian formulation, which we have avoided for two reasons. First, it can easily slip back into functionalist assumptions of equilibrium. When he says, for instance, that we have not sufficiently documented a presumed "original undisturbed ecosystem," he is taking the position that change is a problematic move away from equilibrium. One of the advantages of our approach, we hope, is exactly in *not* making such an assumption, leaving us open to think about types of flux that may have occurred throughout Chinese history. Second, by placing the focus squarely on society, his suggestion relegates other parts of the ecosystem to the background—from the way that water shapes life in the lower Yangzi region to the presence of particular spirits—and thus makes it more difficult for us to grasp latent potentials for change as well as possible new symbioses. The comment by Chris Coggins, in contrast, singles out a "spectral ecosystem" from our paper that nicely solves the problem that Huang has referred to. In Coggins's reading, spectrality, together with all the other "social elements," forms a regenerative motor for our "open-ended continuum of change."

One of Stephan Feuchtwang's thoughtful points also tries to push us toward a classic explanation for religious change, particularly where spirit mediums and healing are involved: the medical epidemiology of anxiety in an aging and displaced population. It is not that we consider such things irrelevant. The reason we have not moved toward such an explanation is because it reduces change in temple practices to a secondary effect of anxiety. Why begin by ignoring what the people themselves say is the cause: the yin world is in chaos?

Most of Feuchtwang's comment, however, is directed toward the problem of power and agency. He worries that an approach open to relations among all kinds of things can easily lose sight of the fact that some actors simply have more power, that agency is unequally distributed. Thus, he points out that the initial disturbance was the result of actions initiated by urban planners and developers who affected the change in fundamental ways. Wei-ping Lin similarly asks what room our approach has for a discussion of state power. This is not an unusual critique of any approach that emphasizes networks of relations, but it is nevertheless an important one—and quite obviously so in a situation like China, where temples and mediums like the ones we discuss have sometimes been treated so harshly in waves of political upheavals. Feuchtwang suggests what might be a plausible political mechanism behind the changes we document, based on his extensive research elsewhere in China: that urban community cadres are driven by policy directives aimed at creating local self-managed "small communities," which might include temples. By way of response, let us take a little space to discuss what local community leaders had to say, and hopefully illustrate how issues of unequal power can still be incorporated into our approach.

In 2019, we were able to interview a selection of local cadres in the housing estates where our Suzhou informants had been resettled. Just as Feuchtwang would expect, those leaders were filled with plans for local nongovernmental organizations and other kinds of services that would create proper "small communities." None of them, however, ever mentioned temples of any kind—not the nearby, large Gaodian Temple that we discuss in the article and also not the small shrines that we knew to exist, more or less out of sight, in some of the apartment blocks.

In contrast, other political actors were quick to take the credit both for the destruction of all the many older temples, and for the construction of the few large new ones, but never emphasized the construction of "small communities." The most crucial person, according to almost everyone who knew something about the early history of the project, was the vice chair of the Religious Affairs Bureau (which had recently been combined into the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party); he finally allowed us to interview him in 2019. As he explained it, the initial urban planning for Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) had no space for religion—not just no physical space set aside, but no cognitive space in the minds of the planners. They wanted to build a world city like Paris or Singapore and saw "popular beliefs as backward, stale, and inappropriate to a modern industrialized region . . . something to be covered over by the modern." They tore down a hundred old temples with no thought of replacement, he told us.

Yet, he said, this policy failed. "If we tore down a temple during the day, they rebuilt it at night; if we tore one down in front, they just built another one behind." People were putting up temples faster than he could tear them down. "By 2006, we had probably torn down 300 temples, and there had only been 200 to begin with!" That is when they switched strategies to one that would support new temples to replace the old ones but attempt to make them more "modern" by standardizing them and make them more upscale. As this official phrased the new conclusion they finally reached: "Why should we just be building foreign culture in SIP? Why do we still have the Cultural Revolution's attitude to traditional culture? We can't get rid of the culture of the Chinese people (中华民族文化)."

Feuchtwang's suggestion about the importance of policies on "small communities" is not irrelevant here, but it does not touch directly on any of the changes in temple practice or spirit mediumship. This official's version of the policy change shows first of all that lived politics is not simply the story of an unequal pushing match between abstractions like "the state" and "the people." Even in this small story, we see direct agents of the Communist Party acting in quite different and uncoordinated ways. There is no state as an abstract entity. We can go on to think about why so many temples were rebuilt. In every case we can document (and we suspect in every single case), the reason was not to create or recreate

social cohesion (although cohesions certainly happened), not to challenge "the state," and not even to maintain tradition. People rebuilt the temples because the gods demanded it through the proven voices of their spirit mediums. Even the leaders of the Religious Affairs Bureau, who were certainly no fans of spirit mediums, had to change their plans as a result. That is, by thinking about the ecosystem more broadly, including its invisible parts like the agency of the gods, we can better understand what actually happened in this region and even better understand the implementation of policy. We do not think these dynamics could be captured as well by beginning with categories of the state or society, or by reducing divine voices to mere refractions of underlying social or psychological causes. The ideas of a nonequilibrium ecosystem and disturbance ecology do not prevent us, however, from recognizing that not all agents can affect the system in equal ways. Some agents may have more power than others (including both gods and urban planners), but it is still the collective actions of multiple forces that dynamically shape this open system.

Perhaps this story is a good way to transition to Eric Mueggler's comment, which reads us in a way almost exactly the opposite of Feuchtwang, Huang, and Lin. While those three imply that we may have gone too far in sacrificing more Durkheimian concepts of society and politics, Mueggler understands us instead to be putting old wine in new bottles by repackaging "society" under a new name. The keystone of his critique is the assertion that our use of "nonequilibrium ecosystem" is merely a metaphor, in spite of our protests to the contrary. The point is crucial because if it is a metaphor taken from biology, then the split between nature and culture underlies our entire argument and there is nothing theoretically new, just a disguised reiteration of the same old categories.

In his thoughtful comment, Mueggler supports his argument by quoting several statements from our article that use a "just as" grammatical structure, which he reads as metaphor. For one example, we write that "some innovations die out again quickly, just as not every plant that germinates in a disturbed environment will propagate successfully" (see his comment for more details). Yet the construction "just as" does not usually mark metaphors in English. Instead, it makes a claim of equivalence: we are anthropologists, just as Mueggler is. That is, these are not metaphors in the usual sense.

There is actually a deeper issue here, however, and we are grateful to Mueggler for bringing it up. What, after all, is the difference between a metaphor and an equivalence? There is something metaphorical about any claim of equivalence. That is, when we say that Mueggler, Weller, and Wu are all anthropologists—or even that they are all anthropologists in the lineage of Emily Martin—we are not claiming that they or their versions of anthropology are "the same" as each other in any fundamental sense. No two pencils are the same either. Rather, any claim of equivalence is a construction that emphasizes some similarities and plays down some differences.

There are several different ways we can construct claims that two things are the same (see Seligman and Weller 2019). Based very loosely on C. S. Peirce's distinctions between firstness, secondness, and thirdness, we could say that they share a fundamental quality that really is communal (like Mueggler and Weller's memory of walking around Cologne together when this paper was first presented), or we could say that crucial features of them repeat over time (the way an iteration of a ritual can be considered a repetition of an earlier performance), or we could make a new kind of connection that lets us see a relationship that we had not considered before (all the world is a stage, or life is a bowl of cherries). This last case is what people usually mean by metaphor, but note that, contrary to what Mueggler implies, it need not always maintain the separateness of the categories. The "all the world" and "a stage" may become utterly separate things again after we watch *As You Like It* (the way Mueggler thinks nature and culture do in our article), but it is equally possible that we never see the world or stages the same way again. That is, even if we broaden the definition of metaphor beyond what we did in the article—broaden it enough to include the kind of equivalence that Mueggler cites—we can see that such a usage still does not lock us into the original categories (of nature and culture in this case). Instead, it opens a potential for change.

Mueggler goes on to assert that this particular metaphor privileges "entities, groups, and populations over relations." Certainly, in its biological forms, ecology can do that in the form of population ecology. Yet nothing in the underlying concept forces it to do so. Ecology in principle begins precisely from relations (to use the Strathernian language that Mueggler favors in his comment) and does not require an essentializing reduction to groups and populations. We are happy that Mueggler recognizes our "instinct . . . to bring such possibilities to light," but we also understand this to have been enabled by our understanding of nonequilibrium ecosystems, rather than something we managed in spite of it.

Let us turn at this point to some of the many productive questions and observations that other commenters brought up, building on the approach in our article. Unlike Mueggler, but perhaps more along the same line as Feuchtwang, Judith Farquhar asks "what kinds of people are being cultivated" in this process of standardization. We can see another echo of the same question when Andrew Alan Johnson comments rightfully that "the planner seeks to reshape the individual into something new, a citizen of tomorrow." This kind of "history-free, future-oriented urbanity" that the urban planners wish to cultivate, however, is merely one phantom treading among all the other specters from the past. New personhoods are constantly being formed and forever shifting since relations among various agents are constantly shifting in this system. A "person," that is, is just as much a construction as a "society."

Andrew Alan Johnson has nicely situated our research in the context of urban spirit cults in Asia more broadly and argues with greater force than we did against "the risk of reducing the lived worlds of our interlocutors to our own." Going beyond Farquhar's asking what kinds of new personhoods are

being created, Johnson also asks what kind of new "ghosthoods" are emerging. Perhaps, however, both comments are really referring to the same thing—the relations between humans, ritual specialists, and spirits (as pointed out by Goossaert), as well as strangers. Ultimately, all those scholars seem to point to the formulations of new relations. What we have hoped to show is that those "yin-world agents" enter into different relations with other agents such as the high-speed railways, government officials, new trees, villagers-turned-urban residents, and more instead of being merely "secularized as symbols."

In this transformation, are the "communal virtues" that Farquhar expresses sentimentality for lost? If we treat communal virtues as an aspect of spectrality, then maybe we could rethink this in the sense of the "spectral resilience" that Coggins suggested in his comment, which enabled such power to be continuously at work in this ecosystem of relations. If anything, we would like this paper to be read along these lines. We are not suggesting that communal values or integral persons are impossible to construct, but we do see such moments as difficult to achieve and maintain, as more easily constructed in the nostalgic past than in the messy present, and as not constituting a baseline for moments of change. On the contrary, the ethnographic data have pushed us toward the direction of an open system that is forever in the making.

That leads us to several comments that raise issues of continuity and change, especially from those scholars whose work delves further into the past than ours. Let us begin with Vincent Goossaert's comment. We are very grateful for the potential he sees in our research, which is done in an area he is familiar with, although he explores it with a greater time span. He rightfully points out the importance of "landscape in the locus of religion." Indeed, the Shangfangshan pilgrimage site he mentions became one of the ritual centers of the regional Taimu cult in times of disruption and continues to emit potency today as its changing landscape promotes ritual innovations that carry weight in the ecosystem. We completely agree with his observation that "because it is a sanctuary of things uprooted elsewhere (icons, trees, and more), it is a place of ritual innovation."

The real question he poses is whether the time scale matters. As anthropologists, we are limited by the data we are able to accumulate through ethnographic research and often that means we are limited in how we travel through time. However, we are by no means suggesting that the "disturbed ecosystem" idea might only apply to the contemporary time period. As much as an ecosystem entails relations, it also entails a passage of time during which various agents can come into significant interaction with one another. As a matter of fact, we hope that this research could constitute a minor disruption in the ecosystem of current academia to spur innovations that shape the way we think and carry out research, such as happened during the productive "honeymoon" between history and anthropology in the 1980s.

Huang and Lin also raise issues about continuity and change, for instance where Lin suggests that the degree of religious fragmentation we document may be something new. One way to think about long-term issues of continuity and change is again to ask (as we did for metaphor above) what counts as the same. When we say that a ritual or a belief is continuous (or "resilient," to use the word that Coggins suggests) rather than changed, we are making a claim that the similarities we construct across time spans outweigh the differences. We thus find it less useful to label things as "continuities" or "changes" than to show how people can perceive a changing ecosystem as altered (no more villages, so no more village temples) or as resilient (the deities continue to interact through mediums).

Feijun Long approaches the issue of continuity and change via a different angle when she asks what makes certain potentials manifest themselves. She proposes two kinds of potentials, random and necessary ones. Using examples from her own research on deities called Tata, Long demonstrates that Tata seem to be the necessary potential that links all the other agents together. We fully agree with her that not all potentials are equal in their manifestations. Our emphasis in this paper has been to offer a nonequilibrium ecological perspective that allows us to take into consideration exactly agents such as the Tata in Long's research.

While Long takes an approach like ours to a neighboring geographic area, Haiyan Lee's comment extends our work through time, manifesting what she calls some of the "latent potential" in our article with a quick and bold tour of the religious side of disrupted ecosystems throughout twentieth-century China. We completely agree that the entire period (and earlier ones as well) could be rethought in these terms, and she rightly points out how so many moments when we might have expected the spirits to expire completely (either through direct repression or through the triumph of new market moralities) have instead become moments of creativity and innovation, just as we document in the article.

Finally, much of Michael Puett's comment also addresses issues of continuity and change, first through his critique (which we share) of the functionalist idea that continuities are normal and change is problematic, and then through his fascinating suggestion of theorizing this issue through Chinese concepts. In this case, he suggests using the ideas of flow and blockage to show the proper relation between yin and yang. He cites second-century sources, but the basic idea continues to be important today in Chinese medicine and other areas. We applaud the suggestion that such a set of ideas might evolve into a new theory and are happy to imagine that our article helped inspire Puett and the others who are suggesting new directions.

—Robert P. Weller and Keping Wu

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