



Critical review

“Ghost city”: Religion, urbanization and spatial anxieties in contemporary China



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Contents

References	245
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In the past two decades, China has been experiencing urbanization at unprecedented speed (Guldin, 1997; Marton, 1998; Tan and Ding, 2008). The urban population grew from 20% in 1980 to 40% in 2002 (Hsing, 2010: 3). By 2006, the urban population has reached 577 million (Hsing, 2010: 3). In terms of regional differences, Pearl River Delta and lower Yangtze River Delta are among the fastest urbanizing regions of China (Zhou and Zhang, 1995; Herrle, 2014; Marton, 2000). The latter was already the most urbanized regions of China in the 19th century (Skinner and Elvin, 1974). According to Changzhou Daily, the small lower Yangtze River Delta city with a population over 3.6 million was 59.2% urbanized in 2005 and 67.5% in 2013. Rapid process of urbanization has brought drastic changes to the spaces in which people live and manage their daily activities. Though there is a scoring literature addressing China's urban transformations, there has been a general overlook of religious life within urban spaces. Based on fieldwork in 2006 and 2013, this intervention addresses the spatial re-arrangement and how it impacts the ways new urbanites experience the physical world and their interactions with the spiritual world. Through stories of ghost encounters of residents in “urban edges” (Hsing, 2010), I argue that ghosts are materialized forms of spatial anxieties; and the resulting misfortunes are manifestations of the embodied experience of the spatial past that lingers on people's bodies.

G. William Skinner pioneered the research on Chinese cities and space, leading the way to three edited volumes (Skinner, 1964, 1978; Skinner and Elvin, 1974). These three volumes, with the collective efforts of historians, geographers and anthropologists provided a comprehensive survey of Chinese cities and set the directions of the research on urban China. One of his major contributions is the idea of regional studies. A region, for Skinner, is an area that consists of a major city and its surrounding towns and villages that supply its human and living resources. A region therefore is always a hierarchical system (Skinner, 1978). William Rowe (1993) similarly emphasizes the importance of the surrounding towns and villages to the city. He points out the forces of politics, ecology, technology/transportation, market/economy and industrialization that influence the morphology of cities, as well as the difference between the center and margins. While political economy captured the earlier studies (Whyte and Parish, 1984), civil society and relationship with the state featured the next decade (Davis et al., 1995), with most recent studies focus on economy, industrialization and migration (Chen et al., 2004).

Another dimension of the study on Chinese cities is space and power. Li Zhang's (2001) study of migrants in Beijing shows how migrant leaders utilize traditional social networks to maintain control over their community. Helen Siu's study of village enclaves in cities examines the discursive and institutional practices that separate villagers, migrants and urbanites (Siu, 2007), and she offers a theoretical discussion of emplacement and displacement.

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While the study of migrants is the study of people moving into the city, urbanization concerns the reverse – that of the expansion of the city into communities where people did not move. This intervention explores such a case, which, despite its brevity, reveals the tensions caused by shifting spaces.

Changzhou made a splash in national TV in 2013. The state media CCTV aired a special program calling Changzhou a “Ghost City”, due to its large percentage of empty commercial apartments that leave entire building blocks pitch dark at night. According to the report, there was an overbuilding of commercial housing that was largely unoccupied. Many families had more than one apartment in the newly erected housing complexes on previous farmlands or waterways. This part of China, known as the “home of rice and fish,” used to be famous for its rice fields and rivers. Now they are being transformed into modern commercial buildings, industrial parks, “high-tech zones” and infrastructure, such as roads and railways, at unprecedented speeds. The accusation of “ghost city” might be an exaggeration. However, during my fieldwork since 2006, I encountered a different kind of ghost story; most of which take place at the “urban edges,” those newly urbanized or urbanizing areas.

As Li Zhang (2006) notes, a feeling of “lateness” and “a pro-growth coalition between local governments and real estate developers” are shaping Post-Mao urban development in China (2006: 462). Echoing Zhang and working on religious sites, Xiaofei Kang (2009) suggests that state power and market appeal together shape the sacred spaces. However, writing on the revival of popular religious sites and practices, Mayfair Yang (2004) observes, “even the combined strength of the state–capital complex, with recourse to the strategies of both administrative commands and exchange value in real estate markets, could not easily deter the stubborn will of religious and kinship identities to claim their rightful places in modernity” (2004: 750). Calling it “the revenge of Gods,” Yang (2004) argues that the sacred spaces “answer to a higher alternative sovereignty than that of the secular state,” and the people and communities in such spaces are “asserting themselves and carving out their own lived and embodied rather than conceptual space” (2004: 751). The ghost stories in the urban edges of Changzhou demonstrate a similar agency – from the ghosts – that not only challenges the abstract space of state and market but also embodies the anxieties that come with intrusion and deterritorialization.

Li was a state official in charge of the designing and building of a new commercial complex in the urbanizing outskirts of Changzhou. In order to make space for the shopping mall, a river needs to be filled. This happens quite often, as this part of China used to be full of river ways and small lakes. However, waterways stand in the way of urbanizing processes that require large unblocked lands. Li was facing a similar situation. Without any hesitation, he ordered this small river to be filled so that the shopping mall could be built. On the day of foundation-laying ceremony, the foundation stone hit something hard and could not be hammered down the ground. Li took over the task personally and did it. Before the construction of the shopping mall was completed, however, Li, who was only in his fifties and otherwise healthy, died suddenly. Soon after rumors started to circulate – Li died because he offended the water ghost who resided in those rivers by destroying their habitat.

Water ghost is local knowledge in the lower Yangtze River delta. Children are often warned: “Do not go near the rivers unaccompanied because the water ghost will snatch you and take you down the water.” Water ghost is not only part of people’s cultural imagination but also a reflection of their reverence for the waterways that are crucial to the agricultural life and central for the livelihood of the people. However, waterways are no longer important in face of large-scale urbanization and industrialization. In

fact, they are places of “inconvenience”; what lingers behind is the reverence toward them, emblematic in the image of water ghosts.

Therefore urban expansion and construction have led to the intrusion of humans into spaces that they did not previously occupy and creates opportunities of contact with unhappy ghosts whose spaces shrink in due course. Ghosts or “Gui” 鬼 have been an important component of the Chinese imagination. According to Arthur Wolf’s (1974) now classical study of Chinese popular religion, ghosts are essentially strangers that include those without heirs to worship them or other people’s ancestors. Harrell (1986) in his observation of Taiwanese religion categorizes four types of ghosts: those that represent anomalies in the social order, such as hungry ghosts in the ghost month of lunar July, those that are used to explain random misfortunes; angry ancestors who are used to explain domestic problems and those represent repressed fears. Li’s ghosts fall more into the category of Harrell’s repressed fears. Here, the fear is best explained by the intrusion into the unknown space or territory to which one does not belong. This un-legitimized use of space is accompanied by the insatiable lust for more space in the process of modern urbanization.

Furthermore, ghosts are often tied to a place. “The belief in ghosts was always a local phenomenon, for the interaction of ghosts with humans was always on a personal, therefore, local level” (Poo, 2003: 306). The water ghosts are tied to specific waterways. Jean DeBernardi (1992) points out the spatial and temporal dimensions of Chinese religious life. Kristofer Schipper (1995 [1977]) in his discussion of earth gods in southern Taiwan emphasizes the territorial nature of them. Water ghosts are like earth gods of the water world. Feuchtwang points out that territorially and commercially based temples in the Ch’ing Dynasty Taipei gradually lost their ties to the locality as Taipei became a larger city: “The Gods of the new temples have no local significance . . . the morality preached in their names is . . . [hinged] on the individual as a universal atom” (Feuchtwang, 1974: 301).

Joseph Bosco’s (2007) study of ghost stories circulated among university students in Hong Kong points out that these stories are reflections of the unconscious anxieties students have over the tension between being a good student and dating. Similarly, I argue that people who are haunted with ghosts in this case experience spatial anxieties. First, this anxiety comes from uncertainties associated with new commercial housing. When people purchase commercial housing in China, they only get 70 years of user rights. They do not own these spaces and are uncertain what will happen to these apartments that cost them a lifetime of savings. Secondly, there is the anxiety over the intrusion into other spaces that one does not own. These buildings are not constructed on “empty” lots in the eyes of the real estate companies or the local governments. Rather, they were not only in good use but “occupied” by spirits.

Third, this spatial anxiety also shows in the experiential side of the former villagers who are now “urbanized” and live in apartment buildings. Some of them are forced to live there since their villages are demolished for urban development. Others have purchased commercial housing in urban areas. In comparison to the villages, life quality in apartments is much lower. For instance, many former villagers complained about having to talk quietly and living next door to strangers who never interact with one another. Therefore, urbanization brings a spatial anxiety that hovers over people’s living experience.

Fourth, this spatial anxiety comes from people’s embodied experience with the land and place. Let me illustrate with another ghost encounter that took place in an industrial park outside of Changzhou. Mr. Mu was an entrepreneur who owned a factory that made parts of the farming machinery. Coming from a peasant family, he was among a generation of farmers who caught the trend of

“rural industrialization” (Tan and Ding, 2008). Having moved his factory to the newly built industrial park, with modern amenities and roads, he was disappointed to find that business was not doing as well as he expected. At the pressure of his wife, he consulted a spirit medium who was a resident of her wife’s original village. The spirit medium asked where the kitchen was – most factories had a communal kitchen to feed the migrant workers living in the factor dorm. After Mu provided the location, the medium jumped out of her seat, “It’s no good! You built the kitchen right on top of a resentful ghost.” She explained that this lady was originally from a poor family from Northern Jiangsu. After having served the rich southern Jiangsu family all her life, she was ready to go home with a pot of savings for a good old age. Before she was able to make the trip, however, she died suddenly and was buried in the employer’s family rice field, where the industrial park stood today. She was a resentful ghost because she had no one to worship her and her body could not return to her hometown. Worse still, she lost her territory to the industrial park and had an annoying kitchen built on top of her. Therefore, she was determined to cause trouble. The spirit medium made Mr. Mu sponsor a big ceremony to appease this ghost and move the kitchen to a different spot. This time, he was careful enough to hire a Fengshui master before doing any construction work to avoid further mistakes.

According to *The Phoenix News*, Changzhou planned to expand the urban area from 280 square kilometers to 1864 square meters in 2002, plus 3972 square meters of roads. All the land would come from former villages, rice fields and waterways, which are central to people’s livelihood and sense of space. In the case of Mu the entrepreneur, he both benefits from the industrial park and suffers from it. Growing up in a peasant’s family, he knows well the consequences of losing farmland to factories. His parents still live in the villages, where some fields are polluted due to the nearby factories. They can no longer consume the rice and vegetables grown in those fields. Having becoming a semi-“urbanite” for over ten years, he still does not have the habit of buying vegetables and grains from the supermarket – not knowing which fields they come from, he just does not trust them. Plus, “I cannot get used to the taste of packaged vegetables and grains. There is a plastic taste in them”, he says. As a result, he has to rely on his wife’s family who lives in a village further a field to bring these produce. However, even that village is probably going to lose the battle to urbanization soon. Therefore, the ghost here is not only the resentful lady who could not return home, but also the attachment to the rural place that is brutally murdered in the urbanization process. This attachment is deeply embodied and experiential, manifested in the taste of the urbanized Mr. Mu and many others who are like him. It is not a coincidence that the location of the kitchen is affected – that is where food is prepared. As food is taken in and becomes part of the body, the experience with the land is also embodied.

To conclude, ghosts or other popular religious practices persist in the urbanizing areas of China. They are not only remnants of old ways of life, but also reflect spatial anxieties that are caused by uncertainties brought by urban commercialization and industrialization, the intrusion into unknown places, the unfamiliar interactions conditioned by urban spaces, and embodied attachment to the rural place. Skinner’s (1964) classical study of market towns and regional geography pioneers the understanding of space and social relations in rural China. In the cases cited above, the market towns are replaced by urban centers. Further study is needed to understand how social structure changes at the face of such

dramatic spatial rearrangement. Through the ghost stories, this short review would also like to alert the importance of religion in urban studies, especially at spaces of “urban edges” and the centrality of the relationship between people and space. Agreeing with Lefebvre (1991) that space is socially produced, I also argue that human experience is spatially produced. Instead of metaphors of the uncanny, the ghosts are the materialization of the past and embodied experience of the present and place (Trigg, 2012).

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