HANDBOOK of RELIGION and the ASIAN CITY

ASPIRATION AND URBANIZATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

edited by PETER VAN DER VEER
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Peter van der Veer
This book is about “urban aspirations” in Asia. Neither “urban” nor “aspirations” is self-evident, and these terms therefore require some discussion. Defining the urban would seem to require inventing its opposite, the rural. The rural-urban divide is one of the traditional pieties of the social sciences. Like most dichotomies, it hides as much as it clarifies. Certainly, there are important differences in scale between villages and cities, just as there are between megacities and provincial towns. These differences have significant implications for governance, housing, landownership, and industrial relations; surely, scale matters. However, the rural-urban divide should not be taken as a metaphor for a whole series of dichotomies, such as mechanical versus organic solidarity (Durkheim), gemeinschaft versus gesellschaft (Tönnies), or little traditions versus great traditions (Redfield). To an extent, such dichotomies of modernization have been taken to another level in globalization theories, as in the opposition of the global city to the nation-state.1 Anthropologists of India and Indonesia realized by the 1980s that “the village community,” their primary ethnographic object, was largely a construction of colonial governmentality.2 Similarly, we need to interrogate our notions of “urban society” to understand the different trajectories of urbanization and social formation in human society, as well as their insertion in forms of governmentality.

In fact, it is hard to draw a sharp boundary between city and village. For instance, work on “urban villages” in China shows that urban expansion is encroaching on village land and that differentiated village rights continue to play a role in these cities, with important social consequences for the relation between “established” and “outsiders.”3 In other
places, like Singapore, city planning has demolished the previous kampong, leaving in its wake a politics of heritage (see chapter 15). Again, in Thailand, one finds that the imagined and real urban-rural divide between Bangkok and the rest of the country has enormous political consequences (see chapter 12). More generally, one probably needs to speak about city-regions, like the Shanghai-Suzhou-Hangzhou-Ningbo corridor or the Mumbai-Pune corridor, to account for the continuous interactions that cross the borders of the city.\(^4\) In all these senses, the limits of the city are porous and arbitrary. At the same time, in India, China, and Thailand one finds settlements in the city that create “urban villages” of immigrants and are intricate parts of the urban fabric.\(^5\) Moreover, hometown associations are crucial elements in Chinese transnational networks of urban dwellers, creating substantial flows of information, finance, and people between, say, Chinatown in New York and Fuzhou district in South China.\(^6\) To buy a house in the village while living in the city is a feature of this interconnectivity that blurs in social terms any sharp distinction between city and village or big city and small city.\(^7\) This has become a defining element of the social landscape of Gujarat, Punjab, Kerala, Guangzhou, and Fujian.

The opposition of the urban and the rural is reproduced, to an extent, in the global and the local. Globalization is not the undoing of the local, just as urbanization is not the undoing of the rural. They are complex transformations that produce new spatial formations and are best seen as aspects of the production of locality. While in some cases one can speak about “ethnic enclaves” (Chinatown, Koreatown, Little India, etc.), this is not appropriate when one deals with the transnational connections of a million or more Taiwanese businesspeople and laborers living and working in the Shanghai area or with the embeddedness of Singapore in the Malay region. It is striking that the global city provides a necessary context for global financial markets, despite the increasing dependence on internet-enabled transactions that can in principle be executed from anywhere. In fact, as Saskia Sassen has demonstrated, these markets are important elements in the shaping of the urban context.\(^8\) Similarly, national and transnational migration (a distinction that is primarily made in terms of citizenship) both flows toward and transforms cities. Finally, media images, produced in Bollywood, Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai, and Seoul, provide imaginations of cities that are globally consumed and furnish the self-perceptions of local people in all these places and of those who desire to move there. In the past, Western cities like Berlin, London, Paris, and New York offered much material for the imagination of urban ambition, but today Shanghai and Singapore provide a seemingly more future-oriented vision.

While scale does distinguish big places from small ones, the question, as Arjun Appadurai succinctly put it, remains, what produces a locality “in a world in which spatial localization, quotidian interaction, and social scale are not always isomorphic?”\(^9\) Appadurai draws our attention to the ways in which localities are not given but produced as structures of feeling within the context of political economy. Moreover, localities are not spatially bounded but imaginatively and ritually understood in relation to other localities and to larger, imagined communities like the nation or the dispersed (diasporic) ethnic
community. The extent to which communities are localized and in what ways is historically and contextually produced. Such an emphasis on imagination does not distract from the materialities of social life but rather allows us to consider the material effects of social imagination.

Worries about what constitutes "the city" are common among urban theorists. The dominant voices among them come from Marxist traditions that focus on the city as a crucial site of capital accumulation and thus of particular importance in capitalist transformations, as well as a crucial site for class struggle. Such theory is closely related to urban activism, as in the recent Occupy Wall Street movement. However, what is true for Marxist theory in general also applies to Marxist urban studies. It is too focused on both economic transformation and resistance to be able to come to grips with the variety of urban aspirations that are not directly related to class or indeed the economy. It is not a tradition that encourages ethnography of microprocesses, although it captures some major elements of the larger picture. Nevertheless, Marxist theorists also seem to feel that there is something elusive in "the urban" that the study of capitalism cannot entirely understand. The urbanist Andrew Merrifield gives this eloquent quotation from Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*:

"The signs of the urban are signs of assembly: the things that promote assembly (streets, squares, spaces, surfaces, sidewalks and buildings) and the requirements for assembly (seats, lights). The urban is most forcefully evoked by the constellation of lights at night, especially when flying over a city—the dazzling impression of brilliance, neon, street signs, streetlights, incitements of various kinds, the simultaneous accumulation of wealth and signs." The urban, he adds, is "pure form: a place of encounter, assembly, simultaneity. This form has no specific content, but is a center of attraction and life. It is an abstraction, but unlike a metaphysical entity, the urban is a concrete abstraction, associated with practice. Living creatures, the products of industry, technology and wealth, works of culture, ways of living. . . . Its contents (things, objects, people, situations) are mutually exclusive because they are diverse, but inclusive because they are brought together and imply their mutual presence. The urban is both form and receptacle, void and plenitude, super-object and non-object, supra-consciousness and the totality of consciousnesses."10

Lefebvre’s evocative text recalls those of Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Simmel, which seems to indicate that there is something elusive about the city that calls for more poetic accounts than materialism usually allows. Contemporary urban theorists, like Merrifield, who are inspired by Lefebvre go back to Spinoza for a metaphysics of the city, but despite this taste for pantheism, what remains outside the picture are practical, everyday urban aspirations that connect to “self-cultivation” and “self-presentation,” which require a more anthropological approach.

Besides “urban,” “aspiration” needs some reflection. Appadurai has used the concept of aspiration to point to the ideational character of many of the processes that affect
cityscapes and urban movements. He focuses on “the capacity to aspire” as an “orientation to the future” and writes to promote capacity building among the poor as part of development strategy, but the concept is more generally applicable to city planning, squatting, migration, and gentrification, as well as to the extraordinary roles that religion, the media, and creative arts play in global cities. By paying attention to the aspirations of people, communities, classes, experts, and institutions, one can get away from the static connotations of the concept of “identity” that tends to fix people to what and where they are rather than to what and where they aspire to be. The vectoral potential of the concept of aspiration does not do away, however, with the analytical requirement to situate it within a field of unequal power. When aspirations cannot be achieved, people may feel a real sense of frustration and despair which is as important in motivating them as aspiration, a social fact that Max Weber recognized early on. It is also important to go beyond the individual level and critically analyze what might be called collective “utopias of aspiration” (Marxist, Pentecostal, free market, or otherwise) which characterize urban politics by engaging with the shifting realities on the ground that often contradict these utopian visions.

Aspiration can be partly understood as hope. The Marxist geographer David Harvey has called for attention to “spaces of hope,” but for him hope seems to be primarily about an “optimism of the intellect” based on the European utopian tradition, starting with Moore and ending with Marx and Engels’ Manifesto. Concretely, Harvey is interested in the global processes of uneven development and urban planning in relation to free market ideologies. His depiction of the dystopian reality of urban planning in Baltimore, for example, is convincing, but his helicopter perspective does not allow him to see aspirations that cannot be defined as class struggle. Harvey is theoretically aware of the “situatedness” of urban struggles and the “embodiment” of labor but fails to leave his abstract Marxism for a closer view of the variety of urban aspirations. For him (and many other urban theorists), neoliberalism is the catchall term for the global order that explains the transformation of cities, but this concept is much too broad to be able to explain the differential transformation of cities like Mumbai, Shanghai, and Singapore. In an influential intervention, Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier have suggested applying the concept of “global assemblage” to describe the various ways that some neoliberal practices are incorporated in variable sets of societal arrangements. There are deeper historical trajectories to be explored here than can be explained by the Reaganite and Thatcherite revolutions in the United States and Western Europe, respectively.

While global urban aspirations are the topic of this volume, the empirical data derive from work in Asia. In a recent edited volume, Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong have argued that Asian cities form an alternative to Western paths of urbanization. The authors in this volume share their desire to move urban studies away from the Marxist emphasis on the study of capitalism as the unitary global force that shapes cities and their claim that Asian cities are different. However, we do not share their criticism of what they see as the narrow focus of postcolonial studies of South Asia on the struggle of the disen-
franchised. Ong observes that “when it comes to studying urban transformations in India since colonialism, the emphasis has not been on studying how cities attempt to ‘catch up,’ as is the case in Southeast and East Asian Studies, but rather has focused on the political agency of a special category of postcolonial subjects” (9). This is true, but formulated as a critique it ignores the real differences in politics and the spaces allowed for public protest in India, China, and Singapore. Giving more attention to these differences would go a long way toward explaining differences in governmentality and political agency.

Roy and Ong’s critique that despite its focus on “the global” much of urban theory is in fact based on the North (with Tokyo as a singular exception) is certainly correct (see, for instance, the reader put together by Neil Brenner and Roger Keil). In their view, Asian cities practice an alternative “act of being global,” or what they call “worlding,” but unfortunately this claim does not go much beyond taking Singapore or Shanghai as Asian models of emulation and aspiration, instead of London, Paris, or New York. The nature of this alternative model can perhaps best be understood by examining Singapore. In the same volume, Chua Beng Huat celebrates the economic success of the Singaporean city-state by stressing its growth despite a lack of natural resources and thanks to the incorruptibility of its autocratic one-party rule. He has definitely gone beyond Marxist understandings of urban transformation in embracing Singaporean success, though warning that it cannot be easily emulated in total. Chua observes in passing that “working-class Singaporeans are comforted by the fact that within Southeast Asia they are much better off than the rest” (32) but fails to connect this to his observation that Singapore’s ability to augment or repatriate foreign workers without domestic political repercussions might be unique (41). The exploitation of the foreign working class seems to be justified by the success of the Singaporean model. That this kind of treatment of labor appears attractive to other authoritarian regimes, like that of China, or to ambitious city governments, like those of Bangalore, is unquestionable.

In her essay on the architect Rem Koolhaas’s spectacular CCTV headquarters in Beijing, Ong stresses the importance of the national state and national sovereignty as compared to global capital in determining urban futures, but it remains unclear why a Marxist global perspective on the city could not also include an analysis of national political economy. In China it is perhaps even harder than elsewhere to see where the state ends and “private” corporate actors begin, so the strong distinction Ong wants to draw between capital and state seems unwarranted in general, but even more so in the case of CCTV, the state media, an apparatus of state propaganda that is now also obliged to provide entertainment in order to make a profit. City branding through “skyscraper megalomania” in China and elsewhere in Asia is political and economic at the same time and is not only a spectacle of national sovereignty and global recognition but also a particular manifestation of intense competition between party leaders in a system that pitches them against one another. The World Expo in Shanghai can thus be seen as that city’s answer to Beijing’s Olympic Games in the political context between the Beijing and Shanghai
factions of the Communist Party. Ong, like so many others, seems beguiled by the emergence of China and the Asian tigers on the world stage as economically and politically successful nations, and this leads her to ignore the old questions about social inequality and power distribution within the nation. City planning and spectacular building in China are only possible because of the efficient repression of popular protest, for which information and media representation are essential.

Ong appears to be quite enamored of the work of Koolhaas, whose “engineering skills in designing the building seem to achieve a diagnostic synthesis of the various information technologies and practices that will shape the Chinese picture and projection of the world” (217). There are few people in the architectural world who would celebrate Koolhaas’s engineering skills, but there are many who have objected to the way in which he has provided a spectacular, iconic representation and aesthetic smoke screen for the party’s infotainment machine. Ong is ambiguous in her representation of the debate within and outside China about the building and its relation to China’s particular power configuration. She is, however, forthright in challenging “studies that disconnect urban transformations from the national environment and aspirations, or view spectacular spaces as the exclusive tool of global capitalism” (224).

In our view it is not the global versus the national or the political versus the economic or any other such dichotomy that should frame our study. The main contribution that this volume makes is to step away from the secularist modernism that still dominates urban studies. If one wants to coin worlding as an alternative to the focus on Western cities in urban theory as well as to Marxist globalism, one needs to look squarely at perhaps the most important form of worlding that is not state engineered: religious movements. The neglect of this important aspect of the urban landscape demonstrates the radically secular perspective of urban theorists, which this volume wants to challenge. While urban theorists are vaguely aware that cathedrals and churches are the spectacular skyscrapers of the past, they are happy to leave them to historians as indeed “things of the past.” To anthropologists they leave what they consider to be the passing interest in religious bonds that characterizes the life of recent first-generation immigrants. Most urban theorists have not realized that the tropes of “passing” and “past” belong squarely to the old dreams of secular modernism. Even in the recently emerging interest in the affective register of cities, in “spatialities of feeling,” as championed by Nigel Thrift, there is no reference to religion or to the mix of secularism and religion in what Robert Bellah and his colleagues have eloquently called “habits of the heart.” This neglect is already unacceptable in Thrift’s self-acknowledged ethnocentric choice of the Euro-American urban context. Susan Slyomovics, for instance, has beautifully described the mix of religious and secular motives in the “spatiality of feeling” created by parades in New York. Something similar can be seen in the celebration of Christmas in Western cities. If one goes outside the Euro-American space, ignoring religious spatiality is impossible, even in the sanitized urban spaces of China. What often escapes both sight and analysis is the nature of public life in cities, which features not only shopping malls, bazaars, and cin-
emas but also temples, churches, and shrines with a number of ancillary charitable activities. Global cities are providing social material for the innovation of religious institutions, aspirations, and experiments, partly because they exhibit unexpected combinations of media images and demographic shifts. These cities sometimes seem highly volatile in their ability to act as platforms for the broadcasting of political and religious aspirations. They can be prone to social unrest, riots, rumors, and epidemics of social fear. At the same time, they also appear to generate surprising new solidarities, new visions of the good life, and new ideas about friendship and conviviality.

One of the most tenacious misunderstandings of cities (another result of the rural-urban divide) is that they are modern and therefore secular. A leading French Catholic sociologist, Gabriel Le Bras, wrote in the 1950s that “I myself am convinced that of 100 rural people that come to live in Paris around 90 stop practicing their religion when they get out of Gare Montparnasse.” However, as José Casanova points out (following Weber), the great historical religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) were all urban. Moreover, cities in Asia like Bangkok or Beijing were centers of religious cosmologies. China’s capital Beijing, for instance, has been the cosmic center of China for centuries, ruled from the Forbidden City, organized according to the feng shui principles of yin and yang. When the Communists took over, Mao Zedong personally decided to locate the government in the old city, making use of this ancient conception of the cosmic center but at the same time destroying the old buildings. We see here a form of iconoclasm that is quite common, namely the appropriation of a sacred place, destroying the previous religion and appropriating its sacred power for the new religion. Tiananmen “had to be transformed from an insulated imperial quarter into an open space for political activity.” However, it was “open” only in a spatial sense, not in the sense of Habermas’s Öffentlichkeit. It became the square where the party showed its ideological centrality, in the architecture, in the huge Mao portrait that dominates the square, and in regular manifestations such as the Party Congress in the Great Hall of the People, but also the space for challenging that hegemony in 1989. With the transformation of Tiananmen into a huge public square (with the possibility of containing six hundred thousand people), Mao created a space for the demonstration of the party’s power—which the Chinese occasionally misunderstand as the people’s power. Such mistakes have been and still are bloodily repressed, but the party lives in constant fear of the spread of a revolutionary fervor to its squares (as during the recent Jasmine Revolution in the Middle East, when the Chinese word for “jasmine” [molihua 東莉花] was censored on the internet). Not only the 1989 Tiananmen Square demands for democracy but also the 1999 Zhongnanhai demonstrations in the center of Beijing by the religious Falun Gong movement were violently repressed. Secularism is a state-led project of repression and transformation in China and other communist societies that cannot be understood as a process of secularization.

The relatively recent Western European experience of simultaneous urbanization and unchurching that is the subject of secularization theory is a particular historical
phenomenon, uneven and not linear, and not causally connected to nineteenth-century industrialization. Social scientists like Ernest Gellner and Bryan Wilson (to take only two examples) have mistaken this singular historical experience for a universal model of modernization and secularization. This is all the more surprising in light of the fact that the European experience is radically different from the U.S. experience of a religiously diverse society in which migrants to the city (and especially transnational immigrants) use religion to carve out a space for themselves, as a classical study by Will Herberg argues. Sometimes American sociologists have ignored such experiences. For instance, the Chicago school of urban studies has ethnographically studied urban black communities without paying attention to the role of black churches. The neglect of such overwhelming evidence of social facts must have its origin in the secular ideology of social scientists. The idea that religion can be urban, modern, innovative, and creative instead of rural, traditional, conservative, and repressive and that (if modern) it does not have to be fundamentalist (pace the University of Chicago Press’s Fundamentalism Project of the 1990s) has won ground in the past two decades, but hardly within urban studies.

It is important not to reify “religion” but to include it in a range of urban aspirations. As I have argued at some length elsewhere, “religion” in its modern, universal sense (all people everywhere have religion) is a nineteenth-century concept, with a deeper genealogy in Western thought, that is spread across the globe. In the interactional history between the West and Asia, it belongs to a syntagmatic chain: religion-magic-secularity-spirituality. These terms do not possess stable meanings independent of one another and thus cannot simply be defined separately. They emerge historically together, imply one another, and function as nodes within a shifting field of power. It is therefore not possible to see the city as secular or religious, because it is both at the same time—and it is magical as well as spiritual. In Kandinsky’s view, modern art is spiritual, and it emerges in Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and Moscow. Cinema is an urban phenomenon, originating in Hollywood, Bollywood, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. It is the magic of the cinema that brings the protagonist of John Updike’s novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies* to start doubting his faith. Cinema may be a product of the devil, out to destroy religion—as strict Calvinists in the Netherlands used to think—by providing fantasies that God has forbidden. This is an instance of the long antimagic tradition of Protestantism (see chapter 1), which is alert to the magical possibilities of the Wizard of Oz, Blade Runner, Shaolin movies, and Indian mythologies.

In Shanghai the modern is officially secular. That is the perspective not only of the authorities but also of major cultural theorists like Leo Ou-fan Lee, who in his classic *Shanghai Modern*, on interbellum Shanghai, manages to omit any reference to this city’s importance in Buddhist and Daoist modernism. This is not because of a strict separation of secular and religious spheres, as Zhang Zhen shows in her elegant analysis of Shanghai “martial arts–magic spirit” (*wuxia-shenguai* 武俠神怪) movies from the late 1920s, which were the precursor of the later Hong Kong martial arts movies that are suffused with references to magical power and Buddhist monastic traditions (Shaolin).
The reason is the same one that brought this genre to an end. The government forbade the showing of this popular genre, which fed on the “superstition” of the masses. Its neglect in cultural history is part of a common intellectual denigration of the religious as antiscientific and thus retrograde in China. Likewise, in architectural history there is little sense of the huge destruction of temples and ancestral halls that were the centers of a vibrant religious life in the 1930s.

The magic of modernity can be found not only in the cinema but also in the glittering displays of new consumption palaces, today’s department stores and malls. Places like Singapore, Bangkok, and Shanghai (with Mumbai, Bangalore, and Hanoi following at some distance) try to define themselves with these spaces of concentrated consumption. These are also spaces that allow one, as the Romans had it, to see and be seen. They are also highly regulated spaces that stand in some contrast to the unregulated heat and noise (renao 热闹) of the “wet markets” in Singapore or the Crawford Market in Mumbai. While the department stores sell high-end fashion, the open markets offer items of health and male potency. These goods represent different strategies of magical self-enhancement that we hardly ever connect to each other in our analysis, although those who shop in the malls also frequent the open markets. Moreover, the nature of crowding in these different spaces seems to create a variety of sensorial experiences and effervescences that escape easy mapping in purely secular terms. Henry James called London a city “of dreadful delight,” a phrase that beautifully captures the ambivalence of desire and fear that the city produces.30 Complaints about the rudeness of the inhabitants of New York, Paris, Berlin, or Shanghai are easily coupled with the desire to be with the young and uninhibited. The spaces that need to be avoided out of racial or sexual fear at the same time exert a powerful attraction. Thus the city is the fulcrum of deep moralizations about extreme possibilities and ambitions.

Intellectuals have played a significant role in reforming or rejecting and generally ideologizing traditions as either essentially capable of adjusting to modernity or resistant to modernity. These people have tended to be located in cities where there are universities and the interaction with Western ideas is more intense. While the debate about modernity primarily takes place among intellectuals (secular and religious) in newspapers, magazines, and other media, the city is also the meeting ground of various populations that had been hardly in touch with one another before arriving there, which makes the need to self-identify and connect quite important. This can be done through churches, temples, shrines, or storefront places of worship. The city is thus a theater of religious innovation, although sometimes this can imply a new conservatism. It is often underestimated just how innovative forms of conservatism, of explicit moral strictness and the rejection of immorality, are. There is a materiality and performativity in city life (such as in modes of public transport) that requires everyday tactics of self-presentation.

We propose to use religion not as a thing that can be easily distinguished from the flow of social life in cities but as lens through which one can acquire a better view of what urban aspirations are, regardless of whether they are called secular or religious. It is
precisely global cities that experience large-scale immigration and related innovative patterns of religiosity, often fueled by transnational flows of ideas and people.

Asia is a particular challenge in using religion as a lens to understand the urban. One has to counter the notion that Asian modernity is “unfinished,” that Asians are “religious” because they are not (yet) secularized. This view is tenacious and derives from misunderstandings about the secularity of the West that we have discussed above. China is often seen as an exception to this picture of religious Asia, but the secular nature of public life in Shanghai is the result not of the city’s successful modernization but of political power. Similarly, the religious nature of Bangkok is not a given but likewise the result of political power. What is deemed “religious” or “secular” is determined in a political process that uses the city as a platform for national aspirations.

Why do we focus on Asian cities in this volume? Urbanization is a world historical process. Seventy percent of the world’s population will be urban by 2050 (compared to only 10 percent a century ago). Because of the huge populations that are involved and the speed at which it is happening, urbanization in Asia in particular is overwhelming. From 1950 to 2000, urban populations in Asia increased fivefold, to more than a billion people. More than half of the Asian population lives in urban areas today. While much of the social science literature has treated these developing societies as by and large rural and agrarian, they have become more and more urban and industrial. At the same time, studies of cities in Europe and the Americas dominate much of the literature on urban societies and especially on megacities. This is factually problematic, since of the twenty-one megacities (of more than ten million inhabitants) in the world, Asia has more than half, including the six largest (Tokyo, Beijing, Seoul, Shanghai, Delhi, Mumbai). The understanding of Asian urban societies cannot rest on an extrapolation of our understanding of Western urban phenomena. Asia is gradually but decisively moving to the center of the world economy, and the empirical understanding of Asia has to inform new social science theory. The specifically Asian histories of imperialism (since the nineteenth century), nation formation in the Cold War (in the 1950s), and late (but accelerated) economic growth (after the 1980s), as well as the larger civilizational formations in which these changes have taken place, need theorization. The empirical material in this volume is drawn from Mumbai, Chennai, Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kunming, Beijing, Seoul, Manila, and Jakarta. The purpose is not to give an exhaustive account of urban contexts in Asia but to have good empirical case studies of a number of connecting themes.

While the study of Asia is indispensable for any comparative social science, it should be clear that the idea of “Asia” is as problematic as that of “Europe.” Asian societies and cities form a fuzzy set that can provide the basis of comparisons within the region and with the West. For our purposes, comparison should be seen not primarily in terms of similarities or differences of societies, events, or institutional arrangements across societies but as a reflection on our conceptual framework and on a history of interactions that have constituted our object of study. Such critical reflection may lead to the argument that Asian cities should be understood in their own terms and cannot be understood in
Western terms. However, Indian and Chinese realities have to be interpreted and translated in relation to social science scholarship that has historically originated in the West. Moreover, such translations and interpretations are part of a long history of interactions with the West. Modern media has widely democratized this field of comparison, so that everyday realities of “immediate” and “distant” societies are thoroughly mediated and interconnected. Democracy, civil society, the public sphere, urbanity, civility, and religiosity are all concepts within a particular tradition of modernity that creates the discursive space in which we engage our studies. Comparison, as it is understood here, is thus not a relatively simple juxtaposition of two or more societies but a complex reflection on the network of concepts that underlie both our study of societies and the formation of those societies themselves. In that sense, it is always a double act of reflection. For instance, one can hardly ignore the origins of psychoanalysis in fin de siècle Vienna when attempting to give an account of the emergence of new technologies of the self (including psychotherapy) in urban Asia. The language with which we describe Asian urbanity is always already part of an earlier conversation.

What, then, is the contribution of this volume to the study of the city? First of all, it highlights the creative and innovative role of religious aspirations and spatialities of feeling in urban contexts. It does not assume that religion is something of the past but points out that urban politics and governance are often about religious boundaries and processions—in short, public religion is politics. Instead of processes of secularization that unfold as part of an inevitable modernization and urbanization, one can discern discrete projects of secularism that come up against projects and ambitions of a religious nature. Urban studies has neglected this particular form of contestation which takes the city as its public arena, and this volume is a step toward changing that.

Second, this volume questions the limits of the city. Cities like Mumbai, Singapore, and Shanghai are not contained, spatially or imaginatively. They are part of larger landscapes of spatial imagination and thus have to be understood more from the past than from the future, not as the new global models of futuristic city planning but as having specific cultural and political trajectories. Religion plays a central role in the politics of heritage that is emerging from the debris of modernist city planning, but theseheritages are not only located within the city but can also encompass the hometowns of urban migrants or the imagined cosmos of a transnational community (see chapter 23). In many ways, the rural-urban divide is more an ideological than an empirical one.

Third, the fact that these cities are in Asia implies that imperial modernity plays a dominant role even in their postcolonial politics. Imperial modernity emerges from the interaction between European imperialism and Asian nationalism. While the collaboration of colonial authorities and colonized elites (see chapters 6 and 15) is one aspect of that interaction, the sense of backwardness and need for total reform to create progress are motivating aspirations that explain much of urban planning and governance.

Fourth, megacities are arenas for the assertion of national and transnational aspirations. Political processions in Bangkok and Hong Kong have eclipsed ritual processions
in importance, while ritual processions in Mumbai are shows of political strength in communal politics (see chapter 5). Such processions, sometimes turning into riots, may be responses to happenings outside the city, but the city inevitably seems the best platform for nationwide and international attention. Not only processions but also megachurches cry out for our attention (see chapters 7 and 11).

Fifth, this volume devotes much of its energy to what animates urban aspirations. Ethnographic examples include the new sense of a modern self that is emerging as an urban identity in China (chapter 17), the connection of this self-fashioning with the older language of both Buddhism and Maoism (chapter 16), the voicing of connectivity both spatially and historically in Korean singing (chapter 18), the self-expression allowed by anonymous Twitter posts (chapter 24), the ambivalences of manufacturing and consuming sacred objects (chapter 20), and the construction of selflessness and the morality of money among Karachi traders (chapter 19). The urban world is visceral, affective, and this infuses the energies of urban planning, which unleashes the powers of the dark and the unknown (chapter 10). The city is a site of speculation not only for those who invest in real estate but also for those who look for housing, for employment, for salvation (chapters 8 and 13). That speculative nature of the city finds its expression both in the metaphysical world of finance (chapter 19) and in the celluloid imagination (chapters 21 and 22).

Part of this volume is devoted to a discussion of several ways in which the sacred is mobile and creates social space in the city. Religious processions through the city create arenas of interaction, since they cannot be confined to neighborhoods that are dominated by one community. They are loud and in your face and express the right to be there. In the extraordinarily cramped housing and transport situation of Mumbai, processions are events of great significance. By far the most impressive is the Ganapati Festival, celebrating the Hindu god Ganapati, or Ganesha, who over the past century has become a symbol of Hindu assertion. Given the marginalization of Muslims there today, it is important to remember that Mumbai has risen as a port city dominated by trading groups, among which various groups of Shi‘as are prominent. Before the rise of Ganapati processions, Mumbai was better known for its Muharram processions. Reza Masoudi Nejad shows in chapter 5 how the changes in the routes that the processions take map the patterns of settlement of Muslim groups in the city. The processions are arenas of public contestation of space in the city, not only between various groups of Hindus and Muslims but also between groups of Muslims. Patrick Eisenlohr shows how the Shi‘a communities are determined not by their location in the city but by what he calls a “pious cosmopolitanism” (chapter 23). The global ecumene of Shi‘ism is of longue durée, but today the new media play an increasingly important role in enabling Iranian clergy to function as clerical authorities for Mumbai communities.

Transnational connections are also important for the revival of religious processions in Hong Kong, which Joseph Bosco describes (chapter 6). Like Mumbai and Singapore, Hong Kong was a colonial port city, a crucial node in the British trading empire, but what is often forgotten is the enduring fact that immigrant populations have made these
spaces their own, and, significantly, they have done so by staging ritual processions. For Hong Kong, the main migration context is mainland China and, overwhelmingly, neighboring Guangdong.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, public religion has been portrayed in China as an obstacle to progress, and both colonial and postcolonial authorities have not allowed religious processions to continue, often with reference to public order and traffic safety. China and Singapore show vivid examples of the governing of religion. The gods were in control of a territory, part of a spiritual bureaucracy, but the ancient regime that sustained this spiritual bureaucracy and was in turn sustained by it is gone. In chapter 3, Vincent Goossaert tracks this transformation in Suzhou, for centuries one of the commercial centers of China’s Yangtze River delta. Up to 1949 (when the Communists took over), large Chinese cities were organized as networks of neighborhoods, each with its own territorial god and temple, and the overwhelming fact (which hardly enters urban studies) is that this socioreligious organization was largely destroyed and is only now being partly restored. In Hong Kong, Singapore, and Suzhou, we thus have colonial and postcolonial variations on the theme of city planning and police control as parts of the secularization of the city, a project that is never entirely completed. This secularization is not a historical process but a political project. Its deepest manifestation is a deterritorialization of religion and a shift toward voluntary association. In Singapore, as Kenneth Dean documents in chapter 5, this homogenization of space is directly connected to the demolition of the older urban villages called kampong in Malay. Despite these huge changes that leave only limited space to ritual activities in Singapore’s housing development blocks, there was not an outright destruction of religion as in mainland China, and members of Singapore’s various Chinese-dialect communities have played a significant role in the revival of religion in their hometowns in mainland China since the 1980s.

Singapore today is secular, but not quite, as is clear from Daniel Goh’s chapter 1. The inclusive nature of Chinese and Indian religion also allows Singaporeans to pay respect to one another’s gods, which raises the age-worn specters of “insincerity” and “mere ritualism without belief,” all elements of Protestant modernity. Because of the destruction of the territorial nature of Chinese religion, such questions of “belief” become more prominent and explain the expansion of forms of evangelical Christianity in Singapore and elsewhere in the Chinese ecumene, causing friction and sometimes open conflict in places like Jakarta that have an important Chinese Christian presence, as Chang-Yau Hoon shows in chapter 11. Christianity is the minority religion of choice for urban upwardly mobile youth in China, but in Catholic Manila it faces challenges from secular pop culture, which attracts the youth. Jayeel Serrano Cornelio draws our attention to the responses of the Catholic church to these challenges in metro Manila (chapter 4).

As Francesca Tarocco shows in Shanghai (chapter 2) and Joseph Bosco in Hong Kong (chapter 6), the politics of heritage drives some of the reincorporation of religion into the urban landscape. Jing’an Temple in Shanghai is central to a shopping area that is serviced by its own subway station. The consumption of the past fits seamlessly into the
shopping of the present, and the Buddha’s spectacular image vies for attention with brands like Vuitton and Dior. Somehow the fascinating sculptures by the artist Zhang Huan, made of ashes collected at this temple, capture the fragility of the present moment. In Hong Kong, while religious processions have been in decline and only partially revived in the past few decades, protest marches, symbolizing not a neighborhood but the people in Hong Kong as a whole, have been on the rise. Surely, modernizing elites have tried to promote secular nationalism in urban Asia, but the presence and revival of some crucial aspects of religion keep its ultimate triumph at bay.

Another part of this volume is devoted to immobility (e.g., *immeubles, immobilien*), namely the crucial question of real estate, housing, and speculation on housing. Leilah Vevaina and Nathaniel Roberts explore the upper and the lower end of the spectrum (chapters 8 and 13, respectively). Vevaina discusses the changing nature of the Mumbai housing endowments of the Parsis, a religious minority of fifty thousand people who are the largest private landowners in the city. This real estate is for their exclusive use. In the context of one of the most intense speculations in real estate in the world, the “dead hand” of these religious endowments, which trust committees supervise, is creating considerable friction. The endowments were created in the colonial period as parts of communal philanthropy but are now caught in a fix, with a declining community in a highly speculative real estate market. While the Parsis have an embarrassment of riches, at the other end of the housing spectrum we find the slums, which in India are largely populated by Dalits (formerly known as untouchables). Here a very interesting perspective on the rural-urban problematic is developed. The Dalits seem happy to have escaped from oppressive discrimination in the small-scale community of the village but otherwise have not really improved their situation, as Roberts shows on the basis of his fieldwork in Chennai.

Seoul and Karachi were refugee cities after the devastations of the Korean War and Indian Partition. The memories of the years of scarcity in housing and everything else are maintained in a particular way of talking and singing (chapter 18), shamanistic performance (chapter 20), or cinema (chapter 21). Also in Mumbai, as Arjun Appadurai’s chapter 22 shows, the connection between housing and the cinematic representation of the family is drawn out. Cinema is the site of fantasizing about the urban, and to a great extent this is about an imagined home. This is why the politics of heritage is so crucial in the interplay of city planning and religion. The contributions by Jin-Heon Jung and Nicholas Harkness (chapters 14 and 18) clearly show the importance of heritage in the configuring of Christianity in Seoul. The history of the Korean War and the poverty of the postwar period are central in religious imaginings. Despite all the gestures of newness and modernity, the city is full of lieux de mémoire that show their presence not only materially, in buildings and infrastructure, but also spiritually, in the occult, in cosmological power. As Tam T. T. Ngo argues (chapter 10), in Hanoi, “dragon veins,” arteries of power that run under the city, are not only part of ancient cosmology (which we also find in Beijing and Seoul) but also manifestations of the historical struggle for power between
“Chinese” and “Vietnamese.” While this looks like a squarely religious matter—and from a modernist viewpoint a rather weird one—it is in fact part of a political struggle about the nature of the city and of governance. The city was a sacred space in the past and continues to be so in non-Communist Bangkok, with its Buddhist-royalist regime, which implies that modern city planning has to deal with the “future of the religious past.” This also manifests itself at the more mundane level of a fight to keep Bangkok’s Chinatown alive, in which the presence of temples in certain neighborhoods helps make the inhabitants’ struggle more effective, as Tiamsoon Sirisrisak shows (chapter 9). Bangkok’s relation to the imagination of Thailand’s past and the role of religion and the monarchy in the countryside make it a recurrent arena for the clash of political visions, as James Taylor argues (chapter 12).

It is very hard to imagine Asian cities without religious aspirations, in the form of religious movements, religious processions, sacred spaces, religious communities, or mediatic dreams of self-fashioning. On the other hand, it is often hard to find public manifestations of religion in the highly secularized spaces of the Chinese world. They are hidden from view as the result of particular strategies of governmental control. There is not much evidence for a slow but certain secularization of Asian cities. This book makes the comparative case that one cannot study the historical trajectories of urbanization in Asia without paying attention to the role of religion in urban aspirations.

NOTES


PART 1

GOVERNANCE OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY
TWO TEMPLES AND A NEW YEAR’S EVE

The pedestrian street outside the two temples was bustling with makeshift stalls selling flowers and other kinds of offerings and joss sticks of all sizes. Hawkers, when they were not busy touting their religious wares to passersby, were lighting up oilcans to provide devotees with the fire to light their joss sticks. Security officers were setting up metal barriers to direct the expected heavy flow of worshippers. The Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple was lit up with colorful festive lights. Younger worshippers know it simply as the Guanyin Temple. Older worshippers call it the Si Beh Lor (or Si Ma Lu 四馬路 in Hokkien) Temple. Si Beh Lor means “fourth road,” referring to Waterloo Street, which is partially closed off to automobiles in front of the temple, turning the street into a civic square.

It was only 9 p.m., but there was already quite a buzz of devotees in front of the temple, praying with and burning their joss sticks before entering the main hall to give offerings to the bodhisattva famously known as the Goddess of Mercy—Guanyin Pusa (觀音菩薩). This was the night of the eve of the Chinese Lunar New Year. For the Chinese in Singapore following traditional religious practices, this was the place to be and the ritual to do, if not every year, then at least once in their lifetime. The regulars would also stop in front of the Sri Krishnan Temple, where they would also burn some joss sticks in prayer and bless themselves with holy incense. This very sight, of Chinese worshippers praying in traditional Chinese style in front of the Indian temple, was the attraction of many Western tourists taking a photograph of such a strange practice.
Strange, that is, to modern eyes. I have had friends, local English-educated elites who are Christians or atheists, ask me whether the Chinese who pray to Krishna at Waterloo Street believe in Hinduism, and if so, how they can believe in both Buddhism and Hinduism. The problem is compounded for them when I say that the local Chinese who pray to Guanyin usually also pray to deities of Chinese popular religion and sometimes even to the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic churches, especially Novena Church. Academic scholarship has long sought to resolve problems of this type by distinguishing between belief and practice. The latest installment is Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon’s influential *Ritual and Its Consequences*, which opposes ritual and its “as if” subjunctive world of continuously separating and combining boundaries in creative play to sincerity and its “as is” vision of definitive, totalistic reality that produces absolute boundaries.1 Thus, the Guanyin devotees in Singapore could be said to be engaging primarily in the ritual mode, treating Krishna and other deities as if they were just as real as Guanyin, rather than in the mode of sincere belief and authenticity of self-cultivation. Such an explanation would sit well with the conventional scholarly understanding of Chinese religion as dominated by ritual and practice over belief and doctrine.

It would also sit well with my Christian friends. Despite their elevation of ritual, Seligman et al. and others who emphasize the dichotomy between practice and beliefs remain stuck in Protestant Enlightenment ideology. Ritual, Seligman et al. argue, should not be contrasted to the modernity of conscious and rational individual autonomy. This would merely continue the conceit of the radical Protestant rejection of Catholic ritualism for sincerity and the secularization of this rejection in the Enlightenment. However, sincerity lies at the heart of the Protestant and Enlightenment projects to arrive at the essence of authentic selfhood. Substituting autonomy with sincerity and keeping the dichotomy would help us better understand ritual, especially in supposedly ritualistic oriental religions. Seligman et al. argue that the tension between sincerity and ritual has driven religious change and reform through the ages. Again, I see a certain Protestant Enlightenment conceit—a teleological history driven by dialectics and hurtling toward modernity.

In this chapter, by ethnographically reading the New Year’s Eve rituals in and around the Guanyin Temple and Sri Krishnan Temple, I argue that ritual and beliefs are found combined, inseparable, in spatial practice and produce a dynamic spirituality that is affirmative rather than propositional: “it is” rather than “as if” or “as is.” This spirituality absorbs modernity and infects it, thereby domesticating its presence and drive in the state’s secularizing urban projects that have been impinging on the temples and their rituals.

The two temples have been increasingly hemmed in by urban redevelopment in the past few decades. The Bugis area to their east, which was once the site of one of Asia’s seediest nightlife districts, was redeveloped into a retail shopping complex, sanitized street market, and public housing estate in the mid-1980s. Shopping centers, office buildings, and private apartment complexes sprung up around the temples. Throughout
the first decade of the 2000s, as part of the state's larger agenda to turn the old civic center and neighboring ethnic quarters into a cosmopolitan heritage and cultural hub, so as to transform Singapore into a global city, the Waterloo area to the south and west of the temples, between two metro stations of the Downtown Line under construction, was to be transformed into a hub for the arts.

On New Year's Eve, the Guanyin Temple rituals, already deeply spatial in their everyday practice, spill out into the streets and radiate their spiritual meanings beyond Waterloo Street. How does the religious spatiality of the temple affect the secular urbanism encroaching on it and vice versa? I argue that the state has failed to pin down the religious spatiality as cultural heritage, and instead, the temple continues to infect the secular urbanism with a vernacular spirituality that resists easy incorporation into the developmental state’s ideal global city and offers the alternative worlding of cultural sentiments.

GREETING THE NEW YEAR

I arrived at the cul-de-sac that marks the northern end of Waterloo Street that remains open to automobiles. The road leading to the cul-de-sac is bounded by the aptly named Fortune Centre, a multistory square-block shopping center filled with small proprietors, and the Stamford Arts Centre, an old Japanese school of the colonial era converted into a multitenanted arts building. The National Arts Council manages the Arts Centre as part of the Waterloo arts belt. On the other hand, without much planning but by dint of market logic, Fortune Centre has become the place to go for organic and vegetarian Chinese food, because of its proximity to Guanyin Temple.

Entering the square in front of the Guanyin Temple and Sri Krishnan Temple, I experienced a time warp back to the 1980s Singapore of my youth, when I used to attend school in the neighborhood. Street stalls had been set up to sell flowers, offerings, and different types of joss sticks. Hawkers weaved in and out of the stalls and the crowd to tout their wares, while worshippers and tourists—it was hard to distinguish the two—milled about the entrance to the Guanyin Temple. Clouds of incense smoke wafted up from the front of the temple, gradually blanketing the square with their sharp scent and slightly stinging the eyes. I was reminded that this temple was once part of a cultural complex that covered the Rochor and Bugis areas, places of night markets offering cheap goods, entertainment, and food, dotted with mini religious shrines. Urban redevelopment had isolated the Guanyin Temple, as modern shopping centers and public housing blocks now surround it. It is even separated from its sister Sri Krishnan Temple by a private apartment block. So it seems.

It was still early, three hours before midnight, and the entrance to the Guanyin Temple was still navigable. At the center of the courtyard, outside the front doors of the main hall, was placed a giant urn for joss sticks to be stuck into. Already a crowd was milling about the urn. Worshippers bought their joss sticks outside in the square, lit them from fire provided by the hawkers, and came into the temple to greet the New Year. The ideal
spot would be somewhere in front of the urn, on the line running from the Guanyin statue to the urn and out through the main gate of the temple. A worshipper would walk facing Guanyin into the courtyard, turn around with back to Guanyin, baibai (拜拜) with the joss sticks facing up to the heavens, turn around to face Guanyin, and baibai with the joss sticks again before sticking them into the urn.

Because of the heavy crowd, the joss sticks in the urn were quickly taken out by workers, still smoldering, and thrown into a metal bin, to clear space for the sticks of other worshippers. A boy turned to his father to ask in Mandarin whether this would affect their family's prayers, as joss sticks are supposed to burn down and join their ashes with the pile of others in the urn. The father replied, “No, as long as we are sincere [zhenxin 真心], our prayers will be heard.” Before the temple was reconstructed in 1982, candles and incense were burned inside the main hall. The official reason for moving the urn outside was to prevent incense smoke from staining the ceiling. But there is another explanation: moving a popular ritual outside the main hall. Indeed, at the center of the main hall, toward the front altar, is a rectangular area, specially marked off by beige tiles, with a large lotus motif in the middle, where one is supposed to take off shoes to enter. This is the place for individual quiet prayer and meditation.

One could interpret moving the urn outside as a rationalizing reformist move that shifts a traditional folk practice out as a compromise, so that the hall can be cleared for undisturbed Buddhist meditation while folk worshippers can continue to enjoy incense burning. If so, such an intention would have failed in its modernizing goal. With the urn outside at the door, offering incense now becomes the rite of passage to enter the main hall. Few worshippers skip the step before entering the main hall. If prayers of sincerity in search of the authentic self were expected in the main hall, then they would have to be preceded by ritual. Burning joss sticks is now seen as an act of purification as much as an act of ritual offering, such that one’s doing it has become a test of sincerity—the “as if” as a way of discovering the “as is”—as the father’s reply to the inquiring son attests.

The modernizing goal also would have failed because the theatrical ritual of jostling to be the first to put a joss stick into the urn at the stroke of midnight to greet the New Year has come to define the public identity and image of the Guanyin Temple. By 11 p.m., the crowd in the courtyard had swelled and packed the area, with everyone holding up large joss sticks above their heads. A temple staff member acted as the master of ceremonies, standing on an elevated platform constructed for the event. Speaking into the sound system, sometimes shouting, he maintained order and tried to keep a path clear of waiting devotees so that other worshippers could enter the temple. He had to disrupt the ritual practices of worshippers a number of times because some took too long to baibai with the joss sticks and were jamming up the pathway, causing consternation to the waiting devotees who thought that the worshippers were trying to usurp the best spot to greet the New Year. Moments of sincerity intruded into the ritual space. When things went smoothly and he did not have to maintain order, the master of ceremonies reminded the devotees that they should go straight into the temple after sticking their joss sticks into
the urn, leave through the side doors and go straight home, and not go shopping outside at the night market farther down the road, to preserve the blessings of the incense.

The tension was building up as those at the back pushed those in front as everyone inched toward the urn. Hot ashes dropped on everyone’s heads and shoulders, adding to the tension in the air. By 11:45 p.m., the situation was getting untenable. The master of ceremonies was practically shouting to keep order, while the crowd was exclaiming “Huat ah!” (Fa a 福 in Hokkien), “Prosper!,” in rhythmic unison. At one point the master of ceremonies raised his voice to stop some devotees carrying joss sticks from entering the main hall. At another, he had to persuade the elderly, children, and pregnant women to leave the courtyard, telling them that as long as their desire to bainian (拜年, “worship the New Year”), to pay their New Year’s respects, to Guanyin and Buddha was sincere, they did not have to participate in the ritual, as it was dangerous for them.

Suddenly, at around 11:53 p.m. the crowd became pensively silent. Then, just before 11:55 p.m., a segment of the crowd begin counting down from ten, and everyone joined in. The master of ceremonies panicked and tried to calm everyone down, shouting that it was not yet midnight. But he was ignored. The crowd surged forward, and the master of ceremonies gave in, wished those who had stuck their joss sticks into the urn five minutes early a happy New Year, and turned on the drum music to welcome the New Year. Worshippers began to enter the main hall, but most were still holding out for midnight. When it arrived, after an orderly countdown led by the master of ceremonies, there was another surge, with cries of “Huat ah!” The crowd, satisfied, began to flow into the temple. Devotees, with faces and torsos covered in ashes, put their hands together in prayer mode as they walked into the main hall and baibai’d their way to the front altar. The work of the master of ceremonies was not yet over. For more than an hour, a constant stream of worshippers flowed into the courtyard to greet the New Year.

“I GO SAY THANK YOU”

I observed the ritual from inside the main hall, standing in the spacious area behind the center reflection square. Benches were provided for people to rest. This was the liminal zone, the transition space from self-interested, noisy, and pushy religiosity to the quiet, solitary, and reflective prayerfulness of the center square. Here, worshippers who had just gone through the trial of ashes rested and got ready to enter the prayer zone still stinging with smoke but now facing toward Guanyin and quieting down.

Earlier, during the quieter parts of the night, I had noticed a couple with a baby in a stroller walking in to meet six male friends carrying large joss sticks and offerings. The group stood out in many ways. They were young and spoke English, when the most common language heard in the temple was Mandarin. The couple was a Chinese man and an Indian woman, when the more common mixed-race couples worshipping at the temple were a white man and a Chinese woman. More significantly, several of the men were dressed in similar T-shirts, adorned with gold chains, and had dyed hair, which Chinese
youths from working-class backgrounds like to sport. They seemed to belong to a close-knit fraternity of young businessmen.

As it turned out, the group was responsible for the premature countdown. When the worshippers who stuck their joss sticks in the urn five minutes earlier than midnight streamed into the main hall, the group came in with satisfied smiles on their faces. One member exclaimed, “We did it!” They congregated, chatted, and patted one another on the back at the rear area. These men had created their own group ritual within the larger ritual, carving out the five minutes of the old year to fashion them into their own moments of the New Year. The five minutes stolen and offered back to the gods became the ritual marker of their fraternity. This is perhaps a clever exploitation of time in the production of things—a magical materialism in affinity with the capitalist mode of production.

But one could also read it as demonstrating a well-honed Chinese sensibility. As C. Fred Blake reflects on the Chinese “material spirit” of burning paper replicas of valuable things, the distinction between the natural and the artificial is irrelevant in the Chinese lifeworld: “That which is real, that which is relevant, that which holds value, is man-made.” There the distinction turns on the “imperfection and perfection of workmanship in creating an authentic world” (italics in original). The bainian ritual at the Guanyin Temple belongs to the Chinese material spirit of burning valuable things. Waiting while holding the joss sticks, enduring the hot ashes, and risking burns in the rush to the urn is the ritual work that produces the authenticity of the New Year, which is never just about the passage of time. The Dragon passes time to the Snake, handing the world over to his care. What the fraternity who forged their own group ritual did was to carve their own niche in this authentic world of fortune and fate, so that the group could confront the larger forces of the world in solidarity and good faith. There is no distinction between “as if” and “as is” here. Ritual and sincerity flowed and merged into each other to produce a consciousness that was not propositional but affirmative: “it is.”

As the fraternity chatted away, one member suddenly broke away and said to the group, “I go say thank you.” Turning around to face the altar, he put his hands together and lowered his eyes, then baibaid his way to the main altar. The man paused in front of Guanyin, joining a crowd deep in solitary, quiet prayer. He returned to the fraternity refreshed, and other members took turns to go up to Guanyin to say thank you. It was a sincerity made possible by the ritual of greeting the New Year, and a sincerity that could only be expressed and manifested individually after the group ritual.

Ritual and sincerity melded in front of the altar. Worshippers prayed with their hands brought together, fingers touching each other and facing up, but at different heights. Some held their hands at their chests, close to their hearts. Some held them close to their mouths. Others held them at their foreheads, with heads gently bent. A few held them up high above their heads, which they lowered in standing prostration. Hands were held still, moved ever so slightly, or shook vigorously up and down. Many hands were empty, but some held flowers, young bamboo shoots, or red packets. Some worshippers murmured Buddhist chants, while others prayed for luck, health, or fortune or simply
thanked Guanyin for blessings bestowed. Everyone was oblivious to the presence of the others, introverted into their own worlds of communion with Guanyin, performing their own private rituals to produce the spiritual space of the self.

The presence of others was almost incidental as worshippers focused on the altar. It has a golden statue of Guanyin sitting on a lotus at the center. Buddha, in brilliant chrome, sits behind her on a raised lotus, such that when worshippers gaze on Guanyin, the shadow of Buddha envelops the spiritual space of the self. Hua Tuo, the legendary doctor of the Three Kingdoms period, sits on Guanyin’s right, while Bodhidharma, the first Chinese patriarch of Buddhism, credited with founding Ch’an Buddhism (popularly known by the Japanese name, Zen) and Shaolin martial arts, sits on her left. Devotees pray for health to Hua Tuo, whose long black beard accentuates his benevolent gaze. I was standing in front of him when I was nudged by the crowd pushing its way forward to donate money and obtain flowers from pots in front of Hua Tuo to either place at the altar as offerings to Guanyin or bring home as blessings. Others buy flowers from vendors outside the temple and place them in the urns as offerings to replenish the stock.

At the center of the long front altar table, worshippers placed a row of New Year ritual offerings with individualized significance. There were willows, sticky cakes, oranges, pineapples, green bananas, pomelos, fruit baskets, flower petals, and joss sticks, among other things. Because I was not worshipping but taking notes on my smartphone, I was slowly pushed by worshippers edging to the front, toward Bodhidharma’s side of the altar, where pots of flowers were also placed for the trade of offerings. While I was standing to the side, observing the proceedings, a man went to the side of the altar, took a red plastic offering tray, and emptied a bag of gold-wrapped sweets onto it. Carrying the tray piled with small gold ingots, with his two hands in a prayerful mode, he walked to the center and baibai’d by moving the tray up and down in a gesture of offering. The mountain of gold ingots joined the other offerings on the front altar table.

**SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTERS**

The center square marked off by the beige tiles has a border of black tiles with floral motifs. Anyone who enters this prayer zone first removes their shoes. At New Year’s, worshippers took on different prayer positions, caught up in their private spiritual spaces of prayer. Some were kneeling up, placing the weight of their body on their knees, while others were kneeling down, with their bottoms on their feet. Some were kneeling in prostration, while others were sitting in a lotus position. As with the standing worshippers in front of the altar, hands were put together at different levels to baibai, moving at different speeds and holding an offering or nothing. A few devotees were holding scriptures and meditating over them.

Spatially, the temple is organized in such a way as to facilitate the different combinations of ritual and sincerity that each individual worshipper might customize. The courtyard serves as the purification space where the folk ritual of joss stick burning is performed.
before one turns to the sincerity of solitary, introverted prayer. The rear area of the main hall is the liminal space of transition, where family and friends can wait for one another and the secular is allowed to intrude, with groups chatting and people with their backs facing the altar taking calls on their mobile phones. The center prayer zone anchors the main hall and creates the atmosphere of stillness and quietude. Worshippers going to the front altar have to walk from the sides to approach Guanyin, compelling them to adopt a prayer mode as they pass this zone. Approaching the altar from the side, they are humbled into a denial of the self, walking past either Hua Tuo with his benevolent gaze or Bodhidharma with his martial look, before coming face-to-face with Guanyin. This is quite different from a configuration that would allow worshippers to walk straight up to the altar through the center, in which the self would be in the foreground of consciousness as they approached Guanyin.

Moving worshippers through the sides also makes for serendipitous spiritual encounters. While I was standing by the wall at the side of Hua Tuo taking notes, a mentally and physically handicapped man came up, stood beside me, and went into deep prayer, his hands put together and brought to his murmuring mouth. For some reason, he did not move to the front and was content to be praying at the side. His family members walked up to the front to worship, and he was praying while waiting for them. I became accustomed to his presence and felt a certain spiritual calm listening to his prayerful murmurs. Then I felt a sudden jolt as a man grabbed my upper arm and pulled me toward him rather strongly. He was walking away, and for some unknown reason I did not resist him and went along. We walked a few steps, until the man’s female companion shouted and laughed at him for pulling the wrong person. He turned around in shock and apologized. We laughed in good spirits and wished each other happy New Year. He then took his handicapped brother, who was standing beside me, and left, with all of us in smiles.

After I was nudged from the side of Hua Tuo to the other side of Bodhidharma, I stood near the wall there to observe and take my notes. At the appointed hour of 10 p.m., temple staff cleared the front altar area of standing worshippers and the front portion of the center prayer zone of sitting worshippers. Everyone in the center prayer zone stood up, and others lined up on the sides. A group of lay monks in golden brown robes and nuns in dark blue robes entered in a procession to lead the worshippers in prayer in the center square, facing the altar. Their hands were not placed against each other in the usual baibai fashion but rolled together in a ball at chest level and were moved from left to right to left. Worshippers continued to baibai in their individual fashions. The lay monks and nuns then turned around, faced the main door and the crowd, and continued their baibai with rolled hands. The crowd reciprocated, some bowing, others pressing or rolling their hands together. Some worshippers were waiting for this encounter and left contented to have received the blessings of the lay monks and nuns. The monks and nuns processed out the side door, and the main hall quickly returned to its individualized modes of prayer and worship. To avoid the packed street in front of the temple, the head monk, an old man with a walking stick, left through the side of the altar. As he went, temple volunteers rolled their hands to baibai in greeting, and he reciprocated in kind.
On both sides of the hall by the walls were counters manned by volunteers. They were not doing anything in particular but were observing the worshippers and would help anyone with inquiries. On the counters were wrapped sweets in big bowls. Worshippers could help themselves to the sweets, and these were places of encounter with old friends and acquaintances. It was near the counter on Bodhidharma’s side that I met an ex-student of mine. She came up to me while I was writing my notes and gazing at Bodhidharma and greeted me with a beaming smile: “Prof! Happy New Year!” I did not know why, but I was equally happy to see her. I remember her as a student I had to counsel because she was facing some personal problems and was missing class early in the semester. After the talk, she quickly picked herself up and transfigured into an enthusiastic, conscientious, and vivacious student, leading her team of classmates in a community service project for the course. She became a teacher after graduation, seeking to inspire young people to better themselves. I asked, “Do you worship here often? I thought you were a Christian.” She replied, “I used to be. But my family comes here regularly, and I found myself loving the peace I get here compared to the emotional release in church. When I am troubled, I like to come here and sit at the center to pray quietly and think about life.” I gave her a wide, knowing smile. She did not ask why I was there, as she probably guessed I was doing research. We said good-bye, as her family was waiting for her to leave.

Though I was not at the temple to worship or pray, the two encounters left me with a sense of peace that I have not felt since I was a Catholic youth immersed in meditation sessions at an old village church on a knoll in the quiet countryside. There was something about the transformation of the self that the combination of ritual and sincerity brought about. The veneer of guardedness and self-interest was removed, as was the performativity of self-representation. People encountered one another not “as if” they were fellow Buddhists, not “as is” with their authentic selves. Encounters took place in the immanent “it is” mode, affirming the accidence or coincidence of the meeting. There were no implications or consequences to the encounters, only a strange sense of feeling pleased and being at peace with one’s place in the world.

Soon after the encounter with my student, a nun in Tibetan Buddhist robes who had been lingering at the sides and observing walked up to a volunteer behind the front altar. She asked whether there was something like a brochure of the temple she could have. The volunteer disappeared to the back and returned with a temple calendar. The nun was pleased, and they bowed to each other. Later on, I saw her in the rear area, sitting on a bench and happily looking through the calendar. Like me, she had come not to pray or worship but to observe, for different reasons. But both of us left the temple with encounters that seemed to have touched us.

LORD KRISHNA, THE GOD OF FORTUNE AND THE WORLD

Outside the temple, devotees lined up between metal barricades to enter the courtyard. It was quite a sight to behold at night, especially when they moved forward in an orderly
and deliberate manner while carrying their smoldering joss sticks, as though in a religious procession. The oilcan fires set up by hawkers added to the processional mood. The line snaked toward the night market. At its tail, latecomers were buying joss sticks to properly join the impromptu procession. Groups of devotees huddled around oilcan fires to light their sticks. This was the induction into the ritual of greeting the New Year.

As a whole, this ritual is a scaled-up version of an everyday visit to the temple. On a normal visit, a worshipper would get small joss sticks from a hawker outside the temple, proceed to light them in the courtyard, baibai with them, place them in the urn, and then enter the main hall. Everything is bigger and longer on New Year’s Eve: large joss sticks, large fires, procession to the temple, coordinated collective placing of joss sticks in the urn, and large crowds in the main hall. This reproduces the world appropriate for the temporal scale of the New Year and engenders reflection on the path of destiny that one has been traveling through the years. It produces a search for the authentic self and the coherence of one’s fate in the ever-changing material world.

Down the street, at the night market, at the circle marking the end of Waterloo Street, where the market turns and continues toward Bugis village, a giant God of Fortune statue had been installed. Around the base were placed twelve posters presenting the Chinese zodiac fortune readings for the New Year, in both Chinese and English. The reading for those born in the Year of the Ox was as follows:

Ox friends in the year of the snake will be “blessed” with both the good and bad. Good stars are shining on you, bringing good fortune. However, be cautious of villains and mix with the “right” company of friends. Avoid investments and lending money to prevent heavy losses. Focus on the regular income from your job, maintain a low profile and avoid unnecessary arguments. Business partnerships should be avoided in the possibility the partnerships may fail. You will see the “true-colors” of some of your friends and will realize who your true friends are! As for the Ox kids, this year will be a year to achieve outstanding results, do study hard and smart! Always cherish the people around you. Take good care of your health and family members, especially of the elderly! Pray for safety and good health for all! Be extra careful on roads and safety. For those who are single, congratulations! You might meet your ideal partner this year. Marriage couple should be wary of unwanted attention from the opposite sex, especially from the 2nd half of the year. Stay faithful to your spouse to avoid a broken marriage or you might live with regret for the rest of your life!

There was a good crowd of people reading the posters, many of them prior to buying joss sticks and joining the procession. The God of Fortune was the threshold totem marking the turning of the secular, material world into the sacred space of the Guanyin Temple. Here a would-be worshipper walks from Bugis night market, which sells all manner of cheap goods and services, to meet a reading of his fortune. The fortune reading cannot be read “as if” or “as is.” In fact, it induces reflection on one’s life and its fragments—friends, enemies, investments, job, office politics, business, studies, family, health, travels, love, and sex—and challenges one to search for some coherence in the New Year ahead.
Thus contemplating the consciousness of the world and one’s place and path in it, the worshipper goes down Waterloo Street and buys incense sticks. The worshipper lights the sticks with other worshippers, sharing a fire, all silently reflecting on the fragments for which they are going to seek coherence in the ritual to come. The procession through the dark street continues the reflection as the worshipper looks toward the light emanating from the Guanyin Temple, diffused by the incense smoke from the hopes of worshippers who have gone before. With a resolute stab into the urn, the worshipper abandons the joss sticks representing life’s fragments and marks the moment of entrance into the sacred space and discovery of the worshipper’s authentic self bathed in Guanyin’s benevolence. One may ask for healing, wealth, or good academic results from Guanyin, baibai with red packets or gold ingots, but the worshipper is always thanking her for the blessings already bestowed, for being there in the temple, arriving from the material world and leaving its fragments behind.

For many, the ritual does not end at the Guanyin Temple. They leave in the direction of the Sri Krishnan Temple and make a conscious attempt to stop at the Chinese-style altar constructed just outside its door. On New Year’s Eve, whole families stopped at Sri Krishnan to baibai Lord Krishna with joss sticks. The regulars blessed themselves with the smoke of holy incense burning in a hanging pot of charcoal. A few entered the temple to get a bindi (sacred red dot) applied to their forehead by the priests and to buy a tray of ghee lamps for offering to the gods of the temple. With a small donation, worshippers received a red card from the temple that had the God of Fortune inside wishing the recipient a happy Chinese New Year, and a slip of paper notifying Chinese devotees of the dates of the special worship services provided for them. These occur on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, on festival days for the Guanyin Temple, and on Chinese festival days.

In popular discourse, this hybridization of practices has earned praise for expressing the multiculturalism of Singapore. But this attribution of meaning only serves to domesticate a ritual hybridity that does not have any intrinsic meaning. The practices of Guanyin Temple worshippers at the Sri Krishnan Temple must be seen from the perspective of the worshippers, whose consciousness, when worshipping at the Sri Krishnan, is already conditioned by the visit to Guanyin Temple. The offering of joss sticks and ghee lamps must be seen in the aftermath of the production of sincerity that took place in the procession from the God of Fortune to the Guanyin Temple urn and to the front altar of the main hall. Shaped by the consciousness that the world already exists as “it is,” the Chinese worshipper passing by Lord Krishna cannot ignore him. It is not “as if” Lord Krishna existed to the Chinese worshipper offering joss sticks but that he exists because he is there, living next to Guanyin, and therefore should be respected and worshipped. It is not “as is” an authentic Chinese that the Chinese worshipper offers joss sticks to Lord Krishna, but, as “it is,” Lord Krishna would expect the Chinese devotee to offer joss sticks to him.

If the God of Fortune marked the threshold totem that had the secular, material world fading into the sacred, spiritual space of the Guanyin Temple, then Lord Krishna was the
threshold deity that guarded the exit from the sacred space back into the material world. The exit was not the same as the entrance; the God of Fortune and Lord Krishna were not equivalent. As worshippers exited from Sri Krishnan back into the part of Waterloo Street opened to automobiles, bounded by the commercial culture of Fortune Centre and the state culture of the Stamford Arts Centre, the spirituality they carried slipped out to infect the secular and revive the material spirits of the Chinese lifeworld.

**THE FAILURE OF HERITAGE AND GLOBAL CITY MAKING**

The only building in the area that has been given heritage conservation status is the Stamford Arts Centre. Billed as one of the twenty heritage schools in the city center area by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, it is known as the Former Stamford Girls’ School. Indeed, all heritage school buildings, except the Alsagoff Arab School, have been disemboweled by what the conservation circle would call “adaptive reuse” for commercial and state cultural purposes, seventeen of them carrying the descriptor *Former* in their moniker. My former school, St. Joseph’s Institution, at the other end of Waterloo Street from the Guanyin Temple, is now the Singapore Art Museum. The Authority writes, in the pamphlet featuring the conserved heritage schools,

> School buildings are special places. They are sites of shared memories which bond each successive generation of students who pass through its gates. Schools leave both tangible and intangible imprints on their surroundings, whether they are the sounds of children’s laughter as you pass by its doors, or the sight of a familiar clock tower that marks a journey home. Many school buildings have become architectural or community landmarks, lending a physical and social character to their neighborhoods. 5

The Former Stamford Girls’ School building is neither architecturally special nor particularly memorable. Built by the Japanese population in 1920 for the Japanese School, it housed the Stamford Girls’ School, established by the government in 1951 as a sister school to the premier Raffles Girls’ School (Stamford Raffles being the British founder of the colonial town), from 1955 to 1984 and the successor Stamford Primary School until 1986. Its uses for short periods—twenty years as a school for the foreign Japanese population and just over thirty years for a regular government school—hardly commend it as a heritage building for the local and national community. Its inclusion in the list of heritage schools in the city center helped the Authority to round the number to a substantial twenty and allowed the global city center, touted as a unique mix of old Asian colonial buildings and sparkling skyscrapers, to be haunted with the ghosts of cultural pasts to give it its heritage branding. Symbolically, as ordained by the postcolonial politics of multiracial and multireligious representation, it is needed to pair with the Former Victoria School as the only two colonial and secular government schools in a list otherwise full of Christian and Catholic mission schools and ethnic
Chinese, Indian, and Arabic schools with links to their respective temple, religion, or clan associations.

Compared to the Guanyin Temple and the Sri Krishnan Temple, which have been immensely popular with generations of Singaporeans, the Former Stamford Girls’ School pales in significance. Yet it is the only conserved building in the neighborhood. The original Guanyin Temple was built in 1884. Over the decades, usage outgrew architecture, but it was only when the state began to redevelop the adjacent Bugis area that the temple was demolished and rebuilt. The new temple building, opened in 1982, was twice as big, to accommodate the faithful. Statues of the three main deities—Hua Tuo, Guanyin, and Bodhidharma—and Buddha were moved from separate altars into a common prayer hall, with Buddha sitting behind Guanyin, which seemed to match the new postcolonial order, in which ethnic and religious communities were now combined as equals into a new nation guarded by the state.

However, while the Former Stamford Girls’ School was awarded conservation status in 1994, only the place where the temple sits was designated a historic site by the National Heritage Board, in 2001, mainly to commemorate the use of the original temple as a refuge during the Second World War. In the modern heritage consciousness of the nation-state, the “as is” authenticity of physical architecture with embedded significances is played off against the “as if” imagination of collective memories, just so community lives can be reorganized and reordered for the regime of surplus value secured by the developmental state. The Stamford Girls’ School is therefore now the Stamford Arts Centre, serving the function of infusing artistic vibrancy into the global city. The Guanyin Temple stands outside this regime, yet it could not be ignored, because of the central position it occupies in the historical and cultural life of Singaporeans.

Worse still, the practical “it is” engagement with the world that led to its reconstruction in the 1980s confounds the modern heritage consciousness. The temple building is not sacred in itself. Sacred space could be reconfigured, because its sacredness is found in the relationship between the deities (for the statue of Guanyin is Guanyin), the worshippers, and the world. If the mortals had changed, becoming more national and multicultural—thus, if the world had changed, becoming caught up in postcolonial developmentalism—then so the immortals had shifted themselves to form a reorganized cosmic order to accommodate the world. Authenticity resides in changing rituals of relationships, not in the eternal artifacts of culture. Not coincidentally, the temple has played an important philanthropic role in the health, education, and arts fields in the past two decades, often intentionally reaching out to non-Chinese beneficiaries.

The Guanyin Temple is thus given an honorary role in the urban heritage universe of the state, without the “as is” authenticity of conserved status, because it was reconstructed, but with the “as if” imagination of having played its part in the coming of the nation during the war. The fact that it could not be ignored meant that when the developmental state inaugurated the first Singapore Biennale of Arts, in 2006, the Guanyin Temple was chosen as a heritage site to host international artworks. The biennale was
the anchor cultural event for the International Monetary Fund–World Bank annual meetings in the city, titled “Singapore 2006: Global City, World of Opportunities.” Importantly, “belief” was chosen as the theme of the biennale, in part to showcase the racial and religious harmony of multicultural Singapore and in part to highlight the heritage treasures of conserved religious buildings, to give the global city a unique civic glow.

Seen as sensitive interventions in a religious space, three sets of site-specific artworks were placed in Guanyin Temple. First, the Costa Rican artist Federico Herrero painted the walls and columns at the side of the prayer hall’s main entrance with his trademark round colored things with eyelike circles, interspersed with lines that evoke the masses caught up in the urban environment. But domesticated by the temple walls and columns, they looked like representations of the multitude of worshippers flowing in and out of the hall, their eyes caught between the immortals and the world. Simply titled Painting, Herrero’s work was less an intervention than an allusion to the spiritual shadows that the faithful cast on the walls of the temple.

Second, the Chinese artist Xu Bing produced a carpet to replace the red carpet at the center of the prayer hall where devotees sit or kneel to pray and meditate, made of a square of 841 characters that can be read in all directions for multiple meanings. It mimics a famous ancient Chinese palindrome but is composed of Buddhist scriptures in Xu’s own calligraphic system: an ironic combination of Roman alphabets into Chinese-like characters. Squeezing the West into the Chinese world, Prayer Carpet seems almost to mock the faithful for pursuing Western dreams with the succor of Guanyin. However, the piece was substituted with a carpet with secular writings after the temple leaders felt uneasy that devotees would be trampling on holy scripture.5 Xu’s original carpet was instead displayed at the National Museum. Thus, his intervention was subverted by his misunderstanding of the temple space as sacred in itself, the idea that it made logical and aesthetic sense to adorn the sacred space with a sacred carpet. The prayer carpet was always profane; it could not be sacred. Once a carpet has holy text on it, because a holy word in its physical manifestation is sacred, it cannot be stepped on, just like the statues of the deities and the offerings to them.

Third, the Taiwanese artist Tsai Charwei offered Lotus Mantra, for which she wrote the Buddhist Lotus Sutra, which is partly dedicated to Guanyin, “onto lotus seeds, roots and flowers, representing the Buddhist concepts of the speech, body, and mind, respectively,” as the curator Eugene Tan wrote. Placed as offerings, they dried and rotted, with the writings disintegrating with nature. Tsai also wrote the sutra on living lotus flowers placed in a pond specially installed in the temple, with the writings preserved along with the flowers. Tan writes, “The juxtaposition between the two different states of existence embodied by the lotus flowers highlights the intricate and complex relationships that exists in systems of belief such as Buddhism, between the living and the dying.”6 But such theological conceits about the “as is” essence of self and the universe were lost on worshippers concerned with life and death, live, in the flesh. At most, they were bemused by art tourists, like me, who did not follow the flow of worship and stood
gazing at Tsai's lotus flowers instead of Guanyin herself, “as if” the flowers connected us to the world.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to ritual, modern scholarship on religion has been burdened with the themes and tropes of rationalization, secularization, and performativity. Ritual has been opposed to doctrine, autonomy, and now sincerity. In this chapter, I have quite deliberately juxtaposed the rituals in and around the Guanyin Temple on New Year’s Eve to these themes and tropes to show that ritual is not opposed to them but rather willingly and playfully takes part in their making. Thus, the urn moved outside the temple hall to modernize worship only serves to open the ritual of incense burning out into the streets, creating a purification rite of passage and an annual processional ritual that have come to define the temple’s identity. Even with the deities reordered to better reflect Buddhist beliefs and space reconfigured around the center prayer square inside the hall, rituals of thanksgiving, praying, and greeting the New Year have only intensified, now flowing around and into the square in the creative melding of spiritual encounters. With the rituals redoubled and spilling out into the streets, the Guanyin Temple has become the anchor of the pedestrianized section of Waterloo Street, which is otherwise hemmed in by the secularizing commercial, residential, and civic urban projects of the developmental state. On New Year’s Eve, the street is transformed into a worlding spiritual space stretching, through the procession of giant joss sticks, from the giant God of Fortune to the Guanyin Temple and then out into secular traffic again through the good graces of Lord Krishna.

Attempts by the state to co-opt the temple and its rituals into heritage and global city-making projects floundered because the state approached them in the dichotomous framework of ritual versus sincerity/autonomy. Instead, the temple and its rituals have been participating in the cultural life of the nation, engaging the nation’s multiculturalism and secular materialism in their own terms. It would be wrong to say that the temple and its rituals have resisted modernity or, in a syncretistic manner, absorbed modern culture to persist in an eternal celestial mode. Rather, they have been constitutive of the “modern spirit” of Singapore, effectively interweaving the spiritual and the secular with all the attendant tensions and contradictions and breathing soul into an otherwise technocratic cityscape.

I have intentionally approached the study of the rituals not in terms of time—the cultural history of the littoral and overseas Chinese and the evolution of their religious practices and traditions, which is the dominant approach in the study of Chinese religion—but in terms of space. The intention was to avoid essentializing the rituals and to see how they could spill over and transgress cultural boundaries. The result has gone beyond what I could have anticipated. Ritual is literally larger than life and culture and big enough to encompass modernity and its projects. There is something praxeologically fundamental to human being and our quest for the spiritual, even in ostensibly secular contexts, and this is played out in spatial practice.
NOTES

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4. Urban Redevelopment Authority, Heritage Schools, information pamphlet (Singapore: The Authority, 2010).


Eileen Chang’s description of Shanghai’s train station and machinic Buddhist hell possesses an almost clairvoyant quality. It conjures memories of the hellish existence experienced by Shanghai urbanites since the mid-1990s, a time when housing disputes and forced relocations unsettled their daily life, alongside the clanging of never-ending building sites. Jing’an District (Jīng’ān qu 静安区), where Chang lived in the 1940s, was engulfed in a frenzy of construction as part of the infrastructure development and cosmetic makeover of the city in preparation for the 2010 World Expo. The area is named after a Buddhist site whose physical appearance changed several times over the course of the past century. Badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution, the resuscitated Buddhist temple there is one of the urban icons of twenty-first-century Shanghai, its yellowish external walls hovering above one of the city’s busiest intersections. Urban authorities made conspicuous use of the power of the old religious site during the World Expo, for instance by strewing its image across the city on posters and large billboards. One particularly striking picture showed two cupped male hands containing the few buildings that were deemed iconic and of the people, including Jing’an Temple and the Children’s Palace. An eponymous underground station, which also contains vast retail areas, facilitates the daily journeys of hundreds of thousands of visitors. Jing’an Temple is right at the center of the map of the underground system. Similarly, Shanghai’s first electric tram line, inaugurated in 1908, originated from there. The site has thus been part of the modern transport network of the city for more than a century. Today, thanks to buses and the world’s longest underground system, Jing’an Temple can be reached easily and efficiently.
from virtually everywhere in Shanghai. Has the old religious site been unsympathetically repurposed as a theme park and a shopping mall? A cursory look at the latest renovations could easily lead one to conclude that little of the temple’s religious significance has survived the city’s passage into global modernity. Its glaring external walls are lined with shops, a humongous shopping arcade dwarfs its main hall, and pop-up stores are periodically erected in front of it to peddle anything from cooking pots to luxury cars. Yet Jing’an Temple’s place in the ritual life of Shanghai urbanites should not be underestimated. By tracing the emergence of what I describe as the Shanghai buddhascape of the 1920s and 1930s and its influence on the contemporary urban fabric, I explore the multidimensional relationship between exceptional sites and the contexts in which they function.

Ordinary Shanghai urbanites, I argue, find solace and purpose in Buddhist technologies of salvation. For some of the chroniclers of interwar Shanghai urban life, as Chang’s texts remind us, Buddhist spaces and practices allowed the performance of both cosmopolitanism and Chineseness. In this respect, Shanghai is a privileged site for understanding Buddhist-inspired self-fashioning and, more generally, what I call the spatial tactics of Buddhist practitioners in the context of colonial modernity first and eventually of global capitalism. Chang’s is one of the voices one can listen to in order to gauge the sensitivities of the urban cultural elite toward Buddhism and its presence in China’s modern cityscapes. Her much-loved modern apartment was less than half a mile down the road from Jing’an Temple. She could also easily walk up to a second renowned Buddhist institution nearby, the World Buddhist Devotees Association (Shijie Fojiao Jushilin 菩提寺), founded in 1918 by and for Buddhist laypersons. A little farther away were the buildings of Shanghai Buddhist Books (Shanghai foxue shuju 上海佛學書局) and the vast Hardoon Gardens (哈同花園, or Aili Gardens 爛頂園), whose grounds contained a Buddhist press and a Buddhist university.

What of the falling pagoda that Chang conjures in the title of the novel cited at the beginning of this chapter? Shanghai had a few of these structures, notably the Longhua Pagoda (龍華塔), which features in some of the oldest maps of the city. Chang’s reference is part of a web of allusions to Buddhist-inspired material culture and ideas that can be found in contemporary writings. She was not alone in using the trope of the pagoda. David Der-wei Wang points us to many other texts by prominent modernists and iconoclasts that contain this motif, noting that it ushers us into the “intertextual world of modern Chinese literature” (2010, xvi). The tiered towers, traditionally understood as containers of Buddhist relics, were ubiquitous elements of the landscape throughout the second millennium. In the course of the twentieth century, during China’s age of photography and its concurrent remaking of the landscape both real and imaginary, they became the focus of intense observation by Buddhists and non-Buddhist alike. Often described then as typical examples of so-called Eastern architecture (dongfang jianzhu 東方建築), they have emerged once again in the twenty-first century in the built environment of global Shanghai and other Asian cities.
A widespread conviction that religion is irrelevant as a historical force in modern China is partly to blame for the comparative lack of studies of religious activity in twentieth-century Shanghai. Yet, I argue, Shanghai’s religious sites ultimately reveal the multiple temporalities of the multiple layers of the cityscape.

There are several reasons why Buddhism and Buddhists made their presence felt in the city both in the interwar period and now. Shanghai expanded in an area of strong Buddhist traditions. Many of China’s most important Buddhist sites lie in its vicinity, including the sacred mountains Putuo Shan (普陀山), an island in the East China Sea; Jiuhua Shan (九華山) in Anhui Province; and Tiantai Shan (天台山) in Zhejiang Province. Exchanges between the city and the monasteries on Putuo Island and other pilgrimage sites grew steadily over the years, and the metropolis became an important base of fundraising and preaching for Buddhists from all over China. In addition, as forces both old and new changed the religious landscape, Shanghai Buddhists actively sought to shape key debates with the authorities surrounding the emerging category of religion (宗教). In engaging in charity, education, relief work, lifestyle, proselytizing, cultural heritage, ritual practice, self-cultivation, soteriology, nationalism and transnationalism, and business, Shanghai Buddhism was formidable, eclectic, and adaptable. The writings of the charismatic monk Taixu (太虛, 1890–1947) present it as a political and social utopia and monastics as heroic figures dedicated to saving humanity. In his “A Statement to Asiatic Buddhists” (1925), Taixu declares that only Buddhism, a universal remedy for the ills of the modern world, a better system than socialism or capitalism, “can save the world.” In his Buddhist-inspired modern urban utopia, the marketplace, the highway, the train, the soldier’s barrack, the hospital, the factory, and even the prison ward are to be transformed into a Buddhaland, an earthly paradise where practitioners carry out famine relief work, attempt to prevent natural calamities, and offer medical aid to those wounded in the war. They also take care of factories, encourage land reclamation, support widows, and aid the helpless, the aged, the crippled. Buddhists should build bridges and roads, provide streetlights and free ferry services, and so on.

Indeed, Buddhist activists contributed to shaping the urban landscape of Shanghai. Rich entrepreneurs with disposable income, following deep-seated beliefs in the accumulation of religious merit and the efficacy of merit transference through Buddhist technologies of salvation, zealously supported the making of new religious sites, the creation of printing presses and bookshops, and public ritual activities. In their pursuit of religious and political prominence, Shanghai-based Buddhist activists adapted their traditional buildings to new needs, tailoring the shape and size of monasteries and recitation halls to fit the urban fabric. One of the residences of the highly prominent political reformer Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858–1927) was at one point converted into a Buddhist temple.11 Women and men engaged in acts of self-fashioning by manipulating and recreating the meanings of public religious spaces and ritual actions. Buddhism was mean-
igual to ordinary urban residents as well as to members of the new elites; places and spaces devoted to its practice flourished. The largest and most aspirational buddhascape of all was probably Hardoon Gardens, established in 1904. This is now lost, but its memory lingers in the landscaping and aesthetic practices of new Buddhist sites in China and of Taiwanese Buddhist denominations. One of Shanghai’s richest men, Silas Aaron Hardoon (1851–1931), and his wife, Luo Jialing (also known as Liza Roos, 1864–1941), a devout Buddhist, crafted their own Buddhist-inspired dreamland by erecting a monastery and numerous other buildings and pavilions on the grounds of their expansive urban garden villa. Luo and Hardoon’s buddhascape took five years to build. It extended for more than eleven hectares and contained eight scenic spots of Buddhist inspiration, a Buddhist retreat, a Buddhist college, a number of traditional schools, pavilions, pagodas, a stone boat, a Buddhist temple, a theater, an artificial stream, a lake, and several ponds. It combined the setting of the traditional scholar’s landscape garden (yuanlin 园林) with novel Buddhist-inspired facilities, including the so-called Kalavinka Hermitage, named after a fantastical bird-bodied Buddhist being. The scholar monk Zongyang (1861–1921) lived there beginning in 1908, to work on the publication of the Buddhist Canon. Another scholar monk, Yuexia (1858–1917), gathered more than eighty young monastics to study with him at Hardoon Garden’s Huayan University (華嚴大學), an experimental seminary in the villa.

The final years of the Qing dynasty witnessed a flourishing of Buddhist activity in Shanghai, with the building of a major monastery, the Yufo Temple (玉佛寺) in 1898, and the complete restoration of Longhua Temple (龍華寺) in 1875. The illustrated magazine Dianshizhai huabao (點石齋畫報), published in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Shanghai, recorded the large crowds that gathered to celebrate Buddha’s birthdays. Crowds of practitioners also convened for the Jing’an Temple fair and other ceremonies that were central to the life of the people of Shanghai. Some 149 new Buddhist monasteries and halls were built in Shanghai between the late Qing period and the 1930s, a time of great expansion for the city. Before 1949, it counted at least three hundred Buddhist buildings, staffed by some five thousand clerics. Jing’an Temple in the northwest and Longhua Temple in the south, together with many other sites, rendered Buddhist practice manifest throughout the city, including in the foreign settlements. According to a directory of the Shanghai Buddhist Association, by the late 1940s, many of the city’s almost three hundred monasteries and temples were inside the dwellings in the shikumen ฤffen, where most people had conducted their everyday existence since the 1870s (You 1988, 136–37). There, in Lu Hanchao’s words, “with the addition of a few religious statues and a table for joss sticks and candle, a living room or wing room of a shikumen could be transformed into a Buddhist temple where worship and rituals were conducted in all their proper forms” (1999, 183). In her study of working-class women in the 1930s and 1940s, Emily Honig has shown that those in the cotton mills used Buddhist temples to formalize the creation of “sisterhood societies” (jiemei hui 姐妹會) which helped them to cope with the harshness of life in the city and of work in the factories.
When Communist activists wanted to access the sisterhoods, they had to worship at Buddhist temples with the members, kneel and burn incense, and make pledges in front of a Buddhist altar (1985, 712).

Urban Buddhists also erected Western-style buildings and enjoyed electricity and other modern technologies. In Shanghai, homes were gradually sealed off, insulated from contact with the outside, as new building materials became more widespread. These included “glass windows, solid doors, stone and concrete walls and fixed layouts,” marking “a shift away from the more permeable dwellings common throughout imperial China” (Dikötter 2007, 187). The visual artist and Buddhist layman Feng Zikai (1898–1975), after visiting the premises of the Shanghai Buddhist lay association Jushi Lin, noted that it reminded him of a Western-style building and that it was very comfortable and aesthetically pleasing. Before the Communists rose to power, Shanghai Buddhists participated in a variety of religious practices that were strongly connected to the urban environment. Some activists branded their activities “new Buddhism” (xin fojiao). They readily embraced modern technologies, including the modern press, sound recording, and photography. Decades before the internet became a widespread tool for the diffusion of religious teachings, they had already developed a great interest in the mass-mediated communication of religious ideas thanks to their own radio station, the Foyin Diantai. Founded in the early 1930s, it was in all likelihood one of the first Buddhist radio stations in the world. In this period, public collective singing was firmly established as a means of instructing and enforcing belief as well as prompting social and political mobilization. Buddhist musicians composed novel, anthemlike songs, which were disseminated through books, journals, and the wireless in the hope of aiding the growth of urban communities of practitioners. The Shanghai-based Buddhist publishing world offered its audiences more than just canonical literature; readers had access to several periodicals and to a vast number of books and pamphlets. According to the Chinese Year Book, 1935–1936, there were some sixty-eight publishers of Buddhist material in China; of these, at least seven were in Shanghai. The Jing’an Temple neighborhood was home to a major Chinese Buddhist publishing house, Shanghai Buddhist Books (Shanghai foxue shuju), whose branches and subsidiary offices in 1934 amounted to more than one hundred. The Shanghai Archives preserve a remarkable photograph of the building of Shanghai Buddhist Books, a Western-style concrete edifice with a huge character for Buddha painted on its tiled rooftop. The establishment of a readership community offered visibility to Buddhist cultural activists at a time when traditional Chinese religion was coming under increasing pressure. Shanghai publishers produced millions of printed pages ranging from canonical texts to ephemera. More than 150 periodicals were in circulation throughout China between 1912 and 1948. Of these, at least forty-two were published in Shanghai, their pages filled with references to China’s great monasteries and its sacred geography.

Buddhist publications stimulated urban ritual performance and vice versa. Shanghai Buddhists supported a plethora of associations, including redemptive societies and
For instance, the Great Dharma Foundation for the Release of Living Creatures (Fangsheng hongfa jijinhui 救生弘法基金會) devoted its efforts to freeing birds and fish purchased at the city’s markets with money obtained through collections. The ritual release of animals in urban ponds and the periodical pious abstention from meat and intoxicating substances (chisu 吃素), alongside the patronage of vegetarian restaurants, became widespread practices. Urbanites saluted the opening of Buddhist-inspired vegetarian restaurants under the guise of “merit clubs” (gongdelin 功德林). The prominent author, publisher, businessman, and Buddhist practitioner Ding Fubao (丁福保, 1874–1952) in 1923 initiated the famous “Wednesday dharma assemblies” (xingqisan fahui 星期三法會) at the Gongdelin vegetarian restaurant on Nanjing Road. Today, the Gongdelin restaurant group and its sister company, which goes by the amusing English moniker Godly, are still in business and have several branches scattered throughout the city.

Significant numbers of Shanghai residents took part in Buddhist-inspired activities and belonged to Buddhist societies. The Chinese Buddhist Association (Zhongguo fojiao-hui 中國佛教會), established in 1929, was headquartered in close proximity to Jing’an Temple, within the hefty grounds of the four-acre Enlightenment Garden (Jue Yuan 覺園), a location donated by the wealthy entrepreneurs who owned the Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company. The Shanghai Buddhist Pure Karma Society (Shanghai fojiao jingyeshi 上海佛教淨業社), the Bodhi Study Society (Puti xiehui 菩提協會), and the radio station mentioned above were among the other organizations that took up residence on the estate. The Buddhist Pure Karma Society had spaces dedicated to hosting lecture series and ran an orphanage and a clinic. The Pure Karma Orphanage (Jingye gu'er jiaoyangyuan 淨業孤兒教育院), founded in 1940, was run by one of China’s most influential twentieth-century Buddhists, Zhao Puchu (趙朴初, 1907–2000), who moved on to serve for decades as the president of the paragovernmental Buddhist Association of China (Zhongguo Fojiao xiehui 中國佛教協會). During the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in the early 1940s, Jing’an Temple was the center of Buddhist institutional and organizational activities. In the two decades after the Communist victory and the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, this monastery was often in dire straits, together with many other Shanghai Buddhist institutions. Holmes Welch noted that most Shanghai-based lay Buddhist groups “dropped out of sight” in the 1950s, even if the city still enjoyed the highest level of freedom and support for Buddhist activities of anywhere in China (1972, 317). No religious practices could be performed outside officially sanctioned premises, of which there were only a few. This is still the case today. Like other urban monasteries, Jing’an Temple was locked up by the People’s Liberation Army in the mid-1960s, presumably to stave off attacks by the Red Guards, who had significantly damaged religious buildings and ritual paraphernalia at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when religious images, not unlike human beings, were criticized and denounced (pidou 批斗) in mass struggle sessions (Welch 1972, 348). According to Denise Ho’s research on the activities of the Shanghai cultural bureaucracy during the Cultural Revolution and the Maoist campaigns to “destroy the four olds” (po sijiu 破四舊),
Buddhist property suffered significant damage: “Much of the destruction was neither pre-empted nor prevented: at the Chenxiang Pavilion all the Buddhas were destroyed, the Jing’an Temple lost all its cultural relics, the thousands of volumes of scripture at the Longhua Temple were burned.”26

War, revolution, and the concurrent shifts in government policies toward religion have presented Shanghai with the question of what to do with its Buddhist past. From May Fourth iconoclasts to Red Guards to reform-era critics of traditional Chinese culture, “making revolution” has almost always included a rejection of religious practices. Yet authorities have also derived legitimacy by claiming continuity with the past and the continuing management of its material vestiges. The cultural and economic resources of Chinese Buddhism have proved resilient and capable of reinvoication and reinvention.27

THE CITY AND THE PAGODA

Let me offer the following hypothesis: Preservation in Shanghai is motivated by something quite different from the usual pieties about “cultural heritage,” which, given the city’s colonial past, can only be ambiguous. It is motivated more by anticipations of a new Shanghai to rival the old than simply by nostalgia for the past. In other words, preservation is something more complex than just a question of the past remembered: in Shanghai, the past allows the present to pursue the future; hence “memory” itself is select and fissured, sometimes indistinguishable from amnesia.

ACKBAR ABBAS, “COSMOPOLITAN DESCRIPTI ON: SHANGHAI AND HONG KONG”

A few Buddhist sites are still firmly located within today’s urban fabric, while almost every other traditional religious building has vanished from it. This fact is more remarkable if one considers the sheer scale of the change. Temples and shrines were ubiquitous in Chinese cities until modern times, as Susan Naquin has eloquently demonstrated in her study of urban religion in Beijing between 1400 and 1900. She has documented more than twenty-five hundred Beijing temples, buildings that she describes as “dedicated to housing a representation of a supernatural spirit (a ‘god’) before which offerings and prayers are made” (2000, 19–20). These buildings were crucial to Chinese city life, not only its religious life but also for the purposes of “shopping, entertainment, welfare relief and politics” (622). Some of these earlier functions are developing anew in Buddhist temples. While political agency compounded with the unleashing of market forces in the real estate sector progressively brought about the almost complete disappearance of most temples from Chinese cities, it concurrently permitted the presence of several Buddhist sites in Shanghai. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1983, Jing’an Temple was designated a key Chinese Buddhist temple. In 1984, the city government donated some three hundred thousand dollars to the Jing’an Temple Restoration Committee. The first
phase of its restoration project was completed in 1990. The Metro Line 2 reached Jing’an Temple Station in 1998, making the site uniquely accessible in terms of ease and affordability of public transport. Jing’an Temple epitomizes the plurality of functions of religious buildings in Asian megacities. Under globalization and the cultural logic of late capitalism, the packaging of cities as commodities and the demands for a unique cultural experience associated with a specific place and its built environment are central to the tourist imagination and drive authorities to exploit the “vernacular built heritage” to attract investors (AlSayyad 2001, 3). According to Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, “Planning, design and construction of the city are processes of social production responsible for shaping the urban environment, encoding it with intentions and aspirations, uses and meanings that are often themselves contentiously produced” (2003, 20).

Tim Winter (2007) argues that historic preservation projects are means by which governments use authoritative forms of knowledge and manipulate space to enhance their political legitimacy and boost economic growth. Jing’an Temple is both a monastic and a tourist complex; it is both a ritual space activated by worship and a museumlike institution backed by the government, Buddhist groups, and private individuals. The combination of Buddhists’ spatial tactics with urban planning logics has resulted in the creation of a spectacular complex whose architecture blurs the distinctions among the museum, the theme park, and traditional Buddhist structure.

A reconfigured, architecturally grandiose form is deployed to reinforce traditional soteriological claims but also to produce an alternative social and political space vis-à-vis China’s ostensibly secular state. Temple helpers relate stories of extraordinary donations by local and transnational Chinese businesspeople that allowed the new halls to be built solely with expensive timber imported from Myanmar. Jing’an District is now one of the wealthiest and most expensive neighborhoods in China. The main hall of Jing’an Temple hosts a fifteen-ton silver statue. According to temple volunteers, “The old wooden statue of Guanyin was saved by a Chinese businessman” from its previous location, where it had weathered and cracked. The man restored it and donated it, subsequently sponsoring the construction of the East Hall, where the icon now resides.28

The Chinese belief in “efficacy” (ling ), the powers attributed to spiritual entities, is predicated on deep-seated fears that the dead are able to interfere with the living, and not only in friendly ways. Spirits harboring vengeance will often try to do harm, inflicting illnesses and disasters on the living.29 According to local residents who still regard it as a haunted place, the plot of land across the road from Jing’an Temple once housed a cemetery, which was relocated in the mid-1950s.30 Perhaps in an attempt to suppress this fact in Shanghai’s psychogeography and counter its ominous potential with the magical efficacy of Jing’an Temple, some of the former burial land has been landscaped into Jing’an Park (Jing’an gongyuan 静安公园). A representative voice in the novel Buddhistlandscape of contemporary Shanghai, the artist Zhang Huan (張洹, b. 1956) regards Jing’an Temple as a numinous place. Once back in the city after a long sojourn in the United States, he started collecting the ash of burned incense sticks from Jing’an Tem-
ple, which he now uses as the main material in his paintings and large-scale installations that explore Buddhist iconography and ideas. This is his recollection of his encounter with Buddhist practitioners and of how he decided to work with incense ash:

Two years ago [2005] when I came back to China I went to Shanghai’s Jing’an temple. Initially I went to pray, to make an offering [shao xiang 報香]. When I got there I discovered so many devoted men and women completely entering another spiritual state. They’d be touching a Buddha statue [foxiang 佛像]. They could talk to this image or to this soul, one on one, for hours, as if they were insane or something. I thought that this image, Buddhism, it’s [sic] power is so great. It makes people worship, make offerings. So I saw the whole yard with all these containers filled with incense ash, and I was deeply moved. I immediately thought that this material was really beautiful. I was really excited. I felt that I had found a material I was going to use. How many tens of thousands of people, how many millions of people’s dreams are completed in this light ash?31

The place of the temple in Shanghai’s sacred geography was reinforced when a devastating fire wrecked an apartment block nearby and killed at least fifty-eight people. Elderly local residents once again raised the issue of the harmful effects of building on former burial grounds. The people of Shanghai were in shock, and the temple at once became a platform for public mourning. Buddhist practices constituted a meaningful way to deal with death and its consequences for all those involved. The seventh-day memorial service (touqi 七七) rituals took place in Jing’an Temple.32

Thus, a new institution, a sort of a temple-cum-museum, is emerging in twenty-first-century China as one of the key cultural forms through which religious revivalism and cultural nationalism are attempting to consolidate both their statements and their constituencies. The making of Buddhist-inspired buildings and other urban buddhascapes can be read as a means of developing new local and translocal connections and outreach platforms while evoking more traditional technologies of salvation. With its involvement and investment in these processes, the Chinese government is attempting to achieve several things at many different levels. In particular, it may hope to engender a sense of cultural identity and unity via the appropriation of the past and to generate revenue through the development of religious and cultural tourism. Ultimately, it may also hope to control and limit the rise of indigenous Christian churches and of sectarian groups, fearful as it is of their powerful message of salvation.33 Elsewhere in Shanghai, urban planners of the Xuhui District have anchored a large culture and creative industries hub called West Bund (Xi’an 西岸) around a second Buddhist site, the Longhua Temple and Pagoda. They envision a creative recuperation of the local Buddhist heritage and are aware of Buddhism’s place in local people’s lives and the ever-increasing number of Buddhist funerary services performed in the temple.34 It remains to be seen how the Longhua area will develop and what role, if any, practitioners will play in the current reshaping of the monastic complex. Not all local Chinese authorities behave in the same way toward
Buddhist sites, and sometimes the relationships between practitioners and the state can be tense (Fisher 2011). Ultimately, however, Shanghai’s buddhascapes have proved remarkably successful. Buddhist sites have entered the contemporary imaginary of Shanghai and its ever-expanding internal tourist industry.

Buddhist-inspired buildings are part of Shanghai’s imagination of its past and of its future. If one looks closely at one of the city’s iconic buildings, the Jin Mao Tower, a symbol of its search for wealth and power, the resemblance to the medieval pagoda of Kaifeng is almost uncanny. According to the website of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), the architecture firm tasked with designing the first building of notice in the futuristic Pudong District, a part of Shanghai that has emerged over the course of the past twenty years on the eastern bank of the Huangpu River, “The 420-meter-high Jin Mao Tower was China’s tallest building at the time of its completion and today remains its most iconic. Recalling historic pagoda forms, with setbacks that create a rhythmic pattern, the 88-story tower has become a model for skyscraper design throughout the country.” This monstrum is now one of the emblems of global Shanghai. There are many more. Have architects and urban planners manufactured a sort of retrofuturistic pastiche, an architectural game of shadows, from Jin Mao’s postindustrial pagoda to Jing’an Temple’s glowing turrets to the lotus-shaped roof of the Westin Hotel and the high-hanging prayer wheels of the Hilton Hotel? Yes, perhaps. Yet the spatial strategies of interwar urban Buddhist patrons are still relevant to the making of the global metropolis.

NOTES

1. The semiautobiographical novel The Fall of the Pagoda (Leifeng ta 麗峰塔), from which this chapter borrows its title, was written in English by the Chinese writer Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920–95). It is based on essays about her life in Shanghai written in both Chinese and English in the 1940s and 1950s. Composed between 1963 and 1968, the novel was published posthumously by Hong Kong University Press in 2010, with an introduction by David Der-wei Wang.

2. For the destruction of neighborhoods in downtown Shanghai, see Shao 2010.


5. For a general discussion of the religious practices of Chinese urbanites, see Tarocco 2011; also Tarocco 2007.
6. See, for example, the December 30, 1927, issue of the influential pictorial The Young Companion for a lavishly illustrated feature about pagodas. For a survey of the architectural development of modern Shanghai, see Rowe and Kuan 2002.

7. The scholar Holmes Welch has written three remarkable volumes detailing many aspects of Buddhist life in China in the twentieth century, namely The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900–1950; The Buddhist Revival in China; and Buddhism under Mao. For a general survey of religion in Shanghai, see Yuan and Gao 1992. For Daoism, see Liu 2009. For a preliminary investigation of Buddhist-inspired activism in Shanghai, see Tarocco 2007. For a note on the transformation of the Jing’an Temple in the late 1990s, see Tarocco 2000. For Shanghai before the Communist takeover, see Bergère 1989; Wakeman and Yeh 1992; Goodman 1995; Lee 1999; Lu 1999; Yeh 2007.

8. For Buddhism in twentieth-century Jiangnan, the area of southern China where Shanghai is located, see Tarocco 2007, 25–88, and its underlying sources.

9. For the complicated genealogy of the term religion in China and the rest of East Asia, see Barrett and Tarocco 2011. For its shifting meanings in the age of empires, see van der Veer 2001; 2007.

10. The Buddhist doctrine of karma had served as the basis for morality and instructional books, used as basic guides for specific behavior to accumulate merit in the context of a shifting socioeconomic reality; see Brokaw 1991. For the flourishing of Buddhist-inspired Shanghai-based publishing enterprises and their audiences during the first half of the twentieth century, see Tarocco 2007, 46–65.


12. For instance, in the gardens and scenic spots of the Dharma Drum complex outside Taipei and in North America. See also the discussion of the Longhua Temple development site in this chapter.


15. Yufo Temple was built thanks to the fundraising activities of the monk Huigen (慧根, d. 1900), who left his Putuo Mountain base in 1882 to visit all of China’s sacred Buddhist mountains. Eventually, he decided to go to Tibet via Sichuan and then travel on to Myanmar, from which he brought back to China five statues of Buddha made of white jade. Yufo, literally “jade Buddha,” was built to host two of these consecrated icons. Initially located in Jiangwan town (江灣), the temple and its icons moved to their current location not far from Jing’an Temple on Anyuan Road (安遠路) in 1918; see Pan 2003, 42–44.


17. Yuan and Gao 1992. For a period photograph of the gathering for the ritual “bathing the Buddha” (sufojie 浴佛節) at Jing’an Temple and of practitioners lighting incense sticks, see www.moku.cn/tie/34216, accessed September 20, 2013.

18. Shanghai’s foreign enclaves came into being after the First Opium War (1839–42), when the Qing government was forced to sign a treaty that opened the city to foreign trade and allowed the establishment of the Shanghai concession. The International Settlement enjoyed a high degree of extraterritoriality, and at the time of the Taiping Rebellion, thousands of Chinese refugees, including wealthy and highly educated officials, scholars, and merchants,
took refuge there. For the role of the foreign community in Shanghai, see, for instance, Bickers 1995; Wagner 1995; Wagner 1999. For aspects of Shanghai modernity, see, for example, Cochran 1999; Yeh 2000.


20. For what follows, see the sources underlying Tarocco 2007.

21. See also the discussion in Meng 2003.


23. See Haichaoyin (海慈院), January 1932, 69–77; January 1935, 186–97. Members of the Buddhist gentry have historically carried out charity in various forms toward orphans, the handicapped, and so on and have supported public works, including repairs to bridges and roads. Monasteries have also been connected with various forms of money raising, including pawnshops, auctioning, and selling lottery tickets, for which see Yang 1950.

24. For a study of Ming and early Qing attitudes toward ritually releasing animals, see Smith 1999. For the interwar period, see Prip-Møller 1967; Welch 1968, 75, 250, 311.


27. See, for example, Nedostup and Liang 2001; also the classic studies Welch 1962; 1965; 1967; 1968; 1972.

28. Interviews with temple volunteers and helpers collected by Sandra L. Go, Shanghai, November 20, 2011.


34. Private conversations with government officials and urban planners, Xuhui District West Bund office, September 10, 2013, interview notes in my collection.


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Territory is one of the most important dimensions of Chinese socioreligious organization. Until 1949, large cities were organized as systems of neighborhoods, each with its own territorial god and temple. The territorial temple was where births and deaths were reported (to the gods) and where local affairs were managed. Local religious life has resumed since the late 1970s, but for political and developmental reasons, the vast majority of urban neighborhoods have not been able to restore their temples. This has led to a chasm between the city, where religious grouping is by and large voluntary, and the countryside, where territorial structures have survived to some degree. As a result, the nested hierarchies of territories, expressed as divine bureaucratic order, are crumbling at the same time as this-worldly administrative boundaries (municipalities, districts, wards, villages) are being redrawn at a dizzying pace. But the situation is much more complex than a simple urban-rural divide would suggest, as territoriality still exists in the urban imaginary and urban ritual repertoire; furthermore, the line between city and countryside is blurred and ever moving due to the massive and fast-paced urbanization and industrialization of suburban zones. There, the transformation of villages into urban districts involves tensions and negotiations over territoriality, and the territorial temples in particular.

This chapter, based on a case study of Suzhou but also drawing examples from other cities in the Jiangnan region, aims to sketch this historical transformation, starting from the operation of socioreligious territories in pre-1949 Suzhou. It discusses who has retained memories of this territorial organization and in what kind of context these
memories still function. To that end, it focuses on the process of transforming villages into urban districts and examines what has become of the village gods. In a number of cases, these gods, like their believers, have been forcibly grouped together, in large official temples—divine housing estates, as it were—where they are under the control of the patriotic Daoist association. Yet because their class has two millennia of experience in negotiating with the centripetal forces of the urban clerical authorities, displaced villagers have managed to some extent to retain their territorial identity and ritual life under the new centralized institutional framework.

RELIGIOUS TERRITORIES IN SUZHOU BEFORE 1949

One useful way to look at religion in Chinese local society is to analyze it in four dimensions, visually challenging as this may seem: territorial (closely connected to Daoist ritual), familial-historical (lineages and the ancestor cult), professional (the guilds, powerful until the 1930s, have now disappeared, but new forms of religiosity in the workplace have emerged), and voluntary (this contrasts with the former three, which are largely ascriptive). These dimensions (space, time, economy, and sociality) do not exclude or contradict one another, and individuals can be found at different points in them at different moments of their lives and in different modes. Kenneth Dean has developed the notion of multiple liturgical frameworks to explain how different ritual traditions and specialists can rearrange people, gods, ideas, symbols, affects, and objects in different configurations in one given area according to the circumstances.1 This chapter thus looks at the territorial dimension, with a focus on Daoism as the dominant liturgical framework, while keeping in mind that this dimension cannot in actual practice be completely separated from the others.

Not all temples had a territory (miaojie): those managed by lineages, guilds, or voluntary associations had different ways of defining and maintaining communities of devotees. But, local territorial communities and their temples were historically strong in the Suzhou area.2 Some locals still observe the ancient difference between the Earth God (tudigong), who has a modest shrine and deals with registering the dead, and the tutelary deity of the local community (sheshen), housed in a grander temple (shemiao). The former has existed since antiquity, and the sweeping reform of the first Ming emperor (r. 1368–98) reinstated its cult as the basic official cult at village level. The latter emerged during the early second millennium, and in Jiangnan a few local heroes are concurrently tutelary deities for countless villages and neighborhoods.3 In practice, the shrines of both often merge into one, and the tutelary deity absorbs the Earth Gods. Twentieth-century destructions and reconstructions have further accelerated this fusion.

Because such territorial temples are patronized only by locals and are usually rather modest in size, they are not the most spectacular aspect of Chinese religion; outsiders hardly pay them any notice and most often are not even aware of their existence. Yet for centuries they have been the bedrock of socioreligious life in both cities and countryside.
Whereas Buddhist clerics, who are more numerous than Daoists, have long played a major role in funerary and salvational rituals and prayers for devotional groups, Daoists seem to have largely dominated the servicing of local gods, and thus rituals for territorial communities, since at least the early modern period. Judging by current practice, small-scale rituals by local communities typically involve two main kinds of ritual specialists: spirit mediums and scripture-chanting masters (xuanjuan xiansheng宣卷先生, who recite vernacular scriptures, called baojuan寶卷, telling the histories of the gods and morality tales). Not all territorial communities hire Daoists for their celebrations every year; the scripture-chanting masters provide cheaper, simpler services, complemented by dances and songs by troupes formed among the community’s elder women. For the larger celebrations involving Daoists, spirit mediums and scripture-chanting masters are also commonly present; these specialists have a clear division of ritual labor and are not in competition. Until the 1930s, the most spectacular of these celebrations were the festivals and processions (saihui賽會) of the large territorial temples.

The higher-order miaojie在同治 in downtown Suzhou and in some suburbs, each with its well-identified tutelary god and festival, can be reconstructed from both oral history and local historical documents. The local temples of these territories were intimately integrated within a Daoist bureaucratic structure culminating in the area’s two central temples (the Xuanmiaoguan玄妙觀, right at the center of the city, and Qionglongshan穹窿山, in the western suburbs near the shores of Lake Tai) and their highest gods, notably, in ascending bureaucratic order, the City Gods (Chenghuang城隍),4 the Eastern Peak,5 and the Jade Emperor,6 which form the backbone of the whole pantheon and the primary chain of command in managing human destinies and meting out rewards and punishments. The head of the Daoist clergy (the Heavenly Master) gave many of these local gods Daoist titles and ranks, which were key elements in organizing the local pantheon and ritual hierarchies.5

Linked to these ritual hierarchies, local territorial gods (and their communities) had to pay homage and taxes to their superiors. One occasion when this was most visible was the famed Three Processions (sanxunhui巡會), the thrice-yearly festival6 mandated by the imperial state in all counties, when the City Gods traveled to the altar for vengeful spirits (litan厲壇) to preside over official sacrifices to placate them. On these occasions, all of the city’s territorial gods first came to the City Gods’ temple and then followed the Suzhou prefectural and the three county City Gods (all based in Daoist-managed temples) to the litan near Tiger Hill (虎丘)—a scenic spot just outside the (now destroyed) city walls—and back. This is documented already in the sixteenth century and up to the late nineteenth century; before the Taiping War (1851–64), more than thirty neighborhood gods joined the procession.7

Moreover, in the area broadly extending between Shanghai and Nanjing (with Suzhou at its core), every year, each local community (village and neighborhood) collected spirit money from each household in the name of the local territorial god as a tax for heaven (that is, the Jade Emperor), then brought this tax together with the statue of the territorial

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god in procession to the local central temple, usually that of the City God, the Eastern Peak, or the Jade Emperor, managed by Daoists, to burn the spirit money. This ritual is called “dispatching Heavenly taxes” (jie tianxiang). In some places, the City God went in turn to his superior (the Eastern Peak or the Jade Emperor) to pay homage and remit the tax. Descriptions in late Qing and republican-period newspapers, as well as local gazetteers, clearly show that the heavenly tax collection was organized on a large scale and based on territorial units defined as temple communities. As a matter of fact, in nonofficial documents of this period, people listed their address as the local territorial temple in the jurisdiction where they lived. Thus, the transaction in which these communities engaged was that, in exchange for registration—under the jurisdiction of territorial gods—and the payment of heavenly taxes, members of these communities benefited from the protection and the services of the heavenly bureaucracy (including the Daoists).

In quite a few cases, various heavenly tax-paying communities jointly organized the performance of large Daoist community offerings (jiao). The numerous descriptions concerning the Suzhou territorial temple festivals (both urban and rural) for the late Qing and early republican periods show that participants first paraded around the city, then went to Qionglongshan to pay taxes, then returned home at night. This contributed powerfully to the religious integration of city, suburbs, and more distant villages, with both village communities ritually coming to the Daoist temple in the very middle of the city and urbanites going to pay tax at the other major Daoist temple, beyond the suburbs.

This vibrant festival culture, which intimately linked territorial communities to Daoist institutions, underwent major changes in the modern reforms that began in 1898 and accelerated with the advent of the republic. In the city, many processions had stopped by 1912, if not a few years earlier, including those of the four City Gods, which were heretofore famous throughout Jiangnan for their magnificence. Bans on religious processions as superstitious, chaotic, and unmodern uses of public space are a common story in many parts of the world (including my country, France); the situation in Jiangnan compares in many ways with those in Hong Kong and (later) Singapore, discussed in Joseph Bosco’s and Kenneth Dean’s chapters 6 and 15, respectively. By contrast, in the countryside around Suzhou the processions continued through 1937, even though Nationalist Party (KMT) activists worked hard at banning them in the early 1930s. Yet a severe drought in July 1934 created a whole new situation, in which the local government, wary of igniting riots in a tense social situation, let people organize rain-praying rituals and processions, on an ever-increasing scale, until it actually rained, and a few days afterward, when processions took place all over the city to thank the gods. Many of these processions, which had not been held for twenty years, thus resumed and most of the time included a visit to the Xuanmiaoguan to pay (overdue) heavenly taxes. The four City Gods also resumed their procession, led by the Daoist in charge of one of their temples and followed by the neighborhoods’ territorial gods.

Thus, the republican period saw a growing divide between city and countryside in public religious life, but memories of the place of Daoist ritual in urban life were still
vivid in the 1930s and 1940s, and large-scale celebrations uniting local temples and neighborhoods around the central temples could be, on a few occasions, revived as soon as the circumstances allowed it. This growing division was an ambiguous process, as increased means of transportation during that period allowed large numbers of urbanites to travel to the countryside to take part in festivals that were not happening any more in modern, progressive cities—whereas during the late imperial era, it was mostly the other way round, with descriptions of massive urban festivals never failing to mention the crowds of villagers who flocked in.11

THE POST-1978 DESTINIES OF COMMUNITY TEMPLES

After 1949, temples were progressively dismantled, their property nationalized during the early 1950s and their religious activity gradually brought down to zero before the Great Leap Forward (1958–61). After the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), a few selected temples (including the main Daoist temple in Suzhou, the Xuanmiaoguan) were allowed to reopen, under the supervision of the state-sanctioned Daoist association, but with many controls on their activities. By the 2010s, the Xuanmiaoguan has been largely museified; it is now the nearby City God temple that serves as a main base for Daoist rituals in downtown Suzhou, as does the temple on Qionglongshan; both welcome on a daily basis groups that come for the performance of a community ritual.

A large number of temples rebuilt by local lay communities without any official permission or support have sought to obtain a permit to operate as a religious site, which was made compulsory by the 1994 Regulations on the Management of Places of Religious Activity.12 To this end, they seek to become affiliated with the Daoist or the Buddhist Association while maintaining more autonomy—to a degree that varies according to the local situation—than the major temples, which these associations manage directly.

In certain places, in accordance with the 2005 law on religious matters and with the State Administration of Religious Affairs in Beijing considering recognizing the category of popular beliefs (minjian xinyang 民間信仰) independent of the five official religions, some local authorities have accepted the registration of temples in this category. However, in most cases, joining the Daoist Association remains the favored means for a community temple to obtain recognition from the state.13

Relations between the community temples and the Daoist Association, when they are affiliated with it, cover a wide range, depending on the persons involved, from open tension to simple taxation (affiliation in exchange for a substantial financial contribution) to confident cooperation. Some leaders of the local branches of the Daoist Association (in Hangzhou, for instance) make no secret of their dissatisfaction with the forms of popular and local religion that are deployed there, and would like to reform them. These leaders believe that a Daoist temple should be managed by Daoist masters and not by the laity. Moreover, the question of control over the sometimes considerable resources and income that the temples generate increases tensions between the Daoist Association and
the communities that manage the temples. The leaders of the community temples, some of whom have a very entrepreneurial approach (some temples contract their administration out to managers or actively recruit visitors at other religious sites), take a jaundiced view of the Daoist Association’s desire to control their finances. This is why some major temples with resident Daoists are not affiliated with the association and have not the slightest desire to become affiliated. This is the case with, for instance, the Old Eastern Peak Temple (Lao Dongyuemiao 老東嶽廟) in the Hangzhou suburbs, until 1949 one of the most active and famed temples throughout Jiangnan, where no compromise has been found between the Daoist Association and the neighborhood committee running the temple despite the very important role it plays in the religious life of Hangzhou and the sheer size of its pilgrimage; de facto, as with most community temples, it is not an authorized place of worship. Yet, like most such temples, it is run by the neighborhood committee and its party secretary and therefore represents not civil society but rather grassroots state agents.

Furthermore, certain territorial temples taken over by Daoists and affiliated with the Daoist association tend to move away from a territorial model (catering to the neighborhood community) and toward a model whereby the temple caters essentially to individuals, performing individual rites and very few community events. Lai Chi-tim has studied this trend in the case of a temple in downtown Guangzhou; similar examples can be found in Suzhou and other places in Jiangnan, even though much depends on the personality of the Daoist in charge, and situations on the ground are very varied. Some temple clerics welcome spirit mediums and their groups (even allowing them to place statues of their gods, including deceased mediums) in side halls, while others don’t.

Meanwhile, most of the downtown community temples have been razed for good, and even their memory is fading away. It is common in Jiangnan townships for former neighborhood temples to survive as open-air incense-burning spots (shaoxiangdian 廟香點), which can also manifest as a small shelter or a niche in a wall with a statue inside) tolerated by the local government; this can also be observed, but much less frequently, in large cities such as Suzhou. Some community temples survived or were rebuilt after the Cultural Revolution, essentially because of their location on the edges of cities. Since the beginning of the post-1979 economic reforms, China has experienced extremely rapid urbanization, in the course of which the countryside around cities has gradually transformed into urban neighborhoods. As a result, the vast majority of temples, including those officially registered, are in such suburban areas. While the Daoist Association of Shanghai states that it has twenty-two temples under its authority, only three are in the old city of Shanghai.

The destruction of urban territories, however, does not mean the demise of urban religious aspirations. In Suzhou as elsewhere, Buddhism and Christianity, both coming in numerous varieties, are on the rise, along with other forms of religiosity (Confucian entrepreneurialism, new age spiritualities, etc.). Lay Buddhist devotional networks (which the Communist Party took years to uproot after 1949) are now reforming around
new charismatic masters. Apartment-based Buddhist clerics provide ritual services to those dissatisfied with the clergy based in the official monasteries and train disciples, yet they come from the outside and do not know or care about former territories (that Buddhists are not locals is true in almost all of Jiangnan). Meanwhile, Suzhou is home to the headquarters of the People’s Republic of China branch of the transnational Buddhist Tzu Chi charity, which is popular among businesspeople. I emphasize, however, that this voluntary, network-based type of religious practice is not the product of Communist urban modernity; it was always there. During the late imperial and republican periods, cities and townships in the whole Jiangnan area (and well beyond) were home to countless spirit-writing halls, which recruited among the middle and upper classes and allowed for direct communication with the gods and the collective practice of charity, self-cultivation, and moral reform movements. At the time, such urban religious practices cohabited rather than competed with the territorial dimension of local life. Now, as we will see, even though voluntary networks seem to dominate the urban scene, aspirations to ritually defined territorial identities are developing in the cities, in unanticipated ways.

VILLAGE TEMPLES CAUGHT IN THE PROCESS OF URBANIZATION

In the current reform era, the politics of land has been fuel for urbanization, local government autonomy and empowerment, and endless and often virulent tension. The differentiated rights of agricultural-rural (collectively owned) and urban (state-owned) land and the reclassification of vast swaths of land from the former to the latter category for both industrial and residential purposes have led to local governments gaining power and enriching themselves. This is a process that unfolds at different levels: in villages that are industrializing, in townships and county seats, and in large cities that are fast absorbing their surrounding townships and villages—the last being our focus here. A number of scholars have studied the politics of this process and directed their attention to the agency of local communities as they fight to maintain collective rights on lands. This is a prominent issue in Suzhou, where the huge Suzhou New District (蘇州新區), with its own fast-train station, to the northeast, and other high-tech zones, such as the one in Chefang (車坊), southeast of the city, have become powerful state agencies in their own right.

Scholars have shown that while certain “corporate villages” (a good example being single-lineage villages in Guangdong and other parts of southern China) have managed to maintain part of their rights and collective property in the course of the urbanization process, many other communities have failed to do so. But one aspect of the question that scholars have not paid much attention to is that land is not only about property but also about culture, identity, and practices, often embodied in the shrine of the local territorial god.

In the villages displaced by industrial and housing development, villagers have fought to keep their territorial god shrines. Some village committees have made safeguarding the village temple their number one priority when discussing development with higher
authorities, and have succeeded.\textsuperscript{18} In a good number of cases both in Jiangnan and elsewhere in the Chinese world, villages just absorbed by the expanding city negotiated to retain their temple, either on the spot or moved to or rebuilt on a collective plot of land on the outskirts of the neighborhood. Even when they fail to maintain their temple, and in spite of infl ows of migrants who often outnumber them, the original villagers strive to maintain a sense of their corporate religious identity, such as in a Shanghai neighborhood where, in the 1990s, villagers would come in their hundreds every year to burn incense in front of a condominium built on the site of their former temple. Other cases of villages absorbed into Shanghai show that villagers who could not rebuild their temple put their god in a side shrine of the nearest City God temple managed by Daoists.\textsuperscript{19} While it is customary for displaced gods (statues rendered homeless when families or businesses move) to be sheltered in side halls of Daoist temples, the displacement of village territorial deities ushered in a more systematic regrouping. In the industrial zones, it was negotiated to move the gods into new collective premises, under the umbrella of an officially recognized Daoist temple. I observed two such cases in the greater Suzhou area.

In Chefang, an old, rather large temple, Jianghai Sui Liangwang miao (江海顯靈王廟), dedicated to a major local god, Sui Liangwang, also known as Jin Zongguan (金通管), and located on the banks of the Wusong River (吳淞江), was rebuilt during the 1980s. Around this temple, the locals have, with the tacit approval of the local government, built temporary shelters arrayed in rows for all the local gods of the villages that have been razed in the process of industrial development. These temporary temples, more than twenty in number, were there from about 2007 until early 2013 and were managed by local villagers.

When I first visited, in 2011, the god Sui Liangwang was being feted (my visit fell on the birthday of his wife), so I could attend simultaneous celebrations in the temple compound with the typical local combination of scripture-chanting masters and singing and dancing ladies. The people in attendance were mostly elderly; the old women had all put on their cotton shoes, head scarves, and blue shirts and trousers, the traditional peasant costume that used to have no religious or identity value but is now worn only for festivals. Since the industrial zone had appropriated these people’s plots of land and they had moved to apartment blocks, where they lived on their modest compensation money, their god’s new shelter at Sui Liangwang miao had become their communal space, where they dressed and behaved as a territorial community.

In late 2013, the situation was entirely different. The temple had been razed, and a shining, newly constructed Daoist temple, Gaoshimiao (高堂廟), was standing nearby. High-level Daoist deities occupy the center of the halls, and rows of new statues along the walls represent the village gods who used to have their own shrines on the former site. These statues look very different from their predecessors: before 2013 they were small, locally made, rustic-looking wooden and earthen statues; now they are larger-than-life, stern figures typical of twenty-first-century officially sponsored Chinese religious art. The Daoists show no regret over the older statues and the fact that they were not
safeguarded. Furthermore, there are now fewer statues than before; no god was evicted, but several villages had the same territorial god, which thus used to have different shrines and statues. The Daoists decided that such replication did not make sense and that one statue for each god (to be shared among the villages) was enough.

A related case is that of the Yuhuanggong (玉皇宫), a new, very large, and affluent Daoist temple inaugurated in 2008 in the huge New District high-tech industrial development zone. When the local government began moving the local farmers from their houses to newly built apartment blocks so as to clear land for factories, it promised to move the statues of their local territorial gods into a newly built temple, such as the Yuhuanggong, so that they could continue to worship their gods. Many of these village gods had already relocated several times. The village temples were rebuilt in the 1980s, then destroyed in the course of development, at which point the gods moved to a local unofficial temple which was destroyed when they moved to the Yuhuanggong in 2008. The government handed the management of this new temple to Daoist priests because they accept these local gods as part of their system. The Daoists named the temple Palace of the Jade Emperor because the Jade Emperor, as the head of the pantheon, is the natural lord of all local gods, thus considered equals in this bureaucratic, vertical relationship. Interestingly, among the local gods housed there are some that both the state and Daoists usually squarely categorize as heterodox, such as Taimu (太姆), the mother of the Wutong (五通)—five brothers at the core of a possession cult that has thrived in the Suzhou area since the twelfth century and been repeatedly banned there throughout the premodern and modern periods.

The Sui Liangwang miao between 2007 and 2013 and the two new Daoist temples Yuhuanggong and Gaoshimiao represent two successive stages of a process and differ in crucial aspects. In the former, makeshift shrines were independent and villagers were able to conduct their own rituals, largely unhindered, within their small space. At Yuhuanggong and Gaoshimiao, by contrast, the local deities are present as statues on the sides of the main hall, under the gaze of the Jade Emperor. Daoists control this space, and the villagers are certainly not free to do what they wish there. Spirit possession is forbidden, as are blood sacrifices and the public singing of unorthodox scriptures. When the birthday of one of the local gods arrives, locals may rent (for a modest fee) a front room from the Daoists and have their ceremonies there. Meat offerings and the recitation of vernacular scriptures are permitted in that context, but the Daoists make it clear that there are limits to their tolerance. On the other hand, they admit that the vast majority of the patrons come to the temples for their village territorial gods, not for the higher Daoist deities.

This role the Daoists play in providing a legitimate space for local cults in the midst of brutal modernization is far from an isolated case. That they provide an umbrella and serve as intermediaries in the transactions and compromises between village cults and culture and the government is in direct continuity with historical precedent, albeit with entirely new institutional arrangements and with different levels of standardization imposed by the Daoists in different locales.
Furthermore, such a way of moving gods to housing estates and their devotees from individual homes into apartment blocks at the same time (in both cases sometimes against their will) can be observed in other parts of the Chinese world. In Singapore, for instance, as Kenneth Dean’s chapter 15 shows, rather different sociopolitical conditions have resulted in comparable results: the government auctions off new “united” temples mostly to alliances of bidders who then have to accommodate various local gods in one multistory temple.

While some cults, such as that of the Wutong mentioned above, are tamed and controlled in their territorial dimension under the supervision of the Daoists, they may be thriving elsewhere in their voluntary dimension. The Wutong in particular are as present as ever. The temple atop Shangfangshan Hill (上方山) just south of downtown Suzhou, which has been the center of the cult since at least the sixteenth century, brims every day with families (not larger territorial communities) who come to pray to the gods or thank them for received favors. They are accompanied by scripture-chanting masters and spirit mediums (mostly from neighboring rural areas but also from Shanghai), but Daoists do not go there. When I took a respected Suzhou Daoist to Shangfangshan, he was less than enthusiastic about the practices there. The place is officially a historic site within a public park, but a group of local residents runs it as a temple with rooms rented out for ritual services (the park office makes money from devotees buying entrance tickets and therefore turns a blind eye to what is going on).

All of these places are invisible to tourists and Shanghai businessmen; they are lost in the middle of industrial zones or public parks. Yet they loom large in the mental geographies of local people. For those who do not know how to find these places, it is rather easy to be guided by hearsay to religious intermediaries (locally usually referred to as “incense chiefs,” xiangtou 香頭, who as a rule are also spirit mediums) who know and will take you to them. The xiangtou are also networkers and can contact other religious specialists (notably Daoists) should people need a ritual service they cannot provide themselves. Not only are these spirit mediums grassroots informants about gods and temples; they are often active in the process of rebuilding local temples as well. Similar to the Singaporean spirit mediums in Kenneth Dean’s chapter 15, they are likely the most active source of local religious rejuvenation in urban Jiangnan.

**THE IMPACT OF NEW TERRITORIAL CONFIGURATIONS ON RITUALS AND FESTIVALS**

The new realities of territorial gods in urban Jiangnan (either fallen into near oblivion or moved into consolidated divine condominiums) have a deep impact across the board on ritual and festive life for people newly transformed into urban residents. First, on a macro level, is the question of processions. Still common during the republican period, at least in the countryside, practices such as paying the heavenly taxes and processions from local temples to central temples sharply declined after 1949, only to remain (as far as my
fieldwork experience and interviews with local scholars and Daoists attest) as traces in Daoist temples on the occasion of the Jade Emperor’s birthday (1/9). In Changshu (the textile industry hub north of Suzhou), many villagers and some urbanites still pay their heavenly tax to their territorial temple and post the receipt on their front door, but it has become much less common to go in procession to the nearest central temple to remit this tax. Yet local communities from the Suzhou suburbs and countryside still go to the City God temple or to Qionglongshan to have a Daoist offering ritual (jiao) performed, including the burning of huge amounts of paper money; the memorial to the gods (shuwèn) that the officiating Daoist priest burns explains the reasons and circumstances of the ritual and often mentions that this paper money is “heavenly tax.” Leaders of one such community (who had come to the Suzhou City God temple) told me that even though they often visit Buddhist temples, they come once a year to pay homage to heaven in a Daoist temple. These large Daoist temples thrive on rituals performed for both territorial and voluntary groups. Indeed, most of their ritual services are “community offerings” (gongjiao), that is, done for a community usually based on a territory, belying the notion that religion has largely become privatized—if some downtown Daoist temples mostly perform rituals for individuals, this has not become a general rule.

But processions are not allowed in downtown Suzhou, and the communities that come to a central Daoist temple for a community offering do not bring the statue of their territorial god anymore. What remains, then, is the liturgical core of the festival: the short (half-day) jiao offering. Processions in suburban areas do take place anew, but (as in other Jiangnan cities) on a small scale, without leaving the neighborhood. Police restrictions here have the same crippling effect that Joseph Bosco describes in chapter 6, on Hong Kong, even though in both places, the politics of intangible cultural heritage is now opening new possibilities. And voluntary groups (although not secular ones, as is the case in Hong Kong) from farther away bring life and excitement to the processions but dilute their territorial nature. The same thing can be observed throughout Jiangnan: when the village or neighborhood has maintained enough cohesion and autonomy, it can organize a procession within its limits and even attract processional troupes from elsewhere in the region, but it cannot directly connect to higher-order temples. Some people in the Suzhou area maintain that connection between the neighborhood and central temples to some extent by chartering a bus and going to Qionglongshan (as any group from anywhere in the larger Jiangnan religion would do). For those village or neighborhood gods relocated to a new Daoist temple, there is no more procession to be considered: they can’t travel to the central temple where they are now permanently placed. Space and hierarchies have been compressed.

This fits into a larger scheme that has been described for other parts of Jiangnan and the Chinese world in general. In Hangzhou, for instance, a very rich and dense territorial ritual life used to shape public religious life, with, on the one hand, neighborhood temples organizing their festivals with processions (saihui), plus higher-order saihui in which all the temple territories would take part, and, on the other hand, pilgrimages to the main
urban temples (in particular the Guanyin temples), which drew in people from throughout the region. Since the late Qing period, the local government has consistently banned these sai hui while treating the pilgrimages (which bring in much money from outside the area) much more leniently. As a result, the pilgrimage is now as flourishing as ever, but the local festivals exist only as pale shadows of their former selves. Yet neighbor- hood temples, rather than the famous pilgrimage temples, are where local people go. This reflects the modern state’s favoring voluntary over territorialascriptive forms of religion, and people’s resisting this trend to some extent.

Second, the new territorial configuration also impacts smaller-scale rituals, notably funerals. Before 1949, throughout Jiangnan, family members, accompanied by the officiating cleric (Daoist or Buddhist), would go to the local territorial temple to report the death (a rite called “reporting to the temple,” baomiao) and perform a ritual whereby the deceased was transferred from the registers of the living to the registers of the dead. Temples thus used to serve as registrars when the imperial government did not register people—but there unfortunately does not seem to exist any ancient temple archive that would show us what kind of records they maintained. With people having moved, and their former territorial temple often having been destroyed, this particular rite is now often dispensed with altogether. Some families still practice it, as I have seen in one instance; having moved, the family had to travel with a chartered van to its original territorial temple, which was quite a distance away. A significant portion of the people who visit the two new Daoist temples discussed above come for that purpose: to report a death to their village god.

In many cases, the families cannot remember the name and location of their erstwhile territorial temple or the identity of the god. Daoists often cannot help, because they know about the local gods where they live but do not maintain lists for other locales, even neighboring ones. They have also lost the record of their own former territorial “parishes”: in Suzhou and elsewhere in Jiangnan, before 1949, Daoists, Buddhists, and other ritual specialists had their own turf, that is, a territory (or in some cases a list of families) for which they had an exclusive right to perform rituals. In this case also, the local governments (from the last decade of the Qing Empire onward) have sought to suppress such territorial rights in the name of pursuing competition and free choice. In some circumstances, scripture-chanting masters have lists of local territorial gods and use them to help clients fill in the petitions to the gods that still use the ancient way of listing one’s identity and address with the name of the territorial temple under whose jurisdiction they fall, even when the temple in question has been destroyed for two generations.

In other words, Suzhou-area residents, like other Chinese, used to be fully embedded in a sacred order of things, the territorial dimension of which implied being controlled by the local territorial god, himself part and parcel of a divine bureaucracy that was clearly enacted during public rituals. Part of the population has escaped from this sacred order—which does not mean that they do not partake in religion anymore, but when they do, they act not as registered members of such-and-such a territorial community but as
individuals. But some people in Suzhou, as elsewhere, still belong to that order, and they express it by requesting Daoists to perform a community ritual for them once a year. Some younger urbanites may point out that the people who insist on reregistering with heaven every year are all elderly peasant women. This is largely true, yet elderly women have always been the representatives of their whole families to the gods, and thus some young people, like it or not, knowingly or not, are listed as parishioners. To their grandparents, their belonging to a territory is still part of their lives, even when the territory is becoming imaginary because the temple has been destroyed for good or the god is now one in a row of local gods in a Daoist temple.

CONCLUSION

Much of the data that this chapter presents seems to feed into a larger trend often discussed in sociological analyses of contemporary religion, namely deterritorialization. Throughout the Chinese world, even when “traditional” festivals continue, participation tends to be based more on voluntary bonding than on inherited territorial affiliation, and in the largest city centers, such festivals have ceased to exist and been replaced by entirely different forms of religiosities, based on voluntary participation, informal networks, and meeting in public spaces. But I argue that while this is all true, the idea of a territory as a key mediation between the individual and the gods is alive. As villagers become urbanites, this is a resource they want to maintain.

Deterritorialization (and reterritorialization) is not a linear, inevitable process. It struck hardest those who were or became urbanites between the 1950s and the 1980s. Two generations of urban Chinese in the PRC have grown up in a context where belonging to a neighborhood could not have any ritual expression or meaning. They have not experienced what Alessandro Dell’Orto describes for Taipei (where local ritual life was curbed during that period but never repressed and wiped out the way it was in the PRC): local people’s sense that their neighborhood territorial god is part and parcel of everyday life. Arguably, some new, small-scale voluntary groups may have taken over the role of territorial community. But even more important, since the 1980s the Chinese urban population has swelled, through not only internal migration but also the integration of former villages and their inhabitants, who have grown up with a sense of place linked to ritual geographies. As they become urbanites, they aspire to urban lifestyles (they work in factories and large firms, go out at night, speak Mandarin, are technology savvy) but paste the tax receipt of their territorial god on their front door. The local state is recognizing this vibrant demand for local ritual identity by funding the building of new Daoist temples on the cities’ edges to house the displaced territorial gods—but in a typical Communist manner, they redo the statues and put these gods under the strict control of their divine higher-ups.

One thing that has changed is that it is now much easier to opt out of the ritual territories. It used to be mandatory for all inhabitants to participate in them, but this is no
longer the case. Temples are rebuilt with donations from those interested, not with levies on all residents. Besides front doors graced with heavenly tax receipts, other doors have Christian calendars, and others yet have nothing of the kind. To observe strong cohesion, with all local residents participating in their territorial cult, one should go to certain parts of the countryside. But ritual territories exist in Chinese cities: they are fragmented, displaced, and ritual hierarchies are difficult to enact, yet the idea of being both a modern city dweller and a registered member of a ritual territorial community makes sense to a significant number of people in Jiangnan cities.

NOTES

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2. Wang Jian, Lihai xiangguan, ch. 2. This section draws on Goossaert and Tao, “Daojiao yu Suzhou difang shehui.”
3. To name but two of the most popular, Jin Zongguan 金縱貫 and Liu Mengjiang 劉猛將.
4. There was one City God for the whole Suzhou prefecture, one for each of the three districts centered on Suzhou city, and one each for the large number of neighboring townships.
5. Goossaert, “Heavenly Master,” “Qingdai Jiangnan diqu.”
6. On Qingming, 7/15, and 10/1 (dates given as month/day are in the traditional lunar calendar).
8. Hamashima, Sōkan shinkō, 205–19; Wu, “Ming Qing Jiangnan Dongyue.” Goossaert, “Bureaucratie, taxation et justice,” has a more detailed analysis. Other terms for this practice are jie qianliang 解钱糧 and jie huangqian 解皇钱.
11. Poon, “Thriving under an Anti-superstition Regime.”
12. This section draws on Fang and Goossaert, “Temples and Daoists in Urban China.”
14. On purely entrepreneurial temples, see Lang, Chan, and Ragvald, “Temples and the Religious Economy.”
15. Fang, “Old Eastern Peak Temple.”
16. Lai, “Xiandai dushizhong.”
18. Dean and Zheng, Ritual Alliances, 25–26, discusses this process in Putian (Fujian Province).
20. On these deities in Suzhou culture and their connection to Daoism, see Goossaert, “Daoism and Local Cults.”
22. Remoiville, “Le renouveau religieux.”
23. Goossaert, “Question of Control.”
27. Dell’Orto, Place and Spirit in Taiwan.
28. Benoît Vermander (personal communication, October 2013) argues that many house churches now play the role of neighborhood religious communities for their members (even though they cannot be inclusive in the way that territorial temples are).

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## Further Reading


INTRODUCTION

The management of religions is not a central role of the agencies governing Metro Manila. Also known as the National Capital Region (NCR), Metro Manila is composed of sixteen cities and one municipality with their respective local government units. Coordinating these units is the Metro Manila Development Agency (MMDA), which is often relegated to a short-term and often problem-solving role concerning traffic management and flood control, for example.

If called for, city mayors or MMDA executives enforce existing laws concerning religion. According to various codes, state control over religion is limited to ensuring that organizations are registered as religious corporations, authorizing religious marriage solemnizers, and controlling the entry of missionaries (Pangalangan 2010). Also, the Philippine Constitution enshrines the separation of church and state, which, in its various key decisions, the Supreme Court has explained in terms of benevolent neutrality. For the Philippine judiciary, the religious freedom of the individual is to be upheld unless there are compelling state interests to consider (Thio 2009; Cornelio 2013).

Although limited, these documents continue to serve as references for the management of religious controversies in the Philippines. I agree with the local sociologist Randy David, who suggests that official policies toward religious pluralism as described in the constitution are still “in the process of formation” (2002, 133). In Metro Manila, the relationship between religion and the government will continue to be tested,
given immigration, increasing religious diversity, and controversies involving public morality.

Despite the absence of policies or agencies designed for the management of religious organizations, several recent developments in NCR have rendered visible patterns concerning the relationship between religion and the government of the metropolis. As a contribution to this volume, this chapter also shows that these developments surface the various aspirations of people in Metro Manila. In doing so, it explores two broad patterns.

First, during and in the wake of several controversies involving public morality, religious organizations have appealed to the state for its various agencies to act as moral arbiters. These controversies included sexualized billboards and a local art exhibit. Mainly coming from conservative Catholic and Evangelical groups, this moral militancy reflects the aspiration to sustain the capital’s supposed religiosity, which is threatened by changing religious attitudes among the public, especially in relation to sexual propriety. Many of these changing attitudes are underpinned by Manila’s attempts to become a global capital.

Second, the state is generally permissive of the religious use of public space in the metropolis. This can be seen in the seemingly unproblematic use of historic open spaces in NCR for religious purposes. The state, however, also offers more support to some events, such as the Black Nazarene procession around the old city of Manila. In this case, the state draws from taxpayers’ money to provide sanitation and security, for example, to devotees. In a way, this is expected, since this procession is inseparable from the historical and cultural identity of Manila. But a new pattern has emerged in recent years. The state has extended the symbolic power of its recognition to the ambitious constructions of El Shaddai and Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), two highly influential religious organizations based in NCR. El Shaddai’s International House of Prayer and INC’s Philippine Arena are buildings that surpass expectations of size and grandeur, collectively contributing to the worlding aspiration of Metro Manila.

In the following sections, I first discuss how the state imagines Metro Manila as a global capital. These state imaginings, however, fail to see that, as Metro Manila is increasingly embedded in the global economy, religious diversification and the global religious movements that originate from it also enrich its global character. In the latter part of the chapter, I cover several recent controversies and cases to unravel the different kinds of relationship between religions and the state in Metro Manila. For my purposes here, the state is the MMDA, the various local government units and executives, and the other agencies involved in the governance of Metro Manila.

**METRO MANILA AS A GLOBAL CAPITAL**

The literature has approached the global character of Metro Manila in various ways. Demonstrating its global significance, for one, are the city’s historical milestones. Manila’s status as the capital of the Philippines dates back to Spanish rule at the end of the sixteenth
century. Its global relevance first took shape when it became part of the galleon trade that integrated it with Latin America and Europe (Flynn and Giráldez 2008). On taking over from the Spaniards, the Americans in the early twentieth century planned Manila to be a grand city to justify and exhibit the benevolence of their rule. But it was not until the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s that the metropolis as a wider capital region was created by linking the city of Manila with the other cities adjacent to it (Porio 2009). At that time, Metro Manila, led by Imelda Marcos, saw the construction of government offices and the Cultural Center complex as spaces for not only the showcasing of local cultural heritage but also international events like the 1974 Miss Universe Pageant (Shatkin 2005). These projects effectively inaugurated Metro Manila’s modern global ambitions.

From the point of view of trade, Metro Manila has played an increasingly important role in tourism and the global economy. Tyner’s early work has noted, for example, the presence of recruitment offices and government agencies that facilitate overseas employment. They effectively make NCR the country’s spatial center for the global deployment of Filipino laborers. In other words, since Marcos initiated his labor export policy in the 1970s, the capital has been deeply embedded in “global circuits of labor” (Tyner 2000, 63). In recent years, international investors have turned to Metro Manila on recognizing the Philippine economy’s consistent growth (Burgonio 2013). One key industry is global business process outsourcing, which takes advantage of English-educated labor (Romulo 2013). Although it has a long way to go to catch up with the well-regarded tourism industries of its neighbors Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and Singapore, Metro Manila is now also an important host to local and foreign companies (Shatkin 2005). One may add to this its growing significance for international singers and film producers.

The privatization of space also drives Metro Manila’s aspiration to be a global capital (Shatkin 2005). This has become increasingly pronounced with the rise of gated communities, central business districts, and commercial centers that advertise and encourage cosmopolitan lifestyles. For Shatkin, the government is effectively “playing a reduced role” with respect to private developers in planning the fortunes of the capital (2005, 600). Indeed, a former military base has been transformed into a privately planned business district, the Bonifacio Global City (BGC). Showcasing architectural feats of residential, commercial, and even diplomatic buildings, BGC is being managed by a consortium of highly reputable private corporations. As in other cities in Asia, self-contained “urban integrated mega-projects” (UIMs) are defining much of the landscape of NCR today (Shatkin 2011, 77). Effectively, such privatization of urban planning leaves much to private consortiums (local and international) in envisioning and realizing Metro Manila’s worlding future (Ong 2011).

Paralleling these projects have been government efforts to sanitize the metropolis by veiling spaces of poverty through violent evictions, new walls, and slogans calling on pedestrians and motorists to obey the law. Guazon’s (2013) seminal work on the use of public art in the old city of Manila unravels not just the government’s desire to be a global city but the political convenience of concealing the struggles of its citizens. For Michel
(2010), therefore, the capital’s aspiration to be global is largely symbolic, insofar as it is about projecting a cosmopolitan image. In this light, the rendering of the metro as “the gates of hell” in Dan Brown’s best seller *Inferno* is an emotional assault on such worlding projects (Montelibano 2013). The emotional pain, however, is arguably greater for the drivers of such globalism—private corporations and, more important, the state that is willing to privatize the management of public space at the expense of the disenfranchised majority.

Porio (2012) rightly notes that although Metro Manila accounts for 37 percent of the country’s gross domestic product and is the political center of the Philippines, governing the metropolis and addressing its social problems remain challenges. Poverty incidence among families in the metropolis is at 3.8 percent (National Statistical Coordination Board 2013), and at least 10 percent of its 11.5 million residents live in urban slums (Porio 2012). The unemployment rate is 10.4 percent (National Statistics Office 2013), and a recent survey shows a more discouraging picture: 40 percent of household heads rate their families as “poor” (Philippine Daily Inquirer 2013). All this makes Miguel Syjuco, an award-winning Filipino novelist, admit that to some, Manila will “always be a congested concrete maze, a polluted cancer in a paradise of white-sand islands and mountains of crumpled green velveteen” (2013).

**METRO MANILA AS A RELIGIOUS CAPITAL**

In his introduction to this volume, Peter van der Veer notes that urban theorists and the literature on global cities have largely neglected the presence of urban religiosities. As he rightly explains, this emanates from the assumption that the urban, as opposed to the rural, is necessarily secular. The absence of the religious dimension is palpable too in the studies discussed above. In their preoccupation with the geographic and economic facets of Metro Manila, they have largely neglected religious trends that parallel the global aspirations of the metropolis. Two such trends are noticeable here.

First, Metro Manila serves as the headquarters of global religious movements originating in the Philippines. The Catholic charismatic movement El Shaddai, for example, now has at least seven million members worldwide, mainly among Filipinos working abroad (Wiegele 2005a). Led by an influential figure, Brother Mike Velarde, its weekly prayer event in an open space in the south of Metro Manila gathers at least three hundred thousand. At the center is a cross-shaped church that could very well be the “biggest place of worship and prayers in Asia” (Calleja 2009). The radio station that the movement owns airs playbacks of the event around the metropolis and its vicinity. Similarly, INC’s unmistakable neo-Gothic headquarters in Quezon City embodies its power and worldwide influence. INC is an indigenous religious group perceived as a sect by both Catholics and Protestants for its non-Trinitarian doctrine and strict discipline concerning tithing and endogamy (Harper 2001). With 2.25 million members in the Philippines alone, INC also has a global presence, as it effectively uses television and print media to reach an inter-
national audience (Pedroso 2013). It is estimated that INC is present in at least 110 countries (Rappler 2013). Moreover, alongside these global indigenous movements are mainstream religious groups that have made Metro Manila their regional headquarters. American Evangelicals, for example, have set up the Far East Broadcasting Corporation in Manila, from which they broadcast religious programs targeted at the Hmong and other “unreached people groups” in peninsular Southeast Asia (Ngo 2009, 145). The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), known in the United States for the program The 700 Club, has its Asian headquarters in Metro Manila as well.4

Furthermore, religious diversification is increasingly redefining Metro Manila’s landscape. Although the population is still predominantly Catholic, proselytization and immigration are growing in significance. There is a growing number of Evangelical and charismatic churches, many of which have transnational links. Based on a landmark survey, it appears that Evangelical Christianity underpins the growth of Protestantism (Kessler and Rüland 2008). Macasaet (2009) observes that the sense of belonging these churches afford their members may be the reason why a lot of youths are converting to them. The increasing visibility of Muslims in the metropolis, many of whom have migrated from impoverished Mindanao, has also been noted. Mosques and Muslim communities and informal business ventures that sell DVDs and gadgets, for example, have gradually emerged in various parts of NCR (Watanabe 2007; Watanabe 2008; Sapitula 2013). Korean and Indian students are also taking advantage of Metro Manila’s affordable educational and business opportunities. Forming around them are not just ethnic shops and restaurants but religious organizations and events as well (Salazar 2008). There are now, for example, a Sikh temple, a Hindu temple, and many Korean Christian churches. Cabañes’s (2013) seminal work shows, however, that the media tend to conceal (or portray in a comical way) the presence of Koreans and Indians in Metro Manila.

Religious diversification and the presence of global religious movements are two prominent facets of the religiosity of Metro Manila as the capital globalizes. But the recent urban studies discussed above have neglected these, affording novel approaches to the study of Metro Manila. At one level, religious diversification increasingly compels state agencies to relate to new religious formations. This, of course, does not deny the enduring presence of the Catholic Church in public life in the metropolis or the country as a whole. But at another level, religion offers communities in which individuals can not only exercise spirituality but also articulate their aspirations in the context of a fast-changing urban space. Religion offers the narratives, symbols, and figures that can arouse emotions not just toward the transcendent or the religious community but also toward the world (Riis and Woodhead 2010). Put differently, religion—through its morals, doctrines, and eschatology, expressed in light of contemporary urban contexts—can provide space for the articulation of “aspirations” that “give temporal direction to energies” (Bunnell and Goh 2012, 1). I agree with van der Veer, who, in his work on Singapore and India, argues that religion is a lens “through which one can acquire a better view of what urban aspirations are” (2013, 63).
THE GOVERNANCE OF RELIGIONS IN METRO MANILA

Religion is not just a sigh of exasperation. Religious movements, activities, and reactions to controversies in Metro Manila hint at salient aspirations that relate one way or another to the capital’s global ambitions. But these aspirations are not homogeneous, since they are articulated by different religious groups in competition with one another. Furthermore, these different aspirations become visible when attention is given to how the state governs religions. In line with the points raised above, the state’s desire for the metropolis to be a global capital heavily informs such governance. By governance, I broadly refer to the way the agencies of the state relate to religious organizations, by responding to their petitions, permitting their activities, or actively supporting their efforts. There are two ways such relationships take shape.

First, the state is willing to take on the role of moral arbiter when religions turn to its agencies to act on moral controversies. This is an important development as Metro Manila starts to accommodate cosmopolitanism in the form of advertising and artwork, for example, that challenges dominant conservative norms, especially in relation to sexual propriety. Second, the state’s relationship with religious organizations is contingent on the latter’s use of space in Metro Manila. The state generally permits the religious use of public space and even offers its resources to significant religious processions. However, it also offers its symbolic power of recognizing the ambitious construction projects of religious organizations in Metro Manila. This recognition stands in contrast to the evictions that informal settlements of Muslim immigrants to the metropolis suffer.

THE STATE AND THE NEED TO BE THE MORAL ARBITER

In recent years, local executives and the MMDA have had to deal with controversies that generated reactions especially from conservative segments of the population. Outdoor advertising, in the form of billboards, has, for instance, been accused of sexualizing public space. In 2004, a local beverage company used the tag line “Have you tasted a fifteen-year-old?” on a billboard along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, NCR’s main thoroughfare, to promote its aged brandy. Lawyers and youth advocates immediately filed a case against the company for its insinuations of rape and child abuse (Fingertips 2004). In 2008, religious “moralists,” as local newspapers dubbed them, called on a local clothing company to remove from another major thoroughfare its billboard of a famous actor who was in only his underwear (Garcia 2008). Within a month of its installation, the billboard was replaced with ads of a local female singer who was sufficiently dressed. The clothing company owner explained, however, that the replacement was advertising routine. But perhaps the most controversial case involved the players of the Philippine rugby team, whose oversize photos dominated one side of Manila’s Pasig River. For motorists and commuters, the suggestive message to “throw your support behind” these players was not what made them impossible to ignore. They were in only their underwear, the
product that Bench, a massive clothing company, had paid to advertise. Interestingly, no less than the mayor of Mandaluyong City, which has jurisdiction over the area, called on the company to remove such billboards (Agence France-Presse 2011).

The criticisms directed at these billboards were restrained compared to the storm that an art exhibit generated in 2011. Dubbed *Poleteismo* (Polytheism), the exhibit at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) showcased the provocative artwork of Mideo Cruz. Its various exhibits merged condoms and other phallic symbols, for example, with images of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Apart from receiving death threats, Cruz also saw his installations and murals vandalized with curses. When asked whether “Manila is ready for your kind of art,” he offered a nuanced answer: “Manila is too broad to consider,” as it has both regular gallery visitors used to his approach and others for whom “there is still a long and winding road to travel” (Cuneta 2011). Eventually, CCP was forced to close down the exhibit and face legal charges filed with the ombudsman of the Philippines.

Recently, new stadiums like the SM Mall of Asia Arena in Pasay City have played an important role in crafting spaces for mass entertainment in the metropolis. Like art exhibits and commercial advertising, such spaces contribute to Metro Manila’s increasing significance as a global capital in Asia by providing platforms for international artists. In 2012, Lady Gaga included a visit to the metropolis as part of her “Born This Way” tour around Asia. Given her provocative performances and songs, however, she had to contend with protests from various legal and religious groups. This came in the wake of protests in Seoul and Jakarta, in the latter of which her concert was even threatened with violence (Mitchell 2012). Her two-night concerts at the Arena, both sold out, were heavily guarded. Although she knew she was being monitored by local officials, Lady Gaga bravely exclaimed, “I’m not a creature of your government, Manila!” (Pagsolingan 2012).

What is common among these incidents, apart from the noise they created in social media, is that they became public issues because influential religious groups and individuals reacted. To these religious elites, Manila is fast becoming a site of contestation concerning the overall moral decay of Philippine society. Their reactions demonstrate their moral conservatism, with particular respect to sexual propriety. A bishop, for one, has called for a boycott of the products of the “sexy billboards,” which were “insensitive to the moral sensitivities of Filipinos, especially women and children” (Ramos 2009). A parish priest from Pasay City has also criticized some recent billboards of Victoria Court, a chain of drive-in motels in Metro Manila, for inviting people “to commit something bad or immoral” (Ermitanio 2013). Religious groups like Pro-Life Philippines declared *Poleteismo* “sacrilegious and blasphemous.” No less than Archbishop Oscar Cruz, a former president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), called for its boycott (Silverio 2011). Finally, in spite of her stature, even Lady Gaga faced protests by religious groups. Although local government authorities assured the public that they would not allow obscene acts in her concerts, Catholic and other Christian groups nevertheless staged protests in the city. Evangelical youth groups, for example, expressed their unease over Gaga’s song “Judas” (Associated Press 2012).
These developments render visible the way the government relates to different religious groups. I note here that in some instances, the state does not wait for religious groups to make the complaint. In 2006, the city council of Manila unanimously passed a resolution banning the sale or showing of the movie *The Da Vinci Code*. Known for his conservative values, Mayor Lito Atienza even threatened to close cinemas that would show the film, for “it is against the Christian faith and it destroys the faith” (Macairan 2006). Here the mayor’s Catholic religiosity heavily informed the state’s role as a moral arbiter.

But in many other instances, the appeals of religious organizations have compelled local executives and the MMDA to exercise their legal authority over moral issues. Either way, therefore, the agencies of the state have become moral arbiters in Metro Manila. This certainly occurred in the case of sexualized billboards, when even local mayors took it upon themselves to address the matter directly. But perhaps more instructive is the case of Lady Gaga’s concert. Groups associated with the Catholic Church, such as Pro-Life Philippines, Ang Kapatiran (The brotherhood) Party, and the St. Thomas More Society, formally submitted a legal letter to the mayor of Pasay City (Carcamo 2012). In their formal complaint, they included provocative photos from Lady Gaga’s earlier concerts in Asia to compel the local government to stop the show. What is intriguing is that the letter cited provisions of the Charter of Pasay City, the Local Government Code, the Revised Penal Code, and even the Child and Youth Welfare Code to invoke the duty and power of the mayor to cancel the concert.

Generally, the responses of state agencies show that they see themselves as moral decision makers. On the side of the judiciary, this was most pronounced in the ruling of the ombudsman on the *Poletismo* exhibit. Cases were filed against the administration of CCP, a government agency, for allowing “obscenity” and “offense to religion.” But the ombudsman ruled in favor of the artist’s freedom of expression (*Philippine Star* 2013). On the side of the executive, Mayor Antonino Calixto of Pasay City, in response to protests against Lady Gaga’s concert, claimed that “we reminded the producers . . . that the show and the event as a whole shall not exhibit any nudity or lewd conduct which may be offensive to morals and good customs” (Associated Press 2012). Based on the reports of a team he sent to the first concert, Calixto ruled that while there were “admittedly provocative” acts, they were “part of an artist’s expressions,” which he felt the constitution protected (Melican 2012). There was therefore no reason to cancel Lady Gaga’s second night. Finally, concerning sexualized billboards, the MMDA dismantled several highly visible ones, but for such official reasons as safety concerns and the violation of size restrictions. However, when the chairperson of the MMDA was interviewed on taking down the billboard of a bare-chested athlete, he commented that “you don’t need to be naked when you eat tuna” (Santos 2011b). Furthermore, the MMDA planned to form a committee that would screen billboard content, to which it invited a parish priest (Santos 2011a).
It is important to note that whereas the state effectively supported Lady Gaga’s concert and the Poleteismo exhibit, it dismantled the sexualized billboards. This divergence demonstrates how the state manages religious reactions to controversies in Metro Manila. On the one hand, the first two cases suggest how it is careful not to be seen as interfering with individual freedoms of religion and expression. Religious freedom in particular has taken shape in the Philippines in favor of individual liberties (Cornelio 2013). On the other hand, the state appears to play a more active role when moral controversy has to do with public space. The sexualization of billboards is not simply about freedom of expression but also about what the state reinforces as acceptable sexual norms in Metro Manila. Indeed, religious entities have raised the public visibility of sexual images as the billboards’ main problem (Cornelio 2014).

In spite of their different outcomes, the cases above broadly show that the state, especially if called on, is ready to be the moral arbiter in Metro Manila. Local executives and the MMDA, even if this is not their main responsibility, will see the rising need to decide what is morally acceptable in the metropolis as it continues to aim at being a global capital. International artists and art forms and advertising influenced by liberal values will continue to challenge moral boundaries. And the agencies of the state will be compelled to be moral decision makers. The monopoly of the Catholic Church and other Christian groups on conservative values concerning sexual propriety, for example, will be increasingly challenged. This explains why, as this chapter will revisit toward its end, conservative Christian groups have been at the forefront of protests.

Here I note that these Manila-based developments resonate with recent national issues that point to the wider anxieties of Christianity in Philippine society today. Similar to the moral panics that Poleteismo and the sexualized billboards generated were the controversies engendered by the Reproductive Health Bill, passed in late 2012 after more than a decade of endless deliberations in Congress (Boncocan 2012). Although the document underwent many revisions to appease different parties, the version that was signed into law mandates that the state make artificial family planning methods accessible in state-run hospitals and health centers. It also includes a provision that requires reproductive health education in public schools. The deliberations surrounding the bill were entirely emotional for different sectors of society, including influential leaders of the Catholic Church. Indeed, some Catholic leaders have rallied the support of church intellectuals and even denounced the bill for fostering a culture of DEATH (for “Divorce, Euthanasia, Abortion, Transsexuality, and Homosexuality”; see Leviste 2011; Bautista 2010). To contest the bill, pastoral letters were written and massive campaigns organized as a “general crusade against a broad spectrum of the moral tribulations of Filipino society” (Bautista 2010, 37). Somehow, the Catholic leaders’ vehement reaction to the bill is to be expected, since the majority of Filipinos do not consider artificial family planning methods abortive (Mangahas 2011). Taken together, the RH Bill and the issues discussed above expose the anxiety of Christianity over a wider popular culture that is increasingly welcoming of changing sexual norms.
THE STATE AND THE RELIGIOUS USE OF SPACE

Another way of discerning the governance of religions is by looking at how the state deals with their use of space. Although the state generally permits religious activities in public places, it plays a more active role in recognizing those that it deems helpful to the aspiration of the metropolis as a global capital. Crucial here are ambitious construction projects that significantly enhance Metro Manila’s worlding posture (Ong 2011). This must be qualified. Whereas NCR has been predominantly characterized as driven by private real estate with commercial interests (Shatkin 2005; 2011), I propose that religious organizations like INC and El Shaddai take center stage there. Their projects employ international construction consortiums and aim at surpassing proportions.

The law in Metro Manila generally allows the use of public space for religious assemblies, provided that the local executive or agency in charge of the area has granted them a permit. Permits (often with rental fees) are granted—or not—in consideration of security issues and traffic disruption. In fact, public space, as far as the Public Assembly Act of 1985 (Batas Pambansa Bilang 880) is concerned, includes not just open parks but also highways, bridges, and other thoroughfares, where mass assemblies may also take place. In Metro Manila, historic public spaces serve as typical sites for political protests and religious events (Porio 2009). One noteworthy site, for example, is the Quirino Grandstand, an open space across from the monument to José Rizal, the national hero. Religious organizations like the El Shaddai Catholic charismatic group, the indigenous INC, and the Evangelical Jesus Is Lord (JIL) Church have staged their anniversary events here. Its open grounds can conveniently accommodate their followers, numbering in the thousands. The blatant religious character of these events in public spaces is not problematic to government officials who may also be present to take advantage of their political mileage.

In these examples, the state takes on a mainly permissive role. This is consistent with what the judiciary describes as benevolent accommodation, with religion not immediately deemed hostile to the state (Estrada; Thio 2009). When attention is directed to other religious uses of space, however, I argue that the state takes on a more active and supportive role.

In January of each year, the Black Nazarene, a four-hundred-year-old statue of Christ brought to the country by Spanish missionaries from Mexico, is paraded through the narrow streets of old Manila. The Quirino Grandstand is also where this annual procession commences. Barefoot devotees are known to brave the throngs of at least half a million others just to touch or wipe the statue with their towels, through which supernatural miracles are believed to be transmitted (Tremlett 2006; Teves 2013). The procession normally takes hours before it finally reaches Quiapo Church, which has been the Black Nazarene’s home since the eighteenth century. The city government of Manila shows its support by providing sanitation units and security personnel, rerouting traffic, and even canceling classes in schools affected by the procession (Cabayan 2013; Elona
Other agencies, such as the MMDA and the Department of Health, have also deployed rescue teams and health professionals to assist during the event (Villas 2014). What becomes noticeable in the case of the Black Nazarene procession is the various agencies of the government actively offering their resources to religion. As far as the law is concerned, the state is mandated to provide security and traffic enforcers during public assemblies. However, I need to highlight too that the significance of the statue to the identity of the old city of Manila makes it impossible for the state not to fully offer its resources. Indeed, its significance in public space goes back to the role that plazas and other public squares played in the political and religious lives of Filipinos during the Spanish period (Alarcon 2001). One can therefore argue that the legal provision to allow (and even support) religious assemblies in public spaces ultimately emanates from the “easy interweaving of religion and politics in everyday life,” which, for David, “constantly challenges the meaning of our belief in the constitutional separation of church and state” (2002, 133). The old city of Manila, after all, was the seat of the religious and political power of the Spanish regime (Abinales and Amoroso 2005).

At one level, then, the state’s support of religious processions is inseparable from the Catholic identity of Manila itself. Similar religious activities can also be seen in other parts of the metropolis. At another level, however, the state is also actively recognizing the successes of other religious organizations in NCR. Too often, commentators focus on the political leverage that the mass followings of INC and El Shaddai can offer politicians (e.g., Tolentino 2010). After all, the declarations of support by their religious leaders are key to winning elections. While I do not deny the political advantage these religious groups can bestow, I also suggest that the recognition the state offers them is in view of their successful spatial configurations that align with the aspirations of the metropolis to be a global capital. Critical here is the symbolic power of their building projects.

One important case is El Shaddai, the world’s largest Catholic charismatic group, with ten million members, who are often characterized as coming from the urban poor (Tremlett, 2014; Wiegele 2005a). Led by Brother Mike Velarde, the group used to hold its events in such public places as the Quirino Grandstand and the open grounds at the Philippine International Convention Centre (PICC) in the 1990s. A 1996 Asiaweek report rightly pointed out that “no church can contain the El Shaddai congregation” and that “soon, perhaps, no urban space will either” (Tesoro 1996). In 2009, the three hundred thousand attendees of El Shaddai’s weekly prayer meetings finally moved to their own private space, the International House of Prayer at the Velarde-owned Amvel Business Park in Parañaque City. The US$22.5 million cross-shaped church is deemed the biggest place of worship in Asia, with a maximum capacity of twenty-five thousand (Calleja 2009). The open land around it serves as overflow space. During its inauguration, no less than the president of the Philippines, Gloria Arroyo, cut the ribbon and thanked God in her speech “that after twenty-five years, finally, the prayer partners who are the children of Yahweh El Shaddai have their own home” (RTV Malacañang 2009).
The success of INC can also be traced in relation to its massive projects in Metro Manila. INC was founded in 1914 by Felix Manalo, believed by his followers to be the last messenger prophesied by the Bible to come from the Far East (Harper 2001). It is known for not only its non-Trinitarian doctrine and norms concerning tithing and marital propriety but also its evangelistic fervor. One marker of its spread in NCR and the rest of the country is the apparent pervasiveness of its chapels, unmistakable with their neo-Gothic designs and the seal of the religion prominently displayed on the façade. There are at least five thousand throughout the Philippines (Reed 2001). The different cities of Metro Manila have their respective INC structures, but undeniably the most prominent is the headquarters complex in Quezon City. The construction of this complex, which Reed characterizes as a “City of Faith” (580), began in 1971. Today it is home to a university, a hospital, a residential area, INC’s main office, and the Central Temple, famous for its magnificent spires, which are now an important landmark in Metro Manila. The political significance of the central complex saw a high-water mark when INC’s executive minister Eraño Manalo died in 2009. High-ranking politicians flocked to the complex, and military honors were paid to one of the most influential religious leaders of the country (Dizon 2009).

The construction of the complex coincided with the significant growth of INC that has earned it social and political clout. In this light, the neo-Gothic spires of the Central Temple are not just visual inspirations of worship but towering signifiers of the national importance of a religion that mainstream Christian denominations have rejected as a cult or sectarian (Harper 2001). Recently, INC has embarked on a project that reflects its global reach and economic power. To commemorate its hundredth anniversary, in 2014, INC constructed the Philippine Arena in Bocaue, a town to the immediate north of Metro Manila. Three international building firms erected the arena, which has the world’s largest dome and the capacity to seat fifty thousand spectators. Andrew James, its structural design consultant, claimed the project as “the most exciting and ambitious . . . that we know of in Asia” (Ranada 2013). Whereas INC’s central complex was built solely for religious objectives, the Philippine Arena will be used as a multipurpose dome for religious, entertainment, and athletic events. The local government has willingly reclassified formerly agricultural land to legally accommodate the project, which is welcomed for its projected contributions to economic development and tourism. Already, the Philippine Olympic Committee plans on taking advantage of the stadium, which it admits “even the government cannot afford” to build (Navarro 2013).

UNRAVELING ASPIRATIONS

The controversies mentioned above and the use of space by religions surface not just patterns of governance but also the aspirations of religious organizations, which relate one way or another to the global aspirations of the metropolis. As Metro Manila projects itself as a global capital in Asia, it will increasingly welcome international events, movies, and artists. Meanwhile, its local media, art scene, and advertising have started adopting global
fashion and styles. The “Western” values of some of these cultural imports can be discomfiting, especially to conservative religious groups. As discussed above, what constitutes sexual propriety, for example, will continue to be a battleground. In many cases, the state, whether through the judiciary or the executive, is inevitably compelled to be the moral arbiter. In some instances, the religious values of state officials heavily inform their positions toward controversial issues such as sexualized billboards. But what is noteworthy here is that it is the conservative religious entities, in the form of clergy, religious parties, or congregations, that are behind the lobbying against sold-out concerts or art exhibits. In a way, such lobbying is to be expected in light of shifts in the values and religiosity of the public, especially young people (Cornelio 2014b). Hence, the vigilance of conservative religious groups is an expression of their aspiration for the metropolis to remain religious. Taken critically, this aspiration is underpinned by nostalgia for an imagined morally glorious past. This is implicit in the letter asking Mayor Calixto to cancel Lady Gaga’s concert: “We still hope and aspire that this society and government we are establishing still embodies the ‘ideals and aspirations’ of the ‘Filipino people’, and not the false and destructive ideals of other peoples. And we believe this can start in the beautiful City of Pasay.”

I have also highlighted above that there are instances when the state can be seen as permitting or supporting religions in relation to their use of space in the metropolis. Religious gatherings have been staged in Quirino Grandstand and other public areas in NCR. One glaring case is the Black Nazarene procession, which demonstrates the seemingly unproblematic religiosity of public space even for the local government of Manila. Backed by the state, the procession, predominantly attended by urban poor devotees, is not simply an expression of a “right to be here” in view of their precarious condition living in slum neighborhoods (see Berner 1997), nor of religious fatalism, a judgment that one can glean from dismissive commentators (see Jimenez-David 2012). The ritual is an important demonstration of masculinity and bravery to obtain a blessing meant “to transcend a condition of weakness and vulnerability” (Tremlett 2006, 15). In other words, such a religious endeavor mirrors the attempts of the working class to overcome the hardships of everyday life in globalizing Metro Manila.

Whereas the Black Nazarene procession articulates the aspiration to achieve power, the ambitious projects of El Shaddai and INC are unmistakable statements that they have already done so. And whereas the police force carefully manages this procession for fear of bombing or mob rule (Porcalla 2012), the assemblies of El Shaddai and INC in their respective imposing places of worship are comfortably secure. And the state clearly recognizes them.

The state has extended the symbolic power of its recognition through the president and other government entities that have welcomed the Philippine Arena in Bocaue or the International House of Prayer in Parañaque. The fact that these are products of twenty-first-century Metro Manila is revealing. They are not simply natural developments of religious movements that have become successful in recruiting members. Both of these projects, meaningfully located in the northern and southern cities of NCR, are
unmistakable articulations of the aspirations of these religious organizations that parallel the aspiration of Metro Manila to be a global capital. Religious organizations, not just private consortia, are taking center stage in the very worlding drive of Metro Manila. Such religious worlding, as it were, offers two sociological insights on the intersection of religion and urban space today.

First, the move away from public space is itself a narrative of exodus from poverty to affluence—a powerful demonstration of religious efficacy in a globalizing capital. This shift from public to private space is an important witness to the potency of the prosperity theology of El Shaddai and the sectarian rigor of INC. Wiegele’s (2005b) study, conducted before the construction of the International House of Prayer, shows how narratives of El Shaddai members are able to reframe suffering as an opportunity to obtain God’s blessing. Their new private space arguably plays an irreplaceable role in confirming their religious conviction. Similarly, INC’s headquarters and its Philippine Arena are significant milestones for a religious group that began as a small sect in Manila only a hundred years ago. Declaring itself the only “true Church,” INC today could very well be “the most successful form of ‘indigenous Christianity’ to have arisen in the Third World during the past century” (Reed 2001, 564).

Second, these projects are defining Metro Manila as a sacralized launch pad for global religious movements. As the projects are in the middle of emerging integrated megaprojects (with commercial and residential buildings), they serve the primary role of sacralizing space in the metropolis. In other words, the privatization of urban space has allowed El Shaddai and INC to marry the secular with the religious pursuits of their projects. In a way, this is a modern rendition of the Spanish pattern of planning communities bajo de las campanas (Alarcon 2001). In this sense, El Shaddai and INC—known to be very strict and conservative in their beliefs and moral dispositions—have succeeded where anti-Poleteismo entities, for example, have not. Moreover, both the Philippine Arena and the International House of Prayer are projects that surpass international standards of grandiosity. These are powerful statements of the religions’ global presence. The worlding character of Metro Manila, in other words, is not just driven by consortia (Shatkin 2011). It is also religiously driven. Therefore, any study that assesses the global aspirations of Metro Manila cannot be blind to the enviable fortunes of these religious groups.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For government officials of the metropolis, Dan Brown’s rendering of Metro Manila as the “gates of hell” in his *Inferno* was particularly hurtful in drawing attention to what its worlding aspiration wanted to eradicate (Montelibano 2013). But the creation of parallel worlds of decay and cosmopolitanism is the inevitable result of the privatization of urban planning. As Neferti Tadiar astutely puts it, Metro Manila has become a “city of variegated interiors” of private spaces which only the upwardly mobile can effectively access (2007, 317). The state has supported this, even welcoming and recognizing the megaprojects of
religious organizations like El Shaddai and INC. Such projects show that religion has a significant role to play in the global aspirations of an Asian capital like Metro Manila.

The irony, of course, is that many of the members of these religious organizations come from the urban poor. Thus El Shaddai and INC are not only sacralizing space (which religious events like the Black Nazarane procession, for example, were already doing); their privatized religious sites allow the urban poor to access and share (in a limited way) the global aspirations of these organizations and of Metro Manila as a whole. In a manner that goes beyond the usual assistance given to religious processions, the state has actively recognized these worlding developments.

In stark contrast to these recognitions is the fate of informal communities among Muslim immigrants in Metro Manila. Driven from Mindanao by impoverishment (Watanabe 2008), Muslim immigrants are forming communities in reclaimed and other illegal sites in NCR. Sapitula (2013) has documented the threat of evictions and economic marginalization they face from the state and local (Christian) residents. To stake their claim, they have built mosques, the removal of which is bound to be arduous and emotional, and potentially violent. The evictions and overall disheartening conditions of these communities merely echo Muslims’ structural inability to participate in the worlding mode of Metro Manila. Undeniably, their historical and social place in the aspirations of Metro Manila is an urgent question that researchers and policy makers must confront. Is worlding possible for them?

In addition, the increase in immigrants from South Korea and India, among other countries, presents new questions concerning the governance of their religious formations and their aspirations as foreign residents of the metropolis (Cabañes 2013). I have also mentioned above the presence of conservative Evangelical churches in NCR. There is a growing number of these congregations, often charismatic, that have attempted to participate in politics (Lim 2009). The geographies and use of public space by these emerging religious groups are certainly worth investigating. The secularist mode of benevolent accommodation will be continuously tested in the years to come.

Finally, I note here the role of the state as moral arbiter. As Metro Manila aspires to be a key global capital in Asia, it will have to negotiate the cosmopolitan lifestyles and values promoted by artists, celebrities, and advertisers. The state will be compelled to be the arbiter every time moral boundaries are contested. Sexualized billboards and controversial art exhibits have made this evident, especially when Catholic and Evangelical groups have expressed their moral objections. In many cases, these objections concerned sexual propriety. One related point mentioned above needs to be reiterated here for future research. Although the judiciary can invoke benevolent accommodation as its principle, government officials have acted on their religious biases on occasion. Future studies should continue to take note of how such acts are negotiated and asserted, especially in light of conversion and changing religiosities and values. In other words, the viability of the moral conservatism of religious elites in the context of a fast-changing and globally aspiring capital will necessarily be at stake.
NOTES

A preliminary version of this chapter was presented at the 2014 Southeast Studies Symposium at Keble College, Oxford. I thank my fellow panelists on “Manila at a Crossroads: Transitions and Aspirations of Asian Cities” for their helpful feedback.

1. I use Metro Manila and NCR interchangeably to refer to the metropolis as a whole. The city of Manila is only one of the sixteen cities of NCR.


3. This situation is very different from that in other multicultural cities like Singapore, whose secularist character bars the political participation of religions but encourages their involvement in public services such as welfare delivery (Tan 2008).

4. The CBN Asia website is at http://cbnasia.org/home/.

5. Cornelio 2014a treats the issue of billboard advertising and sexualization in Metro Manila in greater detail.

6. Bocaue is part of what is envisioned as the Greater Metro Manila Area, which spans the rapidly urbanizing areas surrounding NCR (Luz 2011).


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The Muharram ritual has been constantly changed and reinvented in Mumbai over the past two centuries. This chapter investigates the ritual as part of the cosmopolitan process through which Mumbai has been forged. The ritual, as practiced today, is constituted through an intensive interaction and tension between diverse social and religious groups that have come to Mumbai. The main procession of Muharram, which is a symbolic funeral of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, was directed toward seaports in the eighteenth century. Today the procession goes toward Rahmetabad Cemetery in Mazgan. The shift from seafront to cemetery is the result of diverse ethnic and religious groups encountering one another and the colonial authorities. Although the commemoration of Muharram is known as a Shiʿi Muslim ritual, it was limited neither to Shiʿas nor to Muslims, as other socioreligious groups were directly or indirectly engaged.

This chapter investigates the Muharram ritual as part of the process of urbanization that formed Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city. Mumbai has evolved and been fundamentally shaped through local, regional, and international migration. Urbanization is not only about the migration of people to a city; it is intrinsically about the formation of an urban society and its dynamics. It is about encountering the diverse ethnic, religious, and political groups that cohabit in a place and negotiate social and political relations through different forms, including rituals. In the nineteenth century, Mumbai emerged as “the cosmopolis of the Indian Ocean” (Green 2011, 3) and brought together linguistically and ethnically diverse Muslim groups to an unprecedented degree. The city was populated by “Arabs and Turks, Iranians and Turanis, Sindis and Hindi, Kabulis and Qandaharis,
Punjabis and Lahoris, Kashmiris and Multanis, Madrasis and Malabaris, Gujaratis and Dakonis, Baghdadis and Basrawis, Muscatis and Konkonis. These Muslims did not collapse themselves into an indistinguishable and uniform religious community” (ibid:4). All these groups had hardly been in contact with one another elsewhere; therefore they needed to redefine and reinvent their identities. In this landscape, rituals were a crucial social medium for redefining identities; however, this need also intensified the need for invention and reinvention of public rituals. The Muharram ritual, as the most important festival of Mumbai in the nineteenth century, played a significant role in the social dynamics of the city; therefore it was constantly changed during this process, making the ritual in Mumbai unlike Muharram anywhere else. This ritual not only narrates the story of interactions and struggles among diverse groups in the past but also creates a space for encountering and shaping the future of this cosmopolitan city.

Marxist scholars, such as Lefebvre (1991) and Harvey (1973), made splendid contributions to urban studies during the second half of the twentieth century. However, as Peter van der Veer notes in the introduction to this book, Marxist academics focused too much on economic resistance, neglecting urban practices that were not directly related to the notion of class or the economy. Lefebvre and other Marxist scholars have focused heavily on everyday life as a practice to resist capitalism (e.g., Lefebvre 2002; Bayat 2010) and on neglected rituals (non–everyday practices) as part of urbanization processes. The case of Mumbai provides evidence that rituals are some of the most significant means by which urban societies are constituted.

Religious rituals including the Muharram ritual cannot be reduced to just a religious practice. Such rituals often aim at practicing and representing social realities alongside different religious notions. They are intrinsically multipurpose collective actions and discursively entwine paradoxical notions such as social division and intimacy, violence and conciliation (see, e.g., Masoudi Nejad 2013). Mumbai Muharram particularly exists as much as a nonreligious collective practice as a religious ritual.

The dynamics of the Muharram ritual have mainly been studied by examining British colonial policies and the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India (Edwardes 1912; Edwardes 1923; Kidambi 2007; Masselos 1982). While I do not neglect the significance of these studies, I pay closer attention to the diversification among urban communities in Mumbai that were involved in the ritual and its changes. The religious diversity is multiplied by the ethnic diversity in the city, creating a complex social organization that cannot be simplified based on Muslim-Hindu or Shi’a-Sunni divisions. Therefore this chapter emphasizes a shift from political to anthropological attention in studying the dynamics of the Muharram ritual as constitutive of a changing urban society.

THE ASHURA TRAGEDY AND THE MUMBAI MUHARRAM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Muharram ritual constitutes a number of annual rites and ceremonies to observe the tragic martyrdom of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, on Ashura in...
the year 680. Ashura is the name of the tenth of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. The dispute over the legitimacy of Umayyad authority led to the Battle of Karbala (in modern-day Iraq) on this day, when Hussein and his few companions were killed.

Shi’a Muslims have developed diverse rituals, including processions, majlises (mourning service sessions), and passion plays, to observe the tragedy of Ashura. In the Middle East, the Muharram commemoration is associated with Shi’a communities and signifies the division of the Shi’a and the Sunni. However, the Muharram ritual metamorphosed into a non-Shi’i festival in India. Hasnain (1988) has mentioned that in India, not only Shi’as but also Sunnis, especially those of the liberal Hanafi school, commemorate the Karbala tragedy. Hindu communities were also involved in the commemoration in rural areas. Hasnain has particularly noted that some of the Hindu rulers of Gwalior and Jaipur were patrons of the ritual for the purpose of encouraging harmony between their Muslim and Hindu subjects (48).

A large number of reports published in the Times of India (TOI) remark that not only Sunnis but also Hindus of lower orders participated in the Muharram processions in Mumbai (see, e.g., TOI, December 14, 1880, 2). Masselos (1982) explains that the Sunni community of Konkonis not only dominated the Muslim communities of Mumbai but also claimed authority over the Muharram processions in the nineteenth century. These included tolis processions and the taboot (also written tabut) procession. The procession of tolis, or street bands, took place for three to five nights, usually during the fifth through the tenth of Muharram. Each moholla (residential quarter) had its own band, ready to parade through the various quarters of the city and fight with the bands of rival neighborhoods. However, the Ashura tragedy was mainly observed by the taboot procession on Ashura. The procession was named after a word for “coffin,” since it is a symbolic funeral and participants carried symbolic coffins of Karbala martyrs. The taboot procession was the greatest festival of Mumbai during the nineteenth century (Birdwood 1915). Influenced by Hindu culture, this symbolic funeral had been directed toward a seafront in Mumbai. An article in the TOI even argues that the taboot procession “has been resorted to in India in imitation of the ostentatious processions of Hindus” (TOI, October 11, 1955, 6).

Although diverse religious and ethnic groups have observed the Ashura tragedy in Mumbai, this does not imply a kind of social integrity. Rather, the ritual has been a practice that channels urban contestations, competitions, and negotiations. As van der Veer argues, a religious ritual is a “construction of self that not only integrates the believers but also places a symbolic boundary between them and ‘outsiders’” (1994, 11).

The colonial authorities, in their best efforts, usually simplified the complexity of Mumbai’s Muslim society into Shi’a and Sunni communities. However, the city was a great magnet for immigrants from everywhere; this multiplied ethnic diversities by religious diversities, creating a complex urban society. There was an awareness of this complexity even at the height of the colonial period. Rafiuddin Ahmed, in his appeal against Muharram regulations in 1908, argued that:
The most essential fact to be learnt about the Mahomedan [i.e., Muslim] community of Bombay is that there is no such community. There are various communities in this city which profess the Mahomedan religious and which may broadly be classified under the two great sects of Islam, Sunni and Shi’a. The Shi’as, who are in a minority, are themselves sub-divided into no less than five sections, viz, Borahs, Khojas, the Moghals, the Hindustani Asna Asharis, and the Sulamnis. All these differ from each other not only in minor dogmas but also in language, dress, and other essentials of a common nationality. . . . The Sunni again, though they do not differ much in dogma, are roughly divided into four sections, namely, the Memonas, the Kokanis [Konkonis], the Deccanis, and the miscellaneous Mahomedans of Upper India. (TOI, February 18, 1908, 7)

All of the aforementioned groups insisted on their own distinct identities, and Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city intensified this desire. Although all these groups observed Muharram, that does not mean they were solidified through the ritual. The ritual was the manifestation of the complex social relationships among all these groups.

The Ashura tragedy was predominately observed with the taboot procession and the tolis processions, but the Shi’a communities of Mumbai did not often join these, as these processions were not aimed at solemnizing. Instead, the processions were more involved with joy, drinking, and dancing. The following narration well depicts the atmosphere of the processions:

The streets in Native Town became gradually filled with a miscellaneous influx of human being of all kinds, and denominations. Brilliant cavalcades and corteges, bands of merry dancers, groups of counterfeit Ethiopians, knots of clowns—embellished with the conical cap and countless little bells, which tinkled at every step—saints, faqueers, dervishes, and itinerant preachers enacting absurd pantomimes, men painted to resemble the tiger, with long bushy tails, engaged in mime battles, fictitious riders, seated on imitation horses and camels, prancing and dancing around you, and ragamuffin mobs, under the especial eye of our picturesque Mounted Police—the whole a vast and animated masquerade, passed and repassed athwart the bewildered gaze of the spectator, and innumerable illuminated shows and pageants completed his confusion. (TOI, August 25, 1858, 6)

The Iranian community initiated a horse procession (known as shabih in Iran) to represent the Battle of Karbala and its aftermath. However, as Masselos (1982, 51-52) reports, the police banned this procession in the 1830s. Another report (TOI, January 25, 1845, 64) indicates that the Iranians then held a passion play (resembling a typical play) in an open space adjacent to their mosque. This article shortly describes the play and explains that, in contrast to the taboot procession, the Iranian ritual is about grief. An article three decades later vividly describes the passion play at an Iranian gathering:

On the morning of the 10th of Muharram they resort to the open court of the Imambara [a religious community place dedicated to Shi’i rituals]. A Mulla reads the story of the
martyrdom, and as he becomes eloquent the auditors beat their bared breasts and weep aloud, every now and then giving utterance to cries of lamentation—"Wai! Wai Hussain Kush ta Shud!" A kind of ring is meanwhile cleared among the devotees for the passage of a procession, and then, amid intense excitement, three horses are led in. Little children, representing the children of Husain, with blood-stained cloths, are mounted on these horses, surrounded by a large number of mourners, wailing and chanting, and as the procession moves forward headed by six banners—among which is the green standard of Ali—the riders of the horses throw ashes over their heads. A figure borne on a bier, representing the decapitated body of Husain covered with blood and wounds, is brought in, from which broken arrows stick out, with a white dove hovering above it. The profoundest grief is now exhibited by spectators. (TOI, February 20, 1874, 3A)

By the 1870s, the Muharram commemoration had a third component—rituals that were sponsored by Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Khojas. Aga Khan took refuge in Mumbai after his failed rebellion against the Iranian monarchy in 1846. As Daftary (2007, 463–74) explains, he had already developed a good relationship with the British when he was in Iran, so he enjoyed their support in India. When Aga Khan arrived in India, he had a direct connection with his wealthy followers, the Khojas, a group of Sindi and Gujarati traders that had begun to settle in Mumbai in the nineteenth century. In order to stress the Shi‘i aspect of the Khojas’ faith, Aga Khan promoted the Muharram ritual. Apart from a majlis, he had arranged a passion play at his residence and invited a number of Europeans to be spectators. The observance of Muharram (as described here) has been drastically changed throughout the process of interactions among different social, religious, and political groups.

COSMOPOLITAN URBANIZATION AND THE DYNAMICS OF MUHARRAM RITUALS

Reports during the 1840s and 1850s show that the Muharram commemoration in Mumbai was generally peaceful. Nonetheless, the tolis and taboot processions particularly caused major disturbances to the everyday life of the city. As they became more popular and increased in size, a tendency appears in official announcements to regulate the festival of tiger-men and half-naked people who play tom-toms and frighten other people (TOI, January 25, 1845, 64). By the late 1860s, there was a significant drive to limit the tolis processions to the native town and keep them out of the Fort, which was the European and administrative part of the city. In 1871, the brigadier general in command of the city announced the first significant regulation, “bann[ing] entering of taboots into the Fort” (TOI, March 31, 1871, 3).

The Shi‘a communities of Mumbai in the mid-nineteenth century were the Iranians (often called Moghuls), the Bohras, and the Khojas. Sunni communities, which dominated the taboot and tolis processions, suppressed the Iranians’ horse procession, keeping it away
from public streets; moreover, the Khoja (followers of Aga Khan) were not allowed to carry their taboots beyond their private grounds (TOI, April 14, 1871, 3). Therefore, tension between Sunni and Shi’a communities built up in the city. In 1872, this sparked conflict between the Memons (a Sunni community) and Shi’a communities of Iranians and Bohras in the Bhendi Bazaar area (see, e.g., the 1872 TOIs for March 20, 2; March 21, 3; March 22, 2; March 25, 3). One report mentions that the Bohras were peaceful, a “lily-livered” race who would remain at home after receiving a few beatings, but that the Moghuls were ready to fight (TOI, March 23, 1872, 2). It seems that the tension reappeared in 1873, when rioters targeted even Parsees’ places, after which all processions were banned in 1874. Frank Souter, the governor of Mumbai, announced that “it has become necessary for the preservation of the public peace to prohibit all religious processions until the public tranquility is restored. . . . No assemblies or procession is allowed, . . . and all licenses that have been granted are hereby cancelled” (TOI, February 18, 1874, 2).

Although the governor received some objections, he imposed the order. Nevertheless, part of a letter to the governor signed by Ahmed Mahomed is worth quoting here:

Sir,—Doubtless the “f. . . m policy” [illegible] of the Government in suppressing this time the taboot procession in public has the approval of most persons who are of the Christian faith and superficial observers of the present disturbances in this city, while Zoroastrians [Parsees] particularly exult in the promulgation of an Order, the harshness of which is but little understood by them. . . . The political mind of His Excellency . . . cannot grasp the subject in its religious aspect. It is quite plain that His Excellency has only one point in view—the safety of the public—and that in his estimation the only one he has to consider apparently. (TOI, February 25, 1874, 3)

This letter singles out the problematic logic behind the policy of colonial power. More interestingly, it shows that negotiation and contestation over the Muharram occurred among not only those who observed the ritual but also those who did not (the Parsees and the colonial authorities). In fact, based on Queen Victoria’s famous 1858 proclamation, the British guaranteed that they would not interfere with religious customs. However, the governor did interfere, in the name of keeping the peace and public safety. A year later he announced the first significant Muharram regulation (published in the TOI, January 22, 1875, 3). It aimed at spatially and temporally controlling the Muharram processions in public streets. The regulation stated that the police had to license the taking of a taboot or a panja (a symbolic metal palm, attached to the top of a flag, that signifies the Prophet and four members of his family, including Hussein) into a procession. Moreover, it permitted the tolis processions only after the fifth of Muharram, between 1:00 and 3:00 a.m., and the final procession, the taboot procession, on Ashura only after 1:00 p.m. The taboot procession route was announced as heading toward Cooly Bunder in Mody Bay (also written as Moody Bay). Beginning in the 1870s, police regulations and reports gave the details of procession routes. For example, as an 1884 report describes,
“the taboots and punjahs from the several divisions will move in procession by the usual route through Bhendy Bazaar, Kalbadavle Road, along the Esplanade Cross Road, across the Cararnao Bunder railway, over [the] bridge, to the seashore at Cooly Bunder, where the taboots will be finally immersed” (TOI, October 31, 1884, 3).

I have compared a large number of police regulations and reports with historic maps (on which roads are often differently named) to identify the procession route; figure 5.1 shows the result. This route remained the same until 1912, when the procession was discontinued in the south of Mumbai.

Beginning in the 1870s, the police regulations for Muharram were announced every year, and the policing discourse gradually came to dominate the language of newspaper articles about the ritual. Nonetheless, there are still many articles and letters which demonstrate that the police reports exaggerated the levels of tension and violence during Muharram. For example, an article published in 1879 argues that the taboot procession passed peacefully in Mumbai with a “smaller number of casualties than happen in London at every Lord Mayor’s Show” (TOI, January 6, 1979, 8; originally published in 1879).

As the commemoration during these two decades was relatively peaceful, the author of an article that calls the Muharram ritual “the noisiest Indian festival” thankfully mentioned that “happily we are free from the unseemly riots between Hindoos and Mohammdans, which so frequently occur in the Northern districts” (TOI, October 11, 1886, 3). Europeans were commonly present at the Aga Khan’s and Iranians’ places as spectators of the passion play. They also usually occupied every balcony in Crawford Market, from which they enjoyed picturesque scenes of the procession passing along the Esplanade Cross Road.

Many reports describe the participation of Hindus of lower orders, who acted as man-tigers and fools, creating a striking contrast between them and Muslim participants. Gradually, some letters and articles called for excluding Hindus from the processions to keep this noisy ritual quiet. They usually claimed that “these classes of people who play the part of tigers . . . give the greatest amount of trouble both to our over-worked energetic police and the public” (TOI, August 27, 1889, 4). Another article, signed by S.D., argues that

your correspondent “X” very wisely draws the attention of the police to the fact that Hindoos erected taboots under a permit in the name of a Mahomedan. This practice should be put a stop to at once, and it is to the taboots of the Hindoos are mostly to be seen attached those long processions of tigers, mulkhumhees, and buffoons, &c., which make them so attractive to the multitude. From all accounts I hear that the Mahmodans are averse to these things, which throw their religion into ridicule. . . . The police should prosecute all those buffoons, sayaboos, and tigers who insult men and try to outrage the modesty of women on the public streets during the ten days of the Mohurrum. (TOI, August 31, 1889, 5)

The explosive growth of Mumbai in the late nineteenth century generated a constant change in the socioreligious and political landscape of the city. The peaceful
FIGURE 5.1
The route of the Ashura procession (denoted by a dashed line) from the second half of the
nineteenth century until 1912. (a) Jame Masjid (the great mosque); (b) the Crawford Market; (c) the
Fort. The background map is dated 1874, from the Indian Office Records of the British Library
(IOR: X 26036/1).
commemoration of Ashura ended with the riot of 1893 between Hindus and Muslims, which sparked during Muharram. It was the most serious riot of Mumbai during the nineteenth century, and numerous official reports extensively documented it. Stephen Edwardes, who was the commissioner of police in Bombay at the time, argued that the riot was a consequence of a Hindu nationalist movement. Besides being a milestone in the history of the Muharram festival in Mumbai, the riot led to the establishment of a Hindu festival. As he explained: “The Hindu-Muhammadan riots of 1893 were directly responsible for the establishment in Western India of the annual public celebrations in honour of the Hindu god Ganpati, which subsequently developed into one of the chief features of the anti-British revolutionary movement in India. The riots left behind them a bitter legacy of sectarian rancor, which Bal Gangadhar Tilak utilized for broadening his new anti-British movement, by enlisting in its support the ancient Hindu antagonism to Islam” (1923, 104).

Ganpati, or Ganesh, is the elephant-headed deity known as the remover of obstacles and the god of auspiciousness. Hansen (2001, 29) notes that his celebration became a family-based festival among higher castes during the nineteenth century; it concluded with the immersion of a small Ganesh idol in a nearby river. The modern history of the Ganpati festival, however, dates back to 1893, when Tilak gave it a distinctly political face. The riot of that year provided the immediate cause for reshaping the domestic festival of Ganesh into a public manifestation of Hindu culture and the Hindu community (Krishnaswamy 1966, 214).

It is not a coincidence that Tilak initiated the modern Ganpati festival after the riot (1893). Muharram was always an opportunity to challenge the British authority. The Hindus had participated in Muharram, but they had not been influential enough to make the ritual an annual Hindu antigovernment demonstration. Therefore, by reinventing the Ganpati festival, Tilak gave the Hindu community its own public ritual with which to challenge both the British authority and the Muslim community.

The 1893 riot did not interrupt the Muharram processions, but it did cause a shift in the regulations. In 1895, Commissioner of Police R. H. Vincent announced that “the license will be granted to Mahomedans only” (TOI, June 25, 1895, 3). The rise of Hindu nationalism and new regulations sharply reduced the number of licenses granted for taboots and panjas: 169 for taboots and 860 for panjas in 1893, then 132 and 619, respectively, in 1897 (TOI, July 4, 1895, 5; June 12, 1897, 3). These numbers declined to 105 for taboots and 598 for panjas by 1908. Nevertheless, the police reports show that Muharram passed peacefully until 1908 in Mumbai, and Europeans were greatly attracted to viewing the taboot processions and other such rituals.

Mumbai was like a boiling pot, with the different mohollas, which comprised different ethnic groups, constantly competing with one another; the Muharram processions were an important medium of this competition. It particularly manifested in tolis processions during the fifth through the tenth of Muharram, when each moholla ran its procession through other localities and fought with the bands of rival neighborhoods. According to
an article signed by Etonensis, this “recalls the free-fighting which used once to take place between the various quarters of Gujarat and Kathiawar towns during the Holi festival” (TOI, February 17, 1908, 6).

The competition among different localities during Muharram should not be considered a sectarian matter. Instead, this was a natural social negotiation, part of the process of urbanization, whose tension and violence the Muharram rituals channeled. This kind of social tension was also common in Iranian cities, where all people followed the same school of Islam; however, there has always been tension between the hayat (equivalent of toli; also called dasteh, meaning “group” or “team”) of the Haydari and Nemati quarters (Masoudi Nejad 2013; Mirjafari 1979). These cases recall the violence among people in medieval Italian cities (Herlihy 1972; Hyde 1972) or football crowd riots between supporters of the Glasgow Rangers and the Celtics in 1909 (Buford 1993). As Perry has explained, “the common factor in all of these bodies is, of course, the bonding of young males in common warlike activities” (1999, 60).

The fast growth of Mumbai intensified the negotiations among its increasingly diverse groups. During the second half of the first decade of the 1900s, tension developed between Sunni communities and the Shi’a Bohras. In 1908, a fight erupted between the Iranians and Sunnis during Muharram; the violence expanded to target Bohras in particular. The police intervention resulted in the loss of five lives (see the 1908 TOIs for February 13, 5; February 14, 7; February 15, 8; February 18, 7; February 21, 8). In the following year the governor of Mumbai initiated a conciliation committee that included fifty influential members of Muslim communities and was able to control the tension during Muharram that year.

Despite its success in 1909, the conciliation committee was not called in following years. Instead, Edwardes, the commissioner of police, introduced new borders for the tolis processions in 1910. He particularly wanted to close Doctor Street, the heart of the Bohra area, to these processions, as it had been a site of tension in the previous years. He permitted only the passing of silent processions through Doctor Street. However, as he explained later, the mohollas were angry with this policy and refused to bring out their taboots. Therefore, while procession was not banned, no moholla carried out even the taboot procession on Ashura (TOI, January 24, 1910, 8). Their alleged grievance was the fact “that the Bohras had been openly boasting that they had got Doctor Street closed and that they had won a victory over the Sunnis” (TOI, March 9, 1911, 7).

The police changed the balance of power among the communities, causing dissatisfaction. In protest, no one applied for a license and there were no processions in the city for the 1911 Muharram. However, violence erupted nonetheless, and the police killed forty-two people in an attempt to control the riot. The police report says that the mob was a “mixed collection of lower class Mahomedans, mostly young as it seemed, with a strong mixture of Hindus of the lower orders” (TOI, January 13, 1911, 7). While the governor and the commissioner of police did not call the conciliation committee, the official reports blamed the influential Konkonis members, who did not step in to control the violence.
Prior to the Muharram of 1912, Edwardes introduced yet another regulation. This one stipulated that the number of persons accompanying a procession should not exceed thirty, all tolis processions were totally prohibited, and “the lifting and circulation of tabuts and tazias on the tenth night shall be strictly confined to the limits of the respective mohollas in which each tabut or tazia is standing” (TOI, October 23, 1911, 7). This order particularly targeted the processions as a source of violence, as Edwardes argued in a lecture: “There is no question of religion or religious fervor here. The tolis are irreligious rascality let loose for five days and nights, to play intolerable mischief in the streets and terrorise the peaceful house-holder” (TOI, March 10, 1911, 6).

Despite campaigns against the regulation, it was imposed. While it did not ban the procession, its conditions were such that people refused to apply for licenses, effectively ending the tolis and taboot processions for good in the south of Mumbai. A report published on Ashura of 1912 explains that “the last night of celebration passed off the city in a peaceful way and even traffic was in normal condition last night” (TOI, December 20, 1912, 5). A short report from the next day mentions that “Friday was the last day of the Mohurram festival and it passed off in Bombay without any hitch whatsoever. No tabut procession took place, as there was no tabut to be taken out so far as the Mahomedan localities of native town were concerned” (TOI, December 21, 1912, 9). The 1912 regulation stopped all processions and reduced the commemoration to majlises, mainly held at Iranian places. For years following, in reporting on the Muharram, outlets like the TOI spoke of how “the ceremonies passed off peacefully.”

The ritual in Mumbai underwent another major change in the early 1910s, as Aga Khan III introduced a fundamental reform of the creed and rituals of the Khojas, who follow the Shi’a Nizari-Isma’ili school. This occurred at almost the same time as, but was unrelated to, the consequential regulatory changes of 1912. To understand the significance of the reform for the discussion at hand, it is necessary to review the background of the Aga Khans in Mumbai.

As already mentioned, the first Aga Khan fled Iran for Mumbai in 1846. On arrival, he had a direct connection with his wealthy followers, the Khojas, a group of Sindi and Gujarati traders who had begun to settle in Mumbai in the nineteenth century. Aga Khan’s presence affected the social organizations of the Khoja community, which had been constituted over centuries, so some members challenged his authority. They basically denied that the Khojas were Shi’a, claiming instead that the community had a Sunni background. A court case in Mumbai challenged Aga Khan’s authority, which, however, he succeeded in establishing by the hand of the Bombay High Court in 1866. Consequently, he officially affirmed and legally registered the Khoja community as “Shi’a Imami Isma’ili” (Daftary 2007, 476). As Devji (2009, xi) has mentioned, even Aga Khan III deferred the legitimacy of his authority over the Khojas as the living imam to the judgment of the Bombay High Court in the 1860s.

To stress the Shi‘i aspect of the Khojas’ faith, Aga Khan emphasized and promoted the mourning service sessions of Muharram. As mentioned above, his rituals were
indeed considered an important segment of the Muharram commemoration in Mumbai. The TOI often reported a large assemblage of high-ranked Europeans officials in the compound of Aga Khan’s home at Mazagon, where the mourning rituals and passion play were performed (see, e.g., TOI, September 29, 1887, 4; August 17, 1891, 3). Aga Khan came to India from Qajarid Iran, where Muharram rituals shaped social life and public culture. In fact, Qajar kings (who ruled from the eighteenth to the twentieth century) used the Muharram rituals as a medium to shape, influence, and control Iranian society (Aghaie 2005). Therefore, unsurprisingly, Aga Khan used that policy too; he promoted commemorating Muharram to fulfill his political and religious authority. Boivin (2008, 156–57) even argues that Aga Khan introduced the Ithna-Ashari Muharram rituals to the Khojas on his arrival in India to counter the influence of Sufi leaders (sayyids and pirs) and establish his authority.

After the short era of Aga Khan II, which lasted only a few months, Aga Khan III became the Nizari imam in 1885. During his reign, some of the Iranian Shi’a clergy in Mumbai were trying to convert the Khojas to Ithna-Ashari. Therefore the Khoja community was divided into Isma’ili and Ithna-Ashari parts, often respectively referred to as Bardi (majority) and Chori jamat (minority group). Aga Khan III also faced a major court case filed against him by members of his family in Mumbai because of a dispute over the heritage of Aga Khan. It is often called the Haji Bibi case, in reference to the woman who led it. It was decided in favor of Aga Khan III in 1908 and established that “the Nizari Khojas were distinct from the Shi’as of the Ithna-Ashari school, since the plaintiffs had claimed adherence to Twelver Shiism” (Daftary 2007, 481). Thereafter, Aga Khan III, who had already started a reform, emphasized the differentiation of his followers from the Ithna-Ashari Shi’as, based on a fundamental change of the creed and rituals of the Nizari sect. In 1910 he discouraged his followers from joining the Muharram commemoration, arguing that the Nizaris had a living and present imam and did not need to commemorate any of the dead ones (ibid, 492). Although forbidding the commemoration of Ashura was part of a much larger reform (see Boivin 2008, 170), this was a major shift, as the tragedy plays a central role in Shi’i theology and culture. Therefore this sharply demarcated Nizari Isma’ilis from all other Shi’as, including the Musta’ali Isma’ilis (Bohras) in Mumbai. Nowadays during Muharram, the Khoja Ithna-Ashari Jame Masjid in Dongri is crowded and vibrant; however, literally right next to the mosque, the Nazaris’ Jamat Khaneh (religious community center), with its beautiful clock tower, is quiet and looks like an empty colonial building whose time has passed.

The shift of the Aga Khans’ policy on the Muharram rituals was particularly a result of the cosmopolitan context of Mumbai, where different Shi’a groups interacted with and challenged each other. In such a diverse context, the communities encountered each other and needed to constantly reinvent their identities over time. The policy shift of the Aga Khans from promoting to banning the Muharram ritual is a good example of the need to reinvent the community identity in the rapidly changing context of Mumbai.
SOCIAL AND SPATIAL RESILIENCE THROUGH MUHARRAM RITUALS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Although the Muharram commemoration has undergone constant changes over the past two centuries, the most important have unfolded since 1912. I will articulate these by looking at two important cases: the processions in Bandra and the revival of the procession as a Shi’i ritual in the old city of Mumbai.

Bandra, a northern suburb of the city, was officially outside Mumbai and not under the Mumbai governor. It was initially a Christian locality until some Muslims, including the Khojas and the Iranians, settled there in the early twentieth century. The Khoja Ithnashari Jame Masjid, built in 1901, highlights the background of this community in Bandra.

There are reports indicating that Muharram was observed in Bandra in the late nineteenth century (TOI, June 2, 1898; June 25, 1898). When the Muharram processions were stopped in Mumbai, Bandra became the main place for them, attracting large crowds of Muslims in the early 1920s (see, e.g., TOI, August 25, 1923, 13). The first photograph of a crowded Muharram procession in Bandra was published in 1926 (TOI, July 24, 1926, 16). The caption of a photo published in 1929 reads,

Although the Taboot procession, that is one of the most impressive features of the great Mahomedan festival of Mohurrum, is forbidden in the City of Bombay owing to the violent disturbances that invariably marred the peace of Bombay when it was allowed in former years, the prohibition does not extend to Bandra, one of the city’s suburbs, where is held annually. Thousands participate in the processions at Bandra, which are viewed by crowds of Hindus and Christians. The picture shows a procession in Bandra on Wednesday, taking a “taboot” for immersion. (TOI, June 21, 1929, 10)

There were three major processions every year in Bandra in the 1930s (TOI, April 2, 1936, 6), when “every suburban train leaving for Bandra carried crowds of devotees from the City” (TOI, March 3, 1939, 5). The scale of the processions there grew until, in 1943, “special arrangements were made by the police for regulating the traffic” (TOI, January 18, 1943, 4). Moreover, we learn that since 1933 there was also a procession in Andhari, another Muslim locality in the suburbs of Mumbai (TOI, May 6, 1933, 12; April 16, 1935, 6). Fast-growing cities like Mumbai have always produced suburbs and urban villages; the migration of ritual to these places particularly exhibits how they were part of a resilient mechanism that Muslims used to maintain their socioreligious practices.

The Iranians were not a significant community in terms of population size, but they made a major contribution to the establishment of Shi’a religious places in Mumbai. More notably, this community played a crucial role in keeping and reviving the Muharram commemoration in Mumbai. Since 1912, the religious places associated with Iranians, including the Shushthari, Amin, and Namazi Imambaras, as well as Moghul Masjid, were the main hosts of the crowded majlises. Sayyed Safar-Ali Hussini, who was born in Mumbai and whom I interviewed in April and December 2010, is the senior member of
an influential Iranian family that has served as a patron of the Muharram ritual in Mumbai for generations. He mentioned that the British were nice to the Iranians and gave them permission to hold the rituals in the imambars but did not allow the procession through the streets. Therefore the Iranians made a silent procession that moved between the Namazi, Shushtari, and Amin Imambaras.

Supporting Hussini’s narration, the TOI reported in 1925 that “the Moghuls celebrated their Katal-ki-Raat [the night of Hussein’s martyrdom] at the Shustari [Shushtari] Imambara in Jail Road, where the crowd this year was an unusually large one. They came in a procession to the Imambara from the Babar Ali’s [Namazi] Imambara, in Pakmodia Street. . . . They then went to the Zainul-Abidin’s [Amin] Imambara, also at the end of Jail Road, where the ceremonies were brought to a close” (TOI, August 1, 1925, 25). Another report says that “the ceremonies at the Nemazee’s Imambara in Pacmodia Street began at 8:00 p.m. and closed half an hour later when a procession was formed and went under police escort to Shustry’s Imambara at Sandhurst Road. The Moghuls who participated in the ceremonies later went to the Zainul Abedin’s Imambara in Mirza Ali Street, Bombay. The Consul for Persia attended the ceremonies” (TOI, May 6, 1933, 12).

Hussini also stated that the Iranians gradually changed the silent procession into a more typical one. He and Dr. Jafar Najafi, whom I also interviewed in April 2010, noted that initially, the Iranian procession began at the Namazi Imambara, came to the Shushtari Imambara, then passed by Moghul Masjid and terminated at Amin Imambara (see figure 5.2). They mentioned that this procession was small and limited to the Iranian community.

Although Mumbai’s Shi’i populations decreased after Indian independence, they expanded again because of immigration from Utter Pradesh (UP), Lucknow, and Bihar. Hussini pointed out that this particularly happened after the abolition of zamindari (landlordism) in India in the 1960s, when many Shi’a navabs and zamindars—influential social classes that owned or leased and managed agricultural lands in India—came to Mumbai from Lucknow. On their arrival, the Mumbai Shi’i population increased and gained confidence, and the Iranians’ procession became the core driver of expansion for the Muharram processions during the 1960s and 1970s in the south of the city. But although the Iranians initiated the procession in the south of Mumbai in Dongri, it was mainly Ithna-Ashari Shi’as who expanded it, in or around the initial Iranian places. Nonetheless, Iranians do not participate in the expanded processions, preferring to stage their own shorter ones.

As discussed above, the Mumbai taboot procession on Ashura began as a Sunni-dominated ritual directed toward Mody Bay, where the immersion took place. However, the main procession (of Ashura afternoon) no longer ended with an immersion. Moreover, the current procession of Ashura afternoon (i.e., the taboot procession) moved toward the Rahmat-abad Cemetery (associated with Iranians) in Mazgan and not toward a seafront (see figure 5.2). But the most important shift is that the revived processions are mourning rituals. Although immersion is not part of Mumbai’s main procession, in
some suburbs of the city, such as Mumbra and Govandi, Shi’i communities currently carry their processions toward riverbanks, where the immersions take place.

MUMBAI MUHARRAM RITUALS TODAY

Mumbai’s Shi’i population was concentrated in the Dongri area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It gradually scattered all over Greater Mumbai, in Bandra,
Mira Road, Malard, Korla, and Govandi and up to Jogeshwari, Andheri, and Mumbra. Dongri is no longer the main Shi‘i settlement; Lotus Colony in Govandi and even Mumbra, where Shi‘as from UP mainly settle, appear to be more important today. Muharram processions are practiced in all the aforementioned areas; however, Dongri (often called Bhendi Bazaar) remains the center for these processions. In December 2009, I asked Baqir Balaghi, a Shi‘a from Kashmir whose family moved to Mumbai in the early 1990s, the reason for this. He explained that “Bhendi Bazaar is the center of the city; Muslims used to be here, then later gradually scattered into the suburbs. Initially, the procession was carried out here, and when people moved out [to the suburbs], they [would] practice [the procession] there as well, but they keep the center at Bhendi Bazaar.” He emphasized that “if somebody asks you, ‘Have you seen Bombay’s Ashura?’, that means ‘Have you seen Ashura in Bhendi Bazaar?’”

What particularly differentiates Dongri from other Shi‘i areas is that in a short walk around it, you can experience the diverse cultural backgrounds of Mumbai’s Shi‘a communities through the architecture of their religious places. Moghul Masjid, arguably the oldest Shi‘i building in the city, is a wonderful example of Iranian Qajarid architecture. Khoja Masjid clearly addresses Moghul Islamic architecture. The Rowzat al-Tahera of the Bohras celebrates the Fatimid architecture of Egypt. The other major Shi‘i places in Dongri, including the Namazi Imambara, Shushtari Imambara, Amin Imambara, Anjuman-i Fotowat-i Yazdian, Imamiyeh Masjid, and Kaisar Baug are all also within walking distance (see figure 5.2). The concentration of all these places makes Dongri a ritual arena during Muharram.

The Muharram commemoration became a Shi‘a event; however, this does not mean that all Shi‘a communities are integrated during Muharram. For example, the Bohras’ majlises are community-exclusive events and their sole commemoration of the Ashura tragedy: unlike other Shi‘a communities, they do not run processions during Muharram. As the Bohra community is hierarchical, an outsider who wishes to attend a majlis must be invited and accompanied by an influential member. In 2010, I had the privilege of attending the main Bohra majlis, at which there was not a single outsider in the whole crowd.7 The Bohra community, however, is not self-segregated. I saw many individual Bohras at majlises at Ithna-Ashari places, especially Moghul Masjid. Its manager, Ali Namazi told me in December 2010 that the sermons delivered in the evenings of Muharram by Molana Saheb Athar, a popular orator, attract a lot of Bohras. Nevertheless, this is not an organized attendance and is based on individual preference.

One post-1912 phenomenon is the erection of shamianas and mandaps in public spaces to hold public lectures during Muharram (see, e.g., TOI, March 14, 1938, 10). This is a minor connection that Sunni communities have kept to the Muharram in Mumbai. Although there are few shamianas in Dongri during Muharram, recently emerged groups of Wahhabi (an offshoot Sunni sect) set up shamianas close to Iranian places on Jail Road during Muharram, which is very busy then. In fact, this is a kind of counter-ritual to interrupt Shi‘a rituals, since Wahhabi teachings refuse commemorating the
death of people. While the Sunni community builds white shamianas, the Wahhabis’ are distinguished by their red color, which ironically signifies the enemy of Hussein in Shi‘i passion plays. The Wahhabis are a new social group in Mumbai, mainly constituting Indian Muslim workers returned from Arab countries. Although they do not observe the tragedy of Ashura, they opportunely employ the Muharram to be part of an urban negotiation by claiming their authority over some public spaces in Dongri.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new cultural and religious ideas came to Mumbai along with the waves of immigrants from other parts of India and the globe. For example, the immigration of the Parsees, the Marwaris, the Bohras, the Khojas, and the Iranians to Mumbai brought new ethnic and religious dimensions to the urban fabric. Recent years have seen a new phenomenon—the flow of ideas and ideologies. This has happened as Indian workers in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries have brought Salafi and Wahhabi ideas to Mumbai. Mumbai, like other global cities, has a religious dynamic based on national and transnational flows of ideas and people.

**CONCLUSION: MUHARRAM RITUALS AS PART OF COSMOPOLITAN URBANIZATION PROCESSES**

The Mumbai rituals during Muharram are religious practices that address the tragedy of Ashura. However, the dynamics of this observance have a great deal to do with the social dynamics of the city. The rituals have created a space for an intensive social negotiation among the ever-increasing number of segments of this complex urban society. Throughout the past two centuries, the socioreligious groups at the heart of these Muharram events have constantly changed: they were the Konkonis, then the Memonis, then the Iranians, and nowadays the Shi‘as from UP. In fact, not only Sunni and Shi‘a communities but also the Parsees, the Hindus, and the Brits have been involved in the dynamic of the rituals. The fast growth of this cosmopolitan city has intensified the need for constant social negotiation, in which the Muharram ritual has played a crucial role. The ritual not only has been part of the process of urbanism in an ever-changing city but has also itself metamorphosed over time. As I have shown, this metamorphosis changed the Muharram ritual and led to new rituals based on the idea of Muharram processions.

This chapter shows that the rituals during Muharram are neither strictly religious nor strictly secular. In fact, the issue is no longer their definitions along these lines but rather how they affect the process of urbanization as they are in turn inspired and changed by a cosmopolitan process.

**NOTES**

1. The name of the ritual appears in eight different transliterations, most often *Mohurrum*, in the archive materials I consulted. However, *Muharram* is the most common transliteration used in recent times.
2. See also Kidambi 2007; Korom 2003, 142.

3. Two reports (TOI, August 25, 1858, 6; July 22, 1861, 3) say that the taboot procession terminated at Back Bay; however, they give no details about its route. From 1861, all reports explain that the procession ended at Mody Bay.

4. For example, Badruddin Abdulla Koor argued that a number of its conditions were “undesirable and unworkable,” such as the limitation of thirty people for a procession in a city like Mumbai (TOI, October 22, 1913, 4).

5. However, it seems that the Nizari-Isma’ils did not suddenly discontinue the commemoration of Ashura. There are reports indicating that at least Lady Ali Shah, the third Aga Khan’s mother, sponsored majlises until the 1930s (see, e.g., TOI, August 12, 1924, 10; June 9, 1930, 10).

6. Unfortunately, there are no official figures for the Shi’a population in India, but this is a common perception about the distribution of Shi’as in Mumbai. People may give population numbers, but they are not reliable.

7. For the full account of this experience, see Masoudi Nejad 2012, 109–11.

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6

URBAN PROCESSIONS
Colonial Decline and Revival as Heritage in Postcolonial Hong Kong

Joseph Bosco

INTRODUCTION
Hong Kong is a city of flows (Siu and Ku 2008), through which people have moved since the California gold rush and during subsequent waves of Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia, Europe and the Americas. At the same time, neighborhoods have developed, and some Hong Kong residents claim residence for their families in the same area for generations. While “new towns” and high apartment buildings have not been provided with temples, temples in traditional neighborhoods have been preserved, and they sometimes still hold festivals and processions. The processions that do continue are not simply continuations of tradition; they have had to change with the times, and have taken on new meanings.

Contrary to the popular myth that Hong Kong was a barren rock before the British took it over in 1841, there were in fact Chinese settlements on the island, as well as on Kowloon (occupied by the British in 1865) and in the New Territories (leased by the British for ninety-nine years starting in 1898). However, the population did swell greatly with the establishment of the colony. And with this population came the establishment of temples and processions.

The annual processions that continue to be held on Hong Kong Island all began in the late nineteenth century. Temple traditions state that they were begun to plead to deities to end epidemics. Religion was still an important principle of social organization. But only one generation later, an iconoclastic ethos led to the creation of the Chinese Temples Committee and the restriction of popular religion.
This chapter focuses on four religious processions in urban Hong Kong, two that celebrate the birthday of the deity Tam Kung (艸兲), and two fire dragon (火龍 or 火龍) processions. None of these has been particularly famous or spectacular (at least until recently), but they tell us a great deal about Hong Kong’s colonial and postcolonial history and the state’s relationship with religion.

This volume’s introduction alludes to the problems caused by imagining a sharp division between urban and rural. This is especially true of Hong Kong, where rural areas have not engaged in much agriculture since the 1970s and the urban area’s industrial, commercial, and service economies have been the main source of livelihood for most residents for decades. In addition, some of the neighborhoods I discuss began as small, isolated communities, resembling rural towns in many respects. These neighborhoods now have skyscrapers and malls, are linked by subway and highway to other neighborhoods, and are integral parts of urban Hong Kong, but their history is preserved in their religious festivals.

### Proceessions in Chinese Folk Religion

A Chinese temple is thought of as the official residence of a deity, the spiritual equivalent of the imperial magistrate’s office, or yamen. Gods are thought of as part of a spiritual bureaucracy; they rule over a territory and protect its inhabitants (see chs. 3 and 15; Wolf 1974; Feuchtwang 1974, 268–77; Feuchtwang 2001). Processions of deities are modeled on the trips of officials in imperial times. The deity is placed in an ornate sedan chair to tour its territory or to visit another temple and accompanied by attendants and guards, drums and gongs, and signs telling spectators to look away.

The common term for procession in Chinese is jinxiang (進香), which means “to offer incense” but should be translated as “to go on a pilgrimage” or “to worship in a temple.” There are two types of processions in Chinese folk religion. One covers the district of a temple. It starts and ends at a single temple, whose ritual sphere its route ritually marks (Lin 1987; Watson 1996). Villagers carry the deity’s statue in a sedan chair to pass by (or to visit) all the families in a village or, for a higher-level festival, to pass through each village of a township in a kind of inspection trip. The second type of procession is a pilgrimage to a sacred site, such as a temple on a mountain (see Naquin and Yü 1992). Deities are brought to these special places to restore their ritual power, on the pattern of the courtesy visits of officials in imperial times.

### Hong Kong Processions

In Hong Kong, there are few religious processions today. Funerals of wealthy and prominent people at one time were occasions for long processions, to bring the coffin from the home or funeral parlor to the cemetery. Funeral processions were no longer permitted after the 1960s because of the congestion they caused (Waters 1991, 117). Wedding processions have also disappeared.
Most temples in Hong Kong have long since abandoned their processions, if they ever held any. I estimate that of the more than sixty Tin Hau (天后) temples in Hong Kong, fewer than ten have processions, and all are in rural areas. For example, the Yuen Long (Tai Shu Ha) Tin Hau Temple has a procession, but only along about five hundred meters of the town’s streets. It then enters a sports ground, where the procession circles three-quarters of the running track before dispersing. The procession used to be much longer, but a combination of police restrictions and lack of labor have simplified the ritual.

This chapter concentrates on the processions of Hong Kong Island. I have found thirty-two popular-religion temples on the island that are still in operation. Ten still have a festival of some sort, though in most cases the festivities merely involve families and private groups visiting on the temple deity’s feast day. Only three temples have annual processions, in which deities process through the streets to the temple: the Tam Kung temples of Wong Nei Chung (黃大仙) and Shau Kei Wan (黃大仙), and the Hung Sheng (洪聖) Temple of Ap Lei Chau (鴻聖). In addition, the neighborhood of Tai Hang and the village of Pok Fu Lam have fire dragon processions, which pass through these communities during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

The changes in the Tam Kung and the fire dragon processions illustrate how processions (and attitudes toward popular religion in general) have changed in Hong Kong. We will see how modernist ideology devalued and suppressed popular religious processions until after the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China, when they were rediscovered as “heritage.”

**TAM KUNG TEMPLES**

There are two Tam Kung temples on Hong Kong Island, one in Happy Valley on Wong Nai Chung Road, built in 1901, and one in Shau Kei Wan, built in 1905. The deity’s cult comes from Huizhou, in Guangdong Province, migrants from which established both temples in Hong Kong (Siu 1987, 278–79). The deity is represented as a young boy, because he is said to have had supernatural powers of curing the sick and controlling the weather from the age of twelve (CTC 2012).

**THE HAPPY VALLEY PROCESSION**

The Tam Kung Temple in Happy Valley is a fine-looking temple but has a simple procession. The temple is also dedicated to Bak Dai (Ruler of the North 北帝) and holds a procession for him in even-numbered years and for Tam Kung in odd-numbered years. The temple is on a rock ledge and is reached by going up several staircases. It is surrounded by the high-rise apartment buildings of Happy Valley.

This temple’s festival is quite simple, even impoverished. The one I attended in 2013 involved a brief ceremony at which a master of ceremonies welcomed fifteen honored guests—local political, government, and police figures—who had assembled in the
courtyard of the temple for the launch of the procession. Many did not know one another, so they had exchanged name cards as they gathered and put on their corsages with name tags. Clearly, this was not a community reunion but a more urban opportunity for networking. The MC, on the other hand, was the owner of a fruit store in the Happy Valley market street and an informal community leader.

The procession route took the god through the main part of the Happy Valley business district. On two-way streets, traffic was stopped on only one side. There were many police officers involved, seeming to outnumber the eighty or so participants in the procession. A dozen flag bearers led the procession, followed by the sedan chair carrying the gods, two boys (including an infant carried by his mother in a modern baby carrier), and then the worshippers, among whom were two lion dancing teams. None of the guests joined the procession; most left as it started, perhaps because it was drizzling. The procession moved steadily, without stopping. Only the lions paused to perform hurriedly at three businesses (including the MC’s fruit store), grabbing suspended lettuce to represent good business in an abbreviated lion dance. The police allowed the procession on the condition that it not stop, and indeed it went on as the lions performed; they ran to catch up later. But since such lion dances are an important part of urban processions, the lions returned to the business area after the procession had ended and the performers had eaten lunch, to bring luck to other businesses and to collect their red packets of money. The procession lasted thirty-four minutes.

Several features stood out in this procession, in addition to its brevity, to make it seem impoverished in comparison with others. As previously mentioned, only about eighty people (of a Chinese population of 11,183 in Happy Valley [Population Census Office 2012]) were part of the procession. Also surprising was the utter disinterest of nearly every spectator and shop along the route. There were almost no residents or businesses with altars prepared or incense burning as the procession passed. The people who saw the procession had looks of bemusement or disdain or just ignored it.

Of course, the view of participants was different. They were old Happy Valley families. My assistant and I interviewed a woman who was a fifth-generation resident. She noted that many who move out of the neighborhood come back for the festival. Its leaders are well-known local shop owners and members of the local neighborhood association (kai fong). She is the wife of a shopkeeper, and for her, the temple and procession are religiously meaningful. She attributed her family’s safe and harmonious life to the protection of the pusa, her term for the gods of the temple. But for the vast majority of Happy Valley residents, the festival is a nonevent. Most did not grow up there, and they consider Happy Valley just where they live, not part of their identity. Another resident whom I interviewed lives in the high rise next to the temple. He is a retired businessman who does qigong exercises and consults a neighborhood Chinese doctor for most ailments. He grew up in Happy Valley. But he has no interest in the Tam Kung Temple or its procession and knows nothing about them.

Festivals usually have operas. This temple at one time sponsored nine operas, but now it has only three, because, we were told, very few people attend. They are held not
outdoors (there is not enough space at the temple, and they would be a nuisance in Happy Valley) but in Leighton Hill Community Hall, which is not very close but is within walking distance.

The day after the procession (the third day of the third lunar month), opera actors performed a ceremony known as the Eight Immortals Offer Wishes for a Long Life at the temple at noon. A Daoist priest (lamolo) presided over a ritual of thanks to both of the temple’s deities. Only fourteen core members were present; they were busy preparing gifts and items for the evening auction that serves as the festival’s primary fund raiser. Items like a red ribbon and ginger (both of which had been carried in the sedan chair), lanterns, and a paper dragon, each with a lucky association, are auctioned to raise funds for the festival. Someone who wishes to have a child would bid on the ginger, for example. The auction takes place in a restaurant and so is not open to the public.

Since the kai fong runs the festival, funds are limited. Still, it is very meaningful for some residents, particularly those engaged in small, neighborhood retail businesses. Several people told us that the Tam Kung procession in Shau Kei Wan is more elaborate. They noted that it receives government money and is worth seeing.

**THE SHAU KEI WAN PROCESSION**

The Tam Kung procession in Shau Kei Wan was indeed quite different from that of the Tam Kung Temple in Wong Nai Chung; it was more elaborate, had more participants, and involved much more of the community. The Shau Kei Wan temple is large and sits fifty meters from the water, with an open plaza in front. At the end of the plaza was erected an opera shed, where the operas for the festival were held.

The festival is held on Tam Kung’s feast day, the eighth of the fourth lunar month (which was May 17 in 2013). That is a public holiday in Hong Kong, Buddha’s Birthday, which replaced the British queen’s birthday after 1997. Buddhism has been gradually supplanting the Church of England as the religion of the elite in Hong Kong. Tam Kung is a Daoist deity, but in Chinese folk religion, the distinction between Daoism and Buddhism is of minor importance for most people. The coincidence of Tam Kung’s birthday with a government holiday made it easier for many to participate in the festival.

The festival has government support from the Eastern District Council but is primarily funded through local donations and is locally managed. The temple belongs to the Chinese Temples Committee (discussed below), but neighborhood groups are very much involved in running the festival. One way this is expressed is in the lotus ceremony held in front of the temple at eleven o’clock the night before the procession. In 2013, organizers and other members of the public first helped light three giant incense sticks (頭注香) using blowtorches at the ends of poles. Then people dressed as the Eight Immortals assembled at the door of the temple for the ritual of celebrating longevity (黃壽儀式), at which “magic lamps of blessings” (福壽神燈) were passed out to festival volunteers, neighborhood elders, and the temple’s management committee members who run the
festival. All of this was done in the open, with an MC calling out the names of the lamp recipients in front of several hundred spectators.

The next day, the procession began shortly after 9:00 a.m. The route goes down the market street of the old town, for a distance of only six hundred meters. In contrast to the Happy Valley procession, the one here is made up of members of forty-two visiting temples and associations, each of which is visiting this Tam Kung temple to show respect by performing in front of it. The performance involves the dragon or the lion dance in the plaza in front of the temple and a ritual of bowing to Tam Kung from the doorway (拜一拜), which means presenting the visiting palanquin three times. The troupes perform along the procession route, but mostly they just wait their turn as each troupe in front of them performs for its allotted ten minutes in front of the temple. Strict police crowd control measures make it difficult to see the performances at the temple; spectators and worshippers are shooed through, to accommodate the maximum number of worshippers who wish to visit the temple. Heavy police presence for crowd control and to prevent any violence between troupes is also notable.

Traditional Chinese temple processions involved deities in palanquins accompanied by a troupe of performers. The Shau Kei Wan procession followed this pattern. The groups (and deities) were of three types: temple and religious groups (one from Shau Kei Wan and three from elsewhere in Hong Kong), local organizations (e.g., trade associations, of which there were six), and martial arts clubs (of which there were thirty-two). The martial arts clubs perform the dragon or the lion dance to display their prowess. They have a variety of names, from tong (堂), or “hall,” to athletic club (體育會), martial arts club (武術總會), alumni association (同學會), and fa pau ui (花炮會, literally “fireworks association”). These are specifically urban groupings, based on voluntary relationships, specifically apprenticeships and relationships to masters, that did not exist in rural areas, where the village was the unit of religious groups in processions.

FA PAU

The fa pau ui is a Cantonese institution. The term refers to both an individual association and a group of associations that come together for temple festivals. In the past, a fa pau ui represented villages or neighborhoods but could also be organized by voluntary associations. Each one organized a troupe of lion or dragon dancers to perform in the annual temple festival procession. They also competed for elaborate decorative wreaths known as fa pau (花炮, literally “flower cannon”), which were redistributed at the end of each festival. The fa pau are three to nine meters in height and made of brightly colored paper and papier-mâché figurines over a light bamboo frame. A box in the lower part holds a statue of a god, making the fa pau a shrine; that means these deities are being brought on procession when they are in the fa pau and must be cared for over the year between festivals.

The fa pau represent luck and fortune, and in the past they were distributed by shooting numbered coins or dowels into the air over a crowd, so that whoever was able to catch
(and hold on to) a marker won the fa pau with that number for his village. Today, few temples have preserved the competitive fa pau ui system, and nearly all that do use a lottery to distribute them. Some fa pau are considered especially lucky. The villagers who won a fa pau would bring it back to their village, where it would be disassembled and its components (referred to as sacred objects) auctioned off to residents and guests: red sashes, representing realizing one’s ambitions and seen as good luck for families building or buying a new home; ginger, desirable for families seeking to give birth; sailing ships, meaning smooth sailing in life. The money thus raised would be used to pay for a new fa pau the following year. It would be taken on procession and donated to the temple for redistribution. Thus the fa pau continued to circulate within the group of fa pau ui that celebrated a certain god’s festival (see also Watson 1996; Liu 2000: 79–98; Liu 2003, 381).

The fa pau ui system has ended at many temples for a variety of reasons. First, the competition for the numbers generated intense hostility among martial arts schools, and injuries and fights were almost inevitable. One master at a martial arts school told my assistant in an interview in August 2013 that when the police began to be involved in regulating traditional festivals in the 1970s, it was an easy decision, for safety and public order, to stop the competition for fa pau. In addition, he argued that the idea of celebrating the deity’s birthday has changed. The government, organizers, and participants think these festivals should be happy and harmonious, something that people can celebrate together, not a competition among different groups. Violent competition and injuries seem to contradict a festive atmosphere, so the fa pau competition has lost its popularity in recent years.

Thus, in Shau Kei Wan no redistribution of fa pau occurs between groups. Some carry a fa pau as they proceed through the street and afterward bring it back to their association banquet for the distribution of sacred parts to members. Having a large fa pau is a sign of prestige (because it is expensive), but it does not represent the redistribution of luck. Interestingly, some of the martial arts groups still call themselves fa pau ui, even though they are no longer part of a larger fa pau collective.

NONTRADITIONAL PERFORMANCE TRoupES

The Shau Kei Wan procession thus is more elaborate and involves many more groups than that of Happy Valley, and the Hong Kong government in fact promotes it as a traditional cultural event (more on this below). But it has adapted to modernity in many ways. Most notably, the procession, like all processions in urban Hong Kong, has no firecrackers or aerial fireworks, which have been banned since the 1960s. The performance troupes are all from voluntary associations, not neighborhood groups organized just for the procession. The number of groups has grown over the years, and now most are no longer local but instead amateur groups from outside the district. These add color to the procession but make it less an expression of local identity and dilute the religious content, since most do not consider the host temple’s god to be their patron deity.
Among the additional troupes performing in the procession was a secondary school marching band behind the banner of Man Kiu College but also including students from Heung Tao College (a famous leftist, or “patriotic,” pro–Communist Party school). It was invited to participate starting in 2012, to make the procession more “exciting,” according to the head of Man Kiu College’s Music Department. The school views this procession as merely a musical event and seeks to downplay its religious meaning. The head of the Music Department also said that the school and the band have no religious or political position, even though it has performed at government and pro-establishment events like July 1 ceremonies celebrating the 1997 handover, and in 2013 it performed at an event timed to coincide (and compete) with a pro-democracy protest march held on the same day. During the procession, the band played its usual repertoire of classic marching band tunes. It played “When the Saints Go Marching In” while passing the front of the temple.

Another nontraditional performance troupe was provided by the Tung Cheng Yuen Buddhist Association, which is based forty-four kilometers away, in Tuen Mun. This religious organization provided more than thirty small floats carrying statues of deities two to three meters in height, on wheeled carts that were pushed down the street by one or two persons. The troupe also included children dressed as characters from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West* and as the monk Jigong, and adults dressed in opera costumes.

An in-line-skating school based in Shau Kei Wan joined the procession, with twelve youths on skates carrying dragons on poles. Eight carried a golden dragon, and two pairs of younger children each carried a smaller dragon. This modern addition to the procession generated a great deal of interest, both because of the skates and because the performers were children.

The first troupe to pass by the temple was of children from the Ching Chung Hing Tung Kindergarten, dressed in traditional fisherfolk costumes and holding small fishing poles with a cardboard fish on the end of the line. Because they were children, they were allowed to go first in the procession. The organizers saw this troupe as important because they represent the future of society, and so were happy to have them in the procession. The chair of the organizing committee told my assistant in an interview on July 23, 2013, that they thought it was important that new blood is joining Tam Kung’s birthday procession, which symbolizes the local culture.

**FIRE DRAGON**

**TAI HANG**

Perhaps the most famous religious procession on Hong Kong Island is that of the fire dragon of Tai Hang. This procession involves carrying a long dragon through the Tai Hang neighborhood on three consecutive days during the Mid-Autumn Festival. The dragon head is made of rattan wrapped in pearl straw, with metal teeth and electric lights
for the eyes. The body is a sixty-seven-meter-long rope, about fifteen centimeters in diameter, with a hemp center wrapped in pearl straw. Thirty-two poles carried by neighborhood men hold it aloft. Thousands of lit incense sticks are inserted into both the head and the rope, which three hundred participants carry in shifts through the streets of Tai Hang. The procession takes place in the evening, when the incense’s glow can be seen. The dragon is led by two “pearls,” which are pomelos on poles with numerous sticks of incense inserted. When they are twirled, the light of the incense makes them look like shining pearls. The tail is also elaborate and is wagged forcefully side to side by the carriers. Two small fish lanterns at the end of long, flexible poles follow the tail, at which they nibble. When the two pearls, the head, the tail, and the fish move in harmony, the effect is to make the dragon come alive.

The fire dragon procession is said to have begun as a healing rite in 1880 to end an attack of the plague, and it was continued annually to commemorate the miraculous cure. Tai Hang was then a Hakka village (the Hakka are a Chinese ethnic group from northeastern Guangdong Province with a distinct language and customs). The procession of the dragon is intended to rid Tai Hang of uncleanness and evil spirits, and as in many cleansing ceremonies, the head of the dragon is thrown into the harbor at Causeway Bay at the end of the ceremony. Some residents continue to believe in the dragon’s magical healing power. Yuen Kwai-sum, who was fifty-five in 2012 and has carried the dragon head for two decades, said, “During Sars, I kid you not, after we sent nine fire dragons out to the different districts—Sars was gone. . . . Keep a strand of the dragon’s beard on you for one year, and no illnesses can touch you” (Cheng 2011).

With the increase in interest in heritage and Chinese traditions, the crowd of viewers has gotten much larger over the past two decades. Whereas it was possible to observe the fire dragon procession quite easily in the late 1990s, it was so crowded in September 2013 that, with police measures to keep people from overcrowding the narrow streets and getting hurt, most people could get only a brief glimpse of the dragon. At the same time, it has become increasingly difficult to recruit volunteers and to raise funds in the neighborhood as older buildings have been replaced by high-rise complexes. Authorities in Beijing recognized the procession in 2010 as one of four examples of “intangible cultural heritage” in Hong Kong, leading many to hope that the festival can be rejuvenated and saved. It has also received HK$1.3 million from the Hong Kong Jockey Club as part of its support for “intangible cultural heritage” (Hong Kong Jockey Club 2013).

POK FU LAM

Pok Fu Lam village also has a dancing fire dragon tradition. It is slightly different from that of Tai Hang: villagers were free to make their own dragons, which they carried around the village while collecting small donations. In the 1970s, apparently because of conflicts between dragon troupes, the dancing dragons were discontinued (Wang 2013), but a village leader revived them in 1997, the year of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty.
The procession has grown in popularity. Starting in 2010, organizers were able to obtain government funding in the form of a Southern District Council grant for HK$350,000, as the application put it, “promote creative design in the district and continued transmission of the unique Mid-Autumn Festival Dancing Fire Dragon Culture” (Southern District Council 2010). They also hired a documentary film crew to make a movie about the fire dragon, to inform more people about it.

The Pok Fu Lam fire dragon is not as well known as the Tai Hang fire dragon, but it is growing in visibility. Ng Kwong-nam, the leader of the Pok Fu Lam fire dragon dance group, is upset that his village’s fire dragon is overlooked and not as well known as the Tai Hang fire dragon, but he admits that the “fire dragon dance has seen more glorious days.” He also notes that “kids in our village grew up with the fire dragon tradition, so they may not find it as interesting. So it is mostly outsiders who find it fascinating” (Bok 2012). Indeed, the fire dragon has been attracting many tourists in recent years, especially since it began receiving funding from the district council.

THE HISTORICAL DECLINE OF PROCESSIONS

Processions and other religious festivals have faced many obstacles in Hong Kong. Going back to at least the 1920s, popular religion was under assault and processions increasingly constrained. The impoverished processions we see in Hong Kong, especially in Happy Valley, are the result of many factors that have only recently begun to be reversed.

Chinese elite hostility toward popular religion can be traced back to the Wuxu Reforms of 1898 (Goossaert 2006) and became mainstream with the May Fourth Movement in 1919 (Cohen 1991, 127; Duara 1995, 90–94). Anti-imperialist and political demands created a cultural movement to jettison tradition and promote “science and democracy” to strengthen the nation.

THE CHINESE TEMPLES COMMITTEE

Both of the Tam Kung temples belong to the Chinese Temples Committee, a semigovernmental body that manages twenty-four temples in the Special Administrative Region, including many of its largest and most famous temples. The colonial government established the committee in 1928 under pressure from Hong Kong’s Chinese elites. The Chinese Temples Ordinance’s title states its purpose: “To suppress and prevent abuses in the management of Chinese temples and in the administration of the funds of Chinese temples” (Hong Kong Government 1997). The first report of the committee’s chair, R. A. C. North, who chaired the committee in his role as secretary for Chinese affairs, stated that

the main objects of the Ordinance are:—(a) to prevent the exploitation of the ignorant by charlatans; (b) to recover for the benefit of the community the control over public temples
which have been slipping into private hands; and (c) to prevent for the future the establishment of temples as purely business speculations. Except in the case of a few exempted temples, the revenues, funds, investments and properties of all Chinese temples are brought under the control of a Chinese Temples Committee; any surplus revenues remaining after providing for due observance of the customary ceremonies and the maintenance of the temple buildings and temple properties shall be applied for the purposes of Chinese charities in the Colony generally (General Chinese Charities Fund). (Administrative Reports for the Year 1928, appendix C, 7)

The law required all temples to register with the committee and to list their funds and how their revenues were used. Temples deemed to be run for profit could be confiscated. Of the almost two hundred registered temples, twenty-eight were closed for being “purely business speculations,” because they were not in detached buildings (Lang and Ragvald 1993, 45; Administrative Reports for the Year 1928, appendix C, 7). The assumption was that a true temple had to have its own building; those run out of private homes were viewed as commercial enterprises. The committee took over ten other temples.

Lang and Ragvald note that “in some colonial regimes, such an act would have provoked instant rebellion. The key fact is that the government had the full support of the Chinese elite for this legislation, and indeed, it appears the Chinese elite had prompted it” (1993, 45). Indeed, the colonial report for 1928 says the legislation “was a private bill introduced by the two Chinese members of the Legislative Council, and it was put forward on the strong recommendation and urgent request of the leaders of the Chinese community” (Hong Kong: Report for 1928, 30–31). The Chinese Temples Committee had seven members, all prominent in the Chinese community except for the chair, who was British. Thus, the law stemmed from elite concerns about superstition, deception, and pseudoreligion.

This ordinance was passed in the period of the Northern Expedition, when the post–May Fourth Movement ideology of antitraditionalism held full sway. The Nationalists (KMT) had “launched a vigorous ‘antireligion’ and ‘antisupernatural’ (most radical nationalists refused to distinguish between the two) drive in Guangdong and the lower Yangzi provinces” (Duara 1995, 99) and argued against waste and frivolous spending. Conservatives might not have been as antireligious, but they sought the revitalization of China through Confucian abstemiousness. And not all intellectuals were hostile to traditional religion; the Tung Wah Group held Confucius’s birthday ceremonies in the Man Mo Temple. The Chinese were not a unified group, but most Chinese intellectuals accepted the predominant view that superstition and money-making cults needed to be stamped out. The report of the secretary for Chinese affairs and other sources (see, e.g., Welch 1961, 105–6) suggest that this new law was passed in response to a rise in religious charlatans and fraud, but it is more likely that such “fraud” had been long-standing and that it was elite concern over this—and the desire to stamp it out—that was new.

This antireligion movement was not peculiar to Hong Kong but on the contrary was linked to movements in the rest of China (Duara 1995, 95–110; Nedostup 2009). Since
the end of the nineteenth century, temples had been converted into public buildings throughout China (Duara 1988). The colonial report *Hong Kong: Report for 1928* (31–32) notes that the attempt to control Chinese temples was not entirely new, though the mechanism of the committee was. The Man Mo Temple had already been successfully run by the Tung Wah Hospital since 1908. Members of Hong Kong’s Chinese elite made up the board of this hospital (Sinn 2003). It was a primary beneficiary of the new law, which transferred funds previously controlled by temples to causes backed by an elite charity. This was another reason for support from the Tung Wah Hospital board and other elites (Lang and Ragvald 1993, 47).

The colonial report for 1928 claims that the Chinese Temples Ordinance “does not interfere in any way with genuine Chinese religion” (*Hong Kong: Report for 1928*, 31). What influence did the Chinese Temples Committee really have on popular religion in Hong Kong?

Hong Kong under colonial rule maintained a congruence of interests among the British colonial administrators, the business elite, and the Chinese elite. British concerns for order and about any potential for religion-led resistance overlapped with Chinese nationalism and the elite’s embarrassment over tradition and “superstition.” We need not exaggerate the degree of cohesion or coherence in their views, but these groups could be united over specific issues, such as control of religion.

Control was, and still is, central to the mission of the Chinese Temples Committee. In an interview in 1995, a top administrator stated unapologetically that “a big crowd should be under strict control.” He said that the goal is to keep the traditions and to keep the temples running smoothly. This view of tradition freezes practices and prevents their adaptation to changing times and needs; it creates a moribund tradition. The administrator agreed that religious belief had no bearing on the membership of the committee, except that since the 1970s representatives of the Buddhist and Taoist Associations have also served on it. These two organizations, however, compete directly with popular temples for worshippers and funds, giving their representatives on the committee clear conflict s of interest. These associations’ interest in controlling popular temples adds to the committee’s tendency to undermine popular religion.

The committee has influenced popular religion by draining temples of funds necessary to keep them growing and lively. The ordinance that established it stated that revenues “are to be applied in the first instance to the maintenance of the temple properties and the due observance of the customary ceremonies” and that any surplus was to be sent to the Chinese Temples Committee charity fund (*Hong Kong: Report for 1928*, 31). Elite notions of what were “customary ceremonies” prevailed, and any aging temple would be reconstructed only at the same scale and in the same style.

The power of the committee to take over temples prevented most of those in Hong Kong from expanding. The one that has thrived is, significantly, not directly controlled by the Chinese Temples Committee. This is the Wong Tai Sin Temple, the largest and most successful folk religion temple in Hong Kong (Lang and Ragvald 1993, 48).
By carefully and skillfully avoiding the control of the Chinese Temples Committee but not challenging it and even supporting its charity fund, the Wong Tai Sin Temple has been able to remain independent and to flourish. None of the temples managed by the Tung Wah Group or the Chinese Temples Committee has so flourished. As a result, some young people make a distinction between “traditional temples,” like Tin Hau temples, and what they call “modern temples,” such as Wong Tai Sin and the Ching Chung Koon Monastery (another independent Daoist temple), a spurious distinction in religious terms but very real and perceptive in terms of the liveliness of the temples.

Officials have admitted that the ordinance is out of date and not being fully enforced. It infringes on freedom of religion and on property rights, and many feel it does not fit contemporary society. The government has failed to put forward any revisions (Ming Pao 2010). Yet it is not its current application but its historical effect that is important for us: the Chinese Temples Committee Ordinance has suppressed processions and most other public rituals at temples for most of the twentieth century.

REDEVELOPMENT

Redevelopment has been a major force undermining traditional festivals. Only 7 percent of Hong Kong’s land is residential, and 40 percent is country parks. Residential areas are densely built up, and many of the older low-rise edifices have been torn down to build high-rise apartment towers. The high-rises bring in many people who have no connection to the local community and its temples and who do not feel they are part of the traditional community. In most cases, new towns and estates did not make provisions for temples when they were built. Developers who build forty-story towers with a podium at the ground level replace ground-level shops and vibrant street life with long concrete walls (Jenkins 2012). Redevelopment has also removed open spaces used for festivals and even temples, as happened to the temple and festival site in Sau Mau Ping, Kowloon.

In addition, it is difficult for festival organizers to collect donations from the community’s families, since they can no longer go door to door. Buildings have security barring the entry of outsiders, and most residents nowadays do not know the festival organizers personally. Outside funds have become essential for holding a festival; in 2012, 77 percent of the cost of the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Festival came from government and other outside sources.

Festival organizers also find it difficult to recruit participants. The low birthrate, lack of sense of belonging to a community, and lack of experience in physical labor mean that few young people are willing to participate. Work in the festival, especially carrying signs or sedan chairs, can be heavy, made more unpleasant by heat, possibly rain, and long hours. In the past, a few dollars in a red packet were enough to bring out young men, but as one organizer noted, “Nowadays, even if you give the kids HK$10 or HK$20, they are not willing to participate” (Chen 2013).
POLICE

Hong Kong police have considerable discretion in whether to allow any processions. The opening paragraph of the form seeking police approval for processions states that the commissioner is allowed “to exercise his discretion to impose conditions upon any public procession notified in the interests of public safety and public order.” In the past, the police have set restrictions that undermined the meaning, integrity, symbolism, and fun of the processions, as we saw in the Happy Valley case. James Hayes (1987, 286–87) notes that before about 1962, lion dance teams from elsewhere entered neighborhoods during festivals and the Chinese New Year to compete with local troupes for packets of lucky money hung above the doors of neighborhood shops. This created great excitement but also squabbles between teams. Police prohibited lion dancers from going around neighborhood streets from about 1962. They have many ways to make religious processions difficult or restrict them to the point that they lose their attraction.

RELIGION AS HERITAGE

Throughout most of the twentieth century, popular religion in Hong Kong was constrained by government and police actions and therefore atrophied. Nearly all temples were preserved in their architecture, and many worshippers have continued to visit them for family rituals, but community rituals declined as processions were constrained, and the neighborhood role of temples weakened or disappeared. The modernist elites could claim they were preserving the temples, but they only preserved the buildings as physical manifestations of Chinese tradition, while their controls diminished temples’ religious symbolism and roles as foci of their neighborhood communities. Even as buildings, temples were frozen in size and style and were not able to expand or adapt to the growth of Hong Kong.

Temples have been preserved as heritage more than as religious sites. For example, when the village of Tung Chung was moved to allow the construction of Hong Kong’s new Chek Lap Kok airport, its Tin Hau temple was relocated to Tung Chung New Town. The new temple was built at the same small size as the original rather than larger and with more elaborate decoration, as would befit the wealthier times and community and the tens of thousands of new residents who moved to the new town (Tam and Yip 2005). In contrast, temples in Taiwan, for example, have continued to be symbols of the community. Their deities are brought out in demonstrations to represent the community (Weller 1999, 116–18). Competition among villages and towns there has assured that all temples have been rebuilt larger and with more elaborate (even gaudy) decorations.

The Pok Fu Lam fire dragon procession, as noted above, restarted only in 1997, after a more than twenty-year hiatus. Attitudes toward such processions have changed, so that instead of anachronistic, superstitious, and backward, they are viewed as a valuable cultural tradition, as heritage. Because the Pok Fu Lam fire dragon is now considered
heritage, it has been possible to revive a part of the ritual that was long suspended. Traditionally, the dragons were brought to Waterfall Bay, where they were tossed in the water. This symbolized the dragon returning to the sea (龍歸大海). This is a common ritual in ceremonies that seek to purge a community of evil, with a boat or animal being used as a scapegoat to carry away trouble and bad luck. After the construction of the Wah Fu Estate (華富邨), shortly after 1967, permission to pass through was necessary to continue the tradition, but it was not given. This part of the ritual was therefore canceled, undermining the integrity and symbolic meaning of the procession and contributing to its suspension in the 1970s. In 2013, however, the procession was allowed to return to its original route, and the dragon went down Pok Fu Lam Road, through Wah Fu Estate, and on to Waterfall Bay (Wang 2013). This shows the change in attitudes toward processions; what was seen as old-fashioned, superstitious nuisance is now heritage.

Also because the fire dragon is now viewed as valuable heritage, organizers have been able to get financial support from the Southern District Council. While elites and the government have tried to tamp down religiosity and public processions in the past, now they are promoting religious processions, in the guise of heritage. Indeed, the “work targets” of the Community Affairs and Tourism Development Committee of the Southern District Council listed the fire dragon dance as a way to brand the Southern District, in the category of “Regular events in promotion of tourism and leisure” (Southern District Council 2012).

New processions are even being created. In Aberdeen, there is now a Sea and Land Temple Procession, sponsored by the Southern District Council and the Chinese Temples Committee. As one member of the committee told a reporter, “We hope the procession can promote Chinese culture and strengthen community solidarity” (Hong Kong Commercial Daily 2010). After almost a century of being seen as backward tradition and with the potential for disorder, processions are now viewed as Chinese heritage and socially (and politically) useful.

In many of the processions, the hand of the government and pro-government groups in promoting “traditional Chinese culture” can be seen. In addition to the funds that the Shau Kei Wan Tam Kung temple received, as discussed above, the Hong Kong Bauhinia Youth Association (紫荆青年會) provided it with volunteers to assist with the procession. This is a pro-government voluntary association with no religious content, but several dozen members helped with the organization at the temple in the morning, all wearing turquoise polo shirts and “Hong Kong is Home” buttons. The Tung Cheng Yuen Buddhist Association, which provided more than thirty floats with statues of religious and historical figures, is also strongly pro-government.5

LOCAL HERITAGE BECOMES HONG KONG HERITAGE

Fire dragons are not common in Hong Kong (there are only two examples), and there seem to be few in the rest of Guangdong, though there may have been more in the past.
For the neighborhoods of Tai Hang and Pok Fu Lam, therefore, the fire dragon procession is a symbol of the community’s history and uniqueness. In both cases, the fire dragon originated in the late nineteenth century in response to plagues. Both communities were originally Hakka, and though they have acculturated and become Hong Kong Cantonese, the ritual carries the memory of ethnic difference.

In recent years, some have viewed these unusual processions as symbols of a larger tradition and heritage. The idea of “local” can include the village, the neighborhood, all of Hong Kong, or Cantonese culture more broadly. Thus, processions once celebrated in a neighborhood or village community as symbols of their identity and to promote solidarity can today represent a larger community of Hong Kong, or the even broader “Chinese culture.” This shift from a neighborhood to a Hong Kong identity is made explicit in “Hong Kong Our Home,” a government-led campaign to promote social cohesion and solidarity. The “HK Our Home” website promotes the Tai Hang fire dragon procession with the statement “Being one of the four items successfully inscribed onto the third national list of intangible cultural heritage, this event is an important heritage item of Hong Kong people” (HK Our Home 2013). The government PR campaign justifies the importance of the fire dragon procession with its inclusion in a national list of intangible cultural heritage and states that it is important for all “Hong Kong people,” when in fact it was previously important only for Tai Hang residents and of little meaning to other Hong Kong residents (not to mention that mainland Chinese authorities would have regarded it as “feudal superstition”; see Anagnost 1987; Feuchtwang 1989).

The Tai Hang fire dragon procession has always been a neighborhood event. Now that there is more interest in heritage, the fire dragon is brought out of the neighborhood so more spectators can enjoy it. On the evening of the 2013 Mid-Autumn Festival, the fire dragon extended its procession into Victoria Park, where the government has organized the Mid-Autumn Lantern Carnival (を中心) in recent years. The government promoted the procession as “Chinese traditional culture” and presented it alongside a Sichuan arts troupe, supported by the “Office for Cultural Affairs with Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan regions of the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China,” that performed “ethnic songs and dance, acrobatics and Chinese folk craft” (LCSD 2013). This was the first time that the Tai Hang fire dragon left its neighborhood and processed through Victoria Park. In crossing the road to enter the park, it also left behind its meaning as a neighborhood cleansing ritual and became “Hong Kong heritage” or even “Chinese heritage.”

A similar shift is happening with Tam Kung. The Hong Kong Tourism Board claims that “the worship of this deity is unique to Hong Kong” (HKTB 2013). Since his cult comes from Huizhou, in Guangdong Province, this is unlikely to have been true before the destruction of temples on the mainland (and today there are still Tam Kung temples in Macau, as well as on Hengqin Island in Zhuhai and in Dongguan on the mainland, plus the ancestral temple in Jiulongfeng, near Huizhou). Part of the confusion stems from the fact that the deity originates in Jiulongfeng, Nine Dragons Mountain, which
is easily confused with Hong Kong’s Kowloon (Nine dragons) (Siu 1987). Indeed, the Hong Kong communities that worship Tam Kung were originally from Huizhou. Their worship of the deity was a marker of their outside origins. It is therefore especially notable that this ethnic cult is now presented as an example of traditional Hong Kong and Chinese culture, thus erasing the cultural differences that the processions once represented.

UNESCO recognition of the Tai Hang fire dragon as intangible cultural heritage has encouraged some to participate in the procession for the first time. One new participant was Andy Ng Yan-lai, a lifelong resident of Tai Hang, who said, “It is no longer just the culture of this area or of Hong Kong, but it’s China’s culture” (Cheng 2011). So far, these different interpretations of the Tai Hang fire dragon (as neighborhood, Hong Kong, or pan-Chinese heritage) have not come into conflict. Like many useful political rituals and symbols (Kertzer 1988, 57–76), the fire dragon procession can be interpreted in multiple ways by different spectators and participants.

The Shau Kei Wan Tam Kung procession is also part of the Hong Kong Tourism Board’s “Hong Kong: Asia’s World City” campaign. In 2013, posters and a website listed the festival under the title “Hong Kong Cultural Celebrations.” The subtitle on the posters was “Chic City—Timeless Traditions.” Their text read:

One month, four festivals, hundreds of performers, thousands of years of tradition, hundreds of thousands of incense sticks, and who knows how many buns. May is a month of Chinese celebrations, when the fascinating living culture of Asia’s world city is on full display.

- Birthday of Tin Hau (2 May)
- Cheung Chau Bun Festival (14–18 May)
- Birthday of Buddha (17 May)
- Birthday of Tam Kung (17 May)

Thus, four religious festivals have been repackaged as tourist festivals, exemplars of “Chinese traditions.”

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this volume, Peter van der Veer notes that “the idea that religion can be urban, modern, innovative, and creative instead of rural, traditional, conservative, and repressive and that (if modern) it does not have to be fundamentalist (pace the University of Chicago Press’s Fundamentalism Project of the 1990s) has won ground in the past two decades.” In Hong Kong, however, religion has been deemphasized. The colonial context allowed different religions to coexist but kept religious fervor in check. Only Christianity had free play—and church groups were important in running schools and offering social services—but Christians represent only about 10 percent of the population.
A Pew Research Report says that Hong Kong is one of only “six countries [sic] where the religiously unaffiliated make up a majority of the population” (Pew Research Center 2012, 26). In Hong Kong, 56 percent of respondents identified this way. Many no doubt follow traditional folk religion but, due to the antitraditionalism discussed above, consider their practices not religion but merely customs. Nevertheless, this shows how hidden religion is in Hong Kong. Modernists objected to the crowds and chaos of religious festivals and processions, contrasting them with the presumed orderliness of modernity (they could have focused on the chaos of the market, but did not). The Chinese tradition of religious pluralism has contributed to a tolerance for other religions, but we need to keep in mind the government constraints that froze popular religion in the 1920s and gradually strangled processions and other community rituals.

Since 1997, processions have been revived as heritage. We can see that preserving tradition and encouraging Hong Kong residents to consider themselves Chinese motivate the government and many of its supporters. At the same time, groups seeking to emphasize Hong Kong’s uniqueness can also participate in and support the Tam Kung and fire dragon processions. These are multivocal symbols that everyone can support and enjoy without debating their meanings. However, despite the political content and the secular and heritage motivations of many participants, these processions still have a religious dimension that is essential to their logic. Families are now coming to see religious displays, to light incense, and to make paper offerings to deities in the temples. It remains to be seen whether the processions’ religious aspects can remain central as they change from minor neighborhood rituals into national heritage.

NOTES

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1. In Taiwan and some parts of the mainland, like Fujian, this procession is sometimes called raojing (繞境), which literally means “to go around the territory’s border,” but this term is not used in Hong Kong.

2. Man Kiu means “residents from Fujian,” but the school does not today recruit from the Fujianese community; the name alludes to its origins only. It is common in Hong Kong, following British tradition, for secondary schools to be called colleges.

3. The fire dragon is promoted on Tai Hang’s website, www.taihangfiredragon.hk/home.htm.

4. See, for instance, the example posted at www.docstoc.com/docs/158930357/STRN11000936-Organization-Yuen-Chau-Kok-Baptist-Church-Date.

5. For example, it organizes many pro-government and “pro-harmony” events, such as the November 3, 2013, procession from Victoria Park to Southorn Playground, Wanchai (which the police report called “Promotion for culture and morality 文化和道德推廣”). The group’s slogan for the procession was “Home is Hong Kong Procession and Philanthropic Action, Kindheartedness Walkathon 家是香港顏色巡遊暨慈善行, 建仁心步行籌款.”
6. Community organizers say the Tai Hang procession dates to 1880. The Pok Fu Lam procession celebrated its centenary in 2010, when the Southern District Council first provided support for it, but many believe it dates to the nineteenth century (see, e.g., Chen 2013).

7. Goossaert and Palmer (2011, 342–44) describe the trends on the mainland that have influenced the change of religious rituals and processions into “cultural heritage” in Hong Kong.

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PART 2

SPACE, SPECULATION, AND RELIGION
Contrary to its growing reputation as the most Protestant nation in Asia, South Korea has in fact maintained a remarkably long-lasting and peaceful multireligious social fabric without a dominant majority religion. According to the 2005 Korean Census, a slight majority of the national population (53.1 percent) identified themselves with a religious affiliation, and Buddhists (22.8 percent) nearly outnumbered the combined total of Protestants and Catholics (18.3 and 10.9 percent, respectively). Religious historian Donald Baker indeed contends that South Korea “enjoys one of the most complex and diverse religious cultures on the face of the globe,” including “the largest network of extant Confucian shrines of any nation and . . . a vibrant and active Buddhist community, with hundreds of major monasteries scattered in scenic mountainous regions around the peninsula.”

Inwang Mountain in central Seoul, for example, is the site of several Buddhist temples and Korea’s most famous shamanic shrine, Kuksadang, and the Seoul Metropolitan Government regularly promotes these religious sites as appealing destinations for indigenous heritage and cultural tourism. Similarly, the national government has in recent years promoted Buddhist “temple stay” programs as a tourist attraction, enticing domestic and international tourists to stay in temples to experience a “traditional monastic lifestyle” through an itinerary of vegetarian meals, scenic hiking, and meditation. Though also known for temple food, Won Buddhism—an old, indigenous religion that fuses elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—has become perhaps best known as one of the most active promoters of interreligious dialogue in contemporary Korea.
These multireligious snapshots certainly contradict any superficial description of South Korea as predominantly Protestant. In fact, the common portrayal of South Korea as Christian has much to do with distinct regional patterns that characterize the nation’s uneven and variegated geography of religion. Seoul and the surrounding Gyeonggi (Kyŏng’gi) Province are far more Christian than the rest of the country, with well over 65 percent of all religious affiliations in Gyeonggi Province attributed to Protestantism or Catholicism. In contrast, Buddhism markedly dominates the southern regions of Korea. A remarkable 67.4 percent of religiously affiliated people in Busan—Korea’s second largest city, in the southeast corner of the peninsula—identify themselves as Buddhist, while only 17.8 percent identify as Protestant and 12.8 percent as Catholic. This variegated geography of religion becomes strikingly important when we consider the extent to which Seoul operates as the nation’s capital and political, cultural, financial, and residential center. Nearly half of Korea’s population is concentrated in the Seoul Capital Area (sudokwŏn), though it covers only 12 percent of the country’s territory. Put differently, significant spatial variation and geographical differentials can be discerned in the type, location, density, and distribution of religion, and yet what goes on in Seoul often dominates the national picture.

It is in the broad context of these complex multireligious geographies that this chapter considers the urban political ecology of religion in Seoul. As Seoul’s population density and political gravity amplify and project the city’s particularities as though they represented national characteristics, Christianity has arguably become the most recognizable face of religious life in Korea and beyond. The visible growth of Protestantism, particularly in urban centers like Seoul, has attracted a great deal of theological exposition and scholarly inquiry, but the focus remains somewhat narrowly cast on the growth of urban megachurches without considering the extent to which they interact with other sociospatial processes and contentious politics. Megachurch prominence has complex histories. This is not to deny that some of the world’s largest Protestant mega-megachurches are in fact located in the city of Seoul, competing with corporate towers and apartment high-rises in shaping the city’s skyline. Seoul’s nighttime cityscape famously features a stunning sea of red neon crosses, astonishing visitors and inspiring believers who interpret their numerousness as a sign of the successful proliferation of Christianity. But if megachurches display magnificence and splendor, the countless neon crosses tell a different story, of the diffusion and saturation of religion in everyday life: small churches in rented basements and attics, sharing space with markets and bakeries and sometimes even bars and butchers in mixed residential-commercial zones. Churches are everywhere; no other religious urban form enjoys a comparable degree of prevalence in the public sphere in contemporary Korea. Across spatial scales and denominational affiliations—Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and nondenominational—Protestant churches constitute not only spectacular public displays of faith but also an extensive intimate public sphere, in which intimacy “involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in
a particular way.” Attending church and belonging to a congregation, in other words, produce “modes of attachment that make persons public and collective and that make collective scenes intimate spaces.”

The emphasis on the intimacy of the public sphere gives critical insight into the growing Protestant influence in the political sphere. The 2008 election of the former Hyundai executive and self-described born-again Evangelical President Lee Myung-bak (in office 2008–13) and the overrepresentation of self-identified Protestants in top government and business posts have spurred debates over state-religion and interreligious relations. The year 2007 had marked the centennial commemoration of the Great Pyongyang Revival of 1907, the Korean equivalent of the Great Awakening in the United States, and the political ascendancy of the then–presidential hopeful and Somang Presbyterian Church elder Lee had raised hopes of another great revival to revitalize Christianity. The place of his religious faith in political office had been broached before. In 2004, while he was the mayor of Seoul (in office 2002–6), he famously stated during an event organized by the Holy City Movement, a Christian morality program designed after C. Peter Wagner’s model of spiritual warfare evangelism, “I declare that the City of Seoul is a holy place governed by God; the citizens in Seoul are God’s people; the churches and Christians in Seoul are spiritual guards that protect the city. . . . I now dedicate Seoul to the Lord.” This statement soon became a notorious example of faith-based urban governance and Protestant political dominance. But it was only the first of several occasions when Lee publicly proclaimed his faith, and it marked the start of mounting concerns, especially from Buddhists, over neutrality, fairness, and the separation of church and state. The election of Mayor Lee as president in November 2007 was due in no small part to the enormous number of votes mobilized by Protestant megachurches in Seoul, with numerous religious-political conferences and mass prayer rallies urging Christians to support him in order to celebrate and renew the institutional vitality of Korean Christianity. This marked a new phase of resentment and contentious politics, with Protestants aligned with the ruling party and the rest, especially Buddhists, often related to the margins.

Critical historians and sociologists of religion—including In-chul Kang, Jin-ho Kim, Vladimir Tikhonov, and Mahn-Yŏl Yi—have indeed argued that Protestant growth in Korea has relied on close ties with state power, whether such an association can be characterized as reflecting an enduring faith in the so-called benevolence of American hegemony or steadfast devotion to anticommunism, developmentalism, and militarism under authoritarian rule. In recent years, Protestant social forces have injected into public discourse an ardently conservative moral campaign concerning hot-button issues such as homosexuality and abortion, often following the lead of their counterparts in the United States. Though theological and political conservatism can certainly be found in any social structure or religious organization, conservative Protestants have been especially conspicuous in their political visibility. Throughout the fall and winter of 2013, mass protests against government corruption and social injustice drew students,
activists, and unionists, as well as major representatives of socially engaged Catholic, Buddhist, and Won Buddhist clergy and lay leaders, but Protestant support came from only relatively marginal, nonmainstream ecumenical corners of an institutional landscape dominated by powerful, conservative megachurches. While the dissenting public denounced the political and electoral interference of Korea’s National Intelligence Service—formerly known as the Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA)—and called for the resignation of President Park Geun-hye (in office 2013–18) for her use of illegal surveillance and a repressive military-police intelligence apparatus, mainstream Protestant groups smeared the protesters as unpatriotic and pro–North Korea. In striking contrast to widespread concern over the deepening crisis in democracy, nearly thirteen thousand Protestant leaders and supporters organized to defend Park and counterprotested with a joint “declaration of patriotic concern” urging the public to stop “endangering national security” and instead to pray for more punishing anticommunist investigations to root out dissidents and agitators.\(^{12}\)

Though smaller and more minor groups of liberal and progressive Protestant leaders have endorsed the calls of social justice activists for strengthening democracy and expanding civil liberties, the mainstream Protestant establishment—led by megachurch pastors and represented by the national Christian Council of Korea (CCK)—is increasingly perceived as regressive in its defense of authoritarian political repression. As a theologian put it in the controversial title of his book, many believe that “megachurches must die so that Korean Christianity can live.”\(^{13}\) Cases of financial corruption, ethics scandals, and overzealous fund-raising and expansion projects in many of Seoul’s best-known megachurches have further contributed to this crisis in public opinion. In this chapter, I focus on the case of SaRang Community Church to discuss the contentious religious politics of megachurches in contemporary Korea. This involves two key moments: first, a 2007 labor dispute involving a church leader who was also a corporate business leader; and second, the 2013 grand opening of the church’s new building and the controversies surrounding its expansion and construction. By highlighting not only the successes of megachurch growth but also the tensions and political conflicts within and across the intimate yet fractured public sphere, this chapter examines the uneven urban geography of conflicting aspirations for growth and belonging.

E·LAND WORKER PROTESTS AND SARANG COMMUNITY CHURCH

In the summer of 2007, highly publicized labor protests in Seoul predominantly led by female and low-wage nonstandard workers—doing precarious, part-time, temporary, and limited-term contract work—shut down and occupied several New Core Outlet and Homever department stores, at the time subsidiary companies of E·Land Group. E·Land was not only the second largest retailer in Korea but also famous for its pride as a Christian company. The name E·Land is an abbreviation of “England,” seen in this case as a
national model of church, industry, and civility. Further revealing the founder’s affinity with European and American Christianity, two of E·Land’s most popular clothing brands were named after prominent American missionary families in Korea: Underwood and Hunt. According to 2006 figures posted on the company website, E·Land was a US$58 billion enterprise and the thirty-second-largest company in Korea and owned thirty-two premium large-scale discount stores, twenty-five fashion outlets, two department stores, and thirty SSMs (super supermarkets) throughout Korea.¹⁴

Summers are typically the high season for large-scale protests in South Korea, and several other high-profile campaigns were already under way in the summer of 2007. Laid-off female train attendants of the high-speed rail system Korea Train eXpress (KTX) were demanding reinstatement and improved working conditions, for instance, and women dismissed from Kiryung Electronics had started what turned out to be an epic ten-year struggle for reinstatement and labor policy change.¹⁵ Even so, when E·Land laid off more than a thousand workers a few days before a new law would have required it to convert long-term irregular workers into permanent employees, this action set off a political firestorm and launched a critical new phase of the precarious workers’ movement, involving politically moderate, middle-aged women, whom the male-centered labor union establishment had long deemed unorganizable. Nearly two hundred civic organizations joined efforts to shame and boycott E·Land, and a series of militant occupation protests and hunger strikes ensued. One worker said,

> [E·Land] would sometimes lock thirty employees in a basement room for customer service and “courtesy” training. In one extreme case, they made us stand and bow nonstop for three hours. It was so difficult that one woman nearly fainted after just ten bows. The CEO, Park Sung-su, had said he would treat his employees like family and treat them with [Christian] love, which made me wonder if he actually considered me an employee. I felt very excluded from his so-called family.¹⁶

The fact that Park was widely known to be a devout Christian made him a lightning rod for criticism. Matters were made worse when he sent out a company-wide text message urging the striking workers to “resist Satan’s temptations” by ceasing to participate in illegal strikes and accepting their duty as wage-earning servants of God. As Park famously put it, his distinctly Christian business model did not recognize labor unions because the Bible contained no references to labor unions.¹⁷ He tried to use religion to justify his management policies. The workers, many of whom also identified as Christian, countered that there are no precarious workers in the Bible, either. Members of an ad hoc group, Movement for a New Progressive Party, even staged a seminude protest outside SaRang Community Church, where Park served as an elder. They carried a giant cross and held up signs that read, “Love thy irregularly employed neighbor. Matthew 19:19.”¹⁸ This was an inspired reinterpretation of the Bible verse “Love thy neighbor.” Another ingenious banner read, “Jesus is Heaven, E·Land is Hell,” in a parody of a
The familiar refrain used by street evangelists, “Jesus is heaven, unfaithfulness is hell.” The workers, in other words, challenged corporate authority through biblical exegesis and adopted Christian messages and symbols to bolster their cause.

When allegations surfaced that Park had tithed $10 million to SaRang Community Church in 2006 alone and that his financial contributions had subsidized overseas missions and philanthropic projects, working-class cashiers who earned barely four dollars an hour contrasted his generosity at church with his anti-labor policies at work. A telling editorial cartoon portrays Park at the cross of a crucified worker who wears the ubiquitous labor union vest, praying for his company’s salvation through the workers’ termination (see figure 7.1). The devoutly Christian capitalist is portrayed as crucifying the workers for his own deliverance.

On July 20, twenty days after the protesting workers began occupying the Homever department store, more than seven thousand riot police broke down the barricades and
dragged out the two hundred or so strikers by force. The day after these E·Land workers were taken into police custody, another group of Korean Christians was catapulted into front-page headlines. Breaking news from Afghanistan reported that twenty-three short-term missionaries from a midsize suburban church just outside Seoul had been captured by the Taliban while traveling on a road south of Kabul.

An editorial cartoon cleverly captured the uncanny convergence of these two events (see figure 7.2). On the top part, a shadowy group of missionaries scurry along the horizon, carrying a cross and singing the first verse of the popular hymn “Heavenly Sunlight”: “Over the mountains, through the deep vale . . .” Watching them from a distance, a Taliban leader orders, “Kidnap them!” In the bottom panel, E·Land workers face baton-wielding police in full riot gear, one of whom is recognizable as a caricature of then-president Roh Moo-hyun (in office 2002–7). CEO Park sings from the rooftop of E·Land the second line of the hymn: “Jesus has said, ‘I’ll never forsake thee,’ / Promise divine that never can fail.” The missionaries’ aspirational project abroad is portrayed as parallel
to Christian capital’s joyful praise. While the missionaries face would-be kidnappers, E·Land workers confront brutal state violence. The cartoon’s split frame tellingly conveys the disconnect between here and there: reckless rejoicing over there, heartless profit-seeking here. The spirit of the prosperity gospel contrasts dramatically with the neoliberal specter of labor flexibility and worker repression.

The E·Land protests and these editorial cartoons reflect the mounting social indictment of the Christianity of the rich and powerful: what is the meaning of missionary service abroad when people suffer from poverty and exploitation at home, sometimes at the hands of the very people who set out to praise the gospel someplace else? Charges of hypocrisy are certainly not new. Christians and non-Christians have raised numerous concerns over the years regarding the embezzlement and corruption, despotism and moral improbity of many Protestant leaders.20 What the convergence of E·Land protests and kidnapped missionaries highlighted once again was the extent to which the prosperous megachurches like SaRang had become identified not with the suffering of low-wage workers but with the might of powerful conglomerates and political elites.

MEGACHURCH POLITICS

At a special Christmas service in 2007, E·Land workers, labor activists, and progressive clergy unfurled a banner that said, “Precarious workers of E·Land are neighbors to Korean Christianity.”21 They also issued a joint statement of prayer that read in part, “Today the world emphasizes limitless growth and corporate freedom, but this results in countless victims. We pray for a swift realization of a new social order that sincerely respects the lives and welfare of these victims.” The E·Land union set up a tent in front of SaRang Community Church to demand that Park resolve the protracted labor strike and reinstate the terminated workers. The protesters urged the members and leaders of the church to get involved in negotiating a resolution between E·Land management and the union, charging that the church was a key source and symbol of Park’s power and status. In response, the church’s head, Reverend Oh Jung Hyun, insisted that it was an apolitical organization and refused to take sides in the matter. During a Sunday sermon, Reverend Oh articulated the church’s position as creating a world in which “God’s rule of fairness and justice can flow like a river.” Criticizing this principle of neutrality and so-called noninvolvement, the E·Land union leader Kim Kyŏng-uk pointedly said, “Churches have used religion for social and political causes all this time, and it is hypocritical for them to insist on nonintervention when the issue might incriminate them.”

To be sure, religious groups have played an important role in contemporary Korea, especially in times of political tension and economic hardship. In the post–Korean War years, marked by imbricated processes of militarism, nationalism, and developmentalism, socially engaged Buddhism and the social gospel orientation of liberal and ecumenically oriented Christianity strongly inflected Korean social movements, a legacy still seen today in progressive segments of labor and peace activism. Whether opposing the
labor repression of authoritarian industrialization between the 1960s and 1980s or the market-driven policies of neoliberal democratic regimes during the 1990s and 2000s, religious leaders have advocated for workers in challenging the persistence of injustice and questioning the legitimacy of ruling authorities. Industrial and urban missions sought to transform traditional evangelism from spreading the gospel to “finding the body of Jesus Christ among the workers themselves,” and missionaries joined college students in abandoning their class privilege and choosing to work alongside workers and peasants in factories and on farms. In what was known as a “somatic identification” with the workers, Christian activists shared their “emotional and perceptual experiences of fatigue, pain and anger” and helped render visible “the brutal experiences at work that bred so much anger and resentment among Korean factory workers.”

Korean churches, especially urban Catholic parishes and liberal Protestant congregations, offered sanctuaries for fugitive pro-democracy activists and harbored labor union leaders from state repression, and in doing so they challenged the legitimizing rhetoric of undemocratic government. Socially engaged Buddhists have likewise promoted public welfare and opposed environmental destruction at the expense of development, and progressive Catholic clergy and lay practitioners remain a durable presence in many political movements today.

Activist churches with a social gospel orientation, however, were not the ones that grew large and wealthy to become megachurches like SaRang. CEOs like E·Land’s Park did not join small, activist churches. Rather, corporate executives and political elites joined state-aligned Protestant churches that were conservative in theology and ambitious in their aspirations for growth. While left-leaning ecumenical Christians joined nonmainstream oppositional churches that focused on social issues including poverty, inequality, and injustice, right-leaning churches captured the hearts and minds of the mainstream and the status quo through the gospel of prosperity. Theologically fundamentalist and politically conservative megachurches such as Yoido Full Gospel Church and Young Nak Presbyterian Church increasingly dominated the institutional landscape of Christianity in Seoul and across South Korea, and megachurch pastors have come to represent Korean Protestantism—and South Korea at large—as a model of wealth and growth.

GROWING A CHURCH IN THE CITY

E·Land CEO Park has since resigned from his position as an elder of SaRang Community Church, but the church again found itself in turmoil and the target of vocal protests in 2010. This time, the controversy surrounded Reverend Oh, who dramatically reversed the pledge of the beloved founding pastor, Han-heum Oak, to limit church growth. Reverend Oh announced that the church would begin building a new Global Ministry Centre, a 210 billion won ($186 million) construction project in one of the highest-priced areas in Seoul’s affluent Seocho District. This construction has received a great deal of media attention.
coverage since the announcement, for being permitted, first, in spite of highly restrictive zoning laws; second, under a stretch of public road; and third, with an exit of the Seocho station of the Seoul Metropolitan Subway directly in the church. No doubt such a feat would have been impossible without political influence and close ties to government agencies, especially in the Seocho District; several parliamentarians and other high-ranking officials in the national government count themselves among the members of the congregation. On November 24, 2013, SaRang Community Church opened the doors of its lavish new complex, which stands fourteen stories above ground and eight stories underground and has a six-hundred-seat chapel, a sixty-five-hundred-seat sanctuary, and a ten-thousand-seat auditorium, where attendants can watch Reverend Oh’s Sunday sermons projected on large screens.27

Tellingly, the site of the new SaRang Global Ministry Centre is near an urban squatter settlement known as Flower Village in the 1980s, which saw heated contestations between land speculators and developers on one side and low-income residents of informal settlements on the other. The City of Seoul evicted and forcibly displaced twenty-four hundred households from this settlement in 1992, insisting that its actions were to “protect the property rights of landowners, not for the purposes of public housing development.”28 None other than the former Seoul mayor and born-again Evangelical president Lee Myung-bak was one of the largest landowners in the area.

While the growth of megachurches in the 1960s had relied on a political theology that rewarded the faithful with divine blessings and state commendations, it also produced distinct institutional configurations of Korean Protestant churches. Whereas each national denomination typically dispatched ordained clergy to serve local congregations, megacongregations—more powerful than national denominations in institutional, political, and financial matters—began to act more independently in implementing strategies for growth and engaging in financial and real estate transactions on their own behalf. This pattern was visible especially among Presbyterian churches but also among Methodist and even the more centralized Episcopalian denominations. Many founding pastors of growing churches were able to maintain their leadership over several decades, often remaining de facto in power as emeritus pastors long after retirement. This pattern of strong and perpetual leadership persists to this day, not unlike in the patriarchal, family-run conglomerate chaebol or the eighteen-year regime of Park Chung Hee (1961–79) in the South or the forty-six-year reign of Kim Il Sung (1948–94) in the North.

Related to long leadership tenure is sesŏp, the controversial practice of a son inheriting his father’s position as the lead pastor of a church. In many cases, this transition involves the transfer of not only coveted leadership status but also enormous financial assets associated with the church. This practice is not unique to Korea. “Handing down leadership from founding father to son is common in the world of celebrity ministry leadership,” the New York Times reported in discussing the Crystal Cathedral in Southern California, adding that “the offspring of Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell have all inherited pieces of their fathers’ empires.”29 In Seoul, the dynastic father-
son succession has taken place in many of the best-known megachurches, including Kumnan Methodist Church, Chunggyeon Church, Gwanglim Methodist Church, and Somang Presbyterian Church. Insofar as inheritance systems are crucial opportunities for the transfer of accumulated capital—and in the case of megachurches, religious capital—cultural norms and power dynamics also shape them. The practice of leadership and property inheritance in the megachurch context serves as an important reinforcement of Korea’s power-laden social and property relations.

The Protestant penchant for real estate development and property ownership is reflected in the 2011 survey of religion conducted by the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism that shows Protestants operating 77,966 facilities nationwide. In contrast, Buddhist-run facilities were a mere third of that number, despite a comparable number of adherents, and Catholics held a meager 1,609 facilities nationwide. It is also worth noting that according to an investigative report from 2008, the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism owned land (77,980,000 square meters) that, put together, constitutes an area larger than the entire city of Seoul (60,000,552 square meters), making this order the largest landowner in South Korea, second only to the state. The estimated market value of this land exceeds 1 trillion won, or nearly $1 billion. This is not entirely surprising, given the several-centuries-long history of Buddhism in Korea, but the scale and spatial pattern of religious property holding invite further scholarly consideration of the political economy of religious capital and growth.

“If you build it, they will come” is what a church architect said during an interview—and the logic implies that if one builds a larger church, more congregants will come. Church construction is effective in mobilizing the congregation toward a common project and a concrete goal, but it remains a risky venture for congregations, mortgage lenders, and investors alike. A lender with a history of financing church development projects has stated that he has worked out a lending formula that not only considers the market value of the church building as collateral but also assesses the project’s investment worthiness based on “the size of church membership, degree of intensity of faithfulness, and the weekly volume of church donations.” It is a speculative process of investment, in other words, that combines material and ideational valuation in calculating risk and profit.

However, the fact remains that most churches do not grow into megachurches. The majority of Protestant churches in Korea are in fact small to medium in size, and nearly 80 percent of them struggle to stay afloat with fifty to two hundred members. Church failure is widespread and commonplace, as is evident in the more than a thousand churches nationwide that closed down in 2010 alone. Much of church failure can be attributed to displacement arising from redevelopment and the growth of megachurches, which lead to the consolidation of churchgoers into fewer churches. Some have provocatively described the megachurch phenomenon as leading to a “massacre of microchurches.” Similar concerns were raised with the construction of SaRang Global Ministry Centre, and church reform activists and local churches in the area formed an ad hoc
emergency committee to oppose this project, a pattern often repeated with other megachurch construction projects. The committee held a press conference in June 2011 to demand answers about the special building permits granted to SaRang, and that December, several civic organizations and 350 local residents filed a petition, which was granted, for an investigation of SaRang’s privatized use of public space. In open letters and editorials published in the media, critics of the project asked the city to clarify why exactly it had approved the SaRang construction and what it planned to do with comparable requests in the future. In June 2012, the opposition activists were elated to hear the results of the audit: the City of Seoul determined that the church construction was indeed out of legal bounds, that Seocho District had acted in violation of existing policies, and that the permission to build underneath a public road must be revoked. Seocho District, however, announced that it would not honor the city auditors’ ruling, and the SaRang church construction was carried out to completion. Revealed in the process were not only the local, urban contestations over the place of the megachurch, but also the fissures between the Seoul metropolitan government and Seocho District over their capacity to govern religious aspirations.

CONCLUSIONS

With increasing public criticism and scandals plaguing several megachurches in Seoul, theologians and church historians are questioning whether the trajectory of church growth has been ethically and theologically sound. As small-to-medium churches struggle to draw congregants in a competitive marketplace, they are calling for megachurch reform with concrete urban policy demands. One such demand is for megachurches to stop operating shuttle buses throughout the city: reformers want churchgoers to pay closer attention to their local neighborhood and attend one of the many smaller churches near their place of residence instead of a megachurch on the other side of the city. Another major focus of reform is the proliferation of satellite churches established in the city’s periphery and beyond by wealthy Seoul megachurches, following the corporate franchising model. Rather than corporate megachurches, church reformers propose a vision of urban churches that are smaller, more local, and socially responsible.

Critical church leaders have advocated for self-consciously small local churches as an oppositional antigrowth movement to counter the megachurch model. Some of this no doubt derives its message from the resurgence of the local—eat local, shop local, and now “worship local”—but the roots of locally embedded microchurches can also be traced back to the old minjung church, or Korean liberation theology, of the 1970s and 1980s. These emergent efforts that self-consciously refuse growth and resist expansion can be seen as well in similar movements throughout Asia and in North America. Opting to stay small, these microchurches—a general term that includes churchless churches without their own buildings, “organic churches” that eschew formal bureaucratic structure, underground house churches that defy government regulation and state registry,
especially in places like China, and simply small congregations—are reportedly one of the fastest growing forms of worship. They appeal precisely to people who seek the intimacy of a “spiritual family” and a very active faith, rather than those who might settle for a heavily orchestrated event on Sunday morning that “reduces them to spectators in the audience.”\(^4\) Small churches, however, face significant challenges in high-stakes redevelopment and precarious urban property regimes in places like Seoul. A great majority of small churches in Korea are renters, not property owners, and most do not survive when evicted and displaced from their community. This puts small churches in the same predicament as small businesses and working-class renters, and the issues of urban redevelopment and attendant displacement bring together struggling churches and the urban poor in demanding fairer relocation compensation and participatory urban planning.

Attention to the political economy of church growth raises important questions concerning urban studies of religion. Case studies of megachurch construction projects such as SaRang’s controversial project reveal the contested terrain of church finance, resource allocation, and public policy. They also highlight how the gospel of prosperity espoused by megachurch leaders not only operates in rhetoric but also shapes the built environment. By discussing the low-wage workers’ labor organizing at E·Land and the relationship between E·Land’s Christian corporate practices and SaRang Community Church construction, this chapter has presented low-wage work, urban poverty, and megachurch growth as key constituents of a contentious religious politics in Seoul.

NOTES

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All Korean-to-English translations are mine unless noted otherwise. I follow the McCune-Reischauer system of transliteration for most Korean personal and place-names throughout this chapter. Exceptions are in cases where nonstandard transliterations are already in circulation, for instance for well-known figures like Park Chung Hee and Kim Il Sung.


6. All statistics are from the 2005 Korean Census.


11. S. Lee, “‘God-Given’ President-Elect.”


20. See, e.g., “For God and Country: An Influential Pastor Comes under Scrutiny for His Business Dealings,” Economist, October 15, 2011, www.economist.com/node/21532340; Kwon, Uriŭi sobakk’an kkumŭl ŭngwonhaejuŏ [Please cheer for our humble dreams], 28. When the long-time dissident politician Kim Geun-tae (1947–2011), one of the most prominent democracy movement activists, died from Parkinson’s disease and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), these conditions were attributed to severe torture he had received at the hands of the then–police inspector Lee Geun-an. Convicted of torture, Lee had remained at large for nearly eleven years but in 1999 finally turned himself in. After serving seven years in prison—during which he earned a correspondence degree in theology—he was released in 2006 and ordained as a Presbyterian pastor in 2008. Following renewed public attention after Kim’s death and increasing embarrassment on the part of even the conservative Christian organizations, Lee was eventually sanctioned and stripped of his ordained status as a pastor. Hyun Cho, “Komunkisulja Lee Geun-An moksajik myŏnjik [Torture technician Lee Geun-An stripped of pastor position],” Hyushimjeong (blog), January 9, 2011, http://well.hani.co.kr/77712.


30. Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, *Han’gukŭi jong’gyo hyŏnhwang*.


39. See K. Yi, Taehyŏng kyohoega manghaeya; Gwang-eun Shin, Megachŏch’i nonbak [Refuting the megachurch] (Seoul: Jeongyeon, 2009); Son-ju Kim, Han’guk kyohoeŭi ilgop kaji choeak [The seven sins of the Korean church] (Seoul: Samin, 2009); Jin-ho Kim, “Welbing up’a wa taehyŏngkyoho—munhwajŏk sŏnjinhwa hyŏnsangūrosŏi hubaltayohŏngkyohoe [The ‘well-being right wing’ and megachurches—the late wave of megachurches as a product of cultural advancement]” (paper presented at the Han’guk Posujuŭiŭi Hyŏngsŏng’gwa Kŭrisŭdokyo P’orŏm [Formation of Korean conservatism and Christianity forum], Seoul, April 25, 2011), 11.

40. Han, “Ilbang Chŏnjaengt’ŏro.”


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Real estate in Mumbai has been the subject of much scholarship since the 1990s as the shift to more liberal government policies accelerated the drive to develop and invest in this Indian megacity. As in most other cities, these policies and their related implications did not map onto a simplified supply-demand housing market but instead were unevenly laid over a host of overlapping and interlocking housing laws and spatial distributions. While managing a dizzying array of religious and regional diversity, city officials also have to grapple with these distributions, some of which date back to the colonial period. This chapter explores the communal real estate of one of this megacity’s microcommunities and shows how the introduction and use of specific legal and municipal instruments can lead to dramatic communal and urban spatial transformations.

The Parsis (Indian Zoroastrians), for example, although a minority of fifty thousand people in a city of twelve million, are today the largest private landowners in Mumbai, through their incorporation in a governing charitable trust, the Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP). But their story begins centuries earlier, with their migration to the city and their particular ties to the British colonial government. Parsis were allowed to settle in the British fort because of their mutually beneficial trade ties to the colonizers. This access to prime real estate as early as the 1690s has resulted in the Parsi community and its later settlers being in and around this area in southern Bombay, while other native communities settled in pockets farther away.

The trustees of the BPP manage several temples, funerary grounds, schools, hospitals, and various types of housing for Parsis only. I argue in this chapter that Parsi trust
housing is a unique scape of housing in the city, one that marks a particular religious and judicial landscape, and one that has oriented Parsi communal life in Mumbai from its inception until today. While the trust dates back to the colonial period, what have radically shifted are the aspirations of this unique judicioreligious institution. Through the case of the Parsis from Bombay to Mumbai, this chapter traces the shifting structure and ethics of the communal trust and the consequences for this small community in the city.

THE PARSIS AND BOMBAY

Beginning in the tenth century, boatloads of Zoroastrian settlers, referred to as Parsis, migrated from Iran to India’s west coast to seek new opportunities and flee religious and economic persecution. The migrants were to remain exclusive per an agreement with the local ruler in Gujarat: they promised not to convert anyone and to adopt some local customs and practices. The settlers, however, also brought many cultural practices from their homeland to maintain Zoroastrian laws of purity in their new environment. Along with the keeping of the sacred fire, the funerary practice of dokhmenashini at the towers of silence is a ritual that has marked the Parsis in India since their arrival.

From about the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, Parsis in Gujarat transitioned from mostly agricultural vocations to trades like shipping and trading with local communities and colonials, making them some of the most important brokers with the East India Company. In the late 1670s, as a few Parsi merchants ventured to the new city of Bombay, they received permission to build the first towers of silence and fire temples there. Due to their early and beneficial trade ties to the British colonial authorities, many wealthy Parsi merchants were given access to prime real estate in areas like the Fort as early as the 1690s, which resulted in the Parsi community and its later settlers inhabiting this area. They began to establish powerful support networks for the increasing numbers of Parsi migrants from Gujarat. In contrast to the Parsis’ initial arrival in India, seeking refuge from Iran, the second phase of their migration, from Gujarat to Bombay, was spurred by economic opportunities coupled with the availability of ritual spaces like dakhmas in the early colonial city. Newer arrivals to the city tended to settle near older migrants to enjoy proximity to temples and access to communal living spaces.

In terms of governance, the Parsis, like other communities, formed punchayets, or committees, to adjudicate smaller claims and intracommunity disputes. The punchayet in Bombay slowly took on the role of formulating binding regulations in the spheres of religion and culture, and in 1787, the British colonial government recognized the leadership of the BPP in Bombay, the first step in its consolidation of authority over the rest of the community. A pattern was soon established of Parsi traders and businessmen acquiring masses of wealth, securing large land estates in Bombay from the British, and then donating them to the BPP to be used only in specific capacities, such as for funerary grounds or temples. Because of this unique pattern of the organization of the built environment, Parsi
immigration to Bombay followed the geography of sacred space instead of the structures being built for the needs of the community. Far from the center of priestly power and ever more desperate for space in the new city, the community began to look toward secular leaders like industrialists and philanthropists for leadership.

By the nineteenth century, many Parsis in Bombay were prominent natives in the colonial system and were heavily influenced by British models of education and law. In 1865, lay Parsis in the community even drafted a Parsi communal code that the British recognized. One British legal instrument that mapped particularly well onto existing Zoroastrian practice was the trust, a mechanism that allows property to be endowed for specific social or religious purposes beyond the inheritance practices of an individual family. The following sections detail the basic structure of the communal trust and elaborate how this foundational legal instrument has had far-reaching implications for the ways in which Parsis organize their social life in Mumbai.

THE STRUCTURE OF TRUSTS

Religious endowments, or trusts, are particular legal instruments that are initiated by a settlor, who, in establishing a deed and naming beneficiaries, attaches an obligation to movable and immovable property. Outside the extensive work on English common law, the focus of much scholarship on religious endowments in South Asia is on the Muslim waqf. The word comes from the Arabic root *waqafa*, which means “to stop,” “to hold,” or “to tie up.” A “stopped” piece of land is one held outside market realms of circulation. A waqf could be established for myriad reasons that cut across strict divisions of public and private use, familial or charitable benefit. In practice, it was often used as means of protecting an estate from confiscation by the state or disintegration due to succession under a strict interpretation of Shari’a. Once a waqf was established, it was in most cases safe from seizure by authorities, and this instrument was thus favored in times of political turmoil. In India, a waqf was often used in opposition to Muslim personal laws of succession that were codified in conjunction with colonial rule. It often countered a strict division of property, especially in the early colonial period, as the British tended to reify Islamic law and custom and enforce consistent rules on the division of property. For example, an estate owner with wives and daughters but no sons would, by Qur’anic law, pass his property to his male first cousins, among whom it would be divided. In contrast, settling the land in an endowment would keep the inheritance intact while providing for the inheritors from its income.

From the perspective of the British legal tradition, which has obvious relevance in India, trusts were quintessentially British legal innovations that blossomed in the late eighteenth century. Interestingly, in this time period, laws in the colony and the metropole developed in conjunction with one another, and property endowments flourished in both places. The English trust was based on the medieval English law concept of mortmain, from *mortua manus*, thus embodied by the “dead hand.” As an exception
to the rule against perpetuities, the dead hand of the trust is allowed to hold property through time. The Indian trust has elements of these two legal and customary traditions.

This rigor mortis hold over property parallels the Arabic concept of waqafa—tying up or stopping. A trust, once established, is irrevocable, even by the original settlor, and can only be amended after extensive evidence is presented to a court that meeting the original intent is no longer possible. Thus the trust sets up a particular property subregime with a tripartite structure of settlor, trustee, and beneficiary put into relation with one another, and the written deed can be seen as a materialization of the original intent of these relations.

One may ask whether the trust had a religious significance to nineteenth-century Parsis, since so many in the community took it up so speedily. The legal historian Janós Jany has researched the few Pahlavi texts relating to trusts of the Sassanian period (third to seventh century) to investigate the relationship between the Zoroastrian trustlike institution and the trust of medieval British common law. While the Zoroastrian version is similar to the Islamic waqf, Jany maintains that much controversy still surrounds the historical relationship of these two institutions. The key role was that of the sālār, or guardian, who paralleled the trustee. This person, whose kin inherited his position, was designated to manage the settlement by acting “in harmony” with the intentions of the settlor; if he did not, the position transferred back to the family of the settlor. The sālār could see to the aims of the settlement through the use of profits from the property. The settlor, however, was prohibited from gleaning any material benefits of the trust.

Mitra Sharafi, a legal historian of colonial India and Parsi law, points to the common use of trusts among Parsis in colonial times for muktad rituals, annual rites of giving associated with the death of a family member. Nineteenth-century Parsis customarily left a portion of their estate for Zoroastrian religious purposes, such as funding their own perpetual muktad services or services for less-privileged community members. Family members who wished these perpetual bequests to be voided often legally contested these trusts. From 1930 to about 2010, Sharafi notes, the concerns in Parsi litigation over religious trusts shifted from struggles between priests and lay Parsis to issues of governance between trustees and beneficiaries, especially the BPP. This is probably a consequence of the Parsi Public Trusts Regulation Act of 1936, which required the public registration of trusts, as well as an auditing of their accounts. Concomitant with this oversight was the raising of the status of the beneficiary and the “public,” to whom the trust became legally and financially accountable. Any public charitable trust’s objects now had to contribute to “general public utility,” including the medical, educational, or social welfare of the public or any subset of the public, such as religious groups.

So we have three models of trusts that influenced the contemporary Parsi charitable trust. While all allow for a detour of inheritance from customary paths, the status of ownership in each differs. Once the Zoroastrian endowment was established, its settlor relinquished possession, and neither the beneficiary nor the sālār had what the law would call ownership, since neither party had rights of disposal. Sassanian jurists did
rule that the settlor’s family still held proprietary rights, but only in the case of the trust being partially broken, for instance if the sālār failed to uphold the will of the founder or if a sālār was never named, in which cases everything would revert back to the family or other heirs of the settlor. In contemporary Parsi trusts, this is not the case: even if the objects are not upheld, the assets do not return to the settlor or his heirs. Rather than allow a trust to fail, a court can approve a shift in its objects.

Furthermore, all three earlier models of trust involved some kind of ethics of care and responsibility, with assets from one party entrusted to another for the benefit—however interpreted—of a third. The sālār of ancient Zoroastrian law was required to compensate the trust for any losses he incurred. Trustees of contemporary Parsi trusts, however, are not personally liable for financial losses. The next section details the beginnings of communal trust housing in Bombay and the creation of a particular charitable landscape. As we will see, the issue of liability, both legal and financial, has much to do with the kinds of investments and development projects that trustees attempt and the scope of property they construct.

PARSI CHARITABLE HOUSING

While community-specific philanthropy is centuries old in India, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the colonial government began to convince native philanthropists to work in conjunction with it on large public projects. The historian Ritu Birla has shown how colonial legislation then helped to guide charity toward a more public orientation, even if only for a subset of the public, such as one communal group. In the beginning of the 1880s the distinction between private and public trusts was introduced in India, which Birla notes directly discredited certain forms of vernacular giving and exchange in the private realm of natives in favor of more public endeavors.

While falling in line with new colonial laws, public charitable giving in the late nineteenth century knit together men of wealth in common charitable causes that also served as networks for their commercial dealings. These networks consisted mostly of coreligionists who held together against fierce competition. In mid-nineteenth-century Bombay, Parsis, Khojas, and other native communities were all vying for profitable alliances in overseas trade. These networks of family and communal ties, while later delegitimized by colonial legal interventions, came to be congealed into the histories of trusts.

The first architect of colony housing in Bombay specifically for Parsis was Khan Bahadur Muncherji Cowasji Murzban (1839–1917). Influenced by housing models in Britain, in 1887 he set up the Cheap Rental Quarters for Parsis, which is now known as the Gilder Lane or Murzban colony. For the architectural historian Preeti Chopra, Murzban serves as an embodiment of the “joint enterprise,” as she claims that the spatial and structural formation of colonial Bombay was not solely a mandate of empire but cooperatively formed through negotiations between the British and native engineers and architects. The pattern of British philanthropists convincing their government to intervene in
working-class housing to uplift its inhabitants was repeated in Bombay and had a fresh incentive after the plague of 1896 ravaged the poorer sections of the city. Unlike earlier philanthropic models, these homes and their trust were not meant to make a profit, but were built on an ethic of compassion and care and were to be “self-perpetuating, so that future generations might gain some benefit.”

In 1890, Murzban, with another innovation in philanthropic practice, founded the Garib Zathoshtina Rehethan Fund (GZRF), or Poor Zoroastrians Building Fund, which was funded by numerous donations from Parsis from a range of backgrounds, “from wealthy and famous baronets and leading families to other individuals of more modest means.” By 1899, Murzban was housing about three hundred families. Today it is estimated that more than half of Parsis in Mumbai reside in housing managed by trusts, while almost all Parsis in the city deal with trusts in religious, social, educational, or medical matters. Furthermore, under the law, the BPP remains the apex governing body for all Parsis in the city. The following section details how Parsi authority is composed and exercised by this religious charitable trust, whose unique history and structure allow it a particular positionality in Mumbai today, especially with regard to communal housing.

**THE BOMBAY PARSI PUNCHAYET**

While many religious groups in India have vast assets in trust agreements, the BPP holds in trust almost every aspect of Parsi life in the city. The trust deed of the BPP began with real estate devoted to Bombay’s first tower of silence and grew with the endowment of other lands and assets. The biggest donation the BPP ever received was five trust holdings from the Wadia family, Jerbai Wadia, the widow of the successful industrialist N. N. Wadia, endowed these properties and accompanying funds to the BPP in the names of her husband and sons. While she clearly went out of her way to donate to the needy of the community, some speculate that Jerbai might have had a dual purpose for her generous donation. First, she saw the need at the beginning of the twentieth century to encourage Parsis to emigrate from the more rural parts of Gujarat to the city for better economic prospects and deemed subsidized housing the proper incentive. A second factor might have been the conversion to Christianity of her two sons, Sir Ness and Sir Cusrow, and her desire to prevent either of them from inheriting her estates and assets directly as per the succession rules of her community. Enter the trust, the perfect mechanism for such a detour of inheritance. Using the trust, Jerbai was able to maintain her estate for the needs of her coreligionists and to honor her husband and three sons by name.

**“FROM THE WOMB TO THE TOMB”**

The punchayet’s offices are in the Parsi-founded J. J. School, near the Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus, one of Mumbai’s main train stations. The school’s building is an imposing
structure with wide curving staircases, a large lobby, and high ceilings. The ground floor and the next two floors are occupied by an elementary school, which by all counts has only a handful of Parsi students but is otherwise filled with myriad uniformed children. The BPP occupies the top two floors. The large staircase opens on to the third-floor lobby, which has a huge sign for the BPP that includes its insignia. The main office space is quite large, with high ceilings, the ubiquitous whir of ceiling fans, and rows of desks with piles and piles of paper files. In this sense, the BPP office seems like that of any older bureaucracy in India: loud, dusty, and with office staff running back and forth. I interviewed the CEO of the BPP, the most senior permanent administrator of this enormous institution, on February 2, 2011. He emphasized his expertise, relating that the trustees come and go every seven years, their term of office, but he had been there for twenty-seven. He described the various projects that the BPP manages and now publicizes in its newest venture, a monthly newsletter of about thirty glossy pages, the BPP Review. This is a way to let the community know all the “multifarious” activities of the BPP. Multifarious indeed. Currently the BPP manages the Doongerwadi (Tower of Silence) funeral grounds, about fifteen housing colonies throughout the city, two temples, a rest home, an elder-care facility, a health clinic, an employment bureau, a matrimonial bureau, a Parsi museum, an IVF facility, and a student hostel. It administers several educational scholarships, medical and welfare payments to poor Parsis, and “housing and rent subsidies to the deserving.”

As the CEO told me, the BPP will serve a Parsi “from the womb to the tomb.”

While this list is no doubt impressive for any kind of community organization, the former CEO told me in March 2011 that in recent years, 75 percent of BPP efforts and expenditures have gone toward housing. Indeed, the BPP estimates that it houses about 50 percent of the Parsi community of Mumbai in its five thousand flats. The BPP has basically three housing typologies:

Charity flats are rented out with few or no fees or rents attached. They are usually smaller, less maintained, and in much older buildings than the other types. Since many of the residents are from families that have lived there for generations, their flats are under agreements governed by the Rent Act of 1947, which has allowed only minimal increases in rent from that year.

Leave and license flats and tenancy flats constitute the majority of BPP housing stock. Most of their residents pay heavily subsidized rents to the BPP. Those whose leases predate 1947 are legal tenants, who fall under Mumbai’s rent control laws and thus cannot be evicted. Some pay a very low rent that has been unchanged for decades, but the BPP does levy and increase fees to make up for some of the loss. As people vacate these kinds of flats, the BPP is converting them to leave and license. Under this scheme, monthly rents and fees can range from Rs 50 to 7,500 (US$0.91–136.36), and the license, which allows the BPP to evict someone who breaks its terms, is on an eleven-month renewable cycle.
Ownership flats were introduced in the 1980s. Under this kind of agreement, newer flats are “sold” to Parsis only. Because of the BPP’s fear that the residents might resell to non-Parsis, they must sign away or agree to limit their rights of resale. Also key to this typology, the residents own only the flat but no portion of the land that the building is built on. Due to these restrictions, these flats are usually priced significantly below their potential market value but still are affordable only to upper-middle-class Parsis or Parsis from abroad.

To allot its flats, the BPP has developed a merit rating scheme for the first two types, whereby the trustees grade each applicant in several criteria. This has caused much controversy and even litigation, as the criteria and point system remain opaque and flats are allotted out of application order. In an interview I conducted in July 2006, the then-housing manager of the BPP related how he was constantly accused of “giving flats out of line” and general nepotism. Once a flat is granted, a notice with the name of the new resident is published in several Parsi periodicals asking for any evidence in objection. The allotment of flats and indeed the entire workings of the BPP are subject to oversight by the Office of the Charity Commissioner, where the trust is registered. All public charitable trusts are required to register their deeds, file annual audit reports, and get permission for any changes to their structure or their holdings.

The existence of vast amounts of litigation attests to the fact that the merit rating scheme and flat allotments are anything but transparent, and once again, many have turned to the courts for redress. The BPP has also embarked on even more controversial redevelopment schemes. The next section details one that resulted when some BPP holdings once in rigor mortis were reintroduced to the market in Mumbai after a change in real estate law. Such schemes have blurred the line between the custodial trustee and the real estate developer, between an ethic of care and one of profit.

THE DEVELOPER-TRUSTEE

As mentioned above, real estate held in trust forms a particular historical scape of property in Mumbai. As all trust assets were meant to be held in perpetuity, trust buildings, even if well maintained, tend to be of older stock than much of the fast-developing city. While trust assets have always moved from generation to generation of beneficiaries, this landscape in Mumbai was further ossified by rent control laws and slow, expensive, and illegal transfers of property through the payment of pugree, fees that were usually paid under the table. The legalization of pugree in 1999 caused a seismic shift in the property landscape of Mumbai: the virtual awakening of the “dead hand.” This regulatory intervention, along with skyrocketing real estate prices, sped up the velocity of real estate circulation. For trusts like the Bombay Parsi Punchayet, new redevelopment projects on trust lands suddenly had great potential to increase their cash corpus, to maintain their current housing stock, and to attract the wealth of richer Parsis in Mumbai and abroad.
Many of my informants related that a shift in the internal structure of the BPP has contributed to its interest in new projects. From the BPP’s inception, its trustees were nominated and agreed on by a kind of electoral college made up of donors. In past generations, the trustees were illustrious men and women from highly successful industrial families such as the Jeejeeboys and the Petits, a who’s who of the rich and famous in Bombay’s merchant history. But since 2008, also after much litigation, trustees have been elected by universal adult franchise (UAF)—that is, by those adult Parsis who have registered with the BPP to vote in Mumbai. This has greatly elevated the status of the beneficiaries of the BPP, who overwhelmingly supported UAF for the trust. Clearly this is a dramatic shift for the institution, and it has a few interesting implications for the kinds of projects the BPP undertakes.

In the older system, the trustees had provided part of the trust’s corpus. They therefore made investments with those monies judiciously and conservatively, as they saw the BPP as part of their personal legacies. The role of the trustee was honorary and taken as a duty of the privileged philanthropist who had a protective vision of the community, a moral post whose managerial focus was secondary. Today the UAF system has very different implications for the BPP. Elections now require high levels of campaigning, with great deals of money for advertising, many volunteers able to reach out to Parsis all over the city, or both. One current trustee, a successful Parsi real estate developer, is said to have spent millions of rupees on his campaign. It was no surprise to many that housing and real estate became a big focus of the post-2008 terms.

In 2009 the BPP pledged in a major media announcement to build about 3,215 new flats in the city, adding to the trust’s existing five thousand flats. The proposal involved demolishing older buildings in some of the northern baugs, as housing colonies are called, and building new towers in their place; building open spaces in the trust’s current colonies; and developing a new acquisition in Goregaon, toward the north of the city. This new scheme shows the various ways in which the BPP manages risk as an institution and has shifted its mandate to new potential beneficiaries.

As the BPP is a registered public charitable trust, its properties, income, and cash corpus are tax exempt. A trust is allowed to be tax exempt if it is not making profit in any sense, with any earnings from investments going back to the corpus and financing the original intent of the trust. The various deeds of the Wadia trusts established their beneficiaries as “Parsis and those that practice the Zoroastrian faith” and “poor or needy” Parsis. Hence, when the BPP announced its expansion plans, a few advocacy groups were up in arms that its monies would now be invested in building housing for rich Parsis, as they would be the only ones who could afford ownership flats, which would sell for Rs 4–5 crores ($727,273–909,091). The BPP countered that even though it now sells flats for crores of rupees, these monies go to managing and providing housing for poor Parsis, the trust’s costliest mandate. The BPP employs the language of other Mumbai developers, claiming that it “cross-subsidizes” charity housing with its other schemes. As one Mumbai developer exclaimed to me in September 2011, “Poor housing is expensive!”
As a former trustee explained to me in April of that year, “You have to understand, the BPP has properties, not funds; housing requires funds, so we must sell flats.” This liquidity, or lack of liquidity, seems to be a fundamental problem of older housing trusts. As their building stock becomes older and older, they are unable to generate enough income through frozen rents to even maintain their structures. Like the other trustees I have spoken with, he explained that the costs of maintenance are draining the corpus at a higher rate than the low rents can replenish, as trusts are allowed to maintain their corpus only through charitable donations or very-low-risk investments. So the cross-subsidy is needed, but, he warned, “it only takes one finance officer to unravel the whole thing.” What if the trust were found to be making a profit or in breach of its duty to support only general public utility, which would cause it, at the least, to lose its tax-exempt status? As he wondered aloud, he shook his head to indicate that the whole system could come crashing down. This trustee resigned a few months after I spoke with him, unleashing an extremely contentious election to replace him in 2011.

TRUSTS, RISK, AND SPECULATION

The BPP’s current cross-subsidy scheme is estimated to cost Rs 450 crores (almost $82 million). This kind of investment would be a daring move for any charity, let alone one whose potential clients are so narrowly defined. A smaller trust in Mumbai, for example, after building a Parsi-only high-rise, could not find enough Parsis to fill it. The trust then had to approach the charity commissioner to amend the original proposal to allow non-Parsis to purchase flats in the building. After several years of low occupancy and consequently low rates of return, the building today has only a handful of Parsi occupants and is considered a major failure for the trust, even as its tony balconies soar above the city. A huge amount of risk is mitigated for the BPP—and the trustee specifically—as under trust law, a trustee cannot be held liable for any financial losses to the corpus. Although a trustee might be asked to resign because of financial misdealing, he or she cannot be removed simply for making a deal that goes sour. This creates incredible incentives for trustees to speculate on relatively high-risk real estate schemes, as trusts are constrained from investing in any other type of high-risk, high-yield venture.

The constant oversight of the Office of the Charity Commissioner should reduce, at least in theory, high-risk property purchases and sales by trusts. According to the law, any buying or selling scheme that involves a trust’s corpus must be authorized by the charity commissioner. For most trusts in Mumbai, this is just one of many hurdles to clear before approaching a builder or buyer. As mentioned above, this all follows the letter of the law, but in 2011 the assistant charity commissioner, in charge of trust oversight, was indicted on bribery charges that involved high-risk property development. Although profit seeking by religious charities is certainly nothing new, the growing awareness of such practices has generated much more oversight from the state in terms of tax enforcement and from small-scale groups that take matters into their own hands or, in the case
of the Parsis, take matters to court. While having fully adopted the rhetoric of Mumbai’s redevelopment fever, the BPP’s current trustees are plagued with litigation, some inherited and some no doubt provoked by their having left the purely administrative realm and entered into contentious land politics.

Community opposition to the BPP cross-subsidy scheme was spearheaded by the Alert Zoroastrian Association (AZA), a Parsi activist and watchdog group that has taken on many causes against the trust. A member of the group who agreed to meet with me in December 2010 explained that their chief complaint was that the BPP was “selling flats” to rich Parsis instead of “giving” them to the poor. His group asked what the process was for these sales and how the allotments were done. In his eyes, the policy was “an illegal transfer of property that actually subsidized the rich.” I asked, How so? Well, the flats are “covenanted,” or reserved for Parsis, he explained, so they cannot get the full market price. They are sold for about a third of their market value, so rich Parsis, selling their private flats in the city, can “trade in” for a subsidized BPP flat at a lower cost. According to AZA, the cross-subsidy scheme is more of a lateral subsidy, in that it subsidizes rich Parsis and brings them into the fold of the BPP. This explanation presumes, however, that the funds gained through the sales of the subsized flats are not reaching the poorer sections of the community, which, the BPP assures, is the goal of its building activity. The trust also maintains that AZA’s obstructionist practices have not only wasted community funds with endless litigation but also delayed housing for poor Parsis.

In 2010–11, a focus of controversy was Panthaky Baug, a Parsi colony in Andheri, in the north of the city. It was built in the 1960s through the will of a Mr. Panthaky, for the poor and middle class of the community. The BPP constructed two ownership buildings in the baug to finance the charity ones that already existed there. A member of AZA sued the BPP as an individual Parsi beneficiary, not as a member of any association. The charity commissioner then stayed the construction, effectively leaving the flats empty until a settlement was reached wherein the BPP promised to build two hundred new flats for the poor in Panthaky Baug at the trust’s cost. Another former trustee who was active during the case mentioned that the affair was a huge expenditure of time and money for all involved. The legal fees alone were extremely high, and the case further delayed the movement into flats of those on the housing waiting list. Much of the hardware of the building in Panthaky Baug was only partially in place when the case began, and it had rusted by the time the twenty-five worthy applicants were able to move in. The trustee also reminded me that the delay had cost the BPP two years’ worth of fees for the leave and license flats. Thus, while the legal intervention of groups like AZA is effective in demanding some oversight in muddy cases of allotments, so far the glacial pace of the Charity Commission and the Indian court system is inadequate to keep up with the speed and acceleration of high-finance projects. Activist efforts show the disproportionate strength of beneficiaries, who may stymie even the large redevelopment plans of a trust.

The mechanism of the trust and its fidelity to its original objects sometimes stand in the way of these new high-finance schemes and force trustees to construct curious legal
fictions. Interestingly, what the debate and litigation over these schemes brought to the surface is a unique definition of poverty. Many Parsi trust deeds that I have read list their beneficiaries as “the poor or needy” of the community and “poverty alleviation” as their object. The qualification of such beneficiaries was under much discussion after a controversial announcement by the BPP in June 2012 that it deemed poor any Parsi with a monthly income of less than Rs 90,000, or $1,636. This not only exceeds India’s average annual per capita income of Rs 85,000 ($1,545) but is about 105 times the Rs 858 ($15.60) per month that the Indian government considers the average income of a poor citizen. The BPP issued this definition of Parsi poverty as evidence in the court case over subsidized housing in Panthaky Baug. This amount was reported in several major periodicals in India, which expressed confusion and outrage. The public outcry led BPP chair Dinsshaw Mehta to clarify in the media that the flats in question were not charity flats—which are reserved for those with an income of Rs 5,000–50,000 ($90.91–909.09) per month—and were meant for middle-income but still “poor” Parsis. While necessary to the trust’s allotment scheme, the whole affair was embarrassing for it, as it called the public’s attention to the immense privilege of the Parsis. The reaction in one Reuters article read, “You’re a poor Parsi if you’re ‘slightly’ richer than the average Indian.”

DISINTEREST AND PROFIT

From its origins to the present day, the Parsi trust in Mumbai has been caught between two opposing ethics. One is highly speculative, marked by high risk, and the other is disinterested, an example of philanthropic care. This section explores the issues of interest and disinterest and what is at risk for charitable institutions and community life when religious trusts like the BPP join the redevelopment game.

As discussed above, a charitable trust establishes a particular fiduciary and corporate relationship. The triangular structure of (a) the settlor, whose intentions the trust deed materializes, (b) the trustee, and (c) the beneficiary makes for a unique actor in the real estate market. Under the older ethic, the trustee must be, at least in theory, disinterested. That is, he or she should not receive any gain or personal profit from the trust. The beneficiaries are not stakeholders in the general sense either and can make no claims to profit but only to the original objects of the trust, laid out in the deed.

For example, a beneficiary who rents a trust property technically should have no rights over any profit made from the transfer (including sale) of that property to another beneficiary by the trust. But in my research I have repeatedly heard of those in charity flats receiving a portion of the pugree, or transfer fee, when the flat is transferred to another tenant. In Mumbai this seems to be the only incentive for tenants to leave properties that they do not technically own. Currently when tenanted flats are transferred to other Parsis, the interested parties meet and exchange slips of paper with amounts written on them. The trustees then negotiate the split of the sale with the existing tenant. In the BPP, this is done with the CEO, the tenant, and the interested buyer. Although an attempt
to bring transparency to the pugree, this is still seen by many as violating the objects of the trust on many levels: first, because profits are being gained from charity, a supposedly non-profit-seeking system, and second, because this process signals to some the shift in the BPP’s aim from serving the needs of poor Parsis to enticing the purchasing power of richer ones.

**TRUST IN COMMUNITY**

Shifts in housing styles in the new redevelopment schemes have also shown the potential for changes in the structure of Parsi kinship. Rural Parsis in the mid-nineteenth century lived in large joint-family structures, which was the Indian norm. The earliest Mumbai colonies, like Gilder Lane, somewhat replicated these structures in apartment settings with much shared space, including shared bathroom and kitchen facilities. From the 1920s, these configurations were considered old-fashioned and inconvenient. The early twentieth-century colonies like Cusrow and Rustom Baug were constructed as series of four- to six-story buildings with private entrances, and two- or three-bedroom flats with private bathrooms and kitchens. The new flats being proposed by the redevelopment schemes, however, look farther skyward, to the high-finance buildings that dot Mumbai’s landscape, complete with rooftop swimming pools, doormen, and underground parking. They are far from the older charity model, which privileged outdoor green space and meeting and prayer halls. The new ownership flats are to be even bigger, with bedrooms larger than the common spaces and “modern amenities that will attract the rich Parsi investor,” as one trustee told me in October 2011. While the profits are promised to and earmarked for the poor of the community, the BPP’s move into cash-rich high-stakes redevelopment is a giant leap away from its older projects.

Perhaps most troubling to the critics of the cross-subsidy plans and the building of ownership flats is the ways in which these have privileged wealthy Parsis over the “poor and destitute,” the intended beneficiaries of the trust. Many critics have reported that BPP trustee meetings are now held with high-end residential developers, like Hafeez Contractor, who are all jockeying for the chance to redevelop spaces within baugs, pieces of land that have lain fallow for many decades. These developers would profit not only from the square-meter price of the land, which is some of the most central and therefore expensive in the city, but also from the transfer development rights (TDR), which would give them an incentive to build in the northern parts of the city. Currently at least 70 percent of residents must agree to any redevelopment scheme in a baug, and the trust promises to house them in the interim. Yet in a baug meeting I attended, many residents seemed afraid that they either would never be rehoused in the new facilities or would be unable to pay the much higher property tax on their new flats. “How will we fit with those people?” one older resident asked. “They come from abroad with money and have gone to fancy universities; we are the children of workers.” This presumed class or social schism has been taken into account by the developers, one of whom wanted to “assure”
me in October 2011 that ownership flats and charity flats would be in separate buildings, so as to avoid any “social awkwardness.” So while the BPP’s stated mission is to nurture and revitalize the Parsi community by encouraging endogamous marriage and customary practices, many feel that the cross-subsidy schemes are fracturing communal sentiment, as richer beneficiaries seem to receive preferential treatment from the trust. As landholding trusts like the BPP risk their cash corpora on large redevelopment schemes, I argue that they might also be putting at risk their original object: to care for the poor and needy of the community.

While trusts oriented and somewhat ossified Parsi settlement in Bombay, the deregulation of financial markets and the legalization of pugree in the 1990s dramatically changed the conditions of possibility for their once dormant scape of real estate in Mumbai. For private actors as well as institutions like trusts, perhaps we have reached another moment of transition, with the impetus now coming from incredibly profitable real estate markets and transfers of global capital. The religious trust, once responsible for the care of the poor and destitute and for providing perpetual general public utility, perhaps has a new and opposing aspiration today, driven by market interventions such as pugree and the fever for redevelopment. The profit-seeking trust of even a microcommunity has the potential to radically transform social and spatial life in the megacity.

NOTES

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“Good thoughts, good words, and good deeds” is an oft-repeated phrase summing up the path to righteousness among Parsi Zoroastrians.


10. Even though the broad rules guiding charities in India developed from sixteenth-century English notions of charity, the concepts at their foundations are not the same, as in both Hindu endowments and Muslim waqf, the property is vested in the deity or the Almighty, respectively, and not in the trustee.


16. While in the American understanding, the idea that only certain religious or ethnic groups can stand as beneficiaries is perhaps anathema, in India these groups still constitute subsets of the public and therefore are entitled to be beneficiaries of public charity.


18. Ibid., 278.


23. Ibid., 107.


25. The properties are thus called Cusrow Baug, Ness Baug, Rustom Baug, Jer Baug, and Nowroze Baug and together have 1,545 flats.

26. Interestingly, Sir Ness’s son Neville Wadia underwent the Navjote (Zoroastrian initiation), not without controversy, late in life. He was married to Dina Jinnah, the daughter of
Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and spearheaded the success of Bombay Dyeing, one of India’s largest textile concerns, until he stepped down in 1977. He died in 1996.

27. Today the N. N. and R. N. Wadia Trusts deal with their five baugs and the BPP through a managing committee, whose chair remains a member of the Wadia family.


29. Apart from the BPP there are several much smaller housing-related Parsi trusts in Mumbai with significant numbers of tenants, and of course private housing.

30. Tenant refers specifically to an inhabitant whose lease is under the Bombay Rent Act of 1947. Although the word is used in common speech to refer to either, trustees and housing managers are quick to point out the difference between a “tenant” and a “resident.”

31. This is true only in the states in India that have charity commissions.

32. As this chapter is being written, a group of BPP trustees is pursuing litigation against another trustee, alleging bribery and nepotism in flat allotments.

33. Currently the Bohra Muslim community is undertaking an enormous redevelopment project in central Mumbai through the Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust.

34. See “Our Trustees” at www.bombayparsipunchayet.com/trustees.html for a list of trustees since 1944.

35. The votes of donors to the BPP are counted twice.


37. A crore is a unit of ten million. This chapter uses an exchange rate of Rs 55 = $1.


40. Interview with trust housing manager, November 2011.

41. The “sale” of ownership flats does not come under this purview.


43. Annelies Riles defines legal fictions as claims that are understood to be false but serve to circumvent a law or rule: Collateral Knowledge: Legal Reasoning in the Global Financial Markets (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 173.


45. Kozlowski, Muslim Endowments and Society, 3-4, reminds us that trust deeds are acts of preservation, expressing the values, fears, and objectives of the settlor.


47. In relinquishing a plot of land to the municipality for public purposes, an owner gains TDR including the right to develop anywhere north of the original plot. For a thorough and insightful analysis of real estate speculation and TDR in the larger context of private redevelopment, see Vyjayanthi Rao’s forthcoming Speculative City: Infrastructure and Complexity in Global Mumbai.
INTRODUCTION

Bangkok is one of the major cities in Southeast Asia and the center of Thailand in all aspects. Over the past several decades, it has been famous as a primate city, implying its importance and uniqueness in many ways. As Askew (1994) notes, if one wants to understand Thailand, one needs to understand Bangkok: the city is representative of the country.

As “Bangkok is a city of immigrants” (Tiamsoon and Akagawa 2012, 149), various groups there are mixed but not combined. The Chinese community, Thai society, and the Western community, including small groups of European and American diplomats, businesspeople, and missionaries (Coughlin 1960, 190), have had relatively clear borders since at least the early twentieth century. Although Thailand has never been colonized by a European power, the adoption of Western technologies and aspects of Western cultures was as an integral part of the country’s modernization. Chinese immigrants and their descendants, whom the assimilation policy forced to hold Thai nationality, played an important role in bridging the gaps among different cultures. King even writes, “Bangkok is a Chinese city, not a Thai, though as a space, it is quintessentially (Sino-) Thai” (2011, 69).

It is for this reason that Bangkok’s Chinatown has great cultural value. Over the past few decades, Bangkok has seen ethnic communities use their cultural identity and heritage to claim rights, as heritage is widely accepted as a resource for city development (Friedmann 2005; 2007). As for Bangkok’s Chinatown, the struggle of its historic com-
Communities began after the tourism promotion of old Bangkok in 1982. Moreover, the recent construction of a train network and the new land use plan have accelerated redevelopment in the area. Against these forces, a local effort in the Charoenchai community has stood up for the right to conserve traditional ways of life and heritage. This movement “has been an inspiration to all who are concerned with the threatened destruction of the historical districts of Bangkok” (Stent 2013, 183).

Surrounded by shrines and a Chinese temple, Charoenchai is a center of human-made traditional goods relating to Chinese festivals. Contributing to its uniqueness is that many residents were artisans who migrated from mainland China right before the Cultural Revolution. As a number of cultural goods found in Charoenchai have already disappeared in China, they are irreplaceable and of incalculable value, and Charoenchai can be considered “a museum of intangible overseas Chinese culture” (Stent 2013, 183). Consequently, the community’s survival is crucial to the future of Chinese culture in Thailand.

In the following section, this chapter briefly explains the urbanization of Bangkok. Then it moves on to discuss the situation of old Bangkok in both Rattanakosin and Chinatown. Subsequently, it elaborates on several issues relating to Chinatown, including Thailand’s assimilation policy and the adaptation of Chinese immigrants to Thai society. The following section narrows down to the case of heritage contestation in Charoenchai, in the heart of Chinatown. It explores the community’s struggle in keeping up with the pace of change resulting from the extension of the train network.

**Urbanization and Bangkok Heritage**

Government policies drive major urban developments and other such changes in Bangkok (Tiamsoon and Akagawa 2012a, 183). Anuchat Pounsomlee and Helen Ross observe that “government organizations usually focus on single issues, such as traffic or river pollution, and take a piecemeal approach to solutions” (1992, 2). Consequently, urban development over the past few decades has seemed unplanned and has repeatedly had negative impacts on residents.

Over the 232-year history of Bangkok, at least two incidents dramatically changed the city. The first was the opening of Siam to the Western world during the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV), forced by the Bowring Treaty that was signed with Great Britain in 1855. Free trade and export businesses attracted Chinese laborers and accelerated modernization in Thailand. Bangkok was developed as the country’s center of communication and international trade, including the transportation of agricultural products, through its port. The second incident was the coup of 1932, which changed the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy and led to the rise of capitalism in the country. As economic conditions have always affected urban concentration and development in Bangkok (Anuchat and Ross 1992, 10), it has been the only growth center of the country in all aspects (Medhi and Pawadee 1984) and by the late twentieth century was “the most
primate city in the world” (Baker and Pasuk 2009, 199), indicating an imbalance in development between it and the rest of Thailand. Bangkok expanded from 580 hectares in 1850 to 133,515 in 2002 (Angel 2011, 39).

Starting in the 1980s, the impacts of economic development resulted in severe traffic and environmental problems in Bangkok. Public concern shifted from how to drive the economy to how to cope with these impacts. Askew writes, “Bangkok is a comprehensively researched place, but this is true only to a limited, very technical extent” (1994, 9). The government studies on Bangkok in the 1970s focused on the spatial distribution of activities and land use (for example, Sternstein 1971). Askew has pointed out that most Western scholars rely on “detailed records maintained by urban local government. Other source material considered basic to the Western historian (personal diaries and memoirs) are very rare in Thailand” (1994, 45). He has further suggested that sociocultural studies are vital to the future of Bangkok. In their study of the impacts of modernization and urbanization in the city, Anuchat and Ross accordingly note that “Bangkok’s urbanization is largely a societal phenomenon, so remedial action also needs to be societal” (1992, 2).

A large number of studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s focused on slum settlements, as many neighborhoods were slums and squatter settlements on vacant government and private lands. Akin Rabibhadana, a Cornell-trained anthropologist, was one of the pioneers in studying the socioeconomic organization—the physical arrangement and social characteristics—of slum neighborhoods. What Akin (1975) found is that slums are not isolated from other parts of society. Today, with the rise of the so-called middle class, some residents of slums and other squatter communities no longer necessarily have low income or little education. It is for this reason that the socioeconomic organization of slums has changed.

Akin’s approach of examining a community’s socioeconomic structure has influenced many Thai scholars in anthropology and rural development with a particular interest in the adaptation of rural immigrants to urban life, such as Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, Suriya Smrutkupt, and Permsak Makarapirom. But this approach is not easily applied to a nonimmigrant or nonslum neighborhood whose residents have a variety of occupations, cultural backgrounds, and interests. Such neighborhoods have different social organizations and more complex leadership than in earlier decades. Thus many recent ethnological studies that superficially generalized Akin’s approach have been criticized, as they failed to achieve their objectives. According to officers of the Thailand Research Fund, at a meeting with the Charoenchai community on August 20, 2011, researchers in rural development studies and anthropology have found it difficult to understand the neighborhoods in Bangkok and there is a need for sociocultural studies of urban settlements. Unfortunately, the interest in urban studies shifted to more economic issues after the 1997 financial crisis.

Prior to the crisis, 150,000 new residential units, including apartments in tall buildings, were put on the market each year for four consecutive years in Bangkok. After
suffering from the crisis, the trend of tall building construction came back, as the number of buildings at least a hundred meters tall increased from sixty-five in 1997 to about three hundred in 2008. This figure sharply increased after the big flood in 2011, when living in high-rise condominiums became fashionable. In 2013 the number of condominium units reached eighty-six thousand, an oversupply. That year, *Forbes* warned that Thailand’s emerging-markets bubble had started in 2009, as part of the overall emerging-markets bubble in Southeast Asia (Colombo 2013). From 2009 to 2014, the land value of the Chao Phraya waterfront rose by about 400 percent (“News,” www.Now26.tv, July 2, 2014), reflecting the increasing demand for high-rise buildings and other facilities that serve new urban lifestyles.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Thai government planned to extend the train network and build several stations in old Bangkok. It is still difficult to say where Bangkok and old Bangkok are heading. The extended train network will be another major change, like the erections of expressways, tollways, and the Skytrain, which were the most dramatic changes in Bangkok at the end of the twentieth century (Van Beek 1999). However, such developments always come with good and bad. Smithies notes that “the ‘skytrain’, though facilitating movement around the city, has turned some streets into dark canyons, but it does provide views of the urban conglomeration unobtainable before” (2003, 53). Tall buildings were quickly erected around the train stations and along the Skytrain’s track. Van Beek observes that “despite scores of tall buildings . . . most of Bangkok remains a town of two- and three-story shophouses with family businesses on the ground floor and living quarters upstairs” (1999, 121). Regardless of the demand for tall buildings, this is still true in many parts of the city. However, its urbanization is “mainly . . . a consequence of the importation of western ways of living” (Thai University Research Associates 1976, 38) and tends to imitate that of world cities, where tall buildings play an important role in urban life. Thus, there is a possibility that tall buildings will forcefully replace Bangkok’s current low-rise commercial centers, including in Chinatown.

The contributions of tall buildings to world-city status and their visual impact in the European context have been discussed at length (see, for example, Urban Task Force 1999; McNeill 2002; Tavernor 2007). Asian countries have also been competing to construct the tallest building. After working in world cities such as Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, renowned architects have begun to take up projects in Bangkok. For example, Helmut Jahn, a famous German-American architect, was commissioned to design Suvarnabhumi Airport. Competition among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) cities has recently increased, partially because of the decline in economic barriers leading to the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015. Thailand, in the middle of the north-south and east-west economic corridors of the AEC development plans, is trying hard to keep the leading economic role in the Mekong subregion. As a consequence, its government has largely directed investment toward the improvement of logistics networks, including an electric train system, a high-speed train...
system, new roads, and road expansion. Bangkok has had no choice but to get ready for the growing competition. Thus, the promotion of Rattanakosin as a tourist destination and Bangkok’s development as a world city become two of its major aims.

**CONSERVATION OF OLD BANGKOK**

Bangkok is not just a city but “a dynamic socio-spatial phenomenon” (Askew 1994, 1). Nonetheless, its sociocultural nature has always been analyzed through its physical development. For example, Askew writes that Bangkok plays “a major integrative and symbolic role in national society, expressed physically as an arrangement of places” (6). As key figures of the nation, such physical developments frequently link to the royal family and Buddhism and, not surprisingly, have become part of the national heritage.

The conservation of Bangkok’s heritage can be traced back to at least 1978, when the cabinet appointed the Rattanakosin and Historic Towns Committee to oversee the conservation and development of old Bangkok. In 1981 the committee launched the land use policy and regulations, as the cabinet resolution of October 13, to control physical changes to the waterfront of Rattanakosin, an early urbanized area of Bangkok of approximately six square kilometers. The committee focused on the preservation of historic buildings from before 1910, traffic control, and the creation of open space on the waterfront.

During the celebration of the Chakri dynasty’s bicentennial in 1982, the committee announced 133 “important structures for preservation.” Subsequently, heritage conservation became the promotional catchphrase of the event as it aimed to attract foreign tourists (Peleggi 1996). Since then, Rattanakosin has become one of Bangkok’s most important attractions for both domestic and foreign tourists. For the past three decades, it has been presented as the city’s only urban heritage, with an emphasis on the Grand Palace and some important temples that are open to tourists.

Following the Master Plan of Conservation and Development of Rattanakosin, twenty urban design projects were introduced to romanticize old Bangkok by bringing it back to the beginning of the twentieth century. All development in this area is geared toward tourism and the representation of national pride in important historic structures. However, many writers have discussed the difficulties in implementing the master plan and its negative impacts (for example, Askew and Logan 1994; Askew 2002; Tiamsoon 2009; Herzfeld 2010; Herzfeld 2012; Chatri 2012). For example, according to the master plan, government departments and universities on the waterfront or near the Grand Palace had to make (subsidized) moves to the outskirts of Bangkok to reduce the volume of traffic in Rattanakosin. Some of the historic buildings that they left, such as the office of the Ministry of Commerce, were subsequently converted into museums and other tourism facilities. The traffic congestion quickly resumed, exacerbated by the rows of tourist buses.

Askew writes about the master plan, “The conflicts which have emerged have raised critical questions about the character of the city, its future, and the authority of the state
to determine the cultural significance of place and intervene in the landscape” (2002, 304). He contends that the effort to preserve Rattanakosin ignores the true nature of Thai urban life. Through his study on Banglamphu (1993), he underscores the contribution of traditional neighborhoods in inner Bangkok to the city’s sociocultural character. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Banglamphu was one of the major commercial areas in Bangkok. Despite substantial changes in the physical condition and economy of Rattanakosin, Banglamphu survives today with some new tourism-related activities.

However, not all historic communities are able to keep up with the pace of change. Herzfeld (2010) has studied the case of the Mahakan Fortress community, focusing on the use of history in the claim of heritage significance. The community is under the threat of eviction but has been fighting against the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) with strong support from some renowned local and international scholars. Herzfeld claims that he tries to “view the entire Rattanakosin Island Project from the perspective of some of its economically least privileged residents” (262). As the community occupies space beside a historically important wall constructed under King Rama I, which is today a key element of old Bangkok, “officials and local residents disagree about what [the heritage] significance is” (Herzfeld 2014, 286). Herzfeld explains that the government considers the site “a central element in the celebration of dynastic continuity and authority, while the residents primarily view it as their home and increasingly see themselves as occupying it in the name of the larger Thai polity (and, for the most part, as citizens known for their loyalty to the throne)” (286). Today, through architecture, cultural activities, and storytelling, the community presents to the public its history going back to the reign of King Nangklaos (Rama III), “a strategic focus” that Herzfeld believes “gave the residents the cultural capital they needed to carry their cause into the public arena” (2010, 263). However, those who dispute the residents’ claims question their right to this history, on the factual grounds of when their families variously came to live at the site. Herzfeld concludes that the case of the Mahakan Fortress community presents two persistent issues: the implications of heritage versus housing for urban policy throughout Thailand, and the tension between legal and pragmatic concerns in assessing the rights associated with being a Thai citizen (2014, 299–300).

As for Rattanakosin’s private properties, the Crown Property Bureau (CPB), which is the major landlord, plays a leading role in their development. According to the master plan, a number of CPB-owned shop-houses in Rattanakosin will be torn down to give more open space to the registered temples and palaces. After decades of failure in implementing the master plan because of opposition from locals, CPB recently changed its strategy to avoid criticism from the affected tenants. The shop-houses on Na Phra Lan Road, in front of the Grand Palace, were renovated to their original state of some hundred years ago. The Na Phra Lan Historic Shophouses project later won an honorable mention at the 2011 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation, contributing to CPB’s reputation. The tenants and CPB copaid the conservation costs of the project, which focused on the physical condition of the buildings. The intangible
aspects of the place, such as the historical atmosphere derived from traditional activities, are disappearing as tourism-oriented groups take over the original retail spaces. Other CPB-owned shop-houses are currently following the same pattern, inviting new gentrification.

This CPB investment is one of the first efforts to renovate private properties listed as national monuments. The whole of Rattanakosin was designated as a conservation area, but with different height controls in different places, so new development is allowed in some areas. However, there have been only a few major changes, since most of the roads in Rattanakosin were built on top of the canal network and are too narrow to serve a high-rise or large-scale building. Therefore, most of Rattanakosin adaptively reuses historic buildings to accommodate new tourism-related activities, with the Grand Palace area and Rachadamnoen Road as the center of tourism development (Jakkamon 2003).

I have written elsewhere (Tiamsoon and Akagawa 2012b) that old Bangkok comprises both Rattanakosin and the area around the designated conservation zone, including the part known as Chinatown. Chinatown’s history can be traced back to the beginning of the Chakri dynasty, and its heritage architecture was built in the late nineteenth century, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). While Rattanakosin is kept frozen in time to attract foreign tourists, other parts of old Bangkok are being driven to modernize. The decision to conserve only Rattanakosin as national heritage left other parts of old Bangkok under the threat of new development.

**BANGKOK’S CHINATOWN**

Based on historical evidence, people from China went to Siam, the former name of Thailand, for centuries, since at least the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767), as merchants and laborers and settled particularly along the waterway toward Ayutthaya. They have been called Sino-Thai, overseas Chinese, and part of the Chinese diaspora. In Bangkok, many Chinese lived along the Chao Phraya River since before the Chakri dynasty. When the Grand Palace was built, they were ordered to move south, to live near Chakkrawat Temple and Sampeng Temple (Nangnoi 1991). Consequently, Sampeng is understood as the Chinatown of Bangkok and is “one of the oldest, largest, and most prosperous” (Van Roy 2007, 5) overseas Chinese settlements.

The most important development of Bangkok’s Chinatown can be traced back to 1862, when King Mongkut built Charoenkrung Road from Wat Pho—also called the Temple of the Reclining Buddha, next to the Grand Palace—to southern Bangkok, where the Western settlements were concentrated. After King Chulalongkorn came back from Singapore in 1871, two-story shop-houses like the Sino-Portuguese ones in Singapore were built along the road. Today these remain as the key characteristic of the community. Also in 1871, a Chinese temple called Wat Leng Noei Yi was built in the middle of the area. The number of Chinese people in Bangkok’s Chinatown kept increasing because of the tram development in 1887.
Understanding Chinatown requires examining not only the built environment but also its historical and sociocultural aspects; as Joseph Lee suggests, “Chinatown is a very flexible idea, rather than a territory or space” (quoted in Volkwein 2007, 8). In 1957, G. William Skinner, a professor of anthropology at Cornell University, published *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, which underscores the migration of Chinese people to Thailand since before the seventeenth century. Skinner believed the Chinese immigrants, mainly Teochew, Hakka, Hokkien, and Guangdong speakers, had adjusted to Thai society principally because of the country’s assimilation policy (discussed below). Sino-Thai identity, which is neither Thai nor Chinese (Chanwit 1986, 23), appeared after the Ayutthaya period. In the seventeenth century, the influence of the Chinese was more than that of other foreigners, as the Siamese did not see them as foreigners (Sarasas 1942, 49, quoted in Skinner 1957, 11).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some Teochew speakers settled in Bangkok. Skinner pointed out that of the Chinese people in Siam, more than 95 percent were from Guangdong and Fujian, and they spoke five main Chinese dialects, Guangdong, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan, and Teochew (sometimes explained as four groups, as Teochew is similar to Hokkien). The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw an influx of Chinese immigrants into Siam. The total number of Chinese immigrants fluctuated between 0.44 and 3 million per year from 1822 to 1916. Based on *China Trade Returns, 1882–1917* and *Chinese Customs Decennial Reports, 1902–1911* and *1912–1921*, Skinner calculated that approximately fifty thousand Chinese people embarked for other countries each year from 1906 to 1917 at Swatow, a port city on the eastern coast of Guangdong. He also estimated that about 1.5 million Chinese people migrated to Siam from 1882 to 1917. In 1957 the Chinese population in Thailand was approximately 2.3 million, comprising 1.3 million Teochew, 370,000 Hakka, 278,000 Hainan, 162,000 Guangdong, and 162,000 Hokkien speakers. Contributing to the sharp increase in the number of immigrants were the development of the steamship and the subsequent price competition among shipping companies, the growing demand for laborers in the rice export business in Siam, and food shortages in Swatow and Hainan. Since most Chinese immigrants came to Siam with the hope of building up a fortune, they spent as little as possible and, unsurprisingly, worked much harder than the locals. Sa-nga Kanchanakphan (1977) wrote that Chinese people did any job that Thai people would not.

Skinner commented that such a working attitude was completely different from that of Thai people in general, who tended to have no ambition and did not care about wealth. Due to their country’s plentiful natural resources, many Thai do not see the necessity of saving money or having a business. While Chinese people gradually took over the economy and production factors including land, Thai people preferred to be public servants. Strong relationships between these groups contributed to the growth of Chinese businesses. For example, although American and British businessmen had established rice mills in Siam since 1858, by 1912 there were only two left, while the number of Chinese rice mills was more than fifty.
Sampeng was the center of Chinese Bangkok, with many types of goods and densely built shop-houses. After Charoenkrung Road, called the New Road by Westerners, was built, warehouses and piers were also developed. Chinese merchants started to import Western products, including technological goods. As a result, Chinese people dominated most retail businesses in Bangkok, as they did in other major cities of the country. Around the mid-nineteenth century, many Chinese migrants went to Siam to work as skilled and unskilled laborers. Many were technicians and craftsmen, for example blacksmiths, tailors, or shoemakers. Each Chinese ethnic group lived together and had different kinds of expertise. Teochew and Hokkien speakers were merchants, tax farmers, pawnshop owners, and workers in rice mills, sawmills, restaurants, and hotels. Hakka speakers tended to be vendors, craftsmen, and tailors, while Hainan speakers were street vendors and worked in agricultural and fishery businesses.

All segments of the economy from retail to import-export businesses were in Chinese hands. By the end of the twentieth century, Bangkok’s Chinatown enjoyed a dual reputation as a center of commerce and a center of gray entertainment, with gambling houses, the Green Light District (a red-light district), dancing clubs, and so on (Van Beek 1999, 35). Wright and Breakspear (1903) wrote about Chinatown as a main commercial area of Bangkok, where opium, theaters, nightclubs, and gambling houses could easily be found. Sa-nga (1977) explained his feeling as a person from another Thai province that living in Bangkok was like living in China, as all food and other goods could be bought from Chinese merchants there. In the seventeenth century, Portugal and subsequently Great Britain occupied major Asian cities and dominated the whole market from India to Burma, Malaya, and China (Krairoek 2010). It is likely that the network of Chinese commerce and migration in the Portuguese and British colonies contributed to the Chinese influence over the Thai economy. For instance, opium was promoted throughout the colony of the Straits Settlements. It subsequently spread to Chinese neighborhoods in Thailand and became one of the largest sources of tax revenue by the end of the nineteenth century.

The growing Chinese influence in Thai society is also partly a result of the assimilation policy pushed by the government via various legal instruments. In 1913 a law was enacted that gave Siamese nationality to all Chinese people born in Siam. After the 1932 coup and the end of the absolute monarchy, the military government tried to get rid of foreign influence with various actions, such as establishing state-owned companies to take over Chinese businesses and prohibiting foreigners from holding certain jobs. Some Chinese companies were forced into bankruptcy. Consequently, many Chinese immigrants decided to apply for Siamese nationality and adopt Thai culture. Moreover, after the political revolution the government tried to shrink the Thai unemployment rate by making some industries hire Thai laborers instead of Chinese immigrants. In 1936, a law regarding business registration forced all shops to change their business names to Thai.

The legacy of the assimilation policy has provided Bangkok’s Chinatown with exceptional characteristics. However, similarities between this and other Chinatowns, such as
overcrowded and substandard living conditions, are clear. To explain these similarities and differences, it is useful to mention several renowned Chinatowns. For example, San Francisco's Chinatown was once known as an overcrowded, mysterious, and dangerous area. Its infamous reputation spread throughout the United States from the time of the gold rush to after World War II. A series of liberalization policies, such as a presidential directive in 1962 allowing refugees from China to enter the United States, contributed to an increase in Chinese Americans. Moreover, resulting from the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, several pieces of legislation, including the Immigration Act of 1965, raised ethnic, racial, and gender awareness. Foreign-born Chinese were eligible to become American citizens and the mysterious Chinatown became a significant area of the city, manifesting America’s appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity (Choy 2012).

In New York, some Chinese Americans have lived outside the influence of American society in a self-contained, small-business economy (Kwong 1987) that has become the financial and commercial center of overseas Chinese, supported by investments from Hong Kong and other major overseas Chinese. New York’s Chinatowns include the downtown cluster of relatively poor and uneducated refugees from mainland China and one uptown, of well-educated Taiwanese who gradually assimilate into middle-class America (Kwong 1987; Volkwein 2007).

Most Chinese migrants to Siam went to work as laborers. Some were able to set up small businesses, which they successfully expanded to occupy a large part of the Thai economy. Coughlin (1960, 188–89) argued that the Chinese in Siam did not monopolize commerce and less than a third were aliens, while the majority were native-born citizens. He pointed out that “the Chinese group is culturally and socially homogeneous” (188). However, Skinner commented that Coughlin’s argument was based largely on the ethnographic information of the first- and second-generation Chinese immigrants, while assimilation was complete by the fourth generation (1961, 607). From the end of World War II, Bangkok experienced rapid population growth and saw “a gradual expansion of the Chinese and Sino-Thai entrepreneurial elite and the professional middle class” (Askew 1994, 8).

Although Skinner saw Thailand’s assimilation policy as quite successful in keeping its multicultural society in order, it is likely that many Chinese people there retained their identity and did not adopt Thai culture as much as is believed. By the mid-twentieth century, the differences between Chinese and Thai values in Thailand were noticeable. For example, wealth and business leadership defined Chinese social status, while Thai values focused on the spiritual development of the individual and a nonmaterialistic ideal (Coughlin 1960). Today it appears that capitalist ideals, which are very close to these Chinese ideals, have considerably replaced such Thai values. In Chinese society in Bangkok, traditional beliefs have also declined. For example, according to locals, they respect a person because of what he or she has done rather than just for being a senior or wealthy. Moreover, the traditional Chinese festivals have been simplified to accommodate modern lifestyles.
Located in one of the most expensive areas of the country, Charoenchai, whose inhabitants call themselves Siamese Chinese, is one of the remaining historic communities in Bangkok’s Chinatown. After the 1932 coup, most land in old Bangkok became private property. As for Charoenchai, its land and shop-houses had been given to Prince Paribatra Sukhumbhand in 1892. After the prince died, in 1944, the property right transferred to his son, who died in 1959. Then the ownership passed to the prince’s daughter-in-law, who established the Chumbhot-Pantip Foundation (CPF) in 1968. Since then, the land and shop-houses at Charoenchai have belonged to CPF, whose current president is Sukhumbhand Paripatra, also the current governor of Bangkok.

Five important religious places surround Charoenchai: Wat Leng Noei Yi, Guangdong Shrine, Li Ti Biew Shrine, Leng Buay Eah Shrine, and Tai Hong Gong Shrine. In older days, these not only were spiritual places but also served as associations where Chinese immigrants could get together and help one another. Teochew craftsmen built Wat Leng Noei Yi in the southern Chinese architectural style. It is considered one of the most beautiful Mahayana Buddhist temples in Thailand. Built by immigrants from Guangdong in 1880, Guangdong Shrine was used as a secret association’s meeting place. Later a hospital was established there and provided health services to anyone, regardless of nationality or social class. Particularly after World War II, this hospital has helped thousands of Chinese immigrants who got trachoma or diarrhea during the trip to Thailand. Built in 1902, Li Ti Biew Shrine belongs to Hakka speakers. It was rebuilt in 1992 because of damage from a fire in 1988. The fire stopped right next to Charoenchai, so many residents believe the community has a sacred guardian. Leng Buay Eah Shrine was built in Teochew style in 1658, during the Ayutthaya period. It is possibly the oldest shrine in Chinatown. Tai Hong Gong Shrine was built in 1910, when the Tai Hong Gong undertaker team was established to deal with the bodies of poor or unidentified people. Later this became the Hua Kiew Po Tek Tuang Foundation, which continues this mission today.

Given that shrines and a temple surround Charoenchai, since at least the beginning of the twentieth century the community has served as a center of traditional goods relating to Chinese festivals. Artisans who escaped from China during the Cultural Revolution and settled in Charoenchai have considerably contributed to this development. Most of the traditional goods here are handmade and cannot be found in other places. There is a saying among regular customers: “You can find any traditional goods at Charoenchai, but if you don’t, it means there is no such thing.” These words reflect the custom of a shop recommending nearby stores to customers until they get all the goods they are looking for. Such practices create a network of traditional businesses and a communal economic bond, which are rarely seen in modern commerce.

Charoenchai is a traditional commercial area of two- and three-story historic shop-houses. In 2003 the plan to extend the train network to cover all nodes of the Bangkok
metropolitan region was launched. The extended lines have 136 stations, including forty-five underground, three of which will be constructed in old Bangkok, including Wat Mangkorn station in Chinatown. This new transportation has invited large-scale development, which led to a surge of evictions in the communities along the train lines. As for Charoenchai, the development pressure there has piled up, since the landlord terminated all long-term rental contracts in 2008. The residents, whose families have lived in this area for generations, were given monthly contracts instead, making them feel insecure. In many cases the rental rate considerably increased and the tenants had no room for negotiation.

In late 2008, CPF and CPB set up a joint venture called Chinatown Community Development Co. Ltd. (CCD) to develop the land around Wat Mangkorn station, including Charoenchai. In 2009 CCD commissioned the Arsom Silp Institute of the Arts, a private architectural school, to make a master development plan. Unfortunately, soon after Sukhumbhand, the president of CPF, was reelected as governor of BMA in 2009, an architectural plan of an eighteen-floor building was leaked and spread throughout the area. The residents of Bhutaret, a community on the other side of Charoenkrung Road from Charoenchai, protested the development plan, as they believed the Arsom Silp Institute had tried to deceive them. Later, the institute left the project to ease the tension. Then CCD commissioned the Consortium for Action Planning (CAP), comprising academics from various universities, as a replacement. Contrary to the Arsom Silp approach, CAP proposed a bottom-up approach in master plan making. Still, it took almost half year to rebuild trust between the study team and the locals. Secure in their strong connections with both the federal government and BMA (Porphant 2008), in July 2010 the landlords signed an agreement with the Mass Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand (MRTA) to build a gate connecting their land and the underground station. While the landlords use government mechanisms to their advantage, the Charoenchai residents have tried to deploy their cultural capital as a strategic resource.

The concept of cultural capital has been widely discussed in recent years. Rizzo and Throsby define it as “an asset that embodies a store of cultural value, separable from whatever economic value it might possess; in combination with other inputs the asset gives rise to a flow of goods and services over time which may also have cultural value (i.e. which are themselves cultural goods and services)” (2006, 987). Cultural capital includes historic buildings, material culture, festivals, music, and language. Through tourism-related businesses and identity presentation, cultural capital contributes to the economy of cities (Zukin 1995). Jaime Lerner, a former mayor of Curitiba, the capital of Paraná, Brazil, and a former president of the International Union of Architects, emphasizes that the success of a city has three dimensions: mobility, sustainability, and identity (2005). He further explains that identity is a major factor of quality of life that brings citizens self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Urban heritage is an identity for a city (Eco 1986; Duncan 1990; Barnes and Duncan 1992; Ashworth 1998) and a symbolic meaning of economic, political, social, and cultural issues (Daniel 1993). It involves the shared
memory of a common past (Gillis 1994; Woolf 1996) that today’s people have chosen to conserve (Graham 1998, 48). Thus, it provides locals with civic pride (Greffe 2004; Yuen 2006) and can promote the economic development of cities (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990; Prentice 1993; Morris 1994; Ashworth and Larkham 1994; Herbert 1995).

In the case of Charoenchai, the heritage value embedded in the community’s place, traditions, and daily life manifests its cultural capital. The residents decided to present Charoenchai as a Chinese culture learning center to raise its value in the public awareness. Accordingly, cultural displays, such as a festival and a local museum in a shop-house, were organized. In 2011 the community received a small amount of funding from the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights to repaint shop-houses and repair the building housing the museum. Around the same time, the construction of the extended train line started. In September of that year, the Charoenchai community held a Moon Festival, which had disappeared for years. It included a seminar on traditional goods used in the festival, organized to underscore the expertise of the community. Subsequently, the Charoenchai Conservation and Rehabilitation Group was formed. This group aims to find an appropriate approach to developing the community, based on its cultural capital. The members voice their thoughts at public forums, such as at the public hearing of the new Bangkok land use plan.

The local museum is still the first and only community space in Chinatown designed and operated by area residents. Its contents give an overview of the community’s tangible and intangible heritage. Once visitors step out of the museum, they immediately experience the real things. As the museum began to attract visitors and to appear in media, in March 2012 CPF contacted CAP saying it wanted the room back. Apparently, CAP had failed to convince the landlords to work with the locals. This incident sparked opposition in social media. As a result, a delegate of the CPF board asked the community to hold a meeting, at which he explained that CPF has never tried to close down the museum.

In 2013 Bangkok launched its new land use plan with little involvement from locals. The plan allows large-scale buildings within a radius of five hundred meters from any train station. As the usual distance between stations is about one kilometer, this means new development can take place almost anywhere along the train lines. In 2012 the residents of Charoenchai and some other communities who opposed the land use plan brought the case to the Office of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. They argued that their communities are just as significant as other parts of old Bangkok and thus that large-scale buildings that will affect these communities should be prohibited and the special permit for building near train stations should be reconsidered. The commission sent inquiries to the competent authorities, such as the Fine Arts Department, which is in charge of heritage value assessment. However, the BMA Department of City Planning and other relevant authorities did not respond to the opposition, and the land use plan was enacted without any change. Today the construction of the Wat Mangkorn station is in progress and the future of Charoenchai is unclear.
CONCLUSION

Bangkok has always been a multicultural city. The initial arrangement of different groups of people and the major physical developments in Bangkok were the consequence of government policies. In the past, Western technology and the political revolution in 1932 were the major incidents impacting the physical development of the country. For reasons probably including the limitations in the building code, old Bangkok has been able to maintain its built environment. However, the forthcoming extended train network and the new land use plan may well break through these obstacles, inviting large-scale developments to be erected in old Bangkok. Under this circumstance, historic communities are put at risk of eviction, and thus the recognition of local heritage as part of the identity of the larger community is of paramount importance.

Today Rattanakosin, the privileged royal area of the city, is acknowledged as Thai cultural heritage and the image of old Bangkok. Although its physical condition is well maintained, tourism-related businesses have steadily replaced traditional activities there. As the value of cultural heritage in Asia depends much on intangible aspects (Howe and Logan 2002), ways of life, such as traditional commerce, are undoubtedly important. In this regard, Van Beek questions the master plan and new development: “Can we realistically ever expect to see the sidewalks cleared of vendors, as municipal authorities have tried [to do] for decades? On the other hand, would [we] want to, given the liveliness and human flavor they lend to city streets, a vibrancy not found in shopping malls?” (1999, 125). It is a challenge for the local residents to maintain their sociocultural characteristics while keeping up with the pace of change in city development.

I have argued that old Bangkok comprises both Rattanakosin and Chinatown. Unfortunately, the heritage value of the latter is not appropriately recognized. While tourism is a national agenda, the government has not tried hard enough to protect historic communities, which should be considered one of the country’s main resources. The key issue in many historic communities in Thailand is that the residents are just tenants. They have no right over the lands or structures. In Chinatown, the locals have gone through many hard times, such as suppression during the military governments. It is especially unfair to drive them out after they have turned the decaying land into a very profitable area.

The sociocultural condition of Bangkok’s Chinatown shows that the success of the assimilation policy is questionable, as the residents still maintain Chinese culture and consider themselves Chinese descendants. It is likely that this policy led to an ignorance of the cultural rights of ethnically non-Thai people. Regardless of a few successful Chinese people, government agencies consider Chinese immigrants a working class. Over decades of being Thai, Chinese people in Thailand kept their cultural identity, seen in a number of Chinese cultural practices, but the government holds this identity in very low regard. Urban development and city planning, for instance, rarely take Chinese sociocultural characteristics into account.
The construction of the new transport system is, in a way, a mechanism used by the government to legitimize an eviction. It is likely that most people in Thai society accept all so-called public work without considering the impact on locals. They tend to see the affected people, such as the residents of Charoenchai, as an obstacle of the development. The cultural rights and heritage value of the historic communities are frequently ignored.

Today history and cultural heritage are considered tools for building the self-esteem of locals. In the case of Charoenchai, the community uses heritage to present its cultural identity and to claim its cultural rights. The strategy is to use not only the history but also the material culture and the intangible heritage. Although it is not as wealthy as other communities in Chinatown, its economy is not in decline. Therefore, economic rehabilitation and tourism promotion, usually used in other historic communities, might not be the formula for Charoenchai.

Charoenchai is a good example of a historic community whose significance lies in not only the built environment but also the intangible aspects. So far, it is the only historic community in old Bangkok that has emphasized the value of its intangible heritage rather than focusing purely on historic buildings. The growing public interest in this case implies that the wise way to perpetuate Charoenchai’s value is to keep the traditional activities, the contributing environment, and the residents in place. To do so will require more than the government’s promotion of tourism and the CPB’s program of building renovation. As the case of Charoenchai makes clear, the most valuable components of historic communities are not always physical elements but rather the residents who are the carriers of the culture. Thus, the best way to recognize local heritage might be just to let the residents continue their lifestyle which has been perpetuated for generations.

NOTE

This chapter is a result of my research titled “Heritage and Socio-cultural Situation of Bangkok Chinatown.” I sincerely thank the Charoenchai Conservation and Rehabilitation Group and the Charoenchai residents, particularly Sirinee Uriranont, Chatchai Termteerapoj, Thanda Saraphan, and Bhumsit Phuritongrat, for all their assistance.

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Some years ago I dropped by a branch office of the Hanoi City Planning Bureau to visit a family friend who was employed there. What was on display in the office seemed to give some idea of what urban planning in Vietnam entails. Covering blackboards and desks were maps, charts, and sketches outlining and detailing the city’s morphology in black-inked lines and circles and trunks of different colors. The office workers, all male engineers and architects, explained that they were a part of a larger team that dealt with models and followed a strategy of spatial and functional specialization. They used certain analytical frameworks ranging from what they called “central-place theory” to social-area analyses. In their vision, the ideal outcome of their work would be a master plan for Hanoi as a modern megacity consisting of east-west and north-south axes; zonal divisions; political, cultural, and commercial centers; and multiple nuclear developments.

As the employees of this office proudly saw it, their work was not different from that of their Western colleagues. In the modern world, urban planning is indeed commonly portrayed as a secular process based on technical and financial expertise and arguments. It is the heroic efforts of engineers, architects, and construction workers, combined with the machinations of city bureaucrats and project developers, that result in urban renewal and urban expansion. With the gradual urbanization of human society over the past century and urbanization’s acceleration in Asia over the past decades, urban planning is at the heart of social transformation. Whatever the theoretical difficulties with the notion
of modernization, it seems least problematic here. The financial and political aspects can be understood from the perspective of political economy, while the technical aspects require a scientific mind-set.

What anthropologists like James Holston have been pointing out, however, is that the implementation of urban planning often meets all kinds of unexpected (unplanned) realities on the ground.¹ The clash between the vision of planners and the perspectives of those who are living in these visions is particularly striking in cases of radical modernist planning, for example, Oscar Niemeyer’s Brasília or Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh. From this work it emerges that the rationality and functionalism of urban planning are in fact part of a visionary exercise that can be called utopian, metaphysical, or even magical. The extent to which urban planners are able to ignore or dismiss social reality is an indication of the aspirational nature of their endeavors.

It is striking how magical and religious the facts on the ground are that urban planners often encounter. One of the foundational ideas in Emile Durkheim’s sociology of religion is that the sacred and the profane are spatially separated,² but in fact that dichotomy (like many of those discussed in the introduction to this volume) is much less clear than he presumed. It is precisely the mixture of sacred and profane in urban space that urban planning must confront. Cemeteries, religious shrines, haunted places—subterranean forces are part of reality, but often a repressed reality in the master plan.

Another admixture of sacred and profane is speculation. Because of the large amounts of money that are involved in urban planning and project development, the spoils are enormous. Urban planning is an arena of great speculation, in which information is a crucial asset. Given the inequality of access to information and the shifting nature of political decision making, no one can be certain about where things are heading. This fundamental uncertainty can be addressed in a variety of ways, but one set of possible approaches can be called religious or magical. In passing we may suggest that there is in fact no distinction between religion and magic in a formal sense, although such a distinction may play a role in internal debates in the society we study. Participation in lotteries, buying shares or land at the advice of religious specialists, practices of self-cultivation, prayer, ritual worship of deities, Ponzi schemes, investment in houses, and project development are all speculative practices that cannot be easily divided into secular versus religious or religious versus magical.³ In Asia the opening up of markets previously highly regulated by state socialism has created a feverish atmosphere of opportunity, luck, and misfortune. Everyone, from high to low, is in some way participating in urban aspirations that are tied to urban planning.

The above goes to say that urban planning, despite its image, cannot be separated from various forms of utopianism. Its image of engineering, overcoming technical obstacles, and dealing with recalcitrant populations, all in the name of progress, hides the magic of power. This is clear from the history of master plans in South Asia that show an enormous confidence on the part of urban planners that their spatial interventions can create a “modern” society without caste or religion.⁴ Planning is thus as magical as some of the obstacles, resistances, and facts on the ground that it encounters.
Like elsewhere, urban planning in Hanoi may appear technical, scientific, and secular in its birthplaces, the offices of professional planning bureaus, such as the one I visited. On leaving its birthplace, any master plan can be subjected to maneuvers ranging from economic to political and cultural. Hanoi’s cityscape, as William Logan clearly shows for the period between 1955 and 1990, can be read as a text that discusses political, economic, social, and cultural processes and the functions of culture itself. In this chapter, I take a closer look at another dimension of urban planning practice in Hanoi today, its religious and utopian nature, using two of many episodes that occurred in the process of realizing a new master plan to make it a modern megacity appropriate to its role as Vietnam’s political and cultural capital. Occult powers coming into play while one of the city’s major waterways is unclogged and speculation about the site of an ancient altar for heaven and earth being enough to change a flyover crucial to one of the city’s most important traffic arteries are but two of the examples that illustrate the translation of cosmological, political, and cultural struggles into urban planning in Hanoi today. By placing the discourse of Hanoi urban planning in a theoretical debate about urban religiosity, I argue that contrary to what is often said of urban planning as a rational, technological, and modern state-directed secular project, the process of renewing urban space in Hanoi can provide insight into grassroots understandings of sacred geography, national history, and political transition in contemporary Vietnam.

WRESTLING WITH GODS ON THE TO LICH RIVER

Although retired and in his late sixties, Mr. Tiến was still active as a consultant for big construction projects, and as a substantial side activity he headed a spirit-possession group. There are hundreds of such groups in Vietnam today, but Mr. Tiến heads one of the best educated and affluent. His group started with mediums who become possessed by spirits, that of the “father of Vietnam,” Ho Chi Minh, being the most recent. Recently it added scientifically interested and spiritually engaged outsiders like Mr. Tiến who believe in the existence of spirits and their importance for contemporary life. There are dozens of such groups operating in Hanoi alone, and the number of leading scientists in them is striking.

Coming from an old, influential intellectual family in Hanoi that chose the right side of the revolution, Mr. Tiến and his sisters were among “the hundred red seeds” (trăm hạt giống đỏ) selected by the Vietnamese Communist Party to be sent to Russia for educational and ideological “germination” in the early 1960s. A little more than two decades later, Mr. Tiến had obtained an MA in civil engineering in Cuba and a PhD in foundation engineering in Sweden. In the mid-1990s, all his education paid off; he became one of the most sought-after experts for the reconstruction of Vietnam. He held many prominent positions—for instance, he was a full professor at the prestigious Hanoi University of Technology, the vice–director general of the Hanoi Construction Corporation, and the founder and first CEO of VIC, a large Hanoi-based construction firm.
In 2001, VIC won a big contract to renovate a large part of Hanoi’s waterways. Hanoi, literally “inside rivers,” is also nicknamed Hà Lôi (Flooded). To deal with the city’s increasingly unmanageable flooding and other water-related problems, one of the first acts of urban renewal at the beginning of the 2000s was to improve the flow of the major waterways. One part of this project was to dredge, unclog, and embank To Lich River, a major waterway of Hanoi since time immemorial, which in the past few decades had become a long, stagnant open sewer. The task was given to VIC’s Unit 12, under the direct management of Mr. Cường, a colleague and good friend of VIC’s vice-president. In September 2001, Mr. Cường’s team began dredging the part of the riverbed by Nghia Do ward in Cau Giay district. Things started to get spooky when the workers unearthed eight sets of human bones and various other relics, such as ivories, bones and teeth of horses and buffalo, metal weapons, knives, needles, more than a dozen small ancient incense bowls, and numerous porcelains, some of which appeared to be from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Near where the bones were unearthed, they also found many poles cut from tropical hardwood, driven into the river bottom in an arrangement of short trigrams. Around when they found the poles, one of the team’s drilling trucks was suddenly pulled into To Lich’s black water. The driver survived by jumping out in time but in the afternoon was suddenly hit by a severe epileptic attack. He got better only after his family brought offerings to and burned incense at the riverside to ask for forgiveness. Terrified by this development, Mr. Cường got Mr. Tiến’s permission to go to Hai Phong Province (one hundred kilometers from Hanoi) to request the help of a famous Daoist master, who reluctantly came to conduct a quick ceremony and then quickly ran off, and a few months later barely escaped death from a sudden illness. In the following days, all of the unit’s workers were the victims of epileptic attacks and nightmares, and then one disaster after another struck their families, which prompted most of them to quit the project. When mysterious and tragic accidents happened to many newly recruited workers, Mr. Tiến and the other leaders of VIC had no choice but to stop the project. They then sponsored an academic conference right on the bank of the river to seek answers from prominent historians, archaeologists, and geomancers, as well as the director of the Hanoi Historical Museum.

After two full days of discussion, the conference yielded no official conclusion. Yet most participants agreed with the late professor Trần Quốc Vương, at the time the most prominent historian of Vietnamese culture and history. According to him, what was unearthed from the riverbed was the eight divinatory trigrams (trận đồ bát quái) of the I Ching (Book of Changes, or Kinh Dịch in Vietnamese), laid out to battle a supreme vital force. Since the location of the dredging coincided with the West Gate of the ancient Đại La (a former name of Hanoi) citadel, these diagrams could have been the ones laid down by Cao Biền, the regional military governor (tiệt đô sĩ) of Vietnam in the ninth century. Vương warned the construction company that thousands of ghost soldiers (âm binh) remained around this spot and could be ruthless when it came to punishing anyone who attempted to disturb the trigrams.
Although VIC’s leaders accepted Vuro’s conclusion, they had no choice but to continue the dredging, because of the binding contract that they had signed with the project funders (the Vietnamese government and a number of international donors from Japan and South Korea). Besides trying to improve the technical and medical support for the newly recruited workers, Mr. Tiến went in person to request the help of Superior Venerable Thích Viên Thành, a Buddhist monk famous for his geomantic skill. After a careful examination of the situation, the monk said that he would do what he was obligated to do despite foreseeing the tragic consequence that he would suffer. Three months after conducting an elaborate ritual on the construction site, the monk passed away without any illness.

Since mysterious and tragic mishaps continued to happen, Mr. Tiến and Mr. Cưòng sought help from Master Mào, a nationally famous spirit medium and a powerful exorcist of the Four Palace religion (Tú Phú, an indigenized branch of Daoism in Vietnam). After many requests, in August 2002 Master Mào finally agreed to help and conducted a ceremony praying for forgiveness and peace, which was so elaborate that it became a public spectacle. After the ceremony, Master Mào warned Mr. Cưòng and Mr. Tiến that this ritual could only help them to complete the project but could not prevent the misfortunes that would befall Mr. Cưòng and his family. Even he himself, Master Mào said, might be badly affected by conducting it.

After the ceremony, things seemed to develop just as he predicted. The construction did progress and was completed by the end of 2002. Yet things started to turn grim for Master Mào, Mr. Cưòng, and his family. After suffering many fainting spells, Master Mào ended up bedridden in a number of hospitals for a while. Mr. Cưòng had a succession of bad economic years and almost went bankrupt. His perfectly healthy father suddenly dropped dead, and his brothers and sister fell victim to various tragic accidents. In early 2007, Bảo vệ Pháp luật (Protection of the laws), a journal that belongs to the Supreme Court, published a series of articles named “Wrestling with Gods on the To Lich River” (“Thần vật ở sông Tô Lịch”). When the series included Mr. Cưòng’s detailed and lengthy memoir, the stories of how gods reside in To Lich River and, at that particular conjunction, were punishing those who disturbed their millennial siesta went so viral that they prompted the Vietnamese government to shut down the series and to fire the chief editor of the journal. A media storm, however, had already been set in motion. “Wrestling with Gods on the To Lich River” had become a popular entry in the Vietnamese Wikipedia, and thousands of hits appear when one puts this title in the Google search bar.

THE RISING DRAGON: SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND NATIONAL ASPIRATION

In reporting on VIC’s woes, the Vietnamese media discussed not just the spooky happenings around To Lich River but also Hanoi’s urban planning from the past to the present in relation to its sacred topography. The unearthing of human bones and relics and
the subsequent mishaps that construction Unit 12 suffered were, in the interpretation of most journalists and geomantic practitioners, yet more evidence of the sacredness of Hanoi topography, which cannot be violated at will.

Such a belief is comparable to the attribution of sacredness to many other ancient cities around the world. This is because ancient cities, as Mircea Eliade has explained, are often a reenactment of the mythical creation of the world. Many ancient Indian cities, for example, were designed in the shape of a mandala, replicating a cosmic image of the laws governing nature. China’s capital, Beijing, for centuries has been the cosmic center of China. The country is ruled from the Forbidden City, which is organized according to the feng shui principles of yin and yang. When the Communists took over, Mao Zedong personally decided to locate the government in the old city, making use of this ancient conception of the cosmic center but at the same time destroying its old buildings. We see here a form of iconoclasm that is quite common, namely the appropriation of a sacred place, accomplished by destroying the previous religion and arrogating its sacred power to the new religion. Although Mao’s Communist regime did effect a modern and significant restructuring of the traditional symbolism of the city by turning the east-west axis into Changan Boulevard, which passes in front of the Tiananmen gate, Mao’s mausoleum and the obelisk to the heroes of the Chinese Revolution were built on the old north-south axis in Tiananmen Square, acknowledging the symbolic importance of the older axially. This became the square where the party shows its ideological centrality—in the architecture, in the huge Mao portrait that dominates the square, and in the party’s regular manifestations, such as the Party Congress in the Great Hall of the People—but also, in 1989, the space for challenging that hegemony.

Cosmo-magical symbols gain importance in cities that become national capitals. This is because every great capital must somehow be presented as a universal center, a paradigm for the rest of the world. In an article comparing the designs of Washington DC and Beijing, Jeffrey Meyer shows that while the former at first glance appears to be the architectural expression of a secular government, it is on the contrary steeped in many levels of religious symbolism, the least interesting being its numerous churches, synagogues, and mosques. Although the original plan for Washington lacked the cosmic pretensions of Beijing, symbols have a way of straining toward what might be called their natural fulfillment. Eventually the city did acquire a kind of symbolic cosmic centering. The U.S. Geological Survey’s *Compendius Chart* showed the Capitol as the center not just of the nation but of the entire world. This drawing materialized the 1787 prophecy of Congressman James Wilson of Pennsylvania that America’s new federal government would “lay a foundation for erecting temples of Liberty in every part of the earth.” Thus, even though the United States capital is not a cosmic center in the archaic sense, it was seen as the moral center of the whole world.

As an ancient city and the capital of Vietnam, Hanoi is not an exception, as its builders have conceived of it from the start as a cosmological center not just of the country but sometimes also of the world. For example, Cao Biên, the alleged creator of the eight
divinatory diagrams found at the bottom of To Lich River in the story above, is said to have committed this geomantic act while he was the military governor of An Nam in the 860s once he realized the centrality of the Hanoi landscape, where all the universal vital energy comes together. It is important to note that because he is an extremely controversial character in early Vietnamese history, various legends depict Cao Biên in often totally opposite lights. Vietnamese historians throughout time have endured a love-hate relationship with this character. Some have praised him as the benevolent and protective founder of the Vietnamese nation, for he had the Dai La citadel built, which became the capital of independent Vietnam, and his geomantic skill helped to unify the north and south regions of Vietnam. Many others have denounced Cao Biên as a cunning and treacherous Han colonizer whose greed and ambition drove him to conduct geomantic hexing of the Vietnamese landscape that resulted in the greater vulnerability of the Viet people to Chinese colonization. These attitudes have changed and alternated in time. Keith Taylor argues that in the mid-nineteenth century, scholars and mandarins at the Hue court had a very positive opinion of Cao Biên.¹⁰ But today in certain social circles in Hanoi, his name is cursed every time someone wants to cite historical figures and events that are responsible for the country’s current problems.

The dominant current narrative about Cao Biên is that as a superbly knowledgeable and skillful Daoist master, he had from the start of his time in the south (Nan Yue, Nam Viet) detected the kingly potency (mach đế vương) of the Vietnamese landscape. He spent a great deal of time traveling up and down the land and recorded in a secret diary a map of the country’s dragon veins, through which flows the universal energy that can be tapped to advance a personal or national agenda. With such a map in his possession, Cao Biên’s ambition rose above being just the military governor of Vietnam. He now began to make plans to carve out a kingdom of his own, independent from the North. As the first step, he had the small rampart city called La Thanh enlarged, reconstructed, and renamed Dai (Greater) La Thanh. However, the construction always failed when it reached the city’s west gate, where To Lich encircled the outer wall. Being a skillful geomancer, Cao Biên quickly detected that the construction touched an extremely important dragon vein, where universal energy was channeled down from Tan Vien Mountain, just thirty kilometers to the west of Hanoi. This energy is vital to the prosperity of Hanoi, but since Cao Biên wanted to ensure his family’s future domination in this land, he could not allow it to run loose but had to hide it by the most effective geomancy. This meant severing the supply of vital energy to the Vietnamese nation and thus ensuring its long-term domination by China.

In a series of articles in various newspapers, on blogs, and even on the Hanoi municipal government’s website,¹¹ the architect and activist Trần Thanh Vân presented a map that she took from some French book (she did not give the reference) which shows that Hanoi is the place where the globe’s vital energies converge. She explained that this map displays the layout of the globe’s largest and most important dragon vein, which is itself in the shape of a dragon: the head rests on the Himalaya Mountains (8,848 meters high
at Mount Everest, their peak); the long body spreads along Tibet and down to India's border with China, then crosses the Yunnan Plateau, passing Fanxipan Peak of the Hoang Lien Son Mountain Range in Laochai Province; the tail spreads along the Red River delta before dipping into Halong Bay in the East Sea (South China Sea) to reach the deepest point of the vein, in Mindanao bay of the Philippines (10.8 kilometers deep). This dragon vein is said to be decisive to the fate of the various nations along it.

Geomancers and historians have pointed out that the ups and downs of Vietnam's history have always been connected to the different ways in which national leaders have recognized and treated its dragon veins. For example, as the legend goes, in 1010, after liberating Vietnam from China, Ly Cong Uan detected that the walled city Dai La, rebuilt by the aforementioned Cao Biên, as a seat of power would suit his ambition as the first king of the newly independent Great Viet (Đại Việt) kingdom. Although the folklore account tells us that it was the sight of a dragon taking off that prompted the king to found his new capital and name it Thang Long (Rising dragon), historians like Trần Quốc Vương and architects like Trần Thanh Văn, among many others, today explain the choice of location in geomantic terms. Hanoi, as they say, is at the center of the Red River delta and was in the middle of the nation at the time. According to the description of Ngô Nguyên Phi, a geomancer whom I interviewed in December 2012, the topography of the region gives Hanoi a “bowing mountains, converging rivers” position, which makes it an excellent kingly seat.

More important, just twenty-eight kilometers from Thang Long citadel is the Ba Vi Mountain, which suddenly emerges in the middle of the Red River plain to receive the energy sent down all the way from the Himalayas. According to Vietnamese popular folklore, Tần Viên Sơn Thánh, the patron god of the Vietnamese people, reigns on Ba Vi Mountain, from which he has protected the nation on numerous occasions, including an episode of punishing Cao Biên for his intrusive intervention in Vietnam. Yet by putting the eight divinatory trigrams in the river, Cao Biên was successful in cutting off part of the energy flows from Ba Vi Mountain to Hanoi. King Ly Cong Uan praised Cao Biên’s act and honored him as Cao Vương, the founder of the citadel, whose geomantic skill enabled its construction. But in the heat of today’s anti-China spirit, Vietnamese historians, geomancers, and spiritists all condemn this act as the first attempt by a foreign force to establish control over Vietnam. Cao Biên’s curse has had a long impact on Vietnam. Its clearest result is how it affects the flow of the vital geomantic air to Hanoi. Following the arrow pointing from Ba Vi Mountain to the Red River that has embraced Hanoi since time immemorial is West Lake, Thang Long’s pharynx, as Vietnamese geomancers call it. West Lake was connected to To Lich until the French colonial government covered part of the river with roads during an expansion of Hanoi. Such developments are now compared in partly environmental, partly geomantic terms with choking Hanoi, totally depriving it of its vital air.

Belief in geomantic crimes committed by a nation’s enemies is widespread in East Asia. Let me give only one, but significant, example—the controversy around the
preservation and renovation of Kyongbok Palace in Seoul. This was the place of residence of fifteen Korean kings and thus occupied a central position in Korean national history. Under Japanese colonial rule the place was partly torn down, and in front of it, the Japanese constructed a massive five-story, neo-Renaissance granite structure designed by a German architect. When it was completed, in 1926, the structure totally eclipsed what was left of the palace and was used as the Government-General Building of the Japanese Empire. After Korea gained its independence from Japan, in 1945, this was the Government Building of the Korean Republic, until 1983, when it turned into the National Museum Building. In 1993, President Kim Young Sam announced that the building, as a legacy of the colonial era, would be destroyed in 1995—the fiftieth anniversary of Korea’s liberation from the Japanese and the six hundredth anniversary of the completion of the original palace. Heated discussions over whether or not to demolish the palace immediately followed.

In the end, it was an assertion that the Government-General Building was the greatest geomantic crime committed by the Japanese that allowed the pro-demolitionists to win. The building sat on South Korea’s most important dragon vein. It included an enormous iron dome, which the Japanese supposedly used to block the energy flowing down from Pugak Mountain. Those who argued for demolition also pointed out the following. The building, when seen from above, looks like the Chinese character for “day,” nip in Japanese. Down the street was the rather oddly shaped City Hall, also built by the Japanese; seen from above, it looked like the Chinese character for “basic,” pon in Japanese. By combining the characters formed by Pugak Mountain with these, you got “Great Nippon” (Japan), smack in the heart of Seoul. In addition, geomancers claimed that two other major buildings erected by the Japanese—the Seoul Railway Station and the zoo and botanic garden at Ch’anggyong Palace—were also placed to disrupt the flow of Qi through the city. When the iron dome was torn off the former Government-General Building amid the thunderous applause of people on South Korea National Liberation Day, August 15, 1995, nine thousand iron spikes were found in the debris, more evidence of the Japanese geomantic crime on South Korean soil.

As in previous centuries, the Vietnamese imitated the Chinese, but always with a twist of resistance. Communism was meant to be a global model, but China developed its own brand and expected the Vietnamese to follow it. But as Benedict Anderson observes in the first few pages of his classic *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), nationalism is stronger than internationalist communism. While North Vietnam has maintained tributary relations with Beijing for centuries and there is no doubt about the impact on Vietnam of Chinese civilizational models, including communism, avoidance and resistance are as strong as imitation. The fact that China is so overwhelmingly close and powerful led Vietnamese Communists to emphasize their difference and play both leaders of communism, the Soviet Union and China, against each other. The Vietnamese distrust of Chinese power politics was confirmed in the 1979 war in which China tried to teach its “younger brother” a lesson, as
it had repeatedly tried to do in the two thousand years of their shared history. In a bizarre twist of history, today Vietnam is trying to connect to the United States to balance China’s growing regional hegemony. Hanoi is thus not an uncontested cosmological center of an empire but the cosmological center of what the neighboring Chinese empire has always considered a tributary state. This cosmological struggle finds its expression today in urban planning in Hanoi.

The city’s inhabitants see the sacredness of its geography not only as vital to the fate of Vietnam but also as having a direct and important impact on their own fate and the future of their families. One direct example is that because Hanoi, like many other Asian cities, has been built over what were previously extensive cemeteries, and a sizable part of the population believes in spirits, these areas are haunted and part of everyday speculation about sudden illness and accidents. At the same time, there is a lot of gossip about geomantic crimes and geomantic frauds, such as people secretly burying the bodies of their parents on so-called auspicious land that belongs to someone else, hoping to bring great fortune to their descendants. Geomancers in Vietnam charge outrageous prices for information about auspicious locations while receiving bribes from real estate agents to declare certain lands fortuitous in order to increase their value. These phenomena can be found in other countries, such as Japan, China, and South Korea. Yet in Vietnam, similar allegations are made about certain decisions of the self-declared atheist state, such as the sites of national leaders’ graves and state cemeteries.

Another example is the story above about To Lich River. Although Mr. Tiến was largely silent throughout the entire series of events, he gave total support to Mr. Cường to obtain help from various spiritual experts. Mr. Tiến had no other choice, because he was then officially the head of VIC, a member of the Communist Party, and a respectable government official. He had to aid his employees, but his official political roles in an atheist communist society did not allow him to publicly demonstrate his belief in spirits and Hanoi’s sacred geography. Yet as soon as he retired, Mr. Tiến devoted most of his time and energy to spiritual activities. Although his family also suffered a number of tragedies, Mr. Tiến’s spiritual passion rose above concern for his personal welfare to encompass that of the nation too.

The following short account describes this kind of spiritual nationalism. On the cold and windy morning of January 5, 2013, my research partners and I were driven to an old temple about a hundred kilometers northeast of Hanoi. Mr. Tiến, the architect Trần Thanh Văn, two big buses full of spirit mediums and telepaths, and dozens of professors, historians, and cultural activists were waiting for us there. The group was fascinating, since it included retired top scientists, most of whom had trained in the Soviet Union, a number of former ambassadors, some rich project developers, and a large number of relatively poor female spirit mediums with little education.

Here at the temple of Quỷ Môn Quan (Ghostly gate), the group organized a peculiar ceremony of spirit writing. According to Vietnamese history, the area around Quỷ Môn
Quan was an ancient battlefield where Vietnamese soldiers had on countless occasions defeated and killed hundreds of thousands of Chinese invaders. Today Vietnamese spiritists believe that the ghosts of these Chinese soldiers remain in Vietnam and are the cause of all the problems of Vietnamese society. The ceremony was organized as a spiritual battle to finally defeat these ghosts, followed by a sort of postwar court in which the spiritists judged them. Those that had committed terrible crimes would be sentenced to “spiritual death,” while those with less serious crimes would receive different forms of punishment before being deported back to China. To achieve these purposes, the spirit mediums and telepaths drafted three thousand spirit writing (só thiên) reports, some in advance, some during the ceremony. All of these were burned immediately afterward.

The spirit of nationalism and anti-Chinese sentiment dominated the ceremony. The intellectuals gathered at this event have used geomantic principles to criticize current Vietnamese Communist leaders of being weak and incapable of leading the nation to the right destination. Their view is similar to that of those who condemned the new plan for expanding and restructuring Hanoi, to be completed in 2050, which will move the entire central administrative body of the Communist Party to Son Tay town at the foot of Ba Vi Mountain. According to geomancers, this plan is fatal for the future, because once the nation’s brain settles at the foot of the mountain, the vital energy will fly over instead of to it. This plan was rumored to be yet another of Beijing’s schemes to eliminate the Vietnamese nation.

On the International Herald Tribune’s op-ed page of June 7, 2013, an essay by Tuong Lai, the pseudonym of a popular sociologist, blogger, and former advisor of two Vietnamese prime ministers between 1991 and 2006, was translated from the Vietnamese. It states that Vietnam fought off the Mongols in the 13th century and defeated other foreign aggressors during the 15th, 18th and 20th centuries. Our character was forged by these ferocious struggles. Yet today, in defiance of international law and trampling on morality, China’s territorial claim stretches into the South China Sea like an ox tongue trying to swallow up waters that hold in their depths a vast reserve of petroleum to feed an energy-hungry economy that dreams of attaining superpower status. It is also a vital maritime artery that would enable China to achieve its ambitions.

This is mainstream criticism of a weak Vietnamese government that betrays the country by bowing down to Chinese demands and interests. The sentiment is so widely shared that it is a major threat to the current power constellation. Spiritists add to this an understanding of deeper powers that have to be summoned up to defend the nation. It is striking to see how many major scientists and intellectuals who have made their career in the Communist Party and have been educated in communist countries are involved in the spiritists’ critique of the current government. The urban planning of Hanoi, the seat of state power, is hotly debated in political and geomantic terms, which are not neatly separated.
A STRUGGLE ABOUT A FLYOVER IN HANOI

Besides waterways, another kind of flow that urgently needs to be unclogged in Hanoi is the horribly jammed traffic. For this purpose, the new master plan for the city includes a number of flyovers, underpasses, and ring roads. In November 2006, the committee overseeing the master plan broke ground at the intersection of Nga Dan Street and Hoang Cau Street for a flyover over the Ô Cho Dträ roundabout, which is part of the city’s first ring road and also the city’s most jammed traffic artery. However, as soon as the ground was opened, a number of archaeological ruins were revealed. The digging immediately stopped, and archaeologists, historians, and many other interested parties flocked to the site. The ruins consisted of several brick foundations of some ancient towers or other buildings and numerous ritual items, soon concluded to be the vestiges of an ancient altar for heaven and earth where various Vietnamese kings had held rituals to ask for agricultural blessing. In 2007 the site was recognized as national, cultural, and spiritual heritage and turned into a flower-ornamented monument–traffic island.

Six years later, the city could no longer afford to hold up the construction of the flyover and the first ring road, so it moved to complete them. As soon as the news about the continuation of the construction became public, it was the subject of heated debates on both state-owned and social media. According to those who protested against the plan, mainly historians, archaeologists, cultural experts, and heritage preservationists, the altar is not only an archaeological site but also a tangible heritage of the spiritual past of Vietnam. The Vietnamese Association of Historians, for example, sent a petition to the prime minister urging him to stop the project. In a number of newspaper interviews, renowned members of the association argued that while a hundred flyovers can be built today for the sake of development, there is only one altar for heaven and earth, and it is an artifact. They warned that the government would make an irreversible mistake if it let this flyover be built now and ignored the need to preserve the altar. Such a decision would also mark the state’s ideological and historical failure as the protector of Vietnamese culture and tradition in the face of demand for material development. As the historian and member of the People’s Congress Dương Trung Quốc put it, the sacredness of this altar to the Vietnamese nation is similar to the sacredness of the ancestral altar to every Vietnamese family. The construction of a flyover above this heritage site would, according to Professor Trần Lâm Biềng, be an act of “trampling on the ancestors’ head,” the most disrespectful behavior according to the Confucian code of conduct, which many Vietnamese people obey. In his opinion, the continuation of the project would lead to irreparable physical and spiritual damage to the site and thus to the nation.

In their counterargument, the project’s supporters—mainly urban planners, traffic and transportation experts, and civil engineers—refuted the spiritual importance of the altar while insisting on the urgent need to construct the flyover because of the horrendous traffic situation in this area. In a letter to the Hanoi People’s Committee, the Hanoi
Union of Transportation and Traffic maintained that the altar is perhaps a “tangible ruin of a corrupted feudalist dynasty” (phê tich của một triều đại phong kiến) but cannot be mistaken for the spiritual center of Vietnam. If the altar is so important, the letter asks, why was it neglected for centuries? Why didn’t historians and archaeologists detect its existence before? And why couldn’t they come up with any concrete record of its size and location after it was revealed? In addition, the letter refutes the historians’ claims that the altar stands for the essence of Vietnamese culture, and is thus at the heart of Vietnamese nationalism, by emphasizing its Chinese Confucian origin.

Thanks to digital media, a large number of citizens participated in this heated argument. Most published interviews and debates about the issue included space for reader comments, the majority of which supported the building of the flyover, pleased by the prospect that it would help to solve the horrendous traffic situation in this area. In June 2013 the city government decided to continue with the building of the flyover. To address the concerns of the historians and archaeologists, it called for proposals on how to construct the flyover while preserving the site of the ancient altar. Of more than a dozen submitted proposals, six were shortlisted and published on a government media outlet early enough to garner further public opinion. In the end, proposal number 4 received the most support. However, its choice will make a significant change to the original plan. Instead of a straight I shape, the new flyover will have a bending Y shape, to avoid most of the ground suspected to be the site of the ancient altar. Although the new design satisfied most of the parties involved, it significantly reduced the traffic efficiency of the flyover, the extra money that it will cost will not be insignificant, and its aesthetics is rather limited.

It is common in Vietnam that the government resorts to promises of building better, more modern, and more beautiful cities to legitimize its aggressive urban renewal program. In Ho Chi Minh City, as Erik Harms has shown, evicted residents may be angry about the loss of their homes and unfair treatment in the eviction process but ultimately support this discourse of beauty. The Y-shaped flyover, however, shows us that beauty is not enough to convince citizens to support the government’s plan to make Hanoi a better city. The unaesthetic bending of the flyover was seen not just as a victory of historians and archaeologists over their technical colleagues but also as proof that the state does take national spiritual heritage into consideration and thus tries to avoid allowing misfortune to befall the nation and its citizens. The fear of danger brought about by the violation of sacred sites prompts not only private actions but also public resistance to or support of the government’s policy, depending on whether it is seen as destructive or respectful of the sacred geography of the city. Thanks to the tremendous effect of social media, public opinion has influenced urban planning and renewal in Hanoi more and more. The relationship between the people and the state during this process has also become more complicated as the politics of heritage and the realm of sacred geography have come into play. The above vignette is but an illustration of this development.
CONCLUSION

Urban planning not only has managerial and technical aspects but is crucially concerned with speculation of every kind. As Arjun Appadurai has recently argued, there is a “ghost in the financial machine.”22 If that is so, then one should not draw too sharp a boundary between the rational and the irrational. One then has to accept that the spirit of urban planning also encounters other understandings of the spiritual and that the end result might be a spiritual compromise, as in our last example. It cannot be overestimated how important cosmological understandings of cityscapes still are in East Asia. While these understandings have been reinterpreted by nationalism and have a national salience they are also still part of common understandings of illness and misfortune.

NOTES


Religious pluralism has been lauded as a distinct feature of Indonesia. The Indonesian Constitution officially recognizes six religions, Islam, Christianity (Protestantism), Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and upholds religious freedom by allowing “all persons the right to worship according to their own religion or belief.” According to the 2010 Census, approximately 87 percent of the population of 238 million are Muslims, 7 percent are Protestants, 3 percent are Catholics, 1.7 percent are Hindus, 0.72 percent are Buddhists, and 0.05 percent are Confucianists (Badan Pusat Statistik 2011). Indonesia’s diverse religious landscape is reflected in the nation’s capital, Jakarta—a metropolis of approximately ten million residents. The city evinces the fact that religion is a “constitutive force of both modernity and contemporary capitalism” (Hancock and Srinivas 2008, 621). The population of Jakarta resembles the national statistics stated above, except that it has lower percentages of Muslims (85 percent) and Hindus (0.2 percent), a slightly higher percentage of Christians (7.5 percent), and a significantly higher percentage of Buddhists (3.3 percent). While most Indonesian Hindus reside in Bali, the higher percentage of Christians and Buddhists in Jakarta can be attributed to the much larger population of ethnic Chinese there (6.6 percent), compared to the national statistic of 1.2 percent. More than 90 percent of Chinese Indonesians are Buddhists or Christians (Badan Pusat Statistik 2011), and it is with this particular ethnic group that this chapter is concerned.

The religious diversity of Jakarta is epitomized by the conspicuous presence of various symbolic religious buildings. For instance, within the vicinity of Merdeka Square and the Merdeka Palace in Central Jakarta stands the largest mosque in Southeast Asia, the
Masjid Istiqlal, which can accommodate 120,000 worshippers. In front of this grand mosque is the hundred-year-old neo-Gothic Catholic cathedral. Two recent additions to these “religioscapes” (Hayden 2013) are the Reformed Millennium Center of Indonesia, which features a Coliseum-like evangelical megachurch that seats eight thousand and houses a seminary, a museum, a concert hall, and a school, and the Tzu Chi Center (or Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation of Indonesia), a colossal building near the Sukarno-Hatta airport that is visible from an airplane. Needless to say, the modern high-rise buildings that sprout across this densely populated city epitomize another form of modern religion, capitalism. Next to these skyscrapers sprawl slums that highlight the paradoxical inequities of this religion. It is, however, premature to celebrate the religious pluralism of Jakarta, despite the opulent religious buildings that the city boasts. Beneath the veil of such diversity lie the less obvious undercurrents of the negotiation and contestation of religious space, which often involve competing actors including religious organizations, capitalist enterprises, and the state.

Urban spaces like Jakarta are both sites for the competition of ideologies and loci for the intersection of the forces of the market and religious fundamentalism (Hartiningsih 2011). The political, economic, and social significance of Jakarta has made it a strategic site where religious space is fiercely contested. In addition to being a cosmopolitan hub, it is a center of vibrant political, financial, and economic activities. The move toward decentralization after the fall of President Suharto in 1998 has redistributed some of Jakarta’s power, but it has not reduced the magnitude of this metropolis, where policy decisions, political brokering, and capital flows continue to take place. Moreover, Padawangi claims that post-Suharto Jakarta has become “the very agent of democratization”—a “megaphone to broadcast social movement messages to the rest of its citizens and to those outside the city” (2013, 857–58). It is therefore unsurprising that all six officially recognized religions, as well as many unrecognized religions (or “beliefs”) and even radical groups, have chosen Jakarta as the site of their headquarters.

The visually impressive and nationalistic monuments that the city houses further attest to its inveterate and symbolic significance. Areas of Jakarta may be contested for both their physical space and the symbolic meaning of these places. This can be seen at the Tugu Selamat Datang (Welcome monument), which was erected in the middle of the water fountain at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout. Located in the Thamrin-Sudirman corridor, the main thoroughfare of the central business district, the monument is a regular site for demonstrations and protests regarding issues ranging from labor and political life to religious and moral life (Padawangi 2013). As a case in point, prior to the passing of the Anti-Pornography Bill in 2008, large-scale protests by both proponents—mainly conservative religious organizations—and opponents—largely religious progressives and women’s rights nongovernmental organizations—took place at this site (Allen 2009).

Another example of spatial contestation at a symbolic site is the commotion that took place during a rally at the emblematic landmark of the National Monument (Monas), which President Sukarno built to commemorate Indonesia’s struggle for independence.
Interfaith activists organized a rally on June 1, 2008, to mark the sixty-third anniversary of Pancasila, the state ideology. It was a demonstration in support of Pancasila, religious pluralism, and religious minorities, especially the followers of Ahmadiyah, whom mainstream Islam deems deviant (Crouch 2009). Indeed, members of radical Islamic groups crashed the rally and violently attacked the activists who supported the Ahmadiyah sect. This was signified as a contestation not of physical space but of ideological space. Through the violence, followers of Ahmadiyah were denied and excluded from the claim to religious authenticity, belonging, and citizenship.1

In a hub where multiple religions reside, the contestation of space is a commonplace. Amid the forces of capitalism, fundamentalism, and globalization, negotiation among as well as within religions is required to ensure harmonious coexistence. To examine the contested religioscapes of Jakarta and the intricate processes of the negotiation of religious space, this chapter focuses on two religious minorities: an Evangelical Protestant church and a Buddhist organization, both of which have recently built megastructures as their houses of worship. These organizations and their emblematic buildings are not only testaments to the thriving role of religion in the city but also illuminate the local embeddedness and global mobility of religion (Hancock and Srinivas 2008, 619).

To set the context, the first section gives an overview of religious accommodations and contestations in postcolonial Indonesia. It demonstrates that the aspiration of unity in diversity enshrined in the national ideology of Pancasila is put to the test when juxtaposed to the social reality of rising intolerance. Then the chapter narrates the stories of the two conspicuous religious buildings mentioned in the previous paragraph. It identifies the various actors involved in the religioscape in which the buildings’ organizations are embedded, namely the state, ethnic and religious groups, capitalist enterprises, local residents, and the diasporic Chinese community (Appadurai 1990). The analysis encompasses a critical discussion of the murky relationships among religion, capital, and the state; the ethnic and cultural capital of the organizations; and the role of technology in “mediating piety” (Lim 2009) as the two organizations negotiate local and global dynamics. The chapter argues that the skillful juggling of these three-way political-business-religious relations is the key to the success of the two religious organizations in navigating the treacherous terrain of religious contestation in Jakarta.
principles of the state ideology of Pancasila are belief in one supreme god, humanism, nationalism, popular sovereignty, and social justice—plus, the 1945 Constitution celebrates the motto and Pancasila.

Suharto’s New Order period (1966–98) never seriously dealt with ethnic and religious plurality, because public discourse on social or SARA (ethnic, religious, racial, and intergroup) differences was officially prohibited. Since the 1980s, Islamization has produced a more religious public space in Indonesia, and neofundamentalism has emerged as an important force in Indonesian society. The trend has been toward a more scrupulous observance of the Five Pillars of Islam and public expressions of piety (Fealy and White 2008). Furthermore, the renowned tolerant, nonstandard, syncretic practice of Islam embraced by the Javanese abangan (sometimes known as nominal Muslims), who account for two-thirds of ethnic Javanese (or approximately ninety million people), has collapsed due to the influence of what Hefner (2011) refers to as “religionization.”

The fall of Suharto in May 1998 saw the lifting of the top-down strong-arm tactics employed during the seemingly interminable thirty-two years of the New Order government. While the post-1998 democracy opened the door to ethnic and religious expressions, it simultaneously opened the door to intercommunal challenges. Various episodes of ethnic, religious, and communal violence erupted across Indonesia. Although post-Suharto Indonesia can be seen as a more open and democratic society, the newly opened public sphere has become more contested than ever before. Restrictive governmental regulations and rising intolerance have increasingly circumscribed religious pluralism. The institutionalization of intolerance through the implementation of various regional bylaws based on Shari’a is an example of the “radicalization of public space” (Hartining-sih 2011, 588).

According to a report released by the International Crisis Group in 2010, religious intolerance in Indonesia has been on the rise because of “clashing fundamentalisms,” as hard-line Islamists see the growth of fundamentalist Christianity as a menace. Consequently, radical Islamist groups have carried out “mass mobilization and vigilante attacks.” Moreover, some Muslims have named Christianization (or Kristenisasi) among the most urgent moral threats. With the recent rising popularity of the Evangelical and Pentecostal-Charismatic movements, such tensions have become increasingly marked. The perceived aggressive proselytizing by Evangelical Christians in majority-Muslim areas has raised anxiety among radical Muslims, who have reacted. Another reason for the fear of Kristenisasi is the lack of Muslim understanding of the differences among Christian denominations and the need for each denomination to build a church. Thus, whenever a new church is proposed, Muslims tend to assume that it is being built to accommodate a growth in membership resulting from Muslim conversion (Gudorf 2012).

The construction of places of worship has increasingly become a site of contention. Such buildings are officially governed by a 2006 joint regulation on houses of worship issued by the minister of religious affairs and the minister for internal affairs, which
replaced a joint ministerial decree of 1969. The 2006 regulation outlines a list of onerous requirements for obtaining a permit, including letters of recommendation from various officials and written consent from ninety members of the congregation and at least sixty community members of another religion. The report *Disputed Churches in Jakarta* (Ali-Fauzi et al. 2011) thoroughly examines thirteen controversies relating to church constructions. The authors highlight the following factors that have caused or exacerbated these disputes: religious or ideological resistance, including the fear of Christianization or any other perceived proselytization; socioeconomic differences, which have led to an inability to obtain consent from residents because they have not received or do not expect to receive any material benefit from such building projects; externalities such as opposition from radical Islamic organizations and the rising intolerance in society; and issues involving the state, such as an unsupportive bureaucracy, contradictory national and local regulations, and weak or inactive security forces.

This context calls for a multifaceted and multidimensional approach to understanding religious geography. Moreover, the aspirations expressed by religious groups across the spectrum from fundamentalism to pluralism must thus be read within the context of the national religious landscape. The next sections further explicate Jakarta’s religious landscape as they discuss two significant buildings representing minority religions that have been constructed in this city with a Muslim majority.

**THE TALES OF TWO CONSPICUOUS RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS IN JAKARTA**

As religious space is intensely and sometimes violently contested in Jakarta, the presence of two conspicuous non-Muslim religious buildings there appears ironic, if not confrontational. The Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia (Gereja Reformed Injili Indonesia) established the Reformed Millennium Center in 2008. Hailed as “the largest Chinese church building in the world,” this six-hundred-thousand-square-foot megastucture houses the Coliseum-like Messiah Cathedral, a seminary, a museum, a concert hall, and a school (*Gospel Herald* 2008). The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation of Indonesia (or the Yayasan Buddha Tzu Chi Indonesia) was inaugurated in 2011. Covering ten hectares conspicuously located in north Jakarta, this is the largest Tzu Chi building in the world. Its premises include the main auditorium, known as the Hall of Still Thought (Jing Si Tang), a Tzu Chi school, and an Olympic-size swimming pool. Planning is under way to add a hospital.

Of particular significance is the fact that both of these are organizations of ethnic Chinese—a historically marginalized minority in Indonesia who constitute only 1.2 percent of the nation’s population. During Suharto’s New Order, the Chinese minority suffered systematic discrimination from the regime and was forced to assimilate. Restricted from public sector employment, many Chinese entered into business, where their entrepreneurial skills and social network could contribute to the state ideology of national
development. This inevitably gave rise to a Chinese business class and allowed a handful of its opportunists to increase their wealth by collaborating with the military and other ruling elites through the cakong system (Hoon 2008, 40–41). The privileges they received from the New Order regime fostered an image in the public sphere that all Chinese are wealthy, disloyal, and economically motivated. Such stereotypes, coupled with the continuous vilification of the Chinese through various state-imposed discriminatory measures, made them vulnerable to ethnic and class hostility, which culminated in the large-scale anti-Chinese riots that broke out in several Indonesian cities in May 1998.

The post-Suharto process of democratization and reform has restored many cultural and legal rights to the Chinese. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Chinese conglomerates still control a considerable portion of the private economy in Indonesia, and the conduct of wealthy ethnic Chinese has significant implications and repercussions for the population at large. The Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia and Tzu Chi operate against this backdrop. This section provides an overview of their beliefs, functions, leadership, and operations, while the next section analyzes them.

THE REFORMED EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF INDONESIA

Rev. Stephen Tong, a renowned Chinese Indonesian evangelist who has been hailed as “the Billy Graham of the East” (Teng 2007, xi), established RECI in 1989. In contrast to most megachurches, which belong to either Pentecostal or Charismatic denominations that tend to hold lively contemporary services to appeal to young people, RECI conducts traditional liturgical worship services and has adopted a Reformed or Calvinist theology that is both orthodox and dogmatic. Although doctrinally conservative, it does not shun the use of media. The church has set up the Reformed 21 TV channel, which is viewable on cable TV in Indonesia and in a live stream on the Internet. The channel broadcasts recordings of Tong’s sermons and gospel rallies, classical hymns, and children’s programs on a 24/7 basis.

The opening of the Reformed Millennium Center in the Kemayoran business district of Central Jakarta in 2008 received worldwide media coverage (see, e.g., International Herald Tribune 2008; Wright 2008). The church complex cost US$40 million to build, and it took seventeen years to obtain a permit. The body of the cathedral is a Coliseum-like structure with imposing pillars over which rests a massive dome. Tong carefully crafted the design, measurement, and proportions of the building to reflect Christian ideology: The dome of the cathedral is supported by four main columns, which symbolize the four Gospels. Between two of the columns are ten pillars, symbolizing the Ten Commandments, and between the other two are twelve pillars, in reference to the twelve apostles. A cross erected in the center of the twelve pillars is sixty-six feet high, to symbolize the sixty-six books of the Bible.

With the proliferation of church attacks by Islamic hard-liners in recent years, Tong is cognizant of the potential danger in the high visibility of his church, especially as the
symbol of a double minority—Chinese and Christians. However, when challenged on the necessity of building a church of such grandeur, he cited the constitutional right of religious freedom and argued that his church is a statement to the world that Indonesia embraces the freedom of religion (Wright 2008). He maintains that his church aims at dispelling the misconception that Indonesia is intolerant of minority faiths. He also emphasizes that RECI is a “national church,” because it was built solely with donations from its members in Indonesia. This is in contrast to most mainstream churches in Indonesia, which were established by the Dutch and continue to receive overseas support.

It is impossible to understand RECI without first understanding its seventy-five-year-old founder. Dubbed a Renaissance man with a rare mastery of theology, philosophy, music, literature, art, and architecture (Intan 2007, xvii), Tong can be seen as a charismatic leader who possesses extraordinary qualities and thus authority over his followers (Weber 1963, 2). Such notions of charisma should, however, be distinguished from the Charismatic movement, to which Tong ardently objects because he condemns Pentecostal and Charismatic theology as shallow and unsubstantiated. His church has become a bastion of orthodox teaching, an alternative to the prosperity gospel preached in the rising Charismatic churches. Tong’s vast knowledge, proficiency in Christian apologetics, and fine oratory skills make him popular among intellectual audiences. Mostly middle- and upper-class Chinese Indonesians and a smaller number of indigenous Indonesian intellectuals attend his church in Jakarta. Among its members are the founder of the giant business conglomerate the Lippo Group, Mochtar Riady, and his family.

Tong claims that his objective in establishing the Reformed Evangelical movement in Indonesia is to reactualize the Reformed faith and revitalize the evangelical spirit among Indonesian churches. He criticizes the mainline churches in Indonesia, most of which inherited Dutch Reformed theology, for having lost the “Reformed spirit” and evangelistic zeal as they became ecumenical and developed a contextual theology that is inclusive and liberal (see Hoon 2013a). While Calvinists are not usually evangelistic, because of their subscription to the doctrine of election, otherwise known as predestination (Steele et al. 2004), Tong innovatively combines Calvinism, Pietism, and evangelism in his preaching and practice. Since beginning the movement in 1989, he has opened thirty-five Reformed Evangelical churches in Indonesia and preached to hundreds of thousands of people in massive revival and gospel rallies across the archipelago.

Tong has developed an international profile and is widely respected in the global Chinese Christian community. His Reformed Evangelical Church has expanded globally, opening twenty-four branches around the world, including in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. Every week, Tong travels to Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Taipei, and Hong Kong to deliver expository Bible teachings in Mandarin before returning to Jakarta to preach in his own church on Sunday. Through Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International (STEMI), his works have transcended the Chinese diaspora and moved on to the global Christian scene.
Established in 1966 in a small town in Taiwan by a Buddhist nun named Cheng Yen, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Merit Society is presently the largest nongovernmental organization in the Chinese-speaking world. It is most well known for its disaster relief efforts, although it also extends its work to health care, education, recycling, and so on. In 2010, Tzu Chi reportedly had ten million members throughout more than thirty countries (O’Neill 2010, 2). In contrast to traditional Buddhism, which focuses on the cultivation of the self and ritualistic activities around a temple, Tzu Chi represents an emerging “humanist and socially-engaged Buddhism” (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 299) or “Buddhism in action” (O’Neill 2010, 3).

As with RECI, central to Tzu Chi’s success is a charismatic figure who is able to command authority and submission. Such charisma is embodied in the seventy-six-year-old founder and leader, Master Cheng Yen, whose authority is felt in daily institutional operations and pervades the organization, both in Taiwan and overseas (Huang 2009). Her teachings and sayings are recorded and have been published in the volumes called Jing Si Aphorisms. They are also disseminated around the world through the Tzu Chi–owned Da Ai (Great love) TV channel, schools, and hospitals and are printed on the packaging of the organization’s commercial merchandise and disaster relief materials.

In Jakarta, Tzu Chi had humble beginnings, in the early 1990s, in the form of the wives of diasporic Taiwanese businessmen. They visited orphanages and retirement homes, provided aid to victims of natural disasters, and offered free medical help to poor people. Their activities and resources were limited until the entrance of two Chinese Indonesian magnates: Franky Oesman Widjaja (or Huang Rong-nian), the son of Eka Tjipta Widjaja, the founder of the Sinar Mas Group—one of the largest conglomerates in Indonesia—and Sugianto Kusuma (or Kuo Tsai-yuan), a major shareholder in the Artha Graha Group, a giant corporation involved in property, finance, and trade (O’Neill 2010, 95–98). Tzu Chi expanded tremendously with the backing of these tycoons. Following in their footsteps, more Chinese businesspeople joined the organization. Presently, Tzu Chi has ten thousand members in Indonesia and offices in eighteen cities, including five in Jakarta.

Although it is a Buddhist organization, Tzu Chi in Indonesia is registered not as a religious organization under the Ministry of Religion but as a foundation (yayasan) under the Ministry of Social Affairs. O’Neill reported that it has “built housing for the poor of Jakarta and victims of the tsunami in Aceh, distributed rice to over two million families, helped earthquake victims and tuberculosis patients and held free medical clinics for tens of thousands of people” in Indonesia (2010, 93). Through its efficiently and professionally delivered aid and other philanthropic work, the organization has been able to build a close rapport with the government and trust among Indonesians, including the non-Chinese Muslim majority, among whom are 10 percent of Tzu Chi’s members in Indonesia.
Tzu Chi crosses ethnic, religious, and national boundaries when offering aid to those in need. Huang attributes this to “a realization of the bodhisattva’s universal ideal of relieving all beings from suffering regardless of ethnicity or nationality” (2009, 223). To ensure that its mission abroad does not cause controversy or misunderstanding, Tzu Chi volunteers observe the three noes mandated by Cheng Yen: do not talk politics, talk business, or proselytize. Nevertheless, in a Muslim-majority country like Indonesia, philanthropic activities carried out by non-Muslim organizations have always been viewed with suspicion. Pentecostal churches, for example, are often charged with attracting “rice Christians” by distributing food and aid (Gudorf 2012, 65). In the case of Tzu Chi, the fact that it is dominated by Chinese may further complicate the matter, especially when one considers the complex and ambivalent relationship between the Chinese and non-Chinese in Indonesia, the result of a series of historical events and complicated race, class, and religious entanglement (Hoon 2008).

The acid test of Tzu Chi’s motives came in 2002 when it embarked on a major project to clean up the heavily polluted Red River (Kali Angke), which has contributed to major floods in Jakarta. One of the tasks was to relocate the people who lived on the river to the Great Love Village, featuring new homes built by Tzu Chi. O’Neill observes that the villagers “did not believe they were being given new homes for free, especially by a Buddhist organization; they feared the move would be conditional on converting to Buddhism” (2010, 100). After much communication and assurance that no conversion was necessary, they eventually moved to the Great Love Village, which consisted of twelve hundred housing units, schools, a community center, a nursing home, and an Islamic prayer room. This peaceful relocation with no strings attached further enhanced Tzu Chi’s reputation in the eyes of the Indonesian authorities and society.

After more than twenty years of operation in the country, Tzu Chi finally opened its Indonesia head office in Jakarta in 2011. It features a grand edifice with a façade similar to that of the Tzu Chi Abode in Taiwan, except that the Jakarta one is much more colossal. The Tzu Chi Center is in an exclusive Chinese-majority residential area in the Pantai Indah Kapuk (PIK) district of North Jakarta. The school on the premises offers an international curriculum and charges a considerable fee, catering mainly to the children of wealthy Chinese in the neighborhood. The construction of the multimillion-dollar center would not have been possible without the financial backing of its activists, many of whom are ethnic Chinese capitalists in Jakarta. One of the most prominent supporters was Kusuma, also the president of the Agung Sedayu Group, a key developer of the PIK district.

A main feature of the Tzu Chi Center is its three-thousand-seat auditorium, which its members use for religious gatherings. The auditorium is furnished with a large screen, where video of Cheng Yen can be relayed live from Taiwan. The wall of the center stage is embellished with an ocean blue backdrop that symbolizes the universe. In the middle of this universe is a porcelain Buddha sculpture floating above a mosaic of a world map that resembles a tree. In the center of the Buddha sculpture is a globe, on which the
Buddha’s sight is fixed. This sculpture is intriguing because it differs significantly from the conventional Buddhas found in most Chinese temples. Here the Buddha resembles a gentle female figure like Master Cheng Yen and has a halo around her head like the Virgin Mary. Wittingly or unwittingly, such images appear to exemplify what Huang referred to as the “glorification of Cheng Yen” (2009, 36).

The establishment of Da Ai Television in Taiwan in 1998 has greatly enhanced the global spread of Tzu Chi and the message of Cheng Yen. It can reach 79 percent of the world’s population, by means of satellites (O’Neill 2010, 62). Through Kusuma’s personal connections, Tzu Chi was able to obtain a rare license from the Jakarta government to launch Da Ai TV Indonesia in 2006. In addition to relaying Cheng Yen’s teachings and other content from Taiwan, it reports on the foundation’s work in Indonesia in the national language and produces locally made drama series based on the real-life stories of Indonesians, featuring Indonesian casts. The TV channel allows Tzu Chi to reach a wider audience and recruit new members outside the Chinese community.

NEGOTIATING LOCAL AND GLOBAL DYNAMICS

The presence of two conspicuous non-Islamic, nonnative religious buildings in the capital of the largest Muslim nation in the world points to several issues related to the dynamics of religious and ethnic politics in the local context. Also, the nature of the city as a site of local-global intersection and the transnational milieu of the two religious organizations discussed above raise important questions about the global dynamics of religious movements. This section examines the dynamics of local and global factors in the negotiations of religious space by RECI and Tzu Chi.

While the relationships between the state and religion, business and religion, and the state and business have been widely discussed and theorized about in the literature (see, e.g., Capaldi 2005; Turner, Possamai, and Barbalet 2011), the three-way political-business-religious relationships have not been sufficiently investigated. It has been a common practice for minority groups in Indonesia to become the clients of ruling regime patrons, as political shelter. These groups include the ethnic Chinese and members of the minority religions, especially Christians and Buddhists (Chua 2008; Budijanto 2009). As members of a “market-dominant minority” that has economic but not political power, ethnic Chinese capitalists have a long history of seeking military and other power broker patrons for protection (Hoon 2014). With their experience and networks, these capitalists often become the intermediaries who connect the church or temple to the power holders.

The very presence of both the RECI and the Tzu Chi buildings was made possible by the organizations’ having business moguls such as Riady, Widjaja, and Kusuma in their congregations. These Chinese business elites have not only financially supported the building projects but, more important, also lent their social capital, connections, and networks to the organizations to facilitate the onerous process of securing permits. In
the absence of strong state institutions, state regulations—including those governing the permit needed to build a religious place—are often subject to negotiation, as bureaucrats use them as a ludicrous method of rent seeking (McLeod 2010). Hence the application for a permit inevitably involves certain forms of illegality, such as bribing state officials and paying local residents for their signatures. Because such practices are deemed incompatible with the moral teachings espoused by religious organizations, the role of these capitalists in their building projects is usually clandestine.

In the article “Face, Faith, and Forgiveness: Elite Chinese Philanthropy in Indonesia,” I identify three impetuses behind the altruism of Chinese Indonesian businesspeople, namely to “buy face,” to fulfill the requirements or expectations of a religion, and to seek moral pardon for questionable business conduct (Hoon 2010). While all three factors are, to varying degrees, relevant in explaining the contributions of the business elite to RECI and Tzu Chi, the present study observed another crucial factor. A Chinese Buddhist activist in Jakarta informed me in 2013 that the relationship between the tycoons and Tzu Chi is reciprocal and mutually beneficial. Because Tzu Chi has established a close rapport with the military and the government through its remarkable disaster relief work, involvement in this organization helps these businesspeople rebrand their image in the eyes of the government and the public, which benefits them and their businesses. While these speculations are not verifiable, they illuminate an important insight into the reciprocal relationship between capital and religion, which can inspire further research.

As preceding sections mention, perceived proselytization is one of the key factors in the disputes over religious space in Jakarta. For an evangelical church like RECI, which bears the Great Commission “to make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), its mission to seek converts is a religious mandate. Perhaps one of the reasons that it has not experienced any reported conflict with Muslims lies in Tong’s intellectual approach to preaching the gospel. This intellectualization is similar to that of Nicky Gumbel, the leader of the global evangelism program called the Alpha Course, which uses an “evidence-based approach” to craft an appeal through references to historical and scientific evidence that also shares meaning and value with great literary and artistic works (Kong 2013, 31). In Gumbel’s case, Kong asserts that “the appeal to the intellect through anchoring the understanding of Christianity in historical, literary and scientific evidence predisposes the programme towards the better-educated, transnational elites” (35). Likewise, Tong’s church appeals largely to an intellectual elite rather than to “rice Christians” or those who might be attracted to the faith because of material benefits. The conversion of the last two groups often accounts for most of the conversion controversies in Indonesia (Gudorf 2012, 65).

On the other hand, Tzu Chi adopts a different approach to proselytization than the evangelical Christians. Its hierarchy of membership reveals the process (Huang 2009, 71). In general, there are three levels of membership, differentiated by their uniforms. Those in gray are the ordinary members, whose responsibilities are to pay their monthly contributions, participate in volunteer work, and receive training. Above them are the...
dark blue–uniformed intern commissioners, who take on the additional duties of collecting donations and recruiting new members. They are promoted to the rank of commissioner—with the same blue uniform but with an additional photo ID tag on the upper left pocket—when they fulfill the minimum proselytization requirements, and they are expected to be totally committed to the master’s teachings and to continue recruiting.

In my July 29, 2013, conversation with an executive committee of Tzu Chi Jakarta, I was told that members at the first two levels can follow any religion. The lack of a compulsion to convert explains why Muslims and Christians can be members of Tzu Chi in Indonesia without experiencing opposition from or conflict with their faith. The Tzu Chi model challenges the conventional conversion discourse, which focuses merely on the religion switching of the individual. Woods refers to the “proselytization bias” of such a discourse and argues that “conversion does not require the rejection of one set of beliefs in place of another, but more of an expansion of belief and understanding that enables the co-existence of two distinct belief systems. . . . Conversion is less a process of religious switching [than one] of spiritual self-development: adherents create their own bespoke spiritual commodities—a process of ‘spiritual shopping’—that best suit their personal needs” (2012, 446). This conceptualization departs from the modernist discourse of conversion and reflects the increasingly flexible and syncretic nature of religious behavior in postmodern society. But while Tzu Chi’s conversion model has not antagonized other faiths so far, there is no guarantee that it will not become a potential fault line with the rise of the more hard-line fundamentalist movements in Jakarta.

The fact that contestations of religious space can occur as much within a religion as between religions is often overlooked. In her study of Pentecostal churches in Indonesia, Gudorf asserts that opposition to Pentecostal building permits does not always come from Muslim groups but sometimes originates with other Christians, who “resent Pentecostals poaching their flocks” (2012, 70). Tong’s judgmental and sometimes hostile attitude toward the Pentecostal-Charismatic and mainline ecumenical churches has not won him many friends in those circles. While many churches seek shelter in national Christian organizations, Tong’s is not a member of Indonesia’s largest and most politically significant Christian organization, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, or the Indonesia Evangelical Fellowship or the Communion of Chinese Churches in Indonesia. The survival of his church depends on the reputation, connections, and social capital that he has built up over the years, together with those of his prominent congregation.

Tzu Chi, on the other hand, carefully positioned itself primarily as a social organization when it entered Indonesia in order not to present itself as a competitor of or threat to existing Buddhist organizations. It has also strategically worked with local Buddhist leaders and forged friendly relationships with other Buddhist groups in Indonesia. Before Widjaja and Kusuma joined it, Tzu Chi was greatly helped by the former general chair of Walubi (the Indonesian Buddhist Representative Council) Siti Hartati Murdaya, who now sits on the board of Tzu Chi Indonesia. Tzu Chi is not a member of either Walubi or KASI (the Supreme Conference of Indonesian Sangha), two of the largest
Buddhist associations in Indonesia. Hence, it is able to stay above the ongoing polemics between them.

The Chinese ethnicity of both RECI and Tzu Chi members can be both a blessing and a curse in navigating the treacherous waters of the contested religious space in Jakarta. Needless to say, the greatest advantage of their Chineseness is their ability to attract capital. Besides the tycoons, most members of RECI and Tzu Chi are ethnic Chinese who belong to the middle and upper classes. Being Chinese and being members of a minority religion, these people are doubly marginalized in a Muslim-majority country where the Chinese have a long history of being othered and excluded from the national imagination, notwithstanding their Indonesian citizenship (Hoon 2008). Tong, an Indonesian citizen, has attempted to “authenticate” and claimed national belonging for his church by emphasizing its localness, based on the fact that it has not received any foreign funding. Notwithstanding the ethnicity and citizenship of their members, the “foreignness” of RECI and Tzu Chi lies in their class exclusivity, which is visible in the elite locations, including gated communities, where they build their places of worship. The double minority status of both RECI and Tzu Chi and their conspicuous presence could make them the targets of radical religious vigilantes during times of social unrest. The strategic locations where these organizations choose to build their houses of worship greatly reduce such risks, however. Also, tight security checks are regularly employed for all incoming vehicles, and extra security forces from the police or military are deployed during major religious events. This reinforces the ideas that security risks are a real concern and that both of these organizations are well connected to state functionaries.

The ethnic capital of RECI and Tzu Chi has enabled both to tap into the transnational network of the global Chinese diaspora. The Reformed Evangelical movement began in Indonesia, and then Tong’s ministries globalized it, first throughout the Chinese Christian world and then throughout the global Christian scene. In contrast, Indonesia was on the receiving end of the transnational flow of the Tzu Chi movement, which originated in Taiwan and then expanded globally through the Taiwanese diaspora. Nonetheless, it can be argued that both these religious movements, “which traverse borders and become vehicles of transnational networks while being rooted in localities and enacting symbolic re-localizations in the built environment, capture the complexity of what it means to be a religious subject and to perform urban citizenship” (Hancock and Srinivas 2008, 622).

The global reach of both movements also reflects what Kong referred to as “religious globalization,” which she defined as the homogenization of religious practice made possible by technology (2013, 22). In the case of RECI, this process is evident in Tong’s orthodox teachings and monopolized interpretations of the Bible, while in the case of Tzu Chi, it is exemplified in the regulation of the body of each member via his or her uniform, gestures, diet, and eating habits, which must follow the requirements stipulated by Master Cheng Yen. Capitalism and the media enhance the globalizing efforts of religious practices, facilitating both the imagined communion of religious followers around
the world as a religious community and the promotion of the cult of personality surrounding leaders of religious movements. The capitalization of religion can be seen in the sale of commodified religious products, from the sermons and teachings of Tong and Cheng Yen to other religious materials and ornaments they have endorsed.

RECI and Tzu Chi have strategically used technology to “mediate piety” (Lim 2009) by setting up their own TV channels. The use of media has provided us with a new understanding of the spatial embeddedness of religion because access to religious materials is less than ever limited by one’s physical presence at Sunday services or preaching sessions. While this changes the spatial conceptualization of religion, it does not reduce the spatial significance of religious sites. The Tzu Chi headquarters in Taiwan—the Abode of Still Thoughts, where Cheng Yen resides—is an important pilgrimage site for all members around the world. As the master cannot travel on airplanes because of a health problem, the abode has become even more important and symbolic. It is a site to which followers travel with the objective of receiving wisdom and instructions from the master (Huang 2009, 240). On the other hand, RECI has become a site where religion and capitalism intersect. Since the Reformed Millennium Center was inaugurated, all the national and international conventions of the Reformed Evangelical movement, which were previously held at hotels or conventional centers, have been held on its premises. Such events attract local and international participants, who are encouraged to attend a concert at the concert hall; to visit the church museum, which features Tong’s private collection of classical Western paintings, Chinese vases, and artifacts; and to stay for the weekend, to participate in the Sunday service, where they can listen to Tong live. The experiences of both pilgrims at Tzu Chi and tourists at RECI attest to the capitalist function of religious sites and further complicate the spatial meaning of religion.

CONCLUSION

The city is a site of global intersection. The transnational milieus of RECI and Tzu Chi highlight the global dynamics of religious movements, which are now further enhanced by technological advancements, particularly those related to media and the internet. As such, religious sites in a particular locality may have a larger spatial connotation. This is exemplified by the recent bombing of the Ekayana Buddhist Vihara in West Jakarta by Muslim extremists in retaliation for the persecution of the Rohingya Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar (Jakarta Post 2013). This attack was a consequence not of religious or ideological conflict in Jakarta but of events that occurred more than a thousand miles away in Myanmar. Like this vihara, both RECI and Tzu Chi signify transnational spaces in which the flow of information, capital, and people is taking place at an increasingly rapid pace in the globalized city of Jakarta.

This bombing also serves as a vivid reminder of the vulnerability of minority religions in a symbolic urban site like Jakarta, where religious space is ferociously contested. The ongoing competition over religious space also demonstrates that religion is still highly
relevant in this modernizing city. Such competition is not likely to subside as long as the growth of a particular religious group is perceived by another as a threat. The ideal of religious harmony imbued in the state ideology of Pancasila has not been realized on the ground, due to the failure of the state and its institutions to provide security to religious minorities. The state is likely to maintain the status quo in order to continue to reap material benefits from the capitalists and religious groups that seek its patronage. The burden of survival has fallen on the shoulders of the religious minorities, who must exercise agency to circumvent discriminatory government regulations and find alternative shelters.

In a city where people experience “multiple degradations (social, familial, moral, capitalist and so on) and polarizations” (Woods 2012, 449), religious organizations like RECI and Tzu Chi will continue to thrive, because they are able to fill the vacuum left by deficient secular and state institutions. Their conspicuous presence in Muslim-majority Jakarta appears to be a bold statement against rising religious intolerance and the violence carried out by vigilantes under the banner of religion. In a country where corruption is deeply entrenched and state regulations are inadequately enforced, the flexibility and adaptability of capitalists are apposite to fill the void. The networks, connections, and capital of the wealthy businesspeople in RECI and Tzu Chi have been indispensable to the success of these organizations. The relationships between these groups and their members, however, are reciprocal. Philanthropy has allowed these capitalists to gain reputation and goodwill, which may create further business opportunities among the congregation. More research into these three-way political-business-religious relationships may further reveal the key to the survival of certain minority religions in urban spaces.

NOTES

1. This confirms the assertion that religious belief and doctrine can be potent justification for claims to territory as fault lines emerge when groups clash over territorial belonging (Woods 2012, 447).

2. Hefner defines religionization as “the reconstruction of a local or regional spiritual tradition with reference to religious ideals and practices seen as standardized, textualized, and universally incumbent on believers” (2011, 72–73). Religious practices in Indonesia have gone through religionization since the 1946 establishment of the Ministry of Religion, which officially recognized only six world religions, which it sought to rationalize and standardize.

3. The Gospel Herald (www.gospelherald.com) is the world’s largest pan-denominational Chinese Christian news provider.

4. Tong’s twin attacks on the Charismatic movement and “liberal” mainline churches are recorded in his acceptance speech for an honorary doctorate of divinity at the Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 2008 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=lE34znkG; see also www.wts.edu/stayinformed/view.html?id=1100).

5. Some of the data on Tzu Chi in Indonesia are from an interview I conducted with an executive committee of the organization in Jakarta on July 29, 2013.
6. Tzu Chi has published the memoirs of Widjaja and Kusuma in a book series called Seeing the Shadow of Bodhisattva, in which Master Cheng Yen defines a bodhisattva as someone who expresses great compassion in helping others. This image differs greatly from that of the controversies in which these businesspeople are involved because of questionable business practices (see, for example, Chua 2008).

7. Murdaya is the wife of one of the wealthiest Chinese Indonesians. The Jakarta Anti-Corruption Court found her guilty of bribery and sentenced her to thirty-two months in prison in February 2013 (Jakarta Globe 2013).

8. Huang maintains that “by the year 2000, the Tzu Chi diaspora had more or less become one of the ‘four faces of globalization’, like Christian Evangelicalism and the Sai Baba movement from India” (2009, 209).

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I argue here that, secularization aside, there has of late been a definite resurgence of interest in sacred space in Bangkok. Furthermore, a postmodern viewpoint allows religiosity contextualized by cultural reenchantment, desecularization, and posttraditionalism to become more culturally visible and even more relevant, rather than remain in a more marginal position in modernity. Importantly, it can be seen that Bangkok embraces alternatives, marginality, and new religious articulations.

Presently, Thai Buddhism, expressing wider social and cultural sentiments, is caught in the contradictions of history and tradition and is propelled not so much by a consciousness of the past or the Benjaminian storm of progress (1969, 257–58) as by its own retrospective gaze. Thai religiosity—its symbols, narratives, and practices—is in a continued state of reflection with its own shadow, its own imagining. Interestingly, from an anthropological perspective, it also provides a variegated frame of analysis for broader lived experiences, “what holds us intimately, from the inside” (Paul Leuilliot, quoted in Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 1998, 3). As Roland Robertson (1992, 92–96) has remarked considering Japanese religion, new articulations of Thai Buddhism are significantly implicated in local-global historical and sociocultural contexts. These necessitate an entirely new way of thinking social practices in Thailand. This can be undertaken in an interpretation of the variety of religious (Theravada Buddhist) experiences and the particular sites of social encounter that are defined by relations among the various elements. These may include the assemblage of monasteries and shrines; new religious websites offering liberation online; various commercial centers involved in the production of
sacra, including a lucrative amulet market; contemporary spirit mediums and fortune
tellers/diviners; protective tattoos and incantations; urban ghost stories and the idiosyn-
crasies of popular Buddhist monks, saints, and magicians; and religion and marginality,
imagination and power, contested in the context of social and political change.

We need a new way of thinking religiosity in formally complex Bangkok as a process
of recoding lived worlds, to situate the vernacular, particularized religious narratives in
relation to wider global forces and sentiments. My main concern is to explore new sub-
jectivities and the variety of contemporary religious practices that have recolonized the
Thai city with new realities. These practices are intertwined in a spatial complexity of
everyday life that has fused with new global forces, if reluctantly, as a consequence of the
rise of modernity culminating in the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

New identities, like new religious practices, are intersections between local and glo-
bal, neither wholly one nor the other but a product of urbanization interconnected with
social geographies of transnational capital and world interstate relations (Henri Lefeb-
vre's “politics of scale”: see Brenner 1997, 139). I suggest that in the case of new urban
religiosity, we should consider both foreground and background, near and far, global and
local, as the inside is on the outside, while the outside is now firmly on the inside.

**URBAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, IDENTITY, AND CITY SPACE**

I now turn to defining some primary ideas on the varieties of urban religious experience
in the Thai context, religious modernity, and the reading of city space: what I refer to as
“the religiosity of urban space.” Thailand's social and cultural changes in modernity were
engendered in the national capital (Mahaa-nakhorn, “the Metropolis”) and reverberated
into the countryside (chonabot). However, there is an ambiguous line between the city/town
and the countryside, a feature of the postmetropolis. In fact, analogous to the project of
modernity, Thailand has increasing urban-rural differentiation. This country has relied so
much on the efforts of poor farmers and disempowered rural workers (most, in any case,
often seasonal farmers) for its economic success. The intellectual and cultural division was
evident in the media-controlled and propagandized reactionary-driven debacle of the Sep-
tember 2006 coup, when a small number of ultranationalist elites and members of the
middle class aligned with army interests to take control of the nation-state. The well-
orchestrated result under royalist elites was the destruction of electoral democracy, which
had been supported largely by the working classes and the rural proletariat, who had felt
the social and economic benefits of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s decentralized
policies and programs. This was the first time that such a clear and well-defined intellectual
rift between the sectors of town and country had appeared in a politicomoral guise, although
the urban middle class was always concerned about drawing lines around its interests,
status, and privileges against the incursion of rural folk into the city-nation (Taylor 2012).

*Urban,* although defined as a unit of spatial analysis, concerns a social reality that
consists of relations that are in large part imagined. It is a fabricated condition of being-
in-place. In contradistinction, the term city, following Henri Lefebvre’s thinking (1996, 105), has a present and immediate material reality that is more readily defined in terms of an architectural or physical statement. A town/city is a place materially situated between rice-growing villages and the sometimes invisible ideological hand of the state. It is a complex, interactive network linking social processes and relations with wider spatial practices.

However, ethnographically, urban spatiality and city space are not uncontested and constitute an ensemble of ideas and practices that are contrasted to their opposite, rurality (kiewkab-chiwit chonabot). Indeed, relevant to the Thai experience, there are continuing mediations at work redefining the relationship of urban life to country life through “symbolisms and representations (ideological and imaginary) of nature and countryside” (Lefebvre 1996, 118–19). But for our purposes, urban space exists as a social reality even if increasingly subject to semiotic blurring, as in rural places or designated country things. As a condition of late modernity, the Thai metropolis extends continually outward in its embracement of the countryside. It is a site of the imagination, a myth or a tale (Chambers 1990, 112; Certeau 1984, 95–110), though one that clearly exposes a variety of lived experiences. Although the city undermines the countryside in its embracement, extending its reach, the countryside is able to resist to some extent, through recourse to local history and tradition. Thus, as Lefebvre (1996, 120) argues, the countryside does not necessarily lose itself in the heart of the city, or the city lose itself when absorbing the countryside.

The division (and its imagining) between town and country is concerned with significations that cannot be confused; this separation and contradiction are largely part of the social division of labor. This is in much the same way that the division between culture or society and nature, or material and intellectual (spiritual), is never really ideologically overcome or resolved (Lefebvre 1996, 120). Bangkok articulates these contradictions and their systems of objects and values, even in the domain of religion. In Thailand, discourses concerned with urbanity as a civilized, bourgeois space and rurality as an undomesticated, untamed space are played out every day in the media, education, the economy, and politics, so much so that Thais are always conscious of these spatial differences.

In early nineteenth-century Chakri Bangkok it was easier to draw the line between town and country, with the inscription of the city wall spatially demarcating the sacred-secular center, similar to the traditional division in the monastic sangha between town and forest monks. But this was a material and brutal separation in the case of the cultural, political, and economic city center/summit, which served a dual function of protector and exploiter of the countryside or the base (Lefebvre 1991, 163). Everything on the inside was urban and civilized, while anything outside was rural/forest, wild, and consequently dangerous. There were clear, ritually enforced, demarcated spaces between inside and outside, as between the various civilizing centers of human habitation or towns and cities. Normative sanctity is located in the center, embodied by the monarch, who regulates the potentially ominous exterior.
In the Chao Phraya Delta it is not always clear when one enters or leaves the all-encompassing metropolis, or edge city space, for the countryside. The spatial distinctions are blurred as one drives from the metropolis to adjacent delta provinces, moving through spaces that are neither completely urban nor completely rural. The referents that once clearly separated these elements are now randomly reproduced as “potential signs and horizons within a common topography” (Chambers 1990, 53–54). The Thai urban fabric extends over much of the surrounding countryside as a consequence of modernity and industrialization since the 1960s. This extension corresponded to the creation of new social formations, especially the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie and a mobile urban proletariat (mostly seasonal small farmers seeking income opportunities).

In the Thai metropolis after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, there seemed to be an increased desire for country things and a nostalgia for premodern values. This is also a feature of industrial or late capitalism, as new societies are more and more estranged from the simplicity and totality of assumed primordial rural tradition, even, in a related sense, of religious authority. In Thailand, modernity weakened the traditional bases of moral authority, though this was also connected to an elitist myth of nostalgia surrounding premodern communal coherence (Turner 1987, 152). It seems that middle-class urban Thais desire the quixotic “village” (muubaan) and its contentment, ideas fostered by the monarch, noted below, where all that is needed are “fish in the water and rice in the fields” (following a Thai proverb)—and of course monks, supported in daily offerings through ritual merit making (tham-bun, an essential component of popular Buddhism, doing good deeds and living a moral life to improve one’s prospects in this life and/or the next). It is imagined that all this existed before the disruptive and compounding effects of modernization, rationalism, and urban industrialism. Standard histories represent Thais as a sedentary, mannerly, wet-rice-growing culture. This imagining is contrasted with representations of “other,” uncivilized, peripatetic, unkempt, upland, dry-rice cultures, which are frequently seen in antagonistic relationships with the city-nation as a sanctified place. The current monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), was well aware of the rural problèmematique and had been making regular visits to the countryside since the 1950s, establishing palaces in each region, distributing benevolence through royal projects, setting up provincial elite patronages, and leading public displays of support for acclaimed forest-dwelling Buddhist saints, thus co-opting the monastic frontiersman into the symbolic center of the city-nation (Taylor 1993a).

There has been a desire in recent times for the mediated and networked safety of imagined traditional small face-to-face communities, of local worlds. It was not simply King Bhumibol’s birthday speech on December 4, 1997, though this was surely a factor, that defined the country’s future direction as increased dignity through economic self-sufficiency (setthakit phor-phiang), or self-reliance (pheung-ton’eng), and a new localism (thongthin-niyom)—specifically, a localism discourse known as “community culture” (watthanatham chumchon).
The country, the king noted, must step back in order to move forward, a contemporary recourse to an idealized rurality with its revived Buddhist economics. The aspiration to Buddhist simplicity and a utopic pastoralism is part of a Thai bourgeois imagining of a mythic cultural origin that sees the modern metropolis as a “space of irredeemable unnaturalness, modernity gone awry” (May 2006, 92, 94). The current monarchy has become resacralized precisely because of its institutional devotion to local traditions. As a consequence, the masses have turned to kingship (and to the various state apparatuses) as a representational force, and representation has itself become a source of powerful political efficacy.

In this economy, locality, as Rosalind Morris (2000, 244) states, is both that which demands to be represented and that which is nullified in the moment of being represented. Neolocalism, in its various expressions, many articulated through a Buddhist revivalism, is essentially a reaction to the impacts of globalization commencing in the 1980s. This has been especially poignant since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Globalization in some sense has become a much feared word, one that challenges the bases of local values and culture. New mobile global capitalism, along with transnational economic culture and values, has not been received without some resistance in notions of emplaced locality (Raffles 1999, 326).

Expressions of locality may include the various new social movements that, unlike their predecessors, are not defined along class lines, instead arising from spontaneous, issue-based interests. Individuals, especially in terms of their own lives and environments, focus the new social movements on cultural particularism, the vernacular, and the need for greater control over spatial practices. New activist Buddhism, such as that practiced by new ecology monks or community development monks (Darlington 1998; Taylor 1993b; Taylor 1996; Pipob 2000), has fulfilled a need in this regard since the 1980s. But the vernacular, though often represented in terms of systematic and unitary (traditional) knowledge, has a multiplicity of guises. Any local knowledge is a part of local-based social processes that are a reflection as much of differences among individuals and groups as of consistent ideas and practices.

In Thailand, the term for local knowledge, phuum-panyaa-chaobaan, literally means “place-based wisdom of the villagers,” a knowing through bodily experience that is rooted in the particular conditions of locality. Although an improvised knowing constituted by multiple experiences, it is a located, situated knowledge or wisdom, specific to a place and to a particular sense of collective identity we can call Thainess. The ethnic category “Thainess” invokes an essentialized, somewhat retrospective pastoral imagery, one that is juxtaposed to global (even postmodernist) urbanizing forces. Localism, along with self-sufficiency and self-reliance, then, is a means of contesting transnationalism. At another level, it is also a means by which villagers see themselves connected to wider spatial scales, as, for instance, in the way that local folk religion is connected hierarchically to normative state-sanctioned Buddhism (Pattana 2005).

In contrast to urbanity, the notion of rurality has been reinscribed in the popular imagination as certain signs that define an identity and traditional values which in many
ways are distinct from urbanity/the metropolis, enmeshed with the impersonal forces of globalization and its production of specific global-city bodies. The sanctity of Thainess has been uprooted from its traditional, historical, rural village and religious context and divested of its aura; it is now a “free-floating signifier which can be entered into and ‘exited’ at will by commodities of whatever nationality or ethnicity” (Kasian 2002, 105).

In its new free-floating signification, disconnected from its referent, it may thus denote nothing beyond itself. The real value attributed to the conventional notion of Thainess these days is that associated with globalization and a mobile, urban-based population. Even in the domain of religion, we can see intensified commodification: a montage of sacra, linked to consumption and the pervasive market economy, a confusion of signifiers, with the market tending to dominate all signs. The magical Thai-Lao monk Luang Phor Kuun (Khoon), popular among the urban elites, produces high-value amulets that circulate in the marketplace with the label “ruai, ruai, ruai” (rich, rich, rich), good for playing the national lottery or for making commercial decisions. There are many popular monks like him, as the demand for these services has grown in recent times, reflecting both crisis and economic growth.

The urban spatiality of Bangkok defines distinctive subject worlds and the ways that residents live in space and negotiate its complex terrain day by day. Bangkok is arguably a site for the body’s cultural saturation, correspondingly able to affect the religious domain and its various articulations. It is a place where the body as representation may be opposed, transformed, and reinscribed in the language of difference. Bangkok is a multiple site that is materially and socially complex, constructed historically and synchronically in relation to political-economic and cultural forces. In Lefebvre’s terms (1996, 101), the city consists of “near order” functions—those of the local community and face-to-face relations—and the “far order,” the regulation of society by powerful institutions and a dominant ideology of church, state, and capitalism. These functions may be articulated as counterspaces, or local spatial resistances, such as the Mahakan Fort community (Herzfeld 2003). This community consists of some seventy-seven heterogeneous households that have been resisting for some years the state apparatuses that want to evict them in the name of gentrification and tourification. Then there are the Cham Moslem community of Baan Khrua (Ockey 1997), which refused for some years to be relocated to make room for an extension to the new elevated expressway, and some periurban market gardeners who resist the expropriation of their land and particular way of life, showing that spatial alternatives, initiated by the pluralism of local powers, are possible and even occasionally successful in challenging homogenous state power.

The far order, encapsulating the mediating effects of the metropolis, imposes itself on the reality of everyday life and becomes visible by self-inscription within this reality. It coerces through and by the near order, which confirms its compelling power. Bangkok is a material and social space that reflects society on the ground, an ensemble of differences, varieties, and rhythms of social life. It is a many-centered, complex text, an oeuvre that can be understood only in reflection; it signifies an order of things that may be
understood largely in social and economic relations (Lefebvre 1996, 106). The metropo-
lis is constituted through various established institutions and ideologies, which are
essentially connected as a series of images (Appadurai 1990, 299). It also reflects the
social order, represented at the highest level by the royal palace, a living and active mon-
archy institution, an influential Privy Council around the king, the traditionally powerful
Ministry of the Interior, and police and military establishments. Religious ideology is
signified at the highest level by the monastic residence of the supreme patriarch (phra
sangkharat), the various monastic elites (Phra Somdet, especially those monks of the
Somdet Phraraachaakhana grade), and the various monasteries near the old city center.
These are places of significant power that have been patronized and supported by the
Chakri dynasty kings since the eighteenth century.

Bangkok, then, has a “code of functioning” around these various institutions in which
the social structure, the interwoven patterns of everyday life, becomes manifest (Lefebvre
1996, 112). Premodern Bangkok for some two hundred years carried history and sus-
tained cultural tradition through various national institutions, maintaining a sacred pal-
ladium, universities, museums, and residences of members of the royal family and
military and political elites. These conservative institutional apparatuses constitute the
most immediately relevant sites for the production and circulation of power from the
center or summit outward. The remaining visible nineteenth-century heritage sites in
Bangkok, such as monasteries, Brahman shrines, theaters, and decaying canal bridges,
have become the loci of a transition from memories and sentiments that are meaningful
to some to the imperatives and exigencies of the present time. The metropolis now is
clearly able to appropriate a variety of religious, political, and philosophical meanings.
These are articulated by its buildings, monuments, streets, and squares, “by voids, by the
spontaneous theatricalization of encounters which take place in it, not forgetting the
festivities and ceremonies” (Lefebvre 1996, 114).

The Thai metropolis has immense influence over the countryside, seemingly dutifully
carried out in the wider social order, though rarely unitary. Thus, there are various reli-
gious, political, and moral orders, each concerned with specific ideologies of practical
ramifications. However, the city is also a milieu where counterideologies, everyday utter-
ances, and tactics of resistance are produced and maintained in specific communities,
among near order groupings and individuals. It is also specifically a place of supreme
sanctity. There is clearly now a need to reflect on redefining the nature of sanctity or
religiosity in the context of these wider social changes. In the Thai metropolis, religion
is a reflection of the complexity embodied in the “attitudes, habits, customs, expectan-
cies, and hopes” (Chambers 1986, 183) of this milieu. The Thai metropolis is a challeng-
ing ethnographic site where feudal, modern, and postmodern systems of production and
consumption coexist, reflecting complex social formations. These intersect in a cultural
pastiche where the urban dominates and the city’s multiple presentations are hard to
simplify. But the city is both a real and an imagined place. Bangkok, like any megacity, is
where millions of people (nine to eleven, depending on the calculation) go about their
lives in myriad ways, deploying a variety of cultural strategies. Many of these strategies are articulated through varieties of lived religion, including normative Theravada rituals and practices, connecting through mediumship, devotion to Chinese Mahayana deities (such as Kwan Im), Indic cults (such as those of Ganesha or Brahma), and auspicious magic.

Richard O’Connor (1990, 61–73) also saw the changing Thai metropolis as a place where ordinary and royal/elite values and meanings were affixed in the cultural taxonomy by naming places. Specific activities and historical events define such places. Bangkokians rarely, it seems, use street maps or even care much for street names, instead relying on named locations, moving between named places. These shared social meanings tie Bangkok’s many places together in a hierarchical ordering, with lesser places set below centers of importance. Therefore, organically and spatially, the city-nation (the heart) is set above the far provinces, while important places with Pali-Sanskrit names are situated above ordinary places with simple Thai names, and the elite above commoners.

A RELIGIOSITY OF URBAN SPACE

As the above discussion shows, the attempt to make sense of the religiosity of urban space requires generating new ways of thinking religion and opening possibilities that are latent in thought and action. The fundamental concern here is with understanding the urban condition in its lived totality, a reading on multiple scales to enable the rereading of popular religiosity—that is, the ideas, forms, and practices of belief and everyday religious practices in the metropolis. Importantly, this understanding also involves the imagination of a kind of urban religiosity that is increasing, circulating, and reordering space everywhere.

Postmodern urban life has produced a distinctive religiosity, extending the meaning implicit in Thai definitions of varieties of Buddhism according to location. For instance, Thais tend to formally identify their religion around monastery complexes (wats), as the loci of sanctity; rural Buddhism has village monasteries (wat baan), while town/city Buddhism has “monasteries inside the city” (wat yu-u-nai meu-ang), which are traditionally centers of learning. The forest monastic tradition in recent times has defined its buildings along the lines of “reform ascetic practice monasteries” (wat phra-kammathaan) to distinguish them from the earlier “forest monasteries” (wat paa) of various forms of Buddhism, many of which the spread of provincial towns and cities have absorbed.

In referring to urban Thai Buddhism, I mean two related things: first, specific symbols, ideas, and sentiments that are generated in an urban context, and the multiple material forms that the actors broadly recognize as being sacred; second, those accepted sacred sites where religious practices are undertaken and that attract largely urban devotees, and the specific discursive sets that are produced therein. Most Thai Buddhists likely consider their religion an all-embracing total meaning system, though not necessarily a homogeneous one. In a postmodern frame of reference, Buddhism is best understood as a religious assemblage, a medley of codes constituted by its various multiscaled artic-
ulations. These considerations are usually overlooked in reflecting on bigger pictures or seeking wholes or totalities. Michel Foucault, however, entered the question of religion (though in his case, monotheism and the Catholic Church) through the radical notion of heterotopias, which disorder and eradicate accepted boundaries between the sacred and the ordinary in everyday life (see Carrette 2000, 107; Bernauer and Carrette 2004, 149). These may be understood in, for instance, the paradox of venerated wandering monks who are situated on the outside and coreside in cemeteries, charnels, or cremation grounds as other-places of habitation dissociated from normative society. These sites were the loci of ascetic monks until at least the early nineteenth century and were once inside some of the important city monasteries. As the cities grew, many were moved beyond the city limits and became new feared places, especially given ever-present concerns over epidemics.

Thai Buddhism in the postmetropolis engenders a wide range of meanings in relation to lived experiences in this milieu, an increasingly dense, changing, and intermingled religious landscape. New frames of reference may be useful in a postmodern view of lived religion, one that spatializes and inverts the historical narrative and notions of continuity and tradition. However, in considering new Theravada Buddhisms, it may not be useful to talk of a “postmodern Buddhism,” as some scholars have done, outside the embedded broader dynamics of social and cultural life. The Thailand scholar Peter Jackson (1999), for instance, identifies his postmodern Buddhism with a greater emphasis on the supernatural/magic, as distinct from rationalist/doctrinal Buddhism, which he associates with Thai modernity. However, we can see that in popular or syncretic forms of traditional Thai Buddhism, these opposing modalities have long intermingled and coexisted in the same continuous stream, a distinctive but complementary religious current. Even orthodox Buddhism has a supernaturalism, as the normative Pali-Thai texts attest. A modernist view that inscribes an unambiguous division and dialectical separation between these apparent polarities is counterproductive to understanding the postmodern religious condition. This view also understates the possibilities emergent at the interstices, social or spatial boundaries, of a Buddhist nation-state.

REDEFINING THE RELIGIOUS QUEST

Thai people feel more insecure now than at any time in the past. There are two reasons for this. The first is heightened political insecurities caused by the ancien régime trying desperately to drag society back into modernity’s submissive past and by increasing pro-democracy interests marching forward, toward an uncertain future. This insecurity is also connected to the likely change of reign in the Chakri dynasty. The second is the dislocating and intensifying implications of globalization, which has dramatically taken culture from local to global. These factors account for a proliferation of religious practices and practitioners—including urban mediums, various forms of supernaturalism, magic, and charismatic monks—a recourse to spiritual quick fixes (for those with little time),
and an increase in merit making and consumerism, such as devotion to shopping malls and arcades. This is an-Other kind of religiosity, though clearly localizable even if outside the conventional hierarchy and sanctified ordering of places.

Thais are struggling at the intersection of various forces in an atomistic, rapidly changing, and arguably hyper-rational urban milieu. The changes they face are connected to certain basic globalized urban problems and the fact that there is little time anymore for the fundamentally important cultural practice of merit making. In this complexity, time is connected to a regime of value, commodified: “Time is money” and “Credit is money,” as Benjamin Franklin said (2003, 52), and as modern Thais say, “Welaa pen-neung pen-thorng” (Time is money, time is gold/wealth). If the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer John Calvin had been a Buddhist, that might have explained the current rational urban religious trend in Thailand (Wijeyewardene 1986, 15). The individual, whom Max Weber recommended as important to the serious study of modern societies at the beginning of the previous century, is now very much in the world (if not always of the world). The nineteenth-century Christian missionary R. Spence Hardy wrote, “Religion must be made the work of your life; it must enter into everything; it must be seen by your children, and servants, and neighbors, that your heart is not here, but in heaven” (1866, 226, quoted in Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 273). Although focused on hard work and the sublimation of the desire for pleasure (in order to attain the highest good), new Buddhism is also connected to the logic of consumption. Consumers are drawn to indulge their desires for the many products now available, including the varieties of this-worldly Buddhism in a new religious hypermarket place. The global Dhammakaya movement (Taylor 2006; Taylor 2008, 37–63), centered in metropolitan Bangkok, is symptomatic of the logic of consumption entering into religion, mainly through generating enormous wealth in its ritualized form of merit making, which targets rich members of the middle class, and engaging in market-based speculation and investments.

In urban Sri Lanka in the 1960s, Gananath Obeyesekere (1972, 63–65) noted that the appearance of sacred objects such as images and statues in middle-class homes and in public places indicated a “spatial shift symbolizing the entry of Buddhism into the ‘world.’” The Buddha, then, symbolically is now here in the present, connected to the practices of everyday life. This was most radically expressed in the production of a new, socially engaged Buddhism following the trend of postcolonial religious sentiments in South Asia. This reform-oriented, inner-worldly “Protestant” Buddhism, first noted in Sri Lanka by Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988), is associated with increased secularization. This new religion tends to deny that the monastic sangha should have a central role or that monks are the only medium through which salvation can be attained. It also reflects a greater emphasis on individual effort, as in lay-organized urban-based meditation.

There is evidence more recently of an increased interest in lay insight meditation (vipassana) among the middle classes in Bangkok and Thailand’s northern city Chiang Mai, following a similar long-time interest in neighboring colonial and postcolonial urban Burma and in internationally renowned vipassana teachers. In both cases, there
was a corresponding decrease in monastic involvement. The earlier Sri Lankan reform movement has its historical antecedents in the late nineteenth century, when the country was exposed to the processes of colonialism and the denigrating work of Protestant missionaries. These included the introduction of Western education (purposely belittling Buddhism) and the embourgeoisement of Sinhala society, connected to the growth of consumerism (Turner 1994, 128). This led to the subsequent loss of esteem and demoralization in the monkhood, which never regained its previous level. In response, the charismatic lay reformer Anagarika Dhammapala spearheaded the Buddhist revitalization movement, which expressed the sentiments of the emerging Sinhala middle class and disenchantment with traditional Buddhism, associated with rural society and a peasant moral code (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 215). The term traditional, used to contest modern middle-class urban values, implies from a bourgeois perspective a dislocation from the present time and both a “glorifying” and a “marginalizing” of peasant cultures (Herzfeld 2002, 202). Similarly, in contemporary Thailand it indicates the ideological distance between city/town and countryside, expressed both as a “glorifying” pastoral nostalgia and in the increasing marginality of country people.

These days, reflecting trends in modern urban life in Thailand and its intersection with global forces, Thais are delving into an imagined past while feeling a sense of time and space compression caused by urbanization and late modernity, leading them to seek religious quick fixes or religious experiences on the move—postmodern journeying in its various forms. However, modern Thais do not necessarily have to move their bodies anywhere for this other-place experience, indicative of postindustrial, post-Fordist workers’ lifeways. This is especially the case for the technoelites engaged in Thailand’s burgeoning new IT sector and the children of the New Economy: the new religious individual can “click, click” through cyberspace to saunter around the imaginary electronic promenades that have superseded (at least in part) many places on which traditional identities used to be based. Here we may include the monastery, and its spatial significance. These new educated workers and other elites are inhabitants of an increasingly fragmented and polarized Thai metropolis, which reflects new, insatiable, diverse perspectives and possibilities on their lived worlds. In addition to the differences within this urban world, there are intellectual divisions involving knowledge and power between the rich and well-connected center and the impoverished periphery.

In Thailand, Buddhist monasteries have long been designated historically and through a distinctive set of social practices as village/rural, town/city, or, in the periphery, forest. However, these simplistic divisions are less precise as the city-metropolis in its “sweeping urban fringe of endless suburbs, satellite towns and ribbon development” (Chambers 1990, 53–54) extends itself into the countryside and history is largely erased, memorialized, and archived or made less relevant in the present lived world. Only a collective consciousness can distill meaning from shared learning.

In the traditional constructions of Thai history, the town/city centers (meuang) dominated the countryside, understood as contested wild places between the various centers.
From the ritually important center, the royal palace extended its magnificence, brute force, and merit power (barami) outward. The effectiveness of this extension seemingly depended on the accumulated merit (bun) of the ruler. However, nowadays the central administrative, economic, and political summit exercises a more subtle vertical form of domination, exploitation, and control over the base. At the base, the rural masses inhabit the periphery, even often illicitly occupying forests (places of nature). The civilizing centers of elite culture clearly feared these forests, the Thai maquis. They were considered outside social and political control, even though urban understandings now include domesticated forests as part and parcel of the nation-state. The world, reproduced in all its diversity and imagining, is now compressed inside the forest, while the forest, now domesticated, is incorporated into the center.

CONCLUSION: MONTAGE, METHOD, AND MODERNITY

In the postmodern conditions of Thai society, much of religious history and tradition has become less significant. In a rereading of tradition and history, Derek Gregory (1993, 234) suggests that Walter Benjamin radically spatialized time, entailing a need to reinterpret many of the taken-for-granted normative aspects of the lived world. In this reinterpretation we need to reclaim, demythologize, and re-present tradition and history more as montage, allowing the possibility of multiple readings and experiences. In effect, this kind of montage uncovers what is covered over; it brings to a significant conjuncture seemingly unrelated and inconsequential minutiae, so presenting the broadest picture. In this vein, Buddhism, clearly, cannot be read in isolation.

A number of contemporary religious practices, such as cyber-Buddhism, have reinscribed new spatial representations of Thai Buddhism, portraying it as a new logical morality, indeed even as an emotion and exuberance in the new structures of feeling rooted in the present time. This imagining has been constructed around location and new place-based identities. As O’Connor (1993, 330) succinctly notes, “Thai religion is changing. So is Thai society.” Conversely, as Thai society has transformed, this has encouraged change within the monastery, in near-order relations, and in the nature of religiosity itself. The Theravada Buddhist scholar Donald Swearer (1995, 105) has remarked that “religious traditions are not static”; they are continually responding to a variety of changes, and in some cases even enable and shape such changes.

Buddhist practices in Thailand, I argue, articulate a present moment and hint at possible futures. Bangkok’s religious space, a product of the new varieties of Buddhism engendered in the Thai metropolis, is a pastiche of relations and intersections. These clearly challenge religious authority and tradition. O’Connor (1990, 62) notes that the Thai metropolis is “lived more like a poem is heard—a line at a time. Just as one verse leads to another and then fades away, so too do people move from one place to another without . . . keeping all the places in mind.” This is reminiscent of Lefebvre’s (2004) contemplative “rhythmanalysis”: each individual actor constructs his or her own poem.
in these lived intersecting social spaces. In the mix of various cultural sites, city space is an assemblage that is interlinked with the individual and the wider social body. In turn, each cultural site has its own center. This is reflected in the multiplicity of religious practices that have effloresced in recent times and which are embedded in wider systems of influence and control. Although he did not discuss religious space extensively, Foucault acknowledged that power “touches people’s lives more fundamentally through their social practices than their beliefs” (Fraser 1981, 272). The notion of spirituality in his thinking pertains to the construction of the subject through power relations that shape life, the body, and individuality. Religious beliefs and practices underline existing relations of power and maintain a system of control and discipline through pastoral authority. According to Foucault, religion tends to reorder individuals under a particular structure of control and is inseparable from politics (Carrette 2000, 136). This “political spirituality,” as he calls it, is then connected to power relations and the various constructions of the individual subject. The locus of this construction is the city-nation.

At various times in its political history, we can see how religion has played an influential role in Thailand, if more indirectly than in the confrontations of colonial Burma or Sri Lanka. However, new religious movements and practices are all expressions of a distinctive new religiosity of everyday life in the Thai postmetropolis. These are, undoubtedly, markers of the present time.

NOTES

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PART 3

RELIGIOUS PLACE MAKING
IN THE CITY
To understand urban religion in India—indeed, to understand the city itself—one must understand the village, both as a reality and as it is imagined. Although “town” is everywhere contrasted to “country,” nowhere is the rural-urban contrast so heavily freighted with moral and existential significance, or so deeply embedded in national consciousness, as here. Village India has been described as the “real” India (Dewey 1972; Inden 1990; Jodhka 2002), and the “traditional” village is valorized as a paradigm of social harmony, in which life was simple but none were hungry or in a state of perpetual want. The Indian village has also been envisioned as having an essentially nonviolent social order, as being democratic, and even as providing a viable model for some future nonviolent polity (Mantena 2012). These ideas are rooted in a specific set of assumptions about caste and Hinduism. Cities, by contrast, are portrayed as not really Indian at all but a “Western” phenomenon, characterized by the breakdown of traditional caste norms, the decline of religious life, and the rise of un-Indian greed and striving (Pocock 1960, 65; Gandhi 1969, 151, quoted in Jodhka 2002, 3346).

M. N. Srinivas, the doyen of Indian sociology, once wrote that “if and when caste disappears, Hinduism will also disappear” (1956, 495). Writing in 1956, he assumed, as did most everyone else at the time, that the secularizing forces of modernity threatened not just Hinduism but all religions with dissolution. But Hinduism was more vulnerable than religions like Islam and Christianity, in Srinivas’s view, because it lacked a strong institutional structure. The closest thing in Hinduism to a church hierarchy or an ulema was caste, and for this reason Srinivas and his contemporaries presumed the disappearance
of caste would mean its end. In this chapter I consider the evidence of urban Dalit slum dwellers—descendants of agricultural slave castes—who, despite living under the worst conditions the urban milieu has to offer, celebrate the urban over the rural precisely because traditional caste arrangements have no place there. Yet far from spelling the demise of Hinduism, I argue, city life has revitalized it. Only in this relatively caste-free environment has Hinduism become a religion these Dalits can truly call their own. Where Hinduism in the village remains tied to caste in ways that exclude Dalits from full participation, in the city it has become for the first time a matter of personal choice.

Though caste is not an exclusively rural phenomenon, canonical accounts of its “traditional” form take the village setting as paradigmatic. In the next section I outline the key elements of how the village caste system has been imagined, an image that has dissolved under scrutiny. Long seen as a consensual religious order embraced by even the lowest castes, its apparent victims, the caste system is now recognized as a brutally exploitative arrangement based on systematic violence. This account sets the stage for what I call Dalit urbanism—a specifically Dalit celebration of city life and the aspirations it embodies—which I introduce in the following section. Next I look more closely at the internal organization of village Hinduism. Here I show why, until the early twentieth century, Dalits were regarded not as Hindus but as a separate and subordinate element throughout India. They were redefined as Hindu only in the context of a demographic struggle during which Hindu nationalists realized that counting them as such was critical to the project of redefining the country in Hindu-majority terms (Webster 1992). Originally a marginal position, the push to include Dalits in Hinduism went mainstream when the nominally secular Congress Party began, under Gandhi’s leadership, to treat the strengthening of Hinduism as a vital national interest (Roberts 2014). Immediately after independence, Hinduism’s integration and retention of Dalits became a matter of national policy (Galanter 1971). But where Gandhi saw Hindu India’s best hope as being in its villages, the nature of the village caste system places inherent limits on the integration of Dalits he so longed for. Hence the irony of my counterintuitive finding that urbanization, far from spelling the end of Hinduism, in fact strengthens Dalit commitment to it.

The addition of Dalits, I argue, radically transformed Hinduism. It now includes ideas and values radically at odds with those known to previous generations. In the chapter’s final section, I detail some of these new possibilities, exemplified in the religion of urban Dalits.

THE “CASTE-HINDU VILLAGE”: THE RECEIVED VIEW

India’s mainstream nationalists conceptualized India’s vast rural heartlands in fundamentally Hindu terms (Jodhka 2002), a view that dominant anthropological accounts of the village caste system echoed throughout most of the twentieth century. Each village, according to Gandhi, was in fact a self-contained little “republic” (Gandhi 1978, 4, quoted in Jodhka 2002, 3346) internally organized on the basis of caste. Such accounts celebrated caste as a benign social order, encompassing both religious and political realities, which
had preserved Hinduism for millennia in the face of alternative religious visions that Gandhi identified with outside oppressors: “The vast organization of caste answered not only the religious wants of the community, but it answered too its political needs. The villagers managed their internal affairs through the caste system, and through it they dealt with any oppression from the ruling power or powers” (Gandhi 1964, 221; quoted in Mantena 2012, 544); “The home life, i.e., the village, was undisturbed by the periodical visitations from barbarous hordes [i.e., Muslims]” (Gandhi 1978, 4, quoted in Jodhka 2002, 3346). What this proto-Hindu-nationalist narrative obscures is that rural India has never been a Hindu monoculture. Not only have Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and heterodox religious movements had a long-standing presence in rural society, but a significant portion of the rural population (Dalits) was specifically excluded from the Hindu fold until the twentieth century.

In addition to fending off “foreign” religions, the traditional village is also portrayed as offering a radically different, and in many ways superior, economic model, in which individuals pursued neither personal nor sectional interest but the “good of the whole” (Gandhi, quoted in Ambedkar 1946, 286). “[Caste] as I interpret it . . . obviates social evils and entirely prevents the killing economic competition. And . . . it ensures the fairest possible distribution of wealth, though it may not be an ideal, i.e., strictly equal, distribution” (Gandhi 1965, 84–85). The key contrast here is with a market- and trade-based economy, often incorrectly seen as confined to large-scale society and cities (Fuller 1989). Village-based distribution “is essentially different from a market,” according to Louis Dumont, by “virtue of the fact that everyone is interdependent. . . . We are not in the world of the modern economic individual, but in a sort of co-operative where the main aim is to ensure the subsistence of everyone” (1980, 105). All members of village society—even the hereditarily unfree agricultural laborers who produced the grain surplus other castes then divvied up—are supposed to have benefited from it (103–5).

While no one claims that Dalits’ share of the harvest was commensurate with their contribution to it, the notion that the system nevertheless worked to their benefit is based on the idea that they enjoyed a “right to employment” that made up in security what they lacked in freedom. But here we must distinguish between the rhetoric of the system’s apologists and its reality. For talk of rights is meaningless unless one can specify how such supposed rights were asserted and enforced, and as the agrarian historian Dharma Kumar points out, “the issue [of ‘rights’] would be raised presumably only when there was a failure of the crops, and it would be precisely at times like these, when [the Dalit laborer’s] rights were most needed, that they were most insecure” (1965, 191–92; see also Bailey 1960, 257–58). What the historical record shows, in fact, is that in times of crop failure, supposedly protected Dalit laborers starved in great numbers, and even in times of plenty they frequently went hungry and were visibly malnourished (Viswanath 2014a, 93–103).

Closely linked to the theory that caste is beneficial is a claim about legitimacy; even its apparent victims embraced their assigned position, according to the received view. Rather than relying on violence, the village caste system is portrayed as resting on an
internalized sense of religious duty. “There can be no compulsion from without as there was none for several thousand years during which the Law of Varnashrama [i.e., a Hindu theory of caste] worked without interruption. By training, the people had recognized the duty and the justice of the law, and they voluntarily lived under it” (Gandhi 1965, 85; see also Dumont 1980, 107). Hinduism justifies caste, in other words, and because they were Hindus, Dalits accepted the role assigned to them. Both these claims—that Dalits were always Hindu and that they embrace caste as a religious duty—are contentious. But let us temporarily shelve these questions to focus on the underlying claim that the village caste order was based on a social consensus that included Dalits.

Consensus implies choice and the availability of other options. But it was only in the colonial period that alternatives began to become widely available to Dalits, which made flight from the village a real possibility. Indenture on overseas plantations was one such option, and though plantations were by no means a paradise of workers’ rights, a very large number of landless Dalits nevertheless voted with their feet, and continued to do so even after awareness of conditions in the plantations became widespread. Another important means of escaping village caste regimes was through the military, which under the British opened its ranks to Dalits, many of whom served with distinction and used their savings to begin a new life for themselves and their families. Finally, there was flight to cities. Here for the first time Dalits were able to access new forms of employment, as butlers, maids, cooks, soldiers, syces, craftsmen, and workers with other roles under foreign employers, who did not observe untouchability or distinguish among equally qualified employees on the basis of caste (Rupa Viswanath, personal communication; see also Dubois 1897, 53; Olcott 1902, 3, 19), and as casual day laborers or factory workers in Madras and other urban centers (Viswanath 2014b).

If Dalit laborers were content with their lot and felt protected—or if they accepted their position as part of the natural and inevitable (religious) order—why did so many leave the village? A related question is why, if Dalits accepted their subordination as a matter of religious necessity, were violence and the threat of violence against disobedient Dalits a pervasive feature of village life (see Guha 2013, 95; Bailey 1958, 257–58)? The systematic use of violence and torture to enforced dominant caste authority—including the burning out of eyes with chili pepper, the forced consumption of water mixed with human excrement, and other ritualized punishments—has been described from the colonial period (Thurston 1907; Viswanath 2014a, 30–31) through the mid-twentieth century (Srinivas 1959, 3–4, quoted in Jodhka 2012, 40–42; Gough 1979, 48–49; Srinivas 2012, 199) and to the present day (Human Rights Watch 1999). Indeed, we have no evidence of a time when violence was not necessary to keep Dalits in line.

DALIT URBANISM

The hollowness of the village myth, now obvious to most scholars (Béteille 2012, xv), was already apparent to some Indians even in Gandhi’s time. One such dissenter was
B. R. Ambedkar, an activist and intellectual leader whose main contributions were in the areas of human rights and democratic theory. Unlike Gandhi, he had firsthand knowledge of village life and was himself a Dalit. He saw nothing to be admired in the village, which he recognized as founded on the caste-based expropriation of unfree labor.²

The village republic of which the Hindus are so proud—what is the position of the untouchables [i.e., Dalits] in this Republic? They are not merely the last but are also the least. . . . In this Republic there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is a very negation of Republic. The republic is an Empire of the Hindus over the untouchables. It is a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the untouchables. The untouchables have no rights. . . . They have no rights because they are outside the village republic, and because they are outside the so-called village republic, they are outside the Hindu fold. (Ambedkar 1989, 25–26, quoted in Jodhka 2002, 3351)

Two features of Ambedkar’s thinking are clearly on display in this passage. The first is his affirmation of universal humanist values; the second is his perception of Hinduism as the religion of the oppressor. Dealing with each in turn we will see that, while urban Dalits today wholly embrace Ambedkar’s universal humanism, they do not necessarily share his sense of alienation from Hinduism.

Where Gandhi dressed up as a poor villager, Ambedkar embraced urban garb. Dalits had long been subject to sartorial restrictions, and his dressing in a suit and tie at once challenged the caste hierarchy and signaled his dissent from the village romance of the high-caste nationalists.³ It is no accident that his millions of subaltern followers have most often depicted him in this attire—a plain blue suit and red necktie—even to the present day (Jaoul 2006), while as his elite critics have continued to chide him for being Westernized. But Ambedkar was unmoved by both the authenticity politics of mainstream Indian nationalism and the Gandhian costume play it gave rise to. He felt no need to prove his Indianess. On the contrary, he once told Gandhi, “I have no homeland” (Rao 2009, 159). The values that mattered to him were not nativist but universal.⁴

The same is true among ordinary Dalit slum dwellers. Those I lived with from 2003 to 2004, for example, though having no connection to Ambedkarism, were no less adamant in their rejection of the village and embrace of urban modernity.⁵ To live in the city was to be “modern” and “educated,” a state they contrasted specifically with that of their country cousins. This had nothing to do with formal schooling. Many of these slum dwellers had no more than a third grade education, no better than their rural counterparts. What being “educated” in fact meant to these urban Dalits was being casteless. This was not merely a matter of not believing in caste. Of course they knew that jāti categories correspond to no inherent differences among human beings.⁶ “Caste is nothing but a lie [verum poy],” they would say, or “All people are the same . . . all have the same blood.” “There are only two human jātis: male and female,”⁷ and “Isn’t it true that God
made all people the same?” But all this was obvious; their country cousins knew it as well as they did. What being educated and modern signified, rather, was not a state of mind so much as a state of being, the state of being urban. For it was only in the impersonal urban milieu that they were not known by their caste, and therefore not automatically categorized as untouchable. “Here I can sit next to anyone on a bench in a ‘hotel’ [i.e. a roadside eatery],” one slum dweller explained to me. “I can live anywhere!” The anonymity of urban life was a real force in these people’s lives and one they cherished as allowing them for the first time to be merely human, unmarked by caste.

To say that “there is no caste in the city,” as Dalit slum dwellers sometimes do, is surely to exaggerate, but caste in urban India is a far cry from what Srinivas envisioned as necessary to the continued survival of Hinduism. Though caste remains salient as a basis of informal exclusion and discrimination in the city, it does not retain the power to organize social life or to coerce in the same ways that it does in the villages. Yet urban Hinduism is alive and well, including among Dalits. Though these Dalits share Ambedkar’s humanist universalism, most see no contradiction between rejecting caste and embracing Hinduism. The reason, I argue, is that Hinduism has been transformed in the urban milieu. In the village, the Hindu religion had been essentially a cult of the dominant, non-Dalit community. Worship was a collective affair that served to integrate dominant castes while incorporating Dalits only ambiguously and in ways that emphasized their difference from and subordination to proper Hindus. In the city, by contrast, Hinduism has largely lost its collective aspects and no longer functions as it did in the village, as the community cult of the dominant. Where Dalits were once compelled to participate, collectively, in a limited and unequal manner, those who worship Hindu gods in the urban setting now do so freely, individually, and (so far as they are concerned) with equal standing.

MEMBERSHIP IN HINDUISM, FROM VILLAGE TO NATION

Village Hinduism in South India is best described as a community cult rather than an ethical “world religion” in the classical Weberian sense (1946; see also Geertz 2000). It centers on the collective worship of a village deity (usually a goddess), whose primary function is ensuring the well-being of the village as a whole, by safeguarding crops, ending drought, fending off disease, and warding off both human and supernatural attacks. Defensive functions are more directly fulfilled by a boundary god, who assists the village deity and is also worshipped collectively. Where internecine disputes among leading factions of the dominant landowners and occasionally between the dominant group and lesser power holders typically characterize intravillage politics, collective worship reinforces the idea that at some level all share a common interest. In this way, village Hinduism performs an integrative function. Village gods also resolve intravillage disputes more directly, playing a judicial role though designated spokespeople (often possessed individuals or diviners), thus preventing factional disputes from getting out of hand. Finally,
the village god reinforces the authority of the village headman or the decisions of the
dominant caste's council with the threat of divine sanction against those who would
disobey. Each caste, subcaste, and lineage of the dominant-caste Hindu population also
had its own god, which performed similar integrative functions for that segmental unit.8

Dalits, who lived apart from the caste-Hindu village in a separate hamlet, or cēri, had
their own god, which played a similar role for them that the village god played for the
village as a whole. They possessed only weak structures of self-governance (Deliège 1997,
32–47), however, and their corresponding cult lacked the compulsory dimension so cen-
tral to the dominant village cult. Yet Dalit religion can be said to bear a family resem-
blance to Hinduism and to replicate the structures of the dominant Hindu community
in the traditional village setting. It is perhaps for this reason that few scholars (apart from
Robert Frykenberg [1997]) have thought to question the anachronistic application of cur-
rent Government of India definitions of Hinduism (discussed below) to pre-twentieth
century Dalits. What seems clear, however, is that Hindus themselves did not regard
Dalits as such until the early twentieth century. In everyday speech, Hindu is still com-
monly contrasted with terms for Dalits (Searle-Chatterjee 2008), and examples of such
contrastive usage can be found in government reports on anti-Dalit atrocities even in the
1970s (Rupa Viswanath, personal communication). A stronger case for classifying rural
Dalits as Hindu, even where others did not accept them as such, proceeds from their
participation in the village cult. For in addition to worshipping their own gods, Dalits
played various prescribed roles in the religious festivals of the village as a whole. That
they were traditionally tasked with the removal of ritually impure substances (human
feces, corpses, dead animals) has also been read as proof of their Hinduness (Dumont

In weighing arguments such as these, which seek to retrospectively define Dalits as
Hindu on the basis of participation, three points should be borne in mind. First, Dalits’
participation in the cult functions of the village deities was confined to a narrow range of
menial jobs (e.g., drumming and doing various preparatory tasks). Second, just like the
nonritual labor they performed for village landowners, Dalits’ contributions to the village
cult were mandatory, and refusal to fulfill their assigned ritual role was met with vio-
lence. This is not to say their participation was always under duress; in addition to the
stick, there were also carrots, and no doubt they were grateful for whatever divine bless-
ings they might receive as a result of their involvement. And just as they were accorded
a share of the grain harvest, Dalits were given a portion of the sacrificial meat or other
offerings. But other non-Hindu participants, such as Muslims, were likewise included in
the distribution of offerings (Harriss 1982, 234). This brings us to the third point. As
Frykenberg has pointed out, the fact that not only rural Dalits but also Muslims and
Christians had a role in Hindu village god festivals raises an important question (1997, 100–101).
For if mere participation in a Hindu rite makes a person Hindu, then many
rural Christians and Muslims are also Hindus! But if that is the case, the many Hindus
who visit Christian and Muslim shrines could just as well be reclassified as Christians or
Muslims. Thus, rather than behavior, Peter van der Veer (1994) argues that the only valid criteria for membership in a religion are self-definition and acceptance by others.

On this basis, the masses of rural Dalits were not Hindu prior to the twentieth century. But they are Hindu today. That is because Hinduism was redefined after Indian independence. From being a religion centering on the worship of puranic deities and recognizing the ultimate authority of the Vedas and the Brahmins, it became a residual category that includes any and all religious practices in India that other recognized faiths do not specifically claim. On this basis, the masses of rural Dalits were not Hindu prior to the twentieth century. But they are Hindu today. That is because Hinduism was redefined after Indian independence. From being a religion centering on the worship of puranic deities and recognizing the ultimate authority of the Vedas and the Brahmins, it became a residual category that includes any and all religious practices in India that other recognized faiths do not specifically claim.10

Where membership in the Hindu community was once defined by caste and confined to the four varnas, it is now the default for all Indian citizens. This is a matter of law today. “Heterodox practice, lack of belief, active support of non-Hindu religious groups, expulsion from a group within Hinduism—none of these remove one from the Hindu category. The individual [can] venture as far as he [wishes] over any doctrinal or behavioral borders; the gates [will] not shut behind him so long as he [does] not explicitly adhere to another religion” (Galanter 1971, 471n). No longer defined by either belief or practice, Hinduism has become India’s effective national religion, with membership now assigned on the basis of blood and soil. In the words of the legal scholar J. Duncan Derrett, “the test of whether a person is a Hindu . . . starts with ethnic and geographical tests, which raise a presumption that can be rebutted not by proof of absence of belief or presence of disbelief but only by proof of exclusive adherence (or conversion) to a foreign (i.e. a non-Hindu) faith” (1968, 52).11

Seeking to make Hinduism as capacious as possible, the Government of India has also instituted specific measures to promote the integration and retention of Dalits within the Hindu fold (Galanter 1971). Temples are now legally required to open their doors to Dalits, for example, and discrimination by Hindu religious organizations against Dalits is officially prohibited. Special programs have been instituted to elevate the social status of Dalits and protect them from violent attack. Dalits who convert to non-Hindu faiths, however, are excluded from these programs and stripped of all special protections under India’s hate crimes legislation (Viswanath 2012b). Finally, several Indian states have instituted specific laws that heavily penalize attempts to “lure” Dalits away from Hinduism (SAHRDC 2008).

Almost seventy years after independence, these policies are a huge success. With few exceptions, Dalits now see themselves as Hindu and are accepted as such by others. In addition to worshipping their traditional flesh-eating gods in open-air shrines, urban Dalits can now enter temples once closed to them, including those of gods associated with the Brahminical tradition. But it is only in urban India that laws requiring temples to throw open their doors to Dalits are universally enforced and that other customary practices which continue to mark them as Hindus of lesser status are no longer the norm. Once excluded from the Hindu fold but forced to contribute to Hindu rites, Dalits in urban India can now partake in all Hindu public ritual functions as full-fledged Hindus. And they do so with alacrity.

The next section begins by outlining the basic logic of urban Dalit religiosity. I then describe two surprising facts about the uniquely Dalit interpretation of Hinduism: it
does not moralize religious choice (including the choice to convert to another faith), and it is seen as having no connection with caste.

**SLUM RELIGION: WORLDLY ENDS, MORAL UNIVERSALISM, AND INDIVIDUAL CHOICE**

The religion of urban Dalits, like village Hinduism, is oriented toward worldly ends. Gods are worshipped first and foremost for the blessings and protection they are believed to provide. Although the mainstream Hindu tradition has long acknowledged the legitimacy of worldly ends, at a theoretical level it has always accorded pride of place to purely spiritual ones (Fuller 2004, 71–72). Dalit slum dwellers, however, unapologetically orient their worship toward this-worldly salvation (Roberts 2014, ch. 3). This is true not only of Hinduism as practiced in the slum but also of the main alternative: a Dalit, slum-specific version of Pentecostal Christianity. The fact that the religion of urban Dalits is, in both its Hindu and its Christian forms, oriented toward worldly blessings and protections does not make it any less moral. On the contrary, slum dwellers affirm that religion is by definition an intrinsically moral enterprise: Christians do not impugn the morality of Hinduism, nor do Hindus doubt the correctness of Christ's moral teachings. Indeed, so far as these parties are concerned, the moral teachings of the two religions are identical. Morality is a universal property, accessible to all. No religion holds a patent on it.

Finally, all slum dwellers regard religion as a matter of individual choice. None try to pressure others to worship one god rather than another. Husbands and wives frequently follow different religions, and neither sees this as a problem. Even children are free to choose which gods, if any, they will worship and which religion they will follow. Households in which one or more children worship gods different from those of their parents are common. This follows, on the one hand, from slum dwellers’ deeply felt sense of moral universalism; because religions do not differ from one another morally, there is no basis for moralizing religious choice. On the other hand, the individualist character of slum religion can be linked to the urban context. For unlike in rural settings, where even today worship is mainly within the segmentary cults associated with village, caste, and lineage, in the slum all gods fall into a category known to villagers as *iṣṭa tevānkal* (gods of choice, or “personal deities”).

**SHifting Rosters of Worship, and Religious Conversion**

Two of the most interesting aspects of religion in the urban slum are the manner in which Hindu Dalits exercise preferences for particular deities and the sheer size of the array available to them. While urban Dalits typically worship at most a small handful of deities in practice, they have a far greater variety to choose from than their rural counterparts. Despite their worship being limited to just a few gods, nearly all Hindu Dalits claim to
pray to “all the gods.” They often proceed to illustrate this by reeling off a list of examples—typically including not just a wide variety of Hindu gods but also the likes of Jesus, Buddha, St. Anthony, and Mary Allah. All are regarded in theory as different names for one single God, but slum dwellers speak in different contexts of particular deities—among whom Jesus and Mary are also included—and also more abstractly of “God.” But when they pray or perform other acts of worship, it is always to some particular, named god, who is associated with some unique shrine or temple. This is because even if all gods are theoretically just different forms of one and the same God, who is all powerful, in practice it matters a lot which god one worships. The act of worship is always oriented to some particular end—nearly always, as noted, some worldly blessing or assistance—and for this purpose each god is treated as a unique person, whose particular requirements (the type of sacrifices or vows they respond to) vary, along with their propensity to respond to requests and, indeed, their powers. Jesus, for example, is universally accepted as a genuine god in the slum but is widely suspected of being a relatively weak deity who makes demands on worshippers (e.g., hours of prayer every day, no worship of other gods) entirely out of step with the level of benefits he provides.

In practice, as I said, any given Hindu must invariably focus his or her efforts on just a few gods. Hindus do not dwell on gods they have left behind, but in-depth interviews and participant observation that I have carried out reveal that slum Hindus do in fact periodically drop gods from their personal rosters (see also Srinivas 2012, 330). How, then, are these choices made? In part, some gods might be left aside when new ones are taken up, because a person’s time and other resources are finite. But the main criterion—in practice, if not in theory—is repeated failure to respond to prayer requests; the perpetual search for aid is also the principal (perhaps the only) reason new gods are adopted. Worship is serious business, and which god one invests one’s resources in may well be a matter of life and death, so far as slum dwellers are concerned. Gods are discarded, but not casually or without cause; new gods, likewise, are not embraced all at once or without some tangible evidence that they possess both the capacity and the willingness to meet the worshipper’s needs. Information, anecdotes, speculation, and rumors about gods’ variable potency and responsiveness circulate continuously in the urban slum and are a matter of intense interest to those who live there. This is despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that when it comes to gods’ existence and potency, everyone accepts that what is true and what is false is a matter of intrinsic and irreducible uncertainty.

Gandhi once described religious conversion as “a blasphemy against God and self” (1968, 205), and nationalist discourse in India continues to regard it with deep suspicion (Roberts 2014, ch. 3). Among urban Dalits, however, we find a more flexible understanding of the relationship between human beings and gods. Shorn of any connection to collective identity or the moral blackmail that such identities bring in tow, Dalits move freely and continuously from one god to another. Against this background, what is called religious conversion does not pose any unique political or ethical problem for them. Conversion is simply another instance of the pervasive movement of Dalit slum dwellers among gods.
Though they regard caste as deeply immoral, the urban Dalits I encountered were unanimously of the view that Hinduism is inherently and completely moral. What makes this combination of positions surprising is that both public discourse in India and anthropologists take for granted that caste is a fundamentally Hindu institution. Though it is well known that Indians irrespective of religion are organized into endogamous jātis and that the distinction between Dalits and non-Dalits is recognized across religious lines, it is nevertheless presumed that caste originated in Hinduism and that its existence in other religions is explained away as evidence of Hindu “influence” (Dumont 1980, 201–16).17 The hegemony of this position is such that it is shared by both apologists of the caste system, like Gandhi, and its most formidable critic, the great Dalit leader Ambedkar.

Why do slum-dwelling Dalits think otherwise? The answer lies in how they define religion. Where anthropologists and most other moderns treat the existence of gods as ultimately reducible to the human traditions that posit them, these non-Ambedkarite Dalits subscribe to what I have elsewhere termed “theological realism” (Roberts 2014, ch. 3). This is the belief that the gods’ existence—or lack thereof—is entirely independent of anything human beings say or do. Religion, properly understood, is whatever gods command. Gods, furthermore, are understood to be completely moral beings, by definition.18 The problem with Hinduism, for Christians, is not that it teaches bad morals. It is that its gods do not exist, and therefore cannot help you.19 But morally speaking, the two religions are identical. Because gods cannot possibly command immorality, caste can have no basis in religion. It is a merely human contrivance.20 “God doesn’t recognize jāti,” Dalit slum dwellers say, and “Jāti is a human creation—it was not made by God.” Significantly, not just Hindus but also Christian slum dwellers, who have no vested interest in defending the Hindu religion, emphatically denied any connection between caste and Hinduism.

Suresh, a manual laborer and the father of two young girls, explained caste to me this way:

What is jāti? It is simply this: Some people decide they don’t want to share. For example, suppose the people on that end of the street decided they didn’t want to let those of us on this end use the water pump anymore. “If you come near it, we will beat you.” And then suppose they also said, “No more school for you—school is only for us.” In that case we would have no water and would be suffering horribly. Our children would not be able to develop [vala muthiyātu]. Those people would get bigger and bigger, and we would remain weak. Soon we would have to serve them and work for them. That is jāti.

Suresh is a Hindu and his wife a Christian. But his understanding of caste—that it is essentially a strategy for monopolizing resources and not a question of purity and pollution—is a matter of common sense in the slum. And the resources that caste people seek to control include, according to slum dwellers, those of a supernatural sort. For among the most important of all resources is access to gods, whose temples are understood as

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divine powerhouses and the key to worldly prosperity (see Krishnamacharya [1936?], 8, quoted in Galanter 1971, 476). The fact that Dalits were traditionally excluded from Hindu temples, however, is not seen as evidence that the Hindu religion supports caste. It was not God who barred their entry, after all, but selfish caste people!

My slum-dwelling Dalit informants were equally unimpressed when I presented them with the argument that caste hierarchies receive support from Hindu scriptures, which give pride of place to Brahmins. “Scriptures?” one woman replied contemptuously. “What are the so-called scriptures?” Another woman I tried this argument on just laughed: “Well, maybe that’s what Brahmins say!” (cf. Berreman 1971, 23).

This chapter has argued that it is only in the city that Dalits have become truly Hindu, in the modern sense of this being a freely chosen religious identity and not one determined (or denied) by others. Where the modern Indian state “converted” Dalits to Hinduism by extending its definition to include all manner of beliefs, practices, and people that were not formerly included, this was a conversion in name only. The urbanization of India, however, has made it a reality. For it is only in the city that, for the first time, Hinduism has been thoroughly decoupled from the caste-based forms of required religious service characteristic of the village. The urban conversion of Dalits has also entailed, therefore, a conversion of the meaning of Hinduism, from a caste-based community cult to a genuinely universal religion, membership in which is open to all. Legatees of the old, caste-based formation have attempted to square the circle by at once proclaiming Hinduism a modern “world” religion and claiming for it a special status as India’s national religion. But their efforts fail to account for the perspectives of Dalits. The Hinduism of urban Dalits, unlike that of their elite counterparts, does not dismiss the importance of worldly suffering or its overcoming in comparison to spiritual ends; it emphasizes personal choice rather than subordinating the individual to hypostatized collectivities like caste and religious community, and it treats morality as a universal property, with the same standards applying to all. Dalits also bring a uniquely democratic sensibility to Hinduism, one that rejects the claim of self-styled authorities of Brahminical Hinduism to speak for the religion as a whole, and with it the exclusivity and group-based morality that nationalist Hindus attempt to impose.

NOTES

1. It was once presumed that rural Dalits were content until instigated by outside agitators, such as missionaries. Rupa Viswanath has discredited this assumption, unearthing numerous instances of Dalits in remote areas who, despite having had no contact with would-be liberators, leaped at the first opportunity to escape their lot, often at great personal risk (2014a, 168–216, 242–46).

2. In addition to the pervasive use of violence, Ambedkar identified the monopoly control of land by non-Dalits as among the most important means by which Dalits were kept subordinate (Ray and Ray 2011).
3. This was at a time when Dalits who dressed in such a manner, or who dared to carry a parasol, risked being beaten up. Viswanath recounts how in the 1920s a nationalist magazine in Madras (now Chennai) ostensibly devoted to social reform published a poem openly mocking a “Pariah” (Dalit man) who had attempted to elevate his social status by wearing tailored clothing (2014a, ch. 3).

4. Ambedkar’s statement to Gandhi can be seen as the flip side of Martin Luther King’s “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King 2003, 35; see also Roberts 2010).

5. Unlike Ambedkarites, these slum dwellers did not regard the Hindu religion as the root cause of casteism (see the section “Slum Religion”). Also, at a purely pragmatic level, they did not see independent Dalit-based political organizing as offering realistic solutions to their problems, given that the Indian electoral system was designed specifically to make such organizing impossible (Anand 2014). Ambedkarite Dalits, by contrast, continue to regard organizing along Dalit lines as indispensable.

6. Jāti refers to endogamous groups whose members are thought to share important physical, moral, and intellectual traits, and it is a common synonym for caste. In Indian languages it can also refer to other natural types, such as gender, species of animal, and kind of plant, as well as to races (e.g., “the European jāti,” “the African jāti”). But it is always clear from context which sense of the term is intended. The idea that jāti determines people’s intrinsic nature—their somatic and moral “substance” (Yalman 1969, 87; see also Marriott and Inden 1974)—is a core feature of caste ideology in India. Casteism is, in this sense, comparable to racist theories of human difference (Berreman 1960; 1961). Ignoring these on-the-ground realities, Dumont 1980 reduces native ideas about substance to a French structuralist opposition between pure and impure elements in an essentially Hindu ritual cosmology. For an overview of different anthropological theories of caste, see Roberts 2008.

7. Elsewhere I explore the ambiguities in rejecting caste while affirming the naturalness of the male and female genders, also termed jātis (Roberts 2014, ch. 2).

8. Some good accounts of village Hinduism that shed light on its politico-integrative function are Mandelbaum 1966; Claus 1973; De Neve 2000; Fuller 2004, 128–54; Mines 2005.

9. Beginning from the presumption that caste is an intrinsically Hindu institution, Dumont 1980 leaps to the conclusion that actions non-Dalits consider essential to the maintenance of their caste status—in this case the removal of ritually impure substances by servile Dalits—is in fact ritual service to Hinduism. What he fails to ask is whether Dalits themselves saw toilet cleaning (for example) in this light. Nor does he explain why forced ritual service to a cult implies membership in it. But even if one assumes that these objections could be met, Dumont’s attempt to portray widespread Indian beliefs about pollution as Hinduism’s essential core has been persuasively undermined by Das and Uberoi (1971).

10. Apart from Hinduism, India’s recognized faiths are Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism. In some contexts, Indian law treats the last three as sects of Hinduism.

11. Defining Hinduism in terms of ancestry and territory, India’s Congress-led government tacitly endorsed the Hindu nationalist account laid out by V. D. Savarkar (Sen 2007, 31–37).

12. Personal gods have always existed in village Hinduism, but individual worship is a marginal phenomenon in the village setting compared with that of enduring sociopolitical units and their associated gods.
13. This is a function of scale; Chennai, for instance, is home to nearly nine million people, and while the number of distinct gods is certainly far fewer than the number of human beings there, it is immeasurably greater than the number accessible to any villager.

14. The singular God can be referred to with male, female, and gender-neutral terms (ān. t.avar, amma, and kat.avul, respectively).

15. Compare Michael Herzfeld’s remarkable description of the beliefs and practices surrounding intercessionary prayer and oath taking among Greek shepherds on the island of Crete, where St. George is understood to have entirely different personalities at different shrines. For example, the “St. George at Diskouri” is regarded as more effective for some purposes and “St. George at Selinaris” for others (Herzfeld 2004, 157–60).

16. Just as Dalit slum dwellers do not associate Hinduism with national identity, they do not regard Christianity as foreign (Roberts 2012, 278).

17. The anthropological theory that caste is a Hindu phenomenon has been used since Indian independence to justify discrimination against religious minorities in government programs for Dalit uplift. However, a major Government of India inquiry recently discredited the claim that caste is confined to Hindus and that conversion to Christianity or Islam thereby allows Dalits to escape caste-based oppression (Government of India 2007; Viswanath 2012c).

18. The common view in the literature on popular Hinduism, best summarized by Fuller 2004, is that Hindu gods are morally ambiguous beings who exist on a continuum with humans and other supernatural entities. Among urban Dalits, I encountered a very different understanding. Not only are gods perfectly moral beings, according to slum dwellers, but they are in this sense radically distinct from humans and other beings. Viswanath 2012a, 780, references other studies that have reached a similar conclusion.

19. How could Hindu gods be simultaneously purely moral beings and not exist? The solution to this puzzle is in fact quite straightforward. I trust the reader will agree with me that unicorns are single-horned equines that only virgins can tame . . . and that they do not exist.

20. In exonerating Hinduism of any possible evil, these Dalits’ views are in line with the Gandhian position (Gandhi 1965, especially 15). But where Gandhi saw caste as a fundamentally benevolent institution, they hold it to be the opposite—and in this respect are in agreement with Ambedkar.

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This chapter provides both historical accounts of Korean Christianity and ethnographic vignettes of North Korean migrants’ conversion to Christianity to demonstrate how Seoul has undergone desecularization in response to a changing geopolitical climate and how a particular form of Christianity is experienced as it serves to promote, if not delimit, a modality of ideal liberal citizenship. I explore the ways in which religious revival, invention, and intervention have been intertwined in the processes of modernization and urbanization in Seoul and further elucidate the changing implications of the transformative capacity of Christianity (i.e., conversion) for self and society.

In spite of secularization theories that show secularism and the nation-state consistently replacing religion in generating social meaning and coherence and world-cities frameworks that view the global flow of capital as having precedence over the defined entity of the state, religions and their influences have grown rather than declined in both public and private spaces of South Korea during its process of becoming a modern nation-state. In this case, rapid urbanization and industrialization accompanied this religious growth. Furthermore, Christianity is currently so prevalent that the Seoul metropolitan area, with a population of twenty-five million, is home to the world’s largest megachurches. These churches have always held substantial power in key political and economic arenas, such as the recent presidential election, national security law reform, private school law reform, and policies toward North Korea and North Koreans. Furthermore, they have both competed and cooperated with other churches to advance world evangelization.
The first part of this chapter historicizes and contextualizes the sea change in Seoul in response to modern and colonial forces through the lens of religion. I trace the implications of church-initiated transformations of Seoul and consider the extent to which the church nurtures visions of both this and other worlds in this context. The second section consists of ethnographic tales of individual North Korean migrant converts to Christianity, who are seen as born-again “free citizens” undertaking the sacred aspiration to carry out God’s work. Their conversion to Christianity entails physical movement and spiritual and political transformation and can be seen as what the sociologist Kyung-Sup Chang (2010) dubs the “compressed modernity” of the extraordinarily rapid socioeconomic transformation of South Korea.

HISTORICIZING SEOUL’S MODERN TRANSFORMATION

Ample historical literature documents and elaborates on the intimate relationship between Christianity and emerging nationalisms in envisioning a new sense of self and a modern society in Korean history (e.g., Yi 1981; Wells 1990; Buswell and Lee 2006). While acknowledging the significance of the nation-based analytical framework, I want to highlight the implications of churches, not as fixed structures but rather as metaphoric spaces of human-divine interactions and networks that contribute to further people’s capacities to aspire at particular historical junctures. In particular, I consider the ways in which Christianity initiated Seoul’s transformation with a Western modality of aesthetics and ethics that transgressed existing spatiotemporal sensibilities.5

THE OPENING OF THE HERMIT KINGDOM AND THE EXPERIENCE OF COLONIALISM

The impetus behind Seoul’s urban transformation was humble but symbolically critical. Until Yakhyŏn Catholic Church and Myŏngdong Cathedral were constructed in 1892 and 1898, respectively, no structure was allowed to stand higher than the king’s Kyŏngbok Palace. Additionally, the hills around Seoul were not considered to belong to the human world but were for the dead and the wild, in accordance with the then-dominant theory of geomancy. As the English intellectual Isabella Bird Bishop, in her Korea and Her Neighbors ([1897] 1970), rightly observed, inhabited areas in Korea were nearly always between mountains and rivers, and the best place was supposed to be surrounded by hills or mountains and facing a river, just like old Seoul. The only human objects found on the ridges of hills or the tops of mountains were cemeteries, Buddhist temples, shrines with ancestors’ tablets, shaman shrines, and prayer rocks, which were excluded from residential areas during the neo-Confucian era of the Chosŏn dynasty. Thus Westerners like Bird Bishop perceived Seoul as an exceptionally secular capital city, where there were no religious symbols and only a public square for massive gatherings (cf. Walraven 2000).6
In this historical and topographic context, Myŏngdong Cathedral, built on Namsan Mountain—a sacred landmark dividing inside and outside Seoul—and with its cross on a spire overlooking Kyŏngbok Palace, signified more than a tribute by the French Mission Society to the thousands of Korean martyrs persecuted in the nineteenth century. Given the flagging Korean sovereignty, it was interpreted as an insult to or disdain for the “secular” monarchy behind the persecutions (Chŏn 2008, 154–56). Additionally, it should be stressed that a church on a hill came to inspire a feeling of awe in Protestants and Catholics because the churches served those who were in need of support, comfort, and shelter throughout the era’s political upheavals. Consequently, hillsides became inhabitable places where later urban migrants, war refugees, and returnees came to reside throughout the following decades. The hills once occupied by the dead were renewed as a mediating zone where the divine and the physical worlds of people interacted in and through the church and where shantytown residents aspired to upward social mobility. The desecularization of the cultural and political landscape signaled by building Western-style churches in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should thus be understood with respect to multilayered efficacies and meaning in the broader historical processes and contexts of Korean modernity. Initially, although it was officially recognized and began to be widely accepted by the local people, Christianity in Korea had little opportunity to enjoy a superior and secure position backed by a secular power, as imperial Japan took over the nation’s sovereignty at the dawn of the twentieth century.

During the Japanese annexation of Korea (1910–45), Seoul was demoted from its status as the capital city of a sovereign state to a logistical base of imperial Japan. The Japanese colonial power structure was manifested in a massive Shinto complex, also on Namsan Mountain, that was completed in 1925 and directly faced the front of Kyŏngbok Palace, the view of and access to which from central Seoul were blocked by the Japanese Government General Building. Thus, until the shrine was demolished at the end of World War II, the spatial order of Seoul was arranged as if the Japanese Government General Building had annexed the Korean palace, which was subordinate to the Shinto shrine. The governor-general imposed Shinto worship as a civic duty of the imperial subjects, regardless of their individual beliefs, under the “Korea and Japan are one” policy. Shinto was intended to serve as a socioreligious space fostering the spiritual assimilation of local Koreans into a Japanese-centric community, although this imperial aspiration was ill organized and often contested in practice (Henry 2014, 62–91). Japanese settlers increased from about 170,000 to 700,000 during the colonial period, mainly concentrated in Seoul, and the majority, while participating in Shinto rituals, were affiliated with Buddhism as a personal or familial faith. As such, Seoul witnessed an increasing diversity in religious practices and organizations, with Japanese Shintoism and Buddhism, the resurgence of Korean Buddhism, a rapidly growing Christianity, and numerous folk and new religions. Therefore, while most European cities underwent the secularization that Harvey Cox regards as “a historical process, almost certainly irreversible” ([1965] 2013, 25), Seoul was desecularized through an influx of organized religions.
brought by Western missionaries, new native nationalist leaders, and, later, Japanese imperialists.

It should be understood that Japanese colonialism did not improve religious freedom. With no caveats, the diversity and richness of religious traditions and practices were put under Japanese state control. Japanese policies on religion were dualistic and deceitful, with strategies of appeasement, usage, oppression, and destruction. Dividing religions into two categories, Japan authorized Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity and labeled Confucianism, Daoism, Ch'ŏndogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way, a native syncretic religion), and other Korean traditional and new religious practices as pseudoreligions. Japanese Buddhism and State Shintoism were protected, while Korean Buddhism and Christianity were tolerated only when they were cooperative with or at least indifferent to politics. However, as shown by the March 1 Movement for independence, initiated by thirty-three national leaders in 1919 (sixteen affiliated with Christianity, fourteen with Ch'ŏndogyo, and three with Buddhism), Korean religious leaders were involved in diverse anti-Japanese campaigns throughout the colonial period. In this context and in comparison with other religions, the growth of Christianity was unprecedented, and Protestant facilities for education (i.e., schools), medical care (i.e., hospitals), and social welfare (i.e., orphanages, shelters), particularly in Seoul, outnumbered those of other religions. The primary beneficiaries of such faith-based services were the Korean people, who were discriminated against by the colonial state, which provided the public systems.

POSTLIBERATION AND THE DIVISION ERA OF SEOUL

After their 1945 defeat, the Japanese themselves tore and burned down Seoul’s Shinto shrine, to send the spirits to heaven before the colonialists returned to Japan. Within four years, the newly liberated country was divided, with U.S. Army forces governing south of the thirty-eighth parallel and the Soviets overseeing the north. Consequently, a large number of northern Christians migrated to the South, mostly to Seoul, in search of refuge. Yet within three days of the Korean War breaking out in June 1950, North Korean Communist forces occupied Seoul. The city was recovered by United Nations Forces, soon fell to the Chinese–North Korean forces, and then was again taken by UN Forces. When the U.S. and North Korean regimes agreed to the cease-fire line in 1953, Seoul was a devastated pile of ashes.

The social and political dynamics of that time were instrumental in the Christianization of Seoul. The Christian-dominated Syngman Rhee regime and U.S. military forces governed the South, where American missionaries were also active. In the years that followed (1960s–1980s), political loyalty to the South and resistance to the Communist state, the sacralization of Seoul as the legitimate capital of the Korean Peninsula and the Korean nation, the renegotiation with the patriarchal system in family, church, and social relations, and the desire for social mobility through social networks (equivalent to Chinese guanxi) all intermingled to accelerate church growth.
The antagonistic relationship between Christianity and Communism in the context of Korea is not simply grounded in ideological principles but has been actualized and experienced through brutal battle and reproduced in discursive genres of narratives and practices of faith (Kang 2007). The massive migrations from the North to the South between 1945 and 1950 (around 740,000 people) and during the Korean War (approximately 650,000 people) anchored anti-Communist sentiments. Korean evangelical language imagines and portrays the North as a place devoid of religion, a land of darkness and Satan where the Communist regimes oppress innocent northern brethren. According to this view, the Communist party exerts its evil influence on the South too, where its propaganda, managed and promoted by the ppalgaengi (literally, “Reds”), who seek to brainwash the South Korean populace, is behind student movements, teachers’ and workers’ unions, those supporting normalization between North and South, and even the social acceptance of homosexuality. Thus, to evangelical Christians in Korea, reunification must be accomplished by eliminating dark spiritual forces in the name of God. Korean mediascapes and ideoscapes (see Appadurai 1996) have revived this seemingly outdated mode of cold war religiosity.

Despite the complexity and the dynamic nature of this historical context, it is clear that Seoul’s modern form of urbanization has had nothing to do with secularization in the light of separation of church and state. Instead, desecularization has been an integral part of South Korea’s nation-state building. What, then, does this historical context mean in people’s everyday lives in Seoul, where the majority has little interest in what happened in the past?

The following sections are concerned with this inquiry and look closely at individual life trajectories to demonstrate that the aforementioned historical junctures are not merely a background that can be ignored or dismissed but are compressed layers that have been embedded and experienced by certain groups of people in the megacity. One of these groups comprises North Korean migrants who have recently come by way of China to South Korea.

**CHRISTIANITY AND SEOULITE CITIZENSHIP AMONG NORTH KOREAN MIGRANTS**

Christian churches provide sociocultural capital and networks that define urban religiosity and are instrumental in determining what freedoms the migrants from socialist North Korea can or cannot exercise in the context of Seoul’s geopolitical climate. The concept of chayu, or freedom, includes aspirations that, as Arjun Appadurai (2004) and Peter van der Veer suggest, are tightly linked to a dialectical, not teleological, cultural project of people and ideas interacting to define or empower the capacities to desire and achieve them. I discuss the ways in which religion is dynamically intertwined with and embedded in mundane urban lifestyles and imaginations that are construed through and also construe human-divine networks in the megacity Seoul.
Seoul is a late cold war city where the threat of being turned into “a sea of fire” by the North Korean regime is omnipresent (H. Kim 2013). Only sixty kilometers (thirty-seven miles) south of the inter-Korean border, which the then-U.S. president Bill Clinton called “the scariest place on earth,” the city has approximately twelve million inhabitants, including about four hundred thousand migrants, who are much less worried about potential war than the likelihood of shopping centers being closed on holidays (J. Kim 2013). As the capital city of a divided nation where the late cold war legacy is still prevalent, Seoul has long been developed in the name of individual freedom and material prosperity, as opposed to its North Korean counterpart.

The nighttime luminosity of a city is often equated with economic prosperity, developed modernity, and urban consumerism, in contrast to the dark, undeveloped rural areas. When satellite images of the nighttime Korean Peninsula were distributed on the internet beginning in the 1990s, most critics and news media paid attention to the dark North, where there were only a few distinct lit dots, whereas nearly the entire South was radiant, with only the uninhabitable mountainous areas in darkness. The dark North serves to better illuminate the dazzling southern side of the inter-Korean border, the world’s most fortified.

The satellite picture illustrates the differences in urbanization, including the degrees of its success, between the two Koreas; although North Korea saw growth in the 1980s, preceding South Korea, by 2010, South Korea’s urbanization rate was 82.9 percent, while North Korea’s was 60.2 percent (Cho 2013). Though lower than South Korea’s, North Korea’s comparatively high rate of urbanization was accelerated by state-led heavy-industry-centered economic development from the 1950s to the 1980s. The Marxist theorist Slavoj Žižek bitterly uses the North as an example of how the twentieth-century Communist project can be distorted. He asserted in an interview with a Korean scholar in the September 24, 2013, edition of the Kyunghyang Shinmun, a Korean newspaper, that what he can see in the North, where Karl Marx and Communism are no longer discussed, is only militant patriotism. This insight deserves further examination, yet for some North Korean defectors and their advocates in Seoul, only the success of Christianity in the South can provide a rational explanation for the stark difference between the two Koreas.

For these residents of South Korea, the re-Christianization of Pyongyang, the former “Jerusalem of the East,” is required to save the “innocent” brethren and promote reunification. Pyongyang’s display of monuments, statues, street signs, and murals devoted to the personality cult around the Kim family is, from the evangelical perspective, evidence that it is destined to be destroyed. In contrast, once-desecularized Seoul is a developed megacity with Christian churches, Buddhist temples, mosques frequented by Muslim migrants, shamanist shrines, and other religion-based facilities like meditation and yoga centers promoting urban well-being, not to mention schools, hospitals, and social welfare centers originated and run by religious orders.
In a sense, even though the historical contexts are different, the bipolar modernization of North and South Korean is comparable to José Casanova’s idea that “while in Europe processes of modernization and urbanization were historically associated with un-churching, de-confessionalization and drastic secularization, in the United States processes of urbanization and modernization have been continuously associated with processes of churching, denominational affiliation, and religious revivals” (2013, 116). From a South Korean evangelical perspective, the North Korean personality cult does not have equal footing with Christianity. For one of my Christian interlocutors from North Korea now in South Korea, it is imperative that the northerners recognize the superior position of Christianity over the Kim personality cult. As “David” puts it in one of the leaflets he sends on the northward wind by balloon,

Believe in Jesus Christ instead of the Supreme Leader [Suryŏng, i.e., Kim Il-sung]! . . . The world’s best-seller is the Bible [kidok, i.e., the book recording Jesus]

Comparing this Jesus and Suryŏng, who would be greater?! North Korean calendar, Juche system is based on the greatest Kim Il-sung’s birth year (1912) and April 15 is the Sun Day?!

But the origin of the world’s calendar and the worldwide holiday, Christmas, is the birthday of Jesus. . . . China when it recognized [Christianity] rapidly developed as the second greatest economic power

Chinese people wish to go to South Korea as either laborers or brides . . .

The basic mysteries of this earth-and-heaven-like difference between South and North Koreas is the difference between the prosperity of Christianity and the persecution of it

(Excerpt of a leaflet obtained in 2012; my translation of not totally coherent or grammatically correct Korean)

This message demonstrates a non-Western idea about modernity, in which secularization theory is abstracted while Christianization appears to guarantee rapid economic prosperity. It does not consider a state-church separation at all. Accordingly, it represents Christianity as a state religion in South Korea and in China, just as Kimilsungism is in North Korea.

North Korean migrants like David come to learn, through the church, that the prosperity which Christianity brought to Seoul was accelerated by a series of massive revival campaigns that were a key spiritual force behind the 1960s–1980s economic development and urbanization called the Miracle on the Han River. Today, Seoul megachurches hold annual international conferences and spiritual training programs for missionaries and lay Christians, making the city a hub of Christianity in the world. Christianity in Korea is no longer considered a foreign religion or set of institutions but has been transformed into an authentic Korean form. As such, churches provide the second largest amount of material and nonmaterial resources, after the state government, to North Korean migrants during their initial settlement period in the South. Thus, David’s praise
of the intimate relationship between Christianity and economic prosperity as God’s blessing is based on his personal experiences and confessional faith. However, his message entails something more complicated and contested than what appears at first glance in the leaflet above. To unpack his experiential Christianity, which a majority of North Korean converts share, it is necessary to follow a model convert’s life trajectory.

**Christian Pedagogy in Making Marketable and Faithful Citizens**

For modern social thinkers in the West, the “freedom” of individuals in a capitalist city means separation, unboundedness, or detachment from place boundedness, familial obligations, or the restrictions of a traditional household (Mumford 1968, 415). In practice, however, realities are ambiguous, and moreover, a significant result of the contemporary globalization that widens the distance between power (which flows across territories, cyberspace, etc.) and politics (which is likely locally bounded) is an increasing polarization between the upper and lower classes of city residents. Thus, for Zygmunt Bauman, “the secession of the new global elite from its past engagements with ‘the people’, and the widening gap between the habitats of those who seceded and those left behind, are arguably the most seminal of social, cultural and political departures associated with the passage from the ‘solid’ to the ‘liquid’ stage of modernity” (2003, 17).

The term *new global elite* calls to mind images of middle-upper-class individuals in a relatively developed or developing society—like “flexible” citizens, in Aihwa Ong’s ethnography (1999), who travel back and forth between the local and the global. Refugees, exiles, international brides, undocumented migrant workers, and so on are unlikely to be considered equally flexible as the new global elite in their legal and financial conditions. But “it is in the city,” Bauman asserts, “that the strangers who in the global space confront each other as hostile states, inimical civilisations or military adversaries, meet as individual human beings, watch each other at close quarters, talk to each other, learn each other’s ways, negotiate the rules of life in common, cooperate and, sooner or later, get used to each other’s presence and, on an increasing number of occasions, find pleasure in sharing company” (2003, 38). Although religious spaces and networks are absent from Bauman’s globalized city landscape, his perspective is useful for understanding North Korean migrants’ shifting identities in a capitalist city such as Seoul. However, they are expected to be desecularized and born again as “free” Christian citizens.

What follows is a brief biographical sketch of a North Korean woman in her fifties. I have maintained contact with “Grace” over the past ten years, and her story is similar to those of other North Korean migrants who underwent, are still undergoing, or have overcome a seemingly infinite series of deadly obstacles, such as hunger, risk of imprisonment (in North Korea), illegal border crossing, labor exportation, human trafficking (in China), social discrimination, cultural differences, and unexpected economic hardship (in South Korea). Yet their experience of suffering and North Korean refugeeness
has also been a cultural asset, enabling them to negotiate for security and further their spiritual leadership positions. Conversion to Christianity among North Korean migrants demonstrates the ways in which the church mediates and defines the secular and the sacred; the past, the present, and the future; and the local and the global.

When Grace was young in North Korea, housing, medical care, education for children, and food had been provided to the people for free, in the name of “Our Dear Father, Kim Il-sung.” Such free packages began to wane in North Korea after the 1980s, and after Kim Il-sung’s death in 1994 they all but disappeared. The subsequent great famine, called the Arduous March (1995–98), resulted in the deaths of at least one million people. The remaining collective and national focus was placed on maintaining a liberty that equated to governance of the country and a nationalist independent spirit rallied against the imperial United States, under the banner of the Military First Policy. This policy, rooted in the Juche Idea, stands for political independence, economic self-sustenance, and self-reliance in defense. The “self” in this principle means the national, not the individual, self (Cumings 1997, 398–414; Kwon and Chung 2012, 80–82; Ryang 2012, 199–200). However, Grace, like her compatriots, survived by relying not on the state’s distribution system but on her own self, taking care of her children while her husband kept going to a workplace that provided nothing. In her words, he became a “daytime light bulb,” a common term for adult men whose efforts were useless in supporting North Korean households. In her household, Grace was the only substantial breadwinner. By her account, she created a big business in stolen salt in conspiracy with military officials who were in charge of delivering and distributing it to various districts. Such activity, culminating in private black market sales, became widespread throughout her province after the mid-1990s. Her household and those who collaborated with her became wealthier thanks to her talent in business management, a skill that allowed individual and local levels of economic self-sustenance. In a sense, she felt greater freedom in such economic activities when the country turned out to be a “living hell,” but this underground-reliant freedom became more fragile as the state’s control over the black economy strengthened.

Eventually she and her family left everything behind for China, where she had relatives in the Korean-Chinese Autonomous Prefecture. Her initial opinion of church was that it was only for “insane people,” whose methods of prayer included crying, shouting, and speaking in tongues. Only later, when she crossed the nine-fenced border from China to Mongolia, did she kneel down together with five fellow migrants, including her husband, and pray, “God save us, please!” They had to pass through a hundred kilometers (sixty-two miles) of desert before the sun rose. The sandstorms were horrible, but she kept praying while walking, until suddenly the wind direction reversed and things improved. She told me this was the first miracle she had experienced.

Accepted by the South Korean embassy in the Mongolian People’s Republic, Grace was able to fly to South Korea. On arrival there, like nearly all North Korean migrants, she underwent a government interrogation and was sent to Hanawon, a government facility where she was placed in a resettlement program for three months (Chung 2008,
When she was finally released from Hana-won into “real” society in Chunchŏn, a midsize city an hour east of Seoul, she was offered a two-bedroom apartment in a low-income family apartment complex, a settlement subsidy, and full-coverage national health insurance from the government and a bedding set and basic kitchen utensils from Yŏngnak Presbyterian Church. She was not afraid of adjusting to a capitalist way of life, thanks to her previous experience of running a “big business.” She was also neither concerned about the politico-ideological bifurcation in South Korean society (i.e., conservatives vs. progressives) that tends to predetermine an anti-Communist, right-wing inclination in North Korean migrants nor interested in attending church, a potent social institution that integrates migrants into established social relations in South Korea. Instead, she just worked hard at a shopping center.

In search of better opportunities, she moved her family to Seoul after one year in Chunchŏn and enrolled in Freedom School, a megachurch educational facility that specializes in training new North Korean migrants in Seoul. She went to Freedom School every Saturday and Sunday for regular classes and participated in a weekly Bible study group for about ten months. Soon after finishing the program, she was offered a full-time position at Freedom School. However, there were still hardships. She painfully recalled that she divorced her husband, who was unable to adjust to South Korean society and even fell in love with another North Korean woman. She felt guilty seeing her older son hospitalized for a liver disease caused by chronic malnutrition while they were in the North. In spite of the heartbreaking pain of the divorce and the suffering of her son, she became more convinced day by day that God was leading her in a certain direction, just as the Bible suggested to her in the story of Joseph, who was once abandoned but became a leader of Egypt (Genesis 37–47).

Freedom School is emblematic of urban churches’ facilitating the cultural transition of “strangers” (North Korean migrants) into the established social order in a relatively short time. This megachurch-run training program selects fifty or so North Korean adult migrants in the expectation that they will be born again as national leaders in a future reunified Korea. The migrants, who must pass exams to get into this program, each receive a monthly subsidy (about US$200) while taking the classes, which last for about ten months. Along with providing substantial knowledge about different job options, Freedom School stresses norms like sincerity, hard work, self-reliance, and independence.

South Korean Christians who work for the migrants tend to measure their degree of social adjustment, personality, and, more important, religiosity by their appearance and behaviors. Speaking the Seoulites’ language, whitening one’s skin, and having “nice” manners are a few among many examples of how to be “successful” in the job and religious “markets.” This is ironic, however, given that the Freedom School staff always stresses the “interior” mind over the “exterior” body. This is not to say that they subscribe to a conventional Cartesian body-mind binary opposition. Instead, this emphasis
implies dualistic, incoherent, often contradictory, and, more important, somewhat hypocritical (as some migrants told me in secret) characteristics of South Korean Christians’ language and practice.

Many North Korean migrants, including Grace, appreciated what Freedom School provided but were often overwhelmed with everything they were expected to embody to be “free citizens” and “the future of the nation.” Indeed, they came to acknowledge that what are taught as the normative Seoulite morality and etiquette and what a “free citizen” should look like are too “perfect” to exist in reality. A “superior” citizen is armed with creative, not conventional, Christian wisdom and God’s blessing, advanced knowledge about finances and business, and proper ways of speaking and behaving, which make him or her “effective” and “deserving.”

In other words, it is not a model Seoul citizen that North Korean migrants are mobilized to follow, but rather a model “North Korean subject” created and projected by the South Korean neoliberal Christian imaginary. I was often told that “I know all the teachings are very useful, but I have too much of a headache [gori apasŏ] to follow them.” The term headache has multiple connotations in North Korean language. It can refer to a physical pain, but in most cases we should interpret it as a complex somatic-psychological condition that impedes thinking, understanding, following, or exercising.

A North Korean migrant’s “headache” could be seen as a corporeal reaction to the set of cultural demands that intensively yet incoherently intermingle ideal capitalist, ethical, spiritual, and national aspirations produced and imposed over the course of South Korea–centered processes of modernization and urbanization. Indeed, Freedom School crystallizes the urban aspirations that mainstream churches have fostered and disseminated in envisioning spiritual and material prosperity during the course of rapid urbanization and modernization in the context of national division and globalization. Bauman (2003) would understand such a “headache” as a side effect or inherent symptom of moving from the “solid” (North Korea, underdeveloped and closed) to the “liquid” (South Korea, urban and global) stage of modernity at a rapid pace. To some South Korean evangelicals, their “headache” is a sign of unconscious resistance to the Holy Spirit, evidence that they had been brainwashed with Kim Il-sung idolatry in “the most closed society.” In this sense, their headache is intimately related to uniquely Korean religious conversion and is not separate from the speed and scope of Korean modernization and urbanization. Just as massive healing rituals nearly always accompanied earlier revival movements, North Korean conversion to Christianity is mobilized and stimulated through a series of rational trainings, Bible study sessions, prayer meetings, and intensive dramatic healing rituals in Freedom School. The term healing, in Freedom School training, means the desecularization of the “pagan” body and mind of the would-be converts—North Korean migrants—and ultimately Pyongyang and North Korea. The bodily-spiritual transformation of individual North Korean migrants into Christians is thus a sacred undertaking and foundation of Korean churches’ national and global religious aspirations.
For Grace and other North Korean migrants, conversion to Christianity does not mean merely success in the “quest for human belonging” (Austin-Broos 2003, 2, cited in Becci 2013, 159) by joining the established South Korean Protestant community or a search for “closeness and recognition in a community,” as is the case for East German ex-inmates in Irene Becci’s account (2013, 159). This belonging goes much further, by empowering them to expand their networks across denominations and within North-South Korean communities and to have direct, unmediated contact with the Holy Spirit.

Grace was convinced that God called her to serve “our people,” namely North Korean migrants. As such, her social relationships—what she called indŏk, or blessedness with friendly people—with South Korean believers were not confined to the logic of reciprocity. She established faithful relationships with South Korean church ministers and lay leaders across evangelical denominations who were sympathetic to North Korean migrants and North Korean mission. As part of this mission, some of the leaders supported her financially, enabling her to enroll in additional missionary training programs. On top of that, she mediated between other North Korean migrants and her South Korean supporters, for example redistributing material donations to Freedom School trainees or North Korean neighbors. Conversely, South Korean churches and intellectuals asked her to bring or introduce other North Korean migrants to their programs, workshops, and events.

A significant cultural element that gives religious networks meaning is migrants’ discourses of suffering. The recognition and interpretation of personal suffering experiences with biblical vocabulary are essential and predominant when North Korean converts deliver their conversion narratives in churches. Suffering, under the Kim dictatorship and en route to South Korea, is so central that Seoul, identified as Canaan, is reified as good and opposed to the evil and unfree North Korea. In addition to reproducing anti-Communist binaries, articulating suffering makes the testifier an innocent victim deserving of this-worldly and otherworldly compensation.21 I argue that this victim-sufferer consciousness reflects a distinctive form of South Korean urban religiosity, having developed in the context of post–Korean War Seoul. Prominent pastors’ sermons and testimonies by Christian celebrities are likely to interpret external and structural forces rather than individual wrongdoing and original sin as the causes of suffering experiences like physical and psychological illness, familial crises, economic difficulties, and political persecution.22 Many sermons have blamed the Communists for the Korean War since the 1960s and represented Communism as the evil, root cause of the suffering of family loss, poverty, forced migration, and critical illnesses.23 Nevertheless, it would be only partially true to say that North Korean migrants’ conversion testimonies tend to center on suffering and merely reproduce conventional anti-Communist binaries. Nicholas Harkness (2010) makes a convincing case that affluent Korean Christians tend to attribute suffering to the past and joyfulness to the present and thus believe that traditional Korean styles of singing are inappropriate for
worship, while more Western styles are better for glorifying God. Likewise, young believers are coming to consider Korean churches’ pride in being anti-Communist bulwarks in South Korea outdated. Although the National Security Act still serves to oppress progressive, liberal discourses and activities, the enduring “Red complex,” an extreme anti-Communist sentiment, is gradually decreasing, and hope for reunification of the two Koreas is rapidly declining among young South Koreans in general and churchgoers in particular. This ever shifting and pluralized religioscape bears a tension that, though not unusual, tends to confuse rather than convert North Korean migrants. Thus, their conversion to Christianity is a process that puts them on a heterogeneous continuum where they are called to negotiate belonging and departing while being seen as a cultural project by evangelical churches working to revitalize postwar Korean religiosity.

CONCLUSION

To my surprise, I found that Grace has moved to Canada and is serving as a missionary for “our people” (North Korean refugees) in her town. Like some other North Koreans, she arrived there under the pretense that she had come directly from North Korea, not by way of South Korea, in order to claim refugee status and become naturalized. I received an email from her on June 13, 2013, that read in part, “When being free from ideological and mental bondage and servility, and enjoying everyday life according to one’s own will and demands, I think I have acquired freedom” (my translation).

Grace wanted to remind me of her past in North Korea and prompted me to consider the South Korean church hierarchy, which had ranked her lower than her South Korean peers, in light of Søren Kierkegaard’s idea (1968) that unconditional religious commitment requires not submitting oneself to institutional authorities such as political parties, state regimes, or church hierarchies. Grace’s frustration with South Korean church order cannot be underestimated as having nothing to do with the nature of spirituality, which is assumed to be transcendent, or with religious or secular connotations of freedom. On the contrary, it is certainly a mirror reflecting the daunting practical and spiritual tasks that lie ahead for Korean urban churches in the face of such controversial issues as the practice of hereditary succession of church leadership.

The Korean sociologist Yong-Shin Park asserts that “heredity in Korean churches operates with the help of the symbiosis between the social-cultural values of familism and the ever-growing dominance of economism” (2012, 9) Familism refers to enduring traditional values rooted in Confucianism—in particular, family-centered ethics and practices. Economism originated in Park Chung-hee’s militant economics-first national policy that fetishized economic prosperity over other political and social values. These traditional and modern value systems are intermingled in justifying the practice of hereditary succession not only in megachurches but also in big conglomerates. Park further laments that “the earlier transformative capacity has gone. The churches instead have become pillars of the political and economic establishment, enjoying positions of
power and wealth” (9). This is a valuable and critical point that calls for further examination, especially because of the yearning for “the earlier transformative capacity,” which the churches fostered and exercised to transform local conditions for the betterment of society throughout Korea’s modern history.

NOTES
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1. For scholarly discussions of secularization theory and religion in the West and East, see Asad 2003; Casanova 1994 and 2008; van der Veer 2011a and 2011b.


4. Yoido Full Gospel Church, Association of God Grace and Truth Church, Yongrak Church, Nambu Gospel Church, Kum Ran Church, Soong Eui Methodist Church, and others are on a list of the world’s largest megachurches, but Somang Church, Sarangui Church, Onuri Church, and Chunghyun Church, to name a few others in Seoul, are also famous for their size and political-social influence in South Korea.

5. About one hundred years prior to the 1885 arrival of the first Protestant missionaries in Korea, Horace Grant Underwood and Henry Gerhard Appenzeller, some progressive local scholars first embraced and popularized Catholicism as “Western learning” rather than a monotheistic religion. But as its adherents began following doctrinal teachings—such as the renunciation of ancestral worship, of the caste system, and of gender inequality—that conflicted with the established neo-Confucian order, the Chosŏn dynasty initiated a series of severe persecutions that took the lives of thousands of martyrs, including Chinese and French missionaries and Korean priests and adherents, and that lasted until the late nineteenth century, when it concluded the France-Korea Treaty of 1886, which allowed members of the Paris Foreign Missions Society to teach Koreans.

6. Jongmyŏ, the Confucian shrine for the deceased kings and queens, and regular ancestor worship there were not for the public but only for the royal family. Unlike Christianity and Buddhism, it is possible to say that neo-Confucian ancestor worship was practiced as a personal matter. By the end of the Chosŏn dynasty, greater numbers of Buddhist and shamanistic temples and shrines and the freedom to worship existed only outside the Seoul town walls (Walraven 2000).
7. But the district expanded as the population increased from about two hundred thousand in the early 1910s to nine hundred thousand in 1945 with growing influxes of Japanese settlers, foreigners (e.g., missionaries), and, above all, urban migrants.

8. The Japanese colonial project of spatial reform included transforming the palaces, the royal family’s territories, into public spaces such as a museum, a zoo, and parks accessible to ordinary people. The historian Todd Henry calls this the desacralization of the palaces (2014, 29), but this use of desacralization needs further discussion in light of local perspectives on secular and sacred spatial distinctions.

9. They took up all the privileged positions in government offices, markets, trades, and schools, often in extremely radical manners and in degrees incomparable to those of colonial regions of either Western forces or Japanese elsewhere. For example, Bruce Cumings succinctly pinpoints the Japanese domination of the state power in comparison with the Vietnamese case: “If we compare the Korean situation with that of colonial Vietnam, we find that while in 1937 the French ruled a population of 17 million Vietnamese with 2,920 administrative personnel, supplemented by 10,776 regular French troops and about 38,000 indigenous personnel in the administration and in militia organization, the Japanese ruled about 21 million Koreans in the same year with some 246,000 Japanese in public and professional positions that Andrew Grajdanzev classifies as part of the colonial apparatus and some 63,000 Koreans in like but subordinate positions. Upwards of 42 percent of the Japanese population in Korea in 1937 were in government service. . . . Japan was responsible for an extreme skewing of Korean bureaucratic power in the direction of ponderous, overgrown centralization; it bequeathed to postwar Korea a formidable bureaucratic weapon that could rapidly accelerate or severely retard new forms of political participation” ([1981] 2002, 11–12).

10. See van der Veer and Lehmann 1999 for historical and anthropological discussions of religious nationalism in relation to the sacralization of national territory.


12. In anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski spent a great deal of his later career elaborating freedom as “a gift of culture,” as in Freedom and Civilization ([1947] 1960), and recently James Laidlaw (2002) and Joel Robbins (2007) have discussed how such intellectuals as Kant, Durkheim, Weber, and Foucault have defined and developed the concept of freedom, how their ideas have constrained and affected one another and anthropology, and how anthropology could and should contribute to developing studies of freedom and ethics in light of cultural reproduction and changes.


15. Pyongyang was a center of the Great Revival of 1907, which grounded the characteristics of Korean Protestantism for the rest of the century, Donald N. Clark asserts (2003, 121–25).
16. The majority of North Korean migrants who come to South Korea by way of China tend to encounter and experience Christianity in China. See Jung 2011 and 2013; Han 2013.

17. Yŏngnak, or Young Nak, Presbyterian Church, established mainly by northerners who came to Seoul shortly before and during the Korean War, was the world’s largest Presbyterian congregation by 1992.

18. This tendency seems to have multiple roots: a militant method of education that exceptionally stresses mental/spiritual martiality along with physical punishment, a forced ethnic consciousness that intends to homogenize Korean bodies, and obviously the nature of evangelical Christianity in attaching great importance to the faith.


20. The North Korean migrant’s term ‘headache’ may seem similar to its English use when saying that something “is such a headache,” but the former is likely related to the migrants’ traumatic experiences.

21. For the concept of victimhood nationalism, see Lim 2012.

22. I found differences in addressing conversion experiences between American missionaries’ descriptions of the 1903 Wonsan Great Revival and the 1907 Pyongyang Great Revival, and domestic Korean modes since the Korean War. While the former consider the repentance of personal wrongdoing and original sin as the beginning of the conversion process, the latter spend much more time recounting suffering caused mainly by such geopolitical and structural problems as Japanese occupation, the Korean War, ensuing poverty and hardship, and recent economic crises.

23. In the same vein, neo-Confucian patriarchy is often accused of causing housewives’ personal and familial crises (Chong 2008). As such, ample numbers of conversion narratives delivered in churches exhibit a dominant tendency to tell of suffering experiences as a critical turning point toward God rather than articulate repentance of sin or wrongdoing.

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*Chokyomuhwabipyŏng* 13–0: 13–34.


Singapore is a kaleidoscopic space of shifting identities and evolving aspirations. These include the familiar aspiration of many primarily English-educated Chinese, Indian, and Malay Singaporeans for a life in the middle or upper middle class.1 This involves pressure to work late, to have one's children take many hours of tutorials beyond school, and to continuously “upgrade” oneself, one’s home, one’s CV, one’s clothes, and so forth. But there are other aspirations moving through Singapore, such as the desire to experience Christ in a personal way or to form a community of worship around a Buddhist master or to immerse oneself in Hindu ritual and classical dance or to live a life dedicated to Islam. Many Singaporean Chinese also aspire to making connections with the gods, by participating in Daoist rituals, consulting spirit mediums, taking part in divination in temples, making offerings, attending ritual operas, or participating in pilgrimages. Some of these activities involve returning to founding temples or lineage halls back in China. Most of these realms of experience are invisible to the expat or the tourist visiting Singapore. They are even largely invisible to many of the English-educated Chinese mentioned above and to people of different ethnic or religious groups. This chapter explore how lives in Singapore have been drawn into parallel universes despite an abundance of urban planning dedicated to the creation of a perfectly harmonious, multicultural society.

According to Population Trends 2014,2 published by the Singapore Department of Statistics, the population of Singapore in 2014 was 5,469,700. This included approximately 2.9 million Chinese (74.3 percent of the total), 515,000 Malays (13.3 percent), 352,000 Indians (9.1 percent), and 128,000 Eurasians and others (3.3 percent). The country also
KENNETH DEAN has a foreign nonresident workforce of 1.6 million, and more than thirteen million tourists visited in 2011. Recently the Singaporean government released a white paper on population growth calling for a rise to 6.9 million, mostly through increased immigration from China (National Population and Talent Division 2013). This provoked controversy, and for the first time in decades, People’s Park saw public protests, which demanded that the government rethink its development plan, known as the Master Plan (which is of course upgraded every five years), in favor of more services for the present population, allowing them more options and the opportunity to lead quite different visions of the good life.

In defiance of secularization theory and modernization theory, Singapore, one of the most Westernized cities on earth, is also the site of well over a thousand temples, churches, mosques, household altars, and other semipublic religious spaces. The surveys of religious belief conducted by the Department of Statistics every ten years since 1980 have consistently found a small but growing minority of people professing atheism or lack of engagement with any religious movement (see figure 15.1). On the contrary, the past decades have witnessed astonishing transformations in the religious scene, with the rapid spread of evangelical Christianity, best exemplified by the rise of megachurches like the titanium-clad City Harvest Church, and the efforts of the Buddhist and Daoist Federations.
to respond to the rising rates of conversion to Christianity and reclaim adherents. Multiple
new religious movements originating in India, Taiwan, China, Japan, North America, and
Europe have also spread across Singapore in the past few decades (Lai 2008).

**THE COMPRESSION AND EXTENSION OF SPACE**

Despite the abundance of religions, religious space in Singapore over the past fifty years
has been both compressed and extended into transnational networks. For example, a
temple that has had to crowd into a united temple with several others can afford to rebuild
and enlarge its founding shrine in China—including a concrete road leading up to it—
which its members can visit and show off to the younger generation of temple adherents.

In fact, space in Singapore has always been flattened and highly concentrated, in the
sense that the city is also a nation-state and all levels of political discourse and action
occur at each and every level of lived space. Thus, conversations about neighborhood
planning rapidly transform into debates about national policy. The compression of space
affects the compression of discourse. These effects lead to considerable self-censorship
and caution. They also tend to generate a nationalistic or at least patriotic discourse that
elides difference and exclusive lived worlds of experience and emphasizes unity of pur-
pose and the significance of shared accomplishments.

**THE NARROWING OF TEMPORALITY THROUGH
THE ELIMINATION OF HISTORICAL TIME**

The incredibly rapid transformation of urban space in Singapore has been accompanied
by a profound forgetting of the island’s past histories through the suppression of the
regional Chinese languages (or dialects) in which many of its stories were told and the
destruction of the majority of the sites connected to the events of the past. In the place
of a more complex, polyvocal history, nationalist state ideology has constructed the Sin-
gapore Story (sometimes known as the Lee Kuan Yew Story). This describes the extraor-
dinary economic success of Singaporeans, based on discipline, hard work, and steady,
pragmatic (single-party) leadership. The resulting model of development (the Singapore
Model) draws on so-called Asian values of neo-Confucian authoritarianism to justify high
levels of state planning and control of everyday life, including enforced religious and
multietnic harmony. The model also calls for a well-disciplined, English-speaking work-
force along with an easily controlled pool of migrant labor and results, in theory, in a
contented, home-owning middle class.

**WHAT IS MISSING IN THE SINGAPORE MODEL?**

What is missing in the Singapore Model? Any single narrative featuring a highly selec-
tive set of criteria (economic progress, secularization, modernity) eliminates other forms
of memory. Efforts to stamp out the use of various Chinese dialects heighten collective amnesia. What is missing is recognition of the materiality of religion and ritual work and the role of ritual sensation in the creation of senses of community in urban lived spaces. The Internal Security Agency closely monitors so-called religious excess, seen, for example, in the activities of an estimated thousand spirit mediums in their apartments in the housing development blocks (HDBs), some of whom appropriate open spaces in the HDBs for fundraising rites. There is little acknowledgment of the historical role of religion or Chinese associations in the development of Singapore. There is little capacity to defend local communities and spaces or alternative visions of the good life against the developmental vision of the Urban Land Authority. There is still little acceptance by the authorities in Singapore of any degree of disorder or negotiation in political processes. State ideology has generated a category of “religion” as the (potentially dangerously irrational) private beliefs of individuals and groups, the opposite of a pragmatic, state-supported secular modernity, which focuses on economic issues. This designation (and denigration) of religion takes no account of the intermingling of religion, politics, and economics in the early history of Singapore (up to the beginning of the twentieth century). Nor does it acknowledge the paradoxical intermingling of religious and cultural elements in newly invented rituals such as the Chingay Chinese New Year parade (Goh 2009).

SPACE AND TIME IN RITUAL EVENTS: THE SENSORIAL REALM OF RITUAL AND THE ROLE OF AFFECT

Urban experience should not be described only in general analytic terms such as the homogenization of space, particularly when addressing the aspirations of different individuals and communities. Nevertheless, the homogenization of space is very advanced in Singapore, where 80 percent of the population lives in (and owns) highly homogenous apartments in government-built HDBs. Yet even these have public spaces in the courtyards and passageways on their ground floors, which can become the site of a ritual event (when rented by resident spirit mediums or used for funerals or communal feasts for the hungry ghosts). Moreover, the satellite towns all have spaces set aside for religious uses, which are sold in government auctions. The sites of ritual events in Singapore’s HDBs introduce complex realms of ritual sensation into the homogenous spaces of these buildings. At the level of domestic space, each HDB has a number of apartments with at least one room converted into a shrine to various deities, which, at regular times (for example, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6 to 8 p.m.), are transformed into sites for the possession of the spirit medium owners by these gods, who then respond to the questions and dilemmas of their petitioners.

What is most significant about these events, and those hosted by the Chinese temples, is how they transform homogenous space-time into a ritual sensorial zone. Ritual spaces are highly charged sites, replete with colorful images and robes of officiants, the smells of incense and other offerings, the piercing sounds of ritual music and (rarely in Singa-
pore) firecrackers, and the touch of pressing crowds. Bystanders and passersby are absorbed into the ritual event, into which nonhuman forces are summoned. These events are sites of and means for the creation of new subjectivities in rapidly globalizing Chinese societies. The affective qualities of ritual should be examined through ethnographic fieldwork alongside the analysis of liturgical texts, ritual objects, and new media technologies. Religion in Singapore encompasses widely varied sites and events of practice. Rather than conduct a statistical survey of religious membership or sets of beliefs, one should explore how Singaporeans do religion. Religious practices are not merely forms of conservatism or tradition; on the contrary, they can act as forces for wider social change. Ritual can be seen in terms of material, transformative practices rather than as a mere mirroring, reinforcing, or maintaining of society. Ritual can work as an active social force, generating community in an interactive and performative process.

The eight hundred Chinese temples of Singapore (see appendix) have different physical layouts, types of visitors, and ritual practices. The urban context of Singapore allows one to explore the continued importance of ritual affects (ranges of intensity within ritual contexts) in a world of rapidly increasing migration, circulation of capital, and flows of information. This places ritual in the wider context of contemporary life, rather than making it a relic of a past era. Rituals can be analyzed in terms of the affects that particular movements, sounds, and sensations create and the impact of these experiences in producing a sense of community. It is also important to note that recent trends in digital media and internet usage have transformed the materiality of ritual, through the incorporation of new virtual affective objects and circuits. In Singapore, temple festivals and processions, although heavily regulated and controlled by the state, bring the rhythms and movements of temple activity into the streets, adding an overlay of affect-laden ritual practices that acts to reshape city life. Such processions exert a ritual power over the urban environment, transforming its meaning.

Many of the rituals performed in Chinese temples in Singapore relate to wider networks formed through the transnational circulation of ritual objects, practitioners, and financial investments. We will raise some points about the relationship between religious ritual and everyday life in the discussion below.

Rituals in these temples involve a wide range of temporalities. Daoist rites accelerate cycles of cosmic time through the revelation and recitation of scriptures while the main ritual master reverses the flow of time through his inner meditation, in which he returns to the undifferentiated Dao. Spirit possession transforms everyday temporality through the irruption within the body of an outside deeper than any sense of self. An annual cycle of traditional festivals and the birthdays of the multiple deities of Singapore can be followed on annual calendars prepared by the Daoist listserv of Singapore. This calendar shows the peaks and valleys of ritual intensity throughout the year.

To comprehend the current interactions between the project of secularization and the constantly emerging powers of Chinese ritual in Singapore, a review of the background to the Chinese temple system is necessary.
RISE OF THE DIALECT NETWORKS

The spread of Chinese temples and trading associations across Southeast Asia took place over a thousand years, accelerating in the sixteenth century, by which time they had overtaken the earlier-established Arab trading networks. A second massive expansion of Chinese networks took place in the mid-nineteenth century, after the opening up of the treaty ports in China by the Western imperial powers, which released a flood of labor migrants into Southeast Asia, many of whom fell into conditions of paraslavery. In general, the expansion of the Chinese into Southeast Asia took place through chain migration from common regions or dialect areas, the monopolization of economic niches, and the transformation of the Chinese family-lineage form into something resembling a trans-national joint-stock corporation through the adoption of sons, intermarriage with local women, the development of common-surname associations in Southeast Asia, and the creation of temple-run cemeteries with shrines dedicated to invented joint ancestors.

In all cases, the Chinese dedicated their temples in Southeast Asia to the gods of the distinctive local pantheons of their home regions. One way to identify a local pantheon is to survey the temples in a local cultural region (usually also a dialect region), as Zheng Zhenman and I have done for the Putian irrigated plain (Dean and Zheng 2010). One can then list the gods and goddesses most commonly worshipped in the region. This list of top gods will include a mix of those whose cults have spread across the entire Chinese empire and others worshipped only locally. The latter can serve as cultural markers to help identify the dialect communities in settlements of Chinese overseas.

The temples usually contained native-place associations (huiguan) or business offices, both of which handled the trade in specific economic niches, each monopolized by a different dialect group (on niches and corridors, see Kuhn 2001; on the specific occupations of the different dialect groups in Singapore, see Cheng 1985). These temples or business offices contained a number of different kinds of rotating credit pools, watched over by various deities. This method of extending credit, distributing risk, and generating trust (under the supervision of a god) was also used in specific trades (with guild deities) and in Chinese-run retail and distribution networks, plantations (of gambier, sugar, pepper, tobacco, etc.), and tin and gold mining consortia (Wu 1974; Yuan 2000; Kwee 2013).

The temples were centers of communal self-governance and had their own enforcement mechanisms, which the colonial governments referred to as secret societies (Blythe 1969; DeBernardi 2004, chs. 2–4). These were an open secret, in that temples included people from all walks of life in the different dialect communities. Some community leaders had started out as members of secret societies and then rose to top leadership positions in the temples by running opium, alcohol, prostitution, and coolie labor concessions for the colonial powers.

The temples and huiguan were organizations that generated trust. They did this by adjudicating disputes before the gods, with oaths and other rituals. They also built trust by providing the setting and the conditions (supervision by the gods) for rotating credit
pools and by sheltering newly arrived immigrants from their home regions. In addition, they provided charity to their impoverished countrymen, schools for poor children, and burials and cemeteries for the majority without the means to arrange for burial back in their home villages.

The formation of the old town of Singapore, at the mouth of the Singapore River, was closely connected to the rise of distinct dialect territories, in which people from the same region gathered and built their temples, native-place and clan associations, and shops that monopolized different trades and commercial activities. The boundaries of these dialect neighborhoods were preserved from the founding of Singapore in 1819 until the beginning of the urban development of Singapore Island in the mid-1950s (Hodder 1953; see also Freedman 1957 and 1960–61; Freedman and Topley 1961). Currently only traces of these dialect neighborhoods can be seen, in the few temples they left behind. After urban development began in the 1960s, the dialect groups were dispersed across the entire island.

Soon after the founding of Singapore, the temples of the different dialect groups began to hire Daoist ritual masters from their home regions to perform the versions of Daoist ritual that had developed there. Several Daoist ritual altars were established in Singapore to pass on these localized ritual traditions. Nowadays older ritual masters often remark on the drastic simplification of these traditions in recent decades. But other religious forces worked to overcome dialect boundaries in the Chinese communities of Singapore in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With the founding of the Shuanglinsi (Double grove monastery) at the beginning of the twentieth century, organized Buddhist monasteries open to members of all dialect groups began to replace itinerant monks linked to specific dialect group temples. Reform-minded Buddhist leaders such as Taixu (1890–1947) visited Singapore during the buildup to the Japanese invasion in 1940. Their version of a rationalized Buddhism, purged of excessive ritual activities, had a long-term impact on Singaporean Buddhism (Kuah-Pearse 2003; Huang 2009; Hue 2012). However, multiple discrete traditions of master-disciple transmission and sectarian forms of lay Buddhism have also survived and still flourish in Singapore.

THE COLONIAL REGULATION OF RELIGION

From the mid-1850s, colonial regulations of religion led to a gradual dismantling of central elements of the Chinese temple system, which combined communal leadership and enforcement in the form of the secret societies. These policies resulted in a division between a privatized sphere of religion and a public sector public life based ultimately in Chambers of Commerce. Related policies included the gradual elimination of Chinese cemeteries, the removal of hawkers from four-foot-wide covered walkways, and other efforts to improve hygiene and regulate colonial space (Yeoh 1996). These transformations were facilitated by Chinese who were educated in English at mission schools and British universities and who rose in government service. The spread of modern
nation-state nationalism among educated elite Chinese leaders in the republican period intensified the rejection of the Chinese temple system (but note the efforts of Kang Youwei to establish a Confucian religion in Southeast Asia; see Duara 2008).

It is important to analyze the impact of colonial conceptions and regulations of religion in the subsequent transformation of the Chinese dialect community temples. These policies were worked out across the British colonies, from colonial statements on religious tolerance in India to bans in Madras on Thaipusan processions and from regulations in response to temple clashes in Penang to the gradual criminalization of secret societies in Hong Kong and later Singapore. The colonial knowledge machine was creating and imposing categories as fast as it was attempting to assess perceived new threats (such as the potential of the Kongsi in Borneo to become independent; see Yuan 2000). The regulations in the following time line took shape across the Straits Settlements but had a major impact on Singaporean Chinese temple networks.

1856  Penang riot over the attempted dismantling of an opera stage (DeBernardi 2004, chs. 1–2).
1867  Penang riot between feuding secret societies leads to the passage of the Peace Preservation Act, which gives British authorities the right to banish undesirable individuals.
1869  Passage of the Dangerous Societies Suppression Ordinance, which calls for the registration of all secret societies but is, however, only laxly enforced.
1877  William Pickering appointed to the Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, in which capacity he works closely with secret societies, attending many of their ordination ceremonies and arguing for them to coordinate with the colonial authorities.
1887  Assassination attempt on Pickering knocks him out of commission.
1890  Governor Clementi Smith passes the Societies Ordinance Act, declaring the sworn brotherhoods (secret societies) completely illegal.
1891  New prisons built in Singapore to hold the brotherhood members.
1899  The Singapore government establishes the Chinese Advisory Board to encourage greater cooperation from the Chinese elite with the colonial authorities.
1905  Establishment of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowment Board.
1906  Founding of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

With the prohibition of secret societies in 1890 (which took place later in Singapore than in Penang or Hong Kong), the enforcement arm of the temples and clan association businesses was criminalized. At the same time, the British authorities were intruding more and more into the financial side of temple administration (Dean, forthcoming).
POSTcolonial REGULATION OF RELIGION

Singapore saw the beginnings of postcolonial rule with the establishment of self-governance in 1959, followed by independence from Malaya in 1965. Postcolonial legislation carried forward the secularizing project of the colonial state. This took the form of new regulations on religion (including a constitutional freedom of religion nonetheless made subordinate to the drive toward unity of the Singaporean nation-state) and the claim to state ownership of all land (Sinha 1999). This claim was the basis for the dispersal from the old town of the dialect groups and their temples and native-place and clan associations, by means of the Master Plan for urban redevelopment, which redistributed the population of Singapore from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s into sixteen planned towns with HDBs, arrayed in a ring around the island. Each of these towns had the same ratio of Chinese to Indians to Malays, planned spaces for religious institutions and activities (sold at auction by the government), and planned facilities for the public use of space, including shopping, education, recreation, and enjoyment of open land. Most of the HDBs were built as multistory buildings with two-, three-, and four-bedroom apartments and some common open space on the ground floor. Currently, some 80 percent of Singaporeans own their housing (on long-term rent from the government). The remaining private space on the island is hotly contested (again at government auctions) for the construction of high-end apartment buildings, shopping centers, hotels, office buildings, and villa complexes. Overall plans are implemented to preserve aqueducts, green spaces, and green corridors; expand public transportation; regulate the number of cars on the roads; and maintain limited heritage conservation of a small number of national monuments. Continuous efforts are made to reclaim land from the sea and to concentrate industry (including refineries), labor camps for migrant workers, and container ports in specific sectors of the island.

Most religious sites are granted only thirty-year leases, at the end of which they are frequently forced to relocate, purchase a new site from the government, and then build a new temple. The regulation of space and the government expropriation of land, the auction of religious sites, and the competition for these spaces from global religious groups has had profound impacts on local temple communities. This has led to the rise of united temples (which combine many temples in one building) and the formation in 1990 of the Singapore Taoist Federation, which brings together the committees of hundreds of Chinese temples across Singapore. Other state regulations have placed limits on processions, the exploding of fireworks, and the burning of spirit money. This is in striking contrast with Johor, across the causeway from Singapore, where several Chinese dialect groups still cooperate in the massive public Old Buddha Temple procession, attended by tens of thousands of devotees and onlookers.7

Other government regulations demanded the registration and reorganization of temples, along with more transparent accounting and reporting of their finances (Sinha 1999). However, to some extent the regulatory framework had more difficulty dealing...
with the spread of Chinese lay Buddhist sectarian organizations such as Xiantianjiao (Teaching of Prior Heaven). The government response was to register these groups as charity organizations. Many Chinese temples have also registered as charities, a requirement for certain forms of fundraising. One area beyond the direct reach of state regulations is Geylang, one of the few regions in Singapore where it is still possible to get a freehold lease on private land. There one can find brothels on the ground floor and several temples on the higher floors of the same apartment building.

There has been considerable commentary on the adoption in Singapore of a secular framework for religion that closely follows the British imperial policy in India of “non-preferential treatment” and “religious tolerance” (van der Veer 2001, 14) while imposing the very categories of “religious” and “secular” on practices and organizations such as the Chinese temples and the Chambers of Commerce (even though business offices had formerly been an integral part of the temple’s activities; see Thio 2007). The “Men in White” (leaders of the People’s Action Party [PAP]) were of mixed cultural backgrounds but primarily educated in English and often in England and had considerable distance from the dialect communities and their temples. They employed many of the tools of the British legal system, including its rhetoric, to oppose the colonial order, but they preserved many colonial institutions and attitudes in the creation of the new Singaporean nation-state (Goh 2009; Yap, Lim, and Kam 2009).

Some of the early religious and ethnic riots have played a formative role in the evolution of the Singaporean discourse on and regulation of religion, in a way that calls for the employment of some kind of trauma theory to explain the powerful fear these events still arouse many years later. Some Singaporean legal scholars and political scientists prefer to speak in terms of “pragmatic realism” or “qualified secularism” (Thio 2007). The rhetoric is of “pre-emptive prudence, tremendous care, and vigilant effort” on the part of the state to prevent further outbreaks of interreligious, interethnic violence (Tan 2008, 55). Much of the concern relates to developments in surrounding states, where religion and politics have combined in complex and often violent ways (Ibrahim 2008; Tan 2008).

Episodes usually invoked in the litany of Singaporean religious “disturbances” are the arrests of Jemaah Islamiyah members in late 2001, early 2002, and just after the 9/11 attacks in the United States; Catholic groups being accused of acting as covers for Communist cells (liberation theology) in 1987; the May 13, 1964, riot on the birthday of Mohammed; and the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950. By comparison with developments in South Asia during Indian partition or later pogroms in Gujarat, these events seem minor, yet they loom large in the sensibility of the Singaporean state. Since the realm of discourse is condensed and contracted to a high degree, as mentioned above, many citizens share a great concern over these incidents as well.

Singaporean state policy toward religion culminated in the passage of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) on November 9, 1990. Thus it is necessary to review earlier legislation and regulation of religion in Singapore (see Hill 2004). Freedom of religion and the freedom to propagate one’s religion are guaranteed in Article 15
of the 1965 Constitution, as is the right to establish schools to teach religion to members of the religious community (Article 16[2][3]). Article 153 allows for limited shari’a law for family matters in the Muslim community. Later court challenges from religious groups and conscientious objectors led to the following rulings by the Supreme Court: “The sovereignty, integrity and unity of Singapore are undoubtedly the paramount mandate of the Constitution and anything, including religious beliefs and practices, which tend to run counter to these objectives must be restrained” (Chan Hiang Leng Colin v. PP, a 1994 ruling that barred Jehovah’s Witnesses from using their religious beliefs to avoid national conscription) and “Article 15 taken as a whole demonstrates that the paramount concern of the Constitution is a statement of the citizen’s rights framed in a wider social context of maintaining unity as one nation” (Nappalli Peter Williams v. Institute of Technical Education [1999]; both cases cited in Tan 2008, 63). The Presidential Council on Minority Rights was established in 1965, and this body appoints the members of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, established in 1990 by the newly enacted MRHA.

The Singaporean state has several mechanisms at its disposal to enforce the MRHA, including the Internal Security Act and the Penal Code. The Internal Security Department (ISD), the police, the courts, and the prisons administer these. The ISD keeps close tabs on religious organizations, with up-to-date lists of the spirit mediums in the HDBs, the sites of _pudu_ (universal deliverance) celebrations during the Ghost Festival, and the timing of annual rituals dedicated to the gods across Singapore, as well as the tentages set up for fundraising in the HDBs and in temples on particular occasions. There are also regulatory offices that keep track of any aggression from one religious group toward another in the media sphere (television commentary, newspaper interviews, radio shows, and blogging). The usual mode of intervention is mediation, as, for example, when Pastor Rony Tan, leader of the Lighthouse Evangelism Church, made statements about the mistaken beliefs of Daoists and Buddhists in Singapore in 2009. Staff from the ISD invited him for a cup of coffee and urged him to publicly apologize and withdraw his views (or face stiff penalties). He acquiesced and paid several well-publicized visits to Chinese temples, where he made effusive apologies (all printed in the Singapore newspapers; e.g., Yen Feng, “ISD calls up pastor for insensitive comments,” _Straits Times_, February 9, 2010). But this was not the end of the matter. Pastor Rony was invited to the main celebration of the Jiucaiba City God Temple. There he performed a karaoke duet with Chen Tianlai, the head of the Daoist Federation, singing, “You are half of me, I am half of you,” a popular Hokkien ballad, in front of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and other invited dignitaries.

Despite these rather extraordinary efforts, there remains a sense in Singapore that the worlds of different religious communities remain cut off and separate from one another. The Religious Education Program of the 1980s instituted classes on five religions or teachings (Daoism was not yet official), namely Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, “world religions” (for those who did not profess a particular faith), and Confucian values. At that time Lee Kuan Yew was strongly promoting the last as a source of Asian values. Tu Weiming, a professor of neo-Confucian thought at Harvard University, was a consultant
for this program. However, it was discontinued after several years. Fewer students signed up for Confucian values than had been hoped, and many more became interested in Buddhism (perhaps contributing to the high numbers of people self-identifying as Buddhist in official surveys). Most students simply signed up for the program closest to their family traditions, so the program’s aim of providing greater insight into the beliefs and practices of other communities in Singapore was not realized.

Underlying the increasing separation of religious communities is perhaps the sense of diminishing returns and ever scarcer resources, especially land, available from the government. The increased scrutiny of temple activities through the regulations on temple registration, organization and constitution of their boards of managers, terms of office of their directors, and more transparent accounting procedures and reporting requirements have all limited the flexibility and creativity of the temples, particularly smaller ones with more limited membership bases and fewer contacts among business leaders and government officials. Some temples, however, have adapted quite enthusiastically to the new regulatory framework, inserting themselves into their new surroundings as cultural and educational centers (with tutoring facilities for students and scholarships for academic achievement), medical facilities, and providers of charity outreach.

Underlying many of these possible outcomes of the regulation of religion are the workings of the Master Plan in its past and future impacts on the Chinese temple networks. The initial call for a master development plan came from colonial administrators in 1948, faced with the horrendous conditions of overcrowding following the Japanese occupation of Singapore. In 1955 the first installment was completed and called for the building of three new towns. Later, United Nations consultants proposed the development of a ring city but also emphasized the preservation of existing buildings (Abrams, Kobe, and Koenisburger 1963). To carry out selected recommendations, the PAP passed the Land Acquisition Act on June 17, 1966, giving itself the right to appropriate land whenever needed for public purposes. This legislation established various offices, including the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), which cleared, assembled, and sold 184 hectares of land under the act’s auspices between 1967 and 1989 (Dale 1999, 90–99, discussed in Hue 2012). A new State and City Planning Project was initiated to develop the HDB units, which house twenty to sixty thousand people each. Later studies conducted by the URA and other agencies found that the new HDBs developed their own local cultures and sense of belonging, but Dale and other scholars have noted that a great deal of the original heritage and local culture of early Singapore was lost in the transition to this new model (Kong 1993; Dale 1999, 241; Hue 2012).

From 1965 to 1985, sixteen satellite cities of HDBs, with shopping centers, designated religious spaces (available via auctions of land), and other public spaces, were completed. The 150 villages that had covered Singapore until the 1970s disappeared one by one, along with their numerous small shrines and temples. This has led to what Chua Beng Huat (1995) has called “nostalgia for the kampong”—a sense of loss of a sense of place and a yearning for an alternative to the pace and unidirectionality of Singapore life—
although as he points out, this reverie has largely forgotten the negative features of kampong life (see also Savage 1992 and 1998).

Thus we find two processes, one in which the scores of temples from the dialect neighborhoods of the old port city were dispersed among the satellite towns, and one in which a certain number of the hundreds of temples based in the villages that had been torn down to make way for the new satellite towns were sometimes rebuilt in one of these towns. It is difficult to estimate how many temples simply disappeared in this process, but there must have been hundreds.

Over the past few years, Hue Guan Thye and I have documented eight hundred Chinese temples in Singapore (see appendix). These can be divided into several categories (by dialect, date of founding, religious or ritual tradition, sectarian background, urban or rural location, transnational or local focus, hybrid or exclusive membership). One could argue that Chinese temples have functioned for some communities as bearers of collective memories and a sense of place and belonging and as sites of contact with supernatural efficacious forces, and thus of blessings, good health, and prosperity (these are repeated themes of the epigraphy of the temples; see Dean and Hue, forthcoming). But the overwhelming majority of the eight hundred temples surveyed have had to move at least once, most many more times. The record was eleven moves. Each move requires an enormous effort to mobilize the community to raise funds, purchase new land, build a new temple, and attend rituals and activities in a new location (which could be quite distant from the original site). The new temples have to work to establish good connections to their new locations. As soon as the move is complete, preparations have to begin for the next one, in thirty years’ time, as there is no guarantee that an extension to the lease can be negotiated. Smaller temples have a more difficult time raising the necessary funds, mobilizing the membership, making connections with prospective patrons, and negotiating with the government. A great many temples have disappeared or sent their gods back to China to retire. In the 1970s many native-place associations and temples became lonely centers for the activities of a dwindling number of old men, unable to interest younger people in participating in their activities. More than three hundred temples have had to merge with other temples and shrines into sixty-five new united temples. Some of these have been quite successful, but others are united only in name.

Many ritual traditions have been increasingly rationalized, for example through the elimination of cemeteries and the transfer of the bones and ashes of ancestors into columbaria eerily reminiscent of the HDBs, a steep reduction in the number of families conducting daily ancestral sacrifice at home altars and the related expansion of halls for ancestral spirit tablets in Buddhist and other shrines, and the simplification of funerary rites (Tong 2004; 2008).

Nevertheless, Daoist funerary rites remain important in Singapore, and spirit mediumism continues to provide a dynamic force for the growth of temples out of spirit altars in the HDBs. Some medium altars also establish transnational networks, as seen in the Putian Xinghua Jiulidong (Nine carp cavern temple) networks. In that case, business
leaders who have been trained as spirit mediums share their ritual knowledge in the training of new generations of mediums in Southeast Asia and back in Putian, China (Dean 2011). The drive to establish new temples only exacerbates the increasingly tight competition for religious space in Singapore, leading to more interfaith tension.

Religious harmony is in fact enforced by law in Singapore, under the MRHA of 1990. The law was passed to preemptively eliminate interreligious antagonism. But it has not been able to prevent, and may have contributed to, in an unintended way, a long-term trend toward greater interethnic exclusiveness—in other words, the creation of parallel universes of experience in the same city, occurring simultaneously but largely invisible to other resident communities.

**REVIRTUALIZATION THROUGH RITUAL, AND THE CREATION OF NEW NETWORKS, SPACES, AND POTENTIALITIES**

The Chinese temples of Singapore celebrate the birthdays of the gods by inviting them to an elaborate feast through Daoist rites of invocation involving choreographed dance in a mimicry of imperial court audience ritual that employs tremendous amounts of documentation, including the preparation of orders to spirit soldiers, talismans, passports for messengers, and memorials addressed to the high gods of the Dao, all prepared in classical calligraphy for transmission through incineration. Gifts of incense, fruit, wine, and valuables are offered to the deities, represented by paintings arranged into a portable altar around the temple ritual space. Music and song are key elements of the ritual, generating an affective zone filled with heightened expectations and excitement. Spirit possession of several mediums by the gods marks a high point, as the mediums often perform acts of self-mortification to demonstrate the power of the deity over life and death (on spirit mediums, see Elliot 1955; Chan 2006; DeBernardi 2006). Spirit possession is highly dramatic, involving stylized gestures alongside highly erratic movements and sounds. Often, once possession sets in, the medium will take questions from members of the temple audience, who line up patiently to ask the god’s advice on their health, family, or business problems. These sessions can last for several hours. Sometimes several mediums perform one after another or together, gathering a crowd of onlookers and creating an alternative universe of experience. Each such ritual is an experiment—a performance in which the Daoist ritual masters, the spirit mediums, and the other participants engage in a collective leap into an altered realm of potential transformations and emergent powers. Most conclude with communal feasts that feature the recirculation and transformation of money, food, and social status.

These communal rituals persist despite colonial and postcolonial regulation of religion and the impact of urban land development. These rituals, when successful, create a zone of intensity that revirtualizes the powers of the community and its gods—each intensive performance of its own powers reaffirms and recharges the community with
potential, allowing for its innovative actualization in new rituals. The collective experiment can fail, as in many rituals that are performed in perfunctory, routinized fashion and fail to reenergize the community. Temple membership usually wanes with repeated moves, and a new generation of spirit mediums may not be found to replace the earlier ones.

The reestablishment of links between temples in Singapore and their founding temples back in China have created new senses of space (new kinds of spatiality), beginning in the 1990s but expanding over the past two decades, linking flows of ritual knowledge to flows of capital, people, and ritual innovation. Ritual revolutions continue to emerge within these networks. The Southeast Asian Chinese temple networks have played a key role in the reconstruction of approximately half a million temples in South China and in the reinvention of ritual traditions of popular Chinese religion there (Dean 1993 and 1998; Dean and Zheng 2010). Ritual changes related to transforming gender roles in Southeast Asian branch temples have in some cases been introduced to founding temples in China as part of the reinvention of local popular religion (Dean 2011). Some of these temple networks are flourishing, with repeated visits back and forth. These new ties provide opportunities for temple and association leaders to entice younger members from Singapore to return to temple activities and to participate in visits to founding sites in China. A wide range of associated investments, connections, and deal making builds up around these visits. In some cases, Southeast Asian temple leaders can provide ritual knowledge to a community deeply disrupted by the Cultural Revolution. The only thing comparable to this wide-ranging reestablishment of connections, rebuilding of temples, and sponsoring and participating in ritual activities is the period just after the Qing coastal evacuation (1660–80), when hundreds of temples were destroyed along the Southeast China coast and monks and travelers were sent to seek support from the far-flung network of Chinese temples already established across Southeast Asia.

It is difficult to know what might have happened in recent years to Fujian or Guangdong if the temple networks of Southeast Asia (including Singapore) and Taiwan had not been so forthcoming, engaging themselves in the reinvention of tradition by supporting the rebuilding of temples and the restoration or innovation of ritual form. As things stand, many of these local ritual systems in Southeast China are now self-supporting, and further transformations can be expected in their relations with their Southeast Asian networks (Dean and Zheng 2010; Dean 2011).

Singapore continues to act as a central node in evolving networks linking temples across Southeast Asia and Taiwan. These temples are currently caught up in a cycle of mutual escalation of contacts and exchanges. These turbulent whirlwinds of interaction (the flow of ritual specialists, ritual change, new understandings of local traditions in globalized networks) create new senses of space for the people participating in them. The deterritorializing effects of rapid modernization, massive urban development, and capitalist neoliberalism lead to equally rapid and determined modes of reterritorializing. These may be top-down, government-planned new construction projects or urban
neighborhood aspirations to construct new temples and celebrate them with intensive ritual events. Such temples can also create new transnational spaces and relations. These transformations provide a range of possibilities to the Chinese temple networks of Singapore, in some cases restoring older potentialities in a rapidly changing global setting. The situation begins to take on the complexity of contemporary models in physics of multiple coexisting parallel universes. Whether these realms and resources can be opened up to interaction and exchange within the limits set by the framing of religion and the secular in contemporary Singapore is another question.

Earlier forms of long-lasting, continuously transforming, hybrid Chinese communities are increasingly vanishing in Singapore: Paranakan culture is now largely celebrated in its absence (Skinner 1996). New mixed cultural forms are emerging, sometimes best analyzed in terms of hybridity as monstrosity, of irreconcilable forms of mixing that constantly demand to be worked through but never seem to be resolved. Daniel Goh (1999) discusses the growth of Christianity in Singapore, especially among English-educated middle- and upper-middle-class Chinese, which shows the impact of charismatic religious movements on class and youth culture (see also DeBernardi 2008), but in some cases these Christian groups uncomfortably preserve certain popular Chinese ritual acts, such as burning incense or spirit possession. He also mentions reform-minded branches of syncretic sectarian movements such as Dejiao (Teaching of virtue) that live in an uncomfortable relationship with the “magical” production of their religious texts by means of spirit writing.

On the more productively hybrid side, one notes a growing Chinese participation in events such as Thaipusan (Kong 2008) and the presence of certain sites of worship that combine Chinese, Indian, and Malay practices, such as the Luoyang Dabogong Temple, which includes a Chinese temple, a Brahmin shrine, and an Islamic shrine. Its leaders revere an Indian saint and visit his tomb in India annually. Many more sites of cultural mixing can be seen in the arts, such as gamelan ensembles, plastic and theater arts, and experimental cinema.

Despite these aforementioned sites of hybridity and cultural interaction, much of Chinese temple life in contemporary Singapore constitutes a sphere of religious experience and ritual affect invisible to many English-speaking Chinese, as well as to other Singaporean ethnic communities, not to mention expats and tourists. The mutual exclusiveness of these communities is largely a result of postcolonial government “multicultural” racist policies and related urban development policies (Goh 2009). These policies reverse the “long history of globalization” (Sahlins 1988; see also Sahlins 1993) that arose through the daily intercultural interactions of everyday life over several hundred years in the treaty ports of Penang, Malacca, and later Singapore. As Goh (2009) has noted, these policies were also designed to forestall the potential for pan-ethnic hybridity of the left-wing socialist movements of the 1960s.

The gaps and absences in the Singapore Model reveal the degree to which the project of secularized modernization cannot ultimately accommodate sacred space and time.
The result is a generalized collective amnesia, punctured sporadically by ritual events in the remaining temples. But these temples and their communities have perhaps been more successful at assisting in the revival of local communal religion in rural areas of Southeast China than in Singapore itself. Urban planning is increasingly shifting the temples to the industrial zones on the outer rim of Singapore Island—on the grounds that because of their burning of spirit money and incense, they are smoke-producing entities. The next step would be to drive them into the sea in a physical manifestation of amnesia—pushing the temples right out of mind. Collective amnesia generates unlivable contradictions.

As Vincent Goossaert’s chapter 3 discusses, urban space in China has lost most of its neighborhood-based communal sacred sites, and there is a clear tendency toward individualized, voluntaristic religious activity in the newly reopened urban temples. Communal, collective celebrations (or even memories) of realms of ritual sensation are unacceptable or incomprehensible to many Chinese elites, whether Singaporean Paranakan business and political leaders educated in the British colonies or iconoclastic, nationalist, or Communist cadres in China. The increasing flows in the transnational spaces of the Chinese temple networks and the revival of collective religion in the Chinese countryside are a kind of return of the repressed. Chinese local communal religion’s power comes from its positive consciousness, its unique ability to actualize virtual dreamworlds by absorbing contradictions and accepting multiple representations of spiritual powers. In China, one can begin to talk about religion in the countryside encircling the cities, in an uncanny echo of Maoist strategy. But in Singapore, there is no outside to the city, and the contradictions are even more extreme, leading to parallel universes of experience with limited possibilities of interaction.

APPENDIX: SURVEY OF RELIGIOUS SITES IN SINGAPORE

The following are the numbers of Chinese religious structures in Singapore:

- more than 800 Chinese temples (of these, more than 350 describe themselves as Daoist, and 300 are found as separate altars in 63 united temples)
- an estimated 1,000 shentan spirit medium altars in private apartments in HDBs
- 72 Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples
- 38 folk Buddhist temples
- 19 Theravada Buddhist temples (including Thai, Sri Lankan, Burmese, and Cambodian, but most primarily funded by Chinese devotees)
- 5 Tibetan Buddhist temples
- 12 Shantang (Halls of good merit, from Teochew)
- 30 Xiantianjiao Guanyintang (halls dedicated to the Bodhisattva Guanyin of the lay Buddhist movement the Teaching of Prior Heaven)
- 7 Dejiao (Teaching of virtue) temples
- 3 Zhenkongjiao (Teaching of true emptiness) temples
Singapore has many other cultural and religious institutions:

- more than 140 tongxianghui (native-place associations)
- more than 100 common-surname associations
- 250–450 Christian churches (DeBernardi 2008)
- 23 Hindu temples
- more than 70 Islamic mosques
- 7 Sikh temples

The country is also home to twenty-three religious organizations originating in India (Sinha 2008), such as the Sai Baba movement and the Temple of Fine Arts; several new Chinese sectarian and Human Realm Buddhist groups, like Yiguandao and Gji; groups originating in Japan, such as Soko Gakkai; and other movements, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Some of these are officially registered religious associations, while others have not tried to register, have been refused registration, or have deregistered. Some nonregistered religious groups are nonetheless allowed to operate in Singapore.

NOTES

1. Education policy is a controversial topic in Singapore. Education is bilingual, with the primary emphasis on English-language education. Classes in language and literature are offered in the student’s mother tongue if it is one of the official languages of Singapore—Chinese (Mandarin), English, Malay, and Tamil. For a recent discussion of the limits of bilingual education in Singapore, see Lee 2012.


3. Or perhaps not so easily manipulated. On December 9, 2013, the first riot in Singapore in forty years took place in Little India, as some four hundred South Asian migrant workers reacted violently, overturning three police cars and setting fire to an ambulance, after a private bus ran over a fellow worker.

4. Prof. Francis Lim (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) asked this question in relation to Chinese religion in his response to Prof. Mayfair Yang’s lecture “What Is Missing in the Wenzhou Model?,” given at the National Library of Singapore on June 25, 2012. Both speakers raised interesting points, which inspired these remarks.

5. Derived from Spinoza’s affectus (2000, part 3, definition 3) and its interpretation by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), affect differs from personal feeling or emotion in being prepersonal; it is not the result of ideas but arises through movement and sensation. The body’s movement through different experiential states changes its ability to act (Massumi 1987, xvi). Affect is abstract and cannot be fully realized in language; it is the body’s nonconscious preparation for action (Massumi 2002, 30), creating the potential for one to act. Affects add intensity to feeling, which then influences how concrete decisions are made (Damasio 1994, 204–22). Affect, then, can be seen as primary in the development of feelings, motivations, and people’s sense of themselves, which mediate groups’ potential ways of life. While membership and beliefs are far easier to quantify in surveys and statistics, they do not suitably
represent much of the world’s religious practice—the study of affect allows for a much more nuanced analysis.

6. Note that Singapore heavily circumscribes processions along public roads (compare the account of processions in Hong Kong by Joseph Bosco in chapter 6, but see also Dean 2010 and Dean and Zheng 2010, 207–18, the latter for a description of processions in Putian, Fujian). Most temple processions are restricted to performances in temple courtyards. The processional troupes then climb into trucks and are driven to the next temple, where they again perform in the courtyard. However, spirit altars often rent public space in the HDBs in order to set up tentages that can receive visits from other altars or temples, including groups of spirit mediums, generating an intense ritual event that several hundred participants and onlookers can attend. Such creation of ritual space is especially marked during the Ghost Festival (in the seventh lunar month).

7. Joseph Bosco’s chapter 6 discusses the colonial regulation of the Chinese temple system of Hong Kong, which froze the physical form of the temples and redirected temple funding to government-approved charities. It also notes the increasing prohibition and control of processions in Hong Kong in the 1960s and their recent revival under the mantle of “intangible cultural heritage.” For a related discussion of the touristic and heritage aspects of officially permitted processions such as Thaipusam in the Indian Singaporean community, see Kong 2008.

8. The interrelated concepts of revirtualization and actualization that I use here are drawn from Deleuze and Guattari 1987 and Massumi 2002. See also the discussions of virtualization in ritual in Kapferer 2004 and 2007.

9. These numbers are preliminary, based (unless otherwise noted) on an ongoing, as yet unpublished survey by the author and Hue Guan Thye carried out under the auspices of the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

REFERENCES


PART 4

SELF-FASHIONING IN URBAN SPACE
On a cold, wet day in late October 2002, I sat with Wang Yi in her cement-floored hutong apartment. The municipal supply of heating had yet to be turned on for the season, so we sat bundled up in coats in Wang’s one small indoor room and drank warm tea while talking. I had first met her the previous week after she had made a spontaneous outburst in the outer courtyard of the Buddhist Temple of Universal Rescue (Guangji Si) during one of the temple’s dharma assemblies (fahui), at which I was conducting participant observation. In Wang’s outburst, which had earned her a small crowd of listeners, she had exclaimed that the period when Mao Zedong (1893–1976) had been the chairman of the Communist Party of China had seen the realization of a true Buddhist society. She had also praised Lei Feng—a People’s Liberation Army soldier whom Mao had upheld as a model to all people for his spirit of self-sacrifice—as an example of a living bodhisattva, a being who postpones his or her enlightenment to first secure the salvation of others.

While Wang’s loud praise of Chairman Mao in a Buddhist temple that was closed to public practice when he had ruled the country might seem highly ironic to any student of modern Chinese history, her views were by no means uncommon at the Temple of Universal Rescue. Lay preachers who gathered in the temple’s outer courtyard frequently juxtaposed Buddhism to Maoist-era moralities or forms of social organization. Wang went perhaps the furthest in making this comparison, however: during my visit to her apartment, she suggested that the whole point of visiting a Buddhist temple was gaining access to the writings of Mao Zedong Thought and to a discursive community that engaged with those writings. According to her, the writings could not be found elsewhere
in Beijing in spite of the fact that it was the capital of the Communist nation that Mao had authored; the present regime had turned its back on Mao and removed any traces of his thought from public discourse. But in the temple, she declared, one could still find Mao’s thought, in the Buddhist-themed literature that temple goers shared and discussed: this literature contained the essence of Mao’s moral philosophy, that a correctly functioning society was one in which all of its members placed one another in their hearts (xin), acting always with their wishes and interests in mind. For Wang, Buddhist thought was Mao thought, and a Buddhist temple was an appropriate place to gather together with others who aspired to realize Mao’s vision in a future China.

Wang’s longing for a Maoist utopia—an aspiration normally confined to the wreckage heap of China’s failed modernization schemes—in a Buddhist temple forms the starting point for an exploration of the role of public Buddhist sites like the Temple of Universal Rescue in post-Mao urban China. I argue that these sites function as arenas for aspirations that find little expression in the nonreligious spaces of secular cities like Beijing. I use the word aspirations here in the sense discussed by Arjun Appadurai (2004) and elucidated by Peter van der Veer in the introduction to this volume—that is, to refer to fluid and evolving conceptions of the future that express themselves in the hopes and fears of persons who live in urban spaces. In the case of the Buddhist practitioners I studied, aspirations refers to actions and discourses engaged in with respect to both hopes for and fears of the future. My analysis is based on the argument that in a self-consciously secular society, religion is by definition ways of thinking and being that differ from those of the secular order, whatever that may be. In China today, Buddhist religious sites are therefore urban spaces within which one can frequently find those who embrace—either publicly or privately—aspirations that differ from those that dominate the urban Chinese landscape.

My discussion here focuses on public religious spaces as key sites for these alternative aspirations, as opposed to private religious spaces or religious groups such as privately organized Christian movements (Cao 2011) or the Internet-based followings of Tibetan Buddhist masters who form their own institutes outside government-sanctioned religious spaces (Smyer Yü 2012). While these private religious spaces and activities have become increasingly common in urban China, particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, their use is often constrained to discrete forms of activity and thought among groups of people who define themselves as adherents of particular movements or organizations. By contrast, public religious sites, particularly those that are designated as Buddhist or Daoist, host a range of activities and groups whose participants can imagine and express many aspirations, including ones that differ from those of the dominant secular order.

As spaces for transgressive aspirations, public religious sites are a distinctively urban phenomenon. This is because the boundaries between religious and secular space are more porous in rural than in urban China (see for instance Bruun 1996, 61–62; Dean 2001, 77–78; Chau 2006, 218–19). This means that, on the one hand, in rural areas there
is more freedom in and tolerance for expressing religiosity but, on the other hand, the aspirations that are expressed in those spaces are more accountable to hegemonic forms of authority. Naturally, cities also differ from one another in the extent to which they divide the religious and the secular. This distinction is starkest in Beijing, of all the cities in China, where the central state continues to exert the most authority over urban planning. As a result, it is a good location in which to observe the religious as a site for aspirations that run contrary to those of a dominant social order.

In this chapter, I use the Temple of Universal Rescue as my key example to demonstrate in detail how urban religious spaces in post-Mao China, particularly Buddhist ones, can function as sites for multiple aspirations that run counter to state and market visions that dominate the urban geography of the secular Chinese city. I begin by reviewing the social history of religion and the secular in modern China and how the post-Mao phenomenon of religious spaces as sites for alternative aspirations arose. Following this, I explore the range and types of aspirations at the Temple of Universal Rescue through a close examination of three temple goers: Wang Yi, whom I introduced at the beginning of the chapter; Li Xiangqian, a migrant shop owner who engaged in devotional activities at the temple; and Jiang Mei, a young, unemployed woman who participated in a range of temple activities. I discuss how, although operating in the same temple space, these temple goers engaged in very different activities with different social groups that enabled them to give voice to diverse aspirations. In concluding, I reflect on how the expressions of these diverse aspirations characterize what the state calls religion in post-Mao China, as well as some of the barriers to the influence of participants at religious activity sites on society at large.

RELIGION AND THE SECULAR IN MODERN CHINA

Religion (zongjiao) in China is a neologism introduced by contact with the West via Japan (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 50). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, in several campaigns, social reformers used the concept of religion to replace indigenous social institutions and regimes of knowledge in which temples played pivotal roles with new, more centralized forms of authority and new institutions of learning, such as schools (Goossaert 2006 and 2008; see also Goossaert, ch. 3; Dean, ch. 15). These “modern” institutions and regimes of knowledge were based on those that Westerners had developed as part of an earlier process of secularization in European and North American nation-states. China, like other modern nation-states, identified various institutions and regimes of knowledge—such as “churchlike” religions within Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam—as belonging to the category of religion (Goossaert 2008). It then isolated these institutions and regimes of knowledge from the public sphere, relegating them to a realm of private, voluntary institutions and private belief. The state characterized other institutions and social phenomena—such as certain temple cults, fortune-telling, geomancy, mediumship, and divination—as “superstition” (mixin) and allocated them no legitimate place in society (Duara 1991, 79–80).
Aspects of China’s secularization project became law as early as 1898, when the reformer Kang Youwei (1858–1927) persuaded the Guangxi Emperor to “destroy temples to build schools” (huimiao banxue; Goossaert 2006, 307–8). It was with the advent of the People’s Republic of China, however, that campaigns against religion and superstition became most aggressive: with the inspiration of a Marxist teleology, which cast particular suspicion on religion, and a strong state capable of ruthlessly carrying out its policies, many popular religious activities were curtailed and the activities of approved religions such as Buddhism confined to limited spaces. The Temple of Universal Rescue became one of these limited spaces: directly commissioned by the Ming emperor Xianzong, it had enjoyed a long history as a prominent Buddhist temple (Naquin 2000, 305, 597; Chen 2003). During the late imperial and republican periods, it had also functioned as a key site for monastic ordinations and was an important center for emerging national Buddhist organizations and the publication of Buddhist periodicals (Welch 1968, 58, 282; Naquin 2000, 32; Chen 2003, 56). The temple’s background enabled the government to recognize it as a nationally prominent Buddhist religious site rather than as a localized temple that mixed Buddhist and popular religious elements. This enabled activities in the temple to fit more clearly into the politically permissible category of religion rather than the unacceptable category of superstition. In 1953, the newly formed, state-sanctioned Buddhist Association of China (BAC; Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui) made the Temple of Universal Rescue its headquarters (Chen 2003, 46–48).

However, the sanctioning of the Temple of Universal Rescue as an approved religious site did not mean that either its religious activities or the newly formed Buddhist association functioned as autonomous realms independent of the state. As Zhe Ji (2008, 246–49) has shown, the state used religious associations like the BAC to both monitor and control religious practitioners, particularly members of the clergy. In the 1960s, the state removed even the nominal legitimacy that it had granted to Buddhism by shutting down the association; Mao’s Cultural Revolution tacitly authorized bands of Red Guards (Hong Wei Bing) to eliminate the material remnants of the worldviews that Buddhism and other forms of Chinese religiosity had once represented. Moreover, in effect, there was no private space within which religion could exist at this time: the state aimed to control all of the thoughts and actions of its citizens, whether they were expressed in visible public spaces; exhibited in businesses, schools, or homes; or even cherished within their own minds. The only acceptable aspiration was the Maoist utopian vision that the collective will of the people could bring about a perfect society.

In the post-Mao period, disenchantment and ideological fatigue, along with the death of Mao himself, led the state to abandon his utopian vision. However, this did not mean the abandonment of a narrative of secular modernization, let alone the Communist state’s abandonment of political power. Led by a market-based model of progress, the post-Mao state has continued to dominate public displays with its aspirations, embodied nowhere more clearly than in the geography of urban spaces. The Falun Gong spiritual movement, which openly criticized the moral direction of post-Mao Chinese society, was
banned because it expressed its critique in the highly public and visible spaces of parks and squares and eventually outside China's central government headquarters. Yet unlike the Maoist-era state, the post-Mao state shows neither the interest nor the capacity to regulate the expression of alternative modernities in private spaces or in the private thoughts of its citizens that are invisible in the public sphere. It is thus in this invisible realm that religion has reemerged in post-Mao China. Examples of this reemergence include personal religious faith and private gatherings of adherents, whether in person or online (see Smyer Yü 2012). Another part of it, which I concentrate on here, lies at the intersection of the private and the public. This is religious activity that occurs in state-sanctioned “religious activity sites” (zongjiao huodong changsuo), spaces that the state has authorized for the practice of religion. These sites are part of a private realm in that they are ghettoized into specific designated areas and not permitted to spill out into “secular” public arenas that the state closely monitors. This ghettoization reflects an ideology of secularization that identifies something called religion and separates it from the public sphere. However, these religious activity sites are also public spaces, in that they are open and accessible to anyone regardless of their position or affiliation in society at large. In the city center of Beijing, most Buddhist religious activity sites do not charge entrance fees, meaning that they are also accessible to all citizens regardless of their economic means. The Temple of Universal Rescue was in an ideal position to be designated as one of these sites, because its important political role in the early Maoist period had saved it from significant damage during the Cultural Revolution. As early as the 1970s, the temple had opened to some foreign delegations again (Chen 2003, 56); by the late 1980s it had reopened to the public.

In theory, the post-Mao state exerts control over religious activity sites in the way that it does over other public spaces. This control is the responsibility of the authorized religious administrators of these sites. In the case of the Temple of Universal Rescue, this is the resident monks, whose religious status is officially registered with the BAC; the BAC, in turn, maintains a close relationship with the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA; Zongjiao Shiwu Ju). However, in reality there is little state control over the practices and discourses of ordinary temple goers at Buddhist sites like the Temple of Universal Rescue. This is for two main reasons: the lack of interest that monastics take in the regulation of lay activities at Buddhist temple sites, and the reluctance of other state authorities to involve themselves in the activities of designated religious areas.

Historically, unlike officially designated Protestant or Catholic churches, which organize worshippers around centralized weekly rituals led by priests or ministers, Buddhist religious activity sites, like Daoist ones, operate in the traditional mode of Chinese temples, which contain several halls and courtyards, from which temple goers can come and go as they please. While temple goers can participate in rituals led by the temple monks, such as the weekly Chanting of the Sūtras (Songjing) or the daily Evening Devotions (Wanke), there are also many other reasons for them to come to the temple. Some temple goers may come to consult particular temple monks, who function as their spiritual
teachers. Others complete devotional circuits of the temple, offering incense to buddhas and bodhisattvas in each of the halls; some visit only one hall because of a special devotional relationship they have cultivated with a particular deity. Contemporary Buddhist religious activity sites in Beijing differ from traditional temples in that their deities derive exclusively from a Buddhist pantheon; however, even in this contemporary case, the temple goers’ worship of them by no means entails a commitment to Buddhist teachings or a Buddhist religious identity.

The Temple of Universal Rescue also has a large outer courtyard that is mostly unused by the temple monks. In this space, unauthorized lay preachers gather to spread their interpretations of Buddhist teachings, often with reference to present-day issues. The lay preachers and other lay practitioners also distribute Buddhist-themed media free of charge to interested temple goers, much of which Wang Yi collected and read. While the leaders of the temple occasionally express concern about the lack of regulation in the outer courtyard, they are generally apathetic to the activities that go on there. The temple monks never engage with the courtyard groups, partly because they fear that such involvement will get them into trouble but also partly because monks are supposed to be detached from the world; in spite of the fact that visitors to the temple greatly outnumber the monks and many desire their spiritual guidance or protection, most monks have little contact with them. With a few exceptions, monks do not see it as their responsibility to provide guidance or instruction to nonmonastics. Moreover, in my observation, when the temple monks do counsel nonmonastics, they disproportionately privilege well-educated and relatively affluent practitioners, who are potential sources of donations to both individual monks and the temple in general. The results of both my ethnographic research and a quantitative survey I distributed in the outer courtyard in November 2003 suggest that, like Wang, the participants in the groups there mostly have a relatively low socioeconomic status, with most having only a junior middle school (chuzhong) level of education. Many have also been laid off or forced to retire early; this was particularly true in the early 2000s, when Wang frequented the courtyard.

In remaining disconnected from the affairs of many rank-and-file temple goers and tacitly permitting them to engage in activities that the monks do not organize, the monks, along with monastics at many other Buddhist temples, are different from the leaders of Christian groups who see preaching to and administering their congregation as their main duties. If one takes into account all of the temple’s activities, including during periods when it is open but not holding specific rituals, the number of participants is probably slightly less in monk-led or monk-organized activities than in activities independent of the monastics who are nominally the state’s representatives at the temple. In this way, despite being legally in charge of the temple, the monks exert fairly little control over the activities and discourses in which temple visitors engage.

If the monks assert little control over Buddhist temple spaces, then what about other agents of the state? On two occasions in my fieldwork, the police were called in to directly intervene in the regulation of discourse in the outer courtyard of the Temple of Universal
Rescue, once by a temple security guard and once by a concerned lay practitioner who volunteered at the temple. In both cases, the party who called the police expressed concern that lay preachers were making political references and claims in their speech. However, when the police entered the courtyard and interviewed the preachers concerned, they quickly dismissed any notion of wrongdoing and told those who had called that the police could not really concern themselves with the content of speech at a designated religious site, unless it was something obviously illegal like the preaching of Falun Gong doctrine. It was apparent in both cases that the police officers feared that they would be making trouble by asserting jurisdiction over a space that was subject to government bureaus other than their own. It was also obvious that the police felt it was well beyond their powers to decide what was legitimate religious speech in a religious site; however, the police are occasionally called on to make such distinctions in nonreligious sites, such as public parks. This is seen clearly in the recent example of the unregistered Shouwang Church, whose members attempted to gather outside Beijing’s Haidian Park for a service but were interrupted by the police because such worship practices are not permitted in nondesignated religious space (Vala 2012), and in attempts to distinguish Falun Gong practitioners from other qigong-type practitioners and remove the former from public space, a common activity for the police in the early 2000s.

From these examples, we can see that there may be no state-connected authority that shapes many of the practices and discourses that take place at Buddhist religious activity sites. At these sites, religion and religious space become something that the post-Mao state defines only on the basis of what they are not—that is, not secular and not linked to the state’s modernist aspirations. The state effectively cedes to the participants in these spaces the ability to define and express their aspirations, even when they seek to revive the state’s earlier secularisms, like the Maoist-era socialist project. These Buddhist religious activity sites (and perhaps Daoist ones) are some of the only public urban spaces that exist as arenas for these alternative aspirations. It is for this reason that they are attractive to temple goers like Wang.

Having established the role of Buddhist religious activity sites like the Temple of Universal Rescue in facilitating the expression of alternative urban aspirations, I turn in the next section to consider through a detailed exploration of the stories of three temple goers what those aspirations are and how the space of the temple helps to facilitate them.

“RELIGIOUS” ASPIRATIONS
WANG YI

Wang Yi believed that the problems facing China today were rooted in the abandonment of Mao’s vision of equality and respect for all people. According to her, when Deng Xiaoping took power in 1978, he did away with Mao’s vision. Because of this, the leaders since that time were not educated in the goals of creating a socialist society and “serving the people” (wei renmin fuwu). Like many practitioners at the temple, Wang believed that it
was this deficiency in the moral education of the leadership that had led to problems of corruption (rather than, for instance, structural conditions like an unchecked consolidation of power within a plutocracy). Corruption in turn had led to social and economic inequality and made it difficult for those without connections (guanxi; literally, “relationships”) to make ends meet. During my visit to her apartment, Wang’s main example of the negative effects of this corruption was the difficulty that many ordinary Beijing residents had in finding work. She complained about how migrant workers had come to the city and bribed officials to allow them to sell their goods there, while the same officials had denied the city’s own residents these permits because they lacked the cash to make their own bribes. In spite of the poor circumstances in which she lived, however, Wang did not suggest herself as an example of the negative effects of this corruption; she was already past retirement age. She felt sorry for a younger generation of city residents, she said, many of whom had many working years left but could not find employment and lacked the security of a retirement stipend.

Wang explained that going to the Temple of Universal Rescue was important because she could find the moral visions to which Mao had aspired in the free literature that was distributed in its outer courtyard. This included the aspiration that ordinary citizens like herself and many of her fellow practitioners in the outer courtyard could live comfortable and secure lives in spite of their lack of access to money and power. Discussing this literature with her fellow practitioners, Wang could relate Buddhist ideas to Maoist ones. Some of the lay preachers in the courtyard articulated the aspiration that Buddhist practitioners, armed with their moral knowledge, could help reeducate their fellow citizens to place the needs of others in their hearts. These preachers and their listeners worked to form a kind of Buddhist public sphere where the process and content of this moral reform could be worked out (Fisher 2014). Wang was not particularly interested in this project, however: having lived through the ideological surveillance of the Maoist period, she preferred not to broadcast her religious beliefs and moral aspirations outside the temple, which she felt would be futile and possibly politically dangerous. But she found it important to discover in the temple the content of those moral aspirations and a space where she could share them with others who felt as she did. She told me that this communication with fellow practitioners was important to her, even if it mostly took the form of mutual commiseration at the public abandonment of the Maoist-era aspirations. It provided her with a moral language with which to express her sense of “imbalance” (bu pingheng) regarding the direction that the larger society around her was taking, which the secular media described mostly in positive terms.

The alternative aspirations that Wang and some of her fellow practitioners in the outer courtyard expressed involved a reordering of time from that of the dominant, modernist narrative of progress through market reform, articulated by the state and expressed in the grand, futuristic architectural projects of the secular city outside the temple walls. For them, Mao’s vision of a communist, egalitarian society had represented a future to which they could aspire. Once Deng had taken power, that future had been halted, and
the country was no longer progressing but regressing. These practitioners expressed this undesirable change with the Buddhist concept of the latter days of the dharma (mōfa shiqí). This notion, first developed by medieval Chinese Buddhist thinkers, proposes that as civilization moves further and further away from the time of the Buddha's teaching, it becomes harder and harder for people to understand his message. A decline in moral behavior in part evidences this lack of understanding (Chappell 1980; Nattier 1991). For some of the courtyard practitioners, the Maoist period became equivalent to the time when the Buddha preached the dharma, a past of right thought and action to which the present could be negatively contrasted. In using this concept to understand their present circumstances, the courtyard practitioners accepted the modern Chinese state's consignment of religion to the past but inverted the moral significance of that past. In the eyes of these practitioners, instead of a time to transcend, the past was a source of guidance and a model for their aspirations for the future.

LI XIANGQIAN

For Wang, the temple was a nonsecular space in which she could safely express aspirations that were transgressive within the society around her. She and her fellow courtyard practitioners expressed these transgressive aspirations in moral terms, as a longing for an order now past. They also identified with a master narrative for the direction of Chinese society as a whole that presented a rival aspiration to the market-based moral vision of the post-Mao state. However, not all temple goers connected their aspirations to those of a collective community, and not all expressed them in moral terms. Moreover, not all temple goers wished to express their aspirations to like-minded others. For many, the temple was a devotional space where they could express their aspirations privately to a deity.

One such temple goer was Li Xiangqian. Li was perhaps the sort of person whom Wang's critique targeted. He was a migrant to the city whose home province was Henan, several hundred kilometers south of Beijing. Along with several other migrants, he had opened a small shop and restaurant outside what was then the Beijing South Railway Station (Beijing Nanzhan). Whether he or his associates had bribed officials to gain permission to set up the shop, as Wang had accused many migrants of doing, I do not know, but his business was far from secure and lucrative. It was one of many similar establishments, mostly selling identical goods, that ringed the exit to the station. A few times each hour, a train would arrive, and its passengers (and perhaps the people arriving to meet them) would walk on the sidewalk along which the vendors were arranged. These departing passengers would sometimes patronize these vendors, but mostly they just walked past. Even when they did stop, they might just as easily visit one of the other shops and restaurants as the one co-owned by Li, about which there was nothing remarkable. While sitting and talking at length with Li in his shop on two occasions, I saw how he could go for hours at a time without any customers.
Li did not consider Beijing his home. Like many migrants, he saw his time in the city as temporary. As he explained it to me, he hoped to earn enough money to pay for his daughter’s college education (she was now in middle school), and then he planned to return home to Henan to be with his wife and daughter full time. In spite of this plan, he had already worked at the shop for six years, sleeping above it each night in a small loft full of bunk beds that he shared with his co-owners. He had yet to save enough money to achieve his goals. Li did not fit the stereotype among some Beijing residents of an ignorant and uneducated migrant shop owner. He had graduated from college, but, as he explained it, problems in the Henan work unit where he had been placed after graduation had constrained his opportunities there, and he had been forced to pursue a living as a petty entrepreneur in Beijing.

I first met Li at the Temple of Universal Rescue in November 2002, on a day when I was interviewing devotees—those who prayed before or brought offerings to images at the temple—on their reasons for coming to the temple. It was not easy to interact with this group. Unlike the outer courtyard practitioners with whom Wang associated, whose main activities were standing around and sharing their religious views and personal problems with one another, the devotees engaged in a silent practice and were often alone; many also desired to keep their petitions private. After sharing my identity and asking them some questions, I often gave out a few business cards, hoping that some would call me and we could later meet at greater length and in private to talk. Few took me up on this request, but Li was one who did. During our first exchange, we met at his shop but then relocated to a grassy verge underneath a nearby overpass to talk. Li said that he wanted to talk to me because he thought that since I had come all the way to China to study it, I should know what Buddhism was really about. In truth, as I had spoken to many devotees at the dharma assembly where we had met, I had not remembered my brief encounter with Li, but he related how I had asked several devotees about their reasons for coming and making offerings to the image of the bodhisattva Guanyin in the temple’s rearmost hall. Around us had been several “old ladies” (lao taitai), as Li described them: in reply to my question, he recalled, they had said that they were giving thanks to Guanyin for her blessings to them. Li told me that they had said this because they had wanted to sound high-minded in front of a foreign researcher; really, he explained, they and most other devotees at the temple prayed for their own selfish aspirations: those without power or money wanted them, while those who possessed both prayed that they would not lose them. Li knew this, he said, because he was no different from those old ladies. He also hoped to earn money, enough to support his family and return to Henan, but he was troubled about his uncertain ability to do so. Expressing his wishes and fears before Guanyin made him feel that he did have some control, that he could put his aspirations into her hands, and that she would help him to fulfill them. He felt this way even though part of him knew that asking just for the things that one wanted was not really the essence of Buddhist teachings; he knew that Buddhism ought to be about something higher than this, about gaining release from the
suffering in the world and achieving awakening. Yet praying to Guanyin to fulfill his deepest desires helped to keep him calm, and therefore he could not help but go to the temple.

Li’s co-owners had no idea that he had visited a temple, which was why he wanted us to talk away from the shop. He was afraid that they would have found his actions “superstitious.” Moreover, as he explained to me on my second visit to his shop, going to a temple to pray for one’s well-being was a political act: if one told others that one went to the temple, one would have to say why. Saying why, in turn, would involve confessing one’s deepest personal problems, which were bound to be connected to social problems and disorders that were politically inconvenient to express. This was also why, he said, people kept their petitions private at the temple and did not broadcast them before the deities cathartically. It was also why those old ladies had been reluctant to tell me what Li believed was the truth about the content of their communications with Guanyin.

Li may not have known about the unique atmosphere of the outer courtyard, where Wang had felt safe to utter out loud her woes about China’s having abandoned its Maoist vision. It is also possible that such an outburst would not have been tolerated in the inner courtyard, the location of the Guanyin Hall, which the temple monks more closely regulate. Whatever the case, both Li and Wang found in the temple a space where they could express aspirations that ran counter to the state’s narrative, of modernization through economic reform, that dominated the secular spaces of city life. While Wang might have seen Li as in harmony with that narrative, in that he had moved to Beijing to engage in capitalist entrepreneurship, Li’s need to come to the temple exposed problems with the narrative, which is one reason why he had been so reluctant to discuss his fears with others: they reflected the city’s and the country’s difficulty in providing promised economic opportunities to all citizens and the ways that the pursuit of money divided families. Moreover, regardless of what Wang might have thought, as a migrant worker engaged in petty entrepreneurship, Li did not represent the state’s ideal image of an agent of economic growth. Indeed, only a few years after I first interviewed him, the chain of shops and restaurants where he had once worked was demolished, replaced by a sleek, futuristic station for high-speed trains that traveled more than three hundred kilometers an hour to take passengers to other major cities. The small shops and restaurants once operated by migrant vendors like Li were replaced by wealthy transnational businesses with plenty of capital to invest, whose workers hawked everything from mineral water to designer shoes. By being able to pray to Guanyin in the temple, Li, like Wang, found a space in which he could find peace by expressing—albeit silently—his aspirations to succeed in an environment where he was not especially welcome.

JIANG MEI

In the temple, Wang found an outlet for her moral aspirations, Li a place where he could express his secret fears and aspirations to succeed in a harsh and unsupportive...
environment. A third practitioner, Jiang Mei, came to the temple in search of friendship, community, and meaning. While both Wang and Li believed that their aspirations were not welcome in the secular society outside the temple walls, Jiang's aspiration was perfectly acceptable within that society, but she did not feel that she could fulfill it there.

I met Jiang in August 2003, when the temple was looking for “young lay practitioners” (nianqing de jushi) to help remodel the quarters of a senior monk. I decided to volunteer so that I could engage in participant observation of these younger laypersons, who were mostly uninvolved in the regular activities that I observed during the temple’s dharma assemblies. Jiang, a twenty-year-old unemployed woman, was one of three helpers that day besides me. We cleaned and painted the monk’s quarters over the course of one day and spent most of the subsequent day being rewarded with a visit to an important shrine of the Buddha’s tooth on the outskirts of Beijing. During these activities, I had many opportunities to talk to Jiang. In fact, in contrast to the taciturn monks who were with us those two days and her fellow lay helpers, who were quiet and reserved, she needed little prompting to relate her personal stories to anyone who would listen.

The only child of two parents who had divorced while she was young, Jiang lived with her mother and a stepfather and frequently visited her father, who had chosen not to remarry. I do not know what her highest level of education was, but she had not attended college. She explained that she had worked only once, briefly selling goods in an art store on a commission basis, and had left the job when she saw that it was not possible for her to earn any kind of living that way. Now, she declared almost cheerfully to her captive audience, she did not even bother to look for work; she knew that there were not any jobs available in any case. Most days she stayed at home while her mother and stepfather went to work, watching a succession of television programs by herself.

Jiang told us that she had first become interested in Buddhism because of her concern about the welfare of animals, which Buddhist teachings address through their emphasis on acting compassionately toward all living beings. All monastics take vegetarian vows, and many of the committed laypersons I studied, like Jiang, also abstained from eating meat, even though their friends and family outside the temple rarely maintained a vegetarian diet. Both Jiang’s mother and stepfather were Buddhists, but she asserted that she had entered into Buddhism more intensely than they had. She also said that she had asked for their permission to become a nun so that she could live each day in the community whose values she had come to embrace, but they had not granted it.

Over the two days we were together, Jiang provided a running monologue about her encounters with monks, her experiences with correct ritual etiquette, and the masters whose books she most enjoyed reading. When we went to visit the Buddha’s tooth, she prostrated herself dramatically at nearly every step that led up to its entrance; after we finished our brief tour of the relic, she made the entire entourage wait while she searched for a lucky bracelet that she had lost while prostrating. She had an extremely gregarious personality and seemed to see everyone she met at the temple as an extension of her family: she addressed me directly by my Chinese name without using the honorific title.
of “teacher” (laoshi), as most others did; maintained close proximity to all of the other volunteers, occasionally putting a friendly hand on our shoulders or backs, which is unusual among mixed-sex strangers in China; and generally treated us as though we were close relations rather than acquaintances whom she had met for only a day or two. She suggested several times that we should arrange another time to go on a day’s pilgrimage outing together. When we all proved unavailable for an outing on the day after our tooth relic visit, she openly complained that there was no one with whom she could go out to have “fun” (wan).

On several occasions, Jiang mentioned to me how much she liked the writings of a particular monk and encouraged me to read his teachings, yet when I asked her why, she only said that he was young, energetic, and modern; she provided few specifics about the content of his teachings. She also told me how much she liked to attend a free lecture class that the monks at the Temple of Universal Rescue provided; on the Saturday following our volunteer work, we attended this class together. Yet while Jiang bubbled over with nervous enthusiasm before the class began, once the monk started to address his audience, she could only keep her attention for about five minutes; she spent most of the remainder of the class chatting and giggling with a woman sitting next to her and periodically trying to impress me by performing origami with a ¥1 note. While she told me that her interest in Buddhism had stemmed from her commitment to animal welfare, she never discussed this commitment or its relationship to her interest in the religion in any detailed way.

Wang was impressed with the moral content of Buddhist teachings, and Li was attracted to the power that the sacred possessed for him at the temple. Jiang, by contrast, seemed most interested in the superficial details of Buddhist life, such as the way that practitioners performed each ritual and the everyday lives of the temple monks. For her, the temple was a brand new world, with its own customs, habits, and regimes of knowledge that contrasted with everyday secular life outside, in which Jiang had clearly exhausted any interest. Socially gauche and evidently lonely, she aspired to find a place for herself among the people who made up this Buddhist world and believed that she could gain social capital by mimicking the ritual comportment of its members and showing her knowledge of its cultural frameworks. It seemed to me that, had circumstances been different, Jiang could just as easily have been part of a church community or even a stamp-collecting group or anime-watching club. Yet this does not take away from the fact that she did choose Buddhism and the religious spaces of Buddhist temples as arenas in which she hoped to fulfill aspirations that she had not fulfilled in the secular world outside these settings. In this respect, she was similar to Wang, Li, and many other temple goers.

CONCLUSION: “RELIGION” AND ASPIRATION

It is striking that Wang Yi, Li Xiangqian, and Jiang Mei each came from different circumstances outside the temple and pursued very different aspirations within it. None of the three had much engagement with the activities or social associations of the others. For
Wang, the temple functioned as a space in which to revive a Maoist-era moral project and to discuss that project with like-minded fellow practitioners; for Li, the temple was a solitary space where he could express unacknowledged tensions and private aspirations; for Jiang, it was a space in which to seek meaning and belonging. Even when the activities of these temple goers did overlap, such as when Li and Jiang both expressed devotion in front of images of Buddhist deities, their reasons for participating in those activities and the aspirations they expressed through them differed significantly: in this case, for Li, it was to seek a calming influence by kneeling in the presence of Buddhist deities as he hoped for the success of his business; for Jiang, it was a bodily expression of adherence to the cultural norms of a community within which she hoped to find belonging. Occasionally, participants would transition from one temple-based group to another, but mostly there was no interaction between them.

These different activities, groups, and aspirations speak to the differences between “religion” in a state-defined urban Buddhist religious activity site and privately organized religiosity. Because privately organized religiosity is arranged by specific social groups, often around specific teachings, the range of aspirations expressed by members of those groups is more limited than that at a religious activity site, whose parameters are defined by space rather than by practice or association and within which a number of groups practicing different activities and with widely different aspirations can gather. There is also a difference between the two in terms of what we can consider religion: the state does not define privately organized religious activities as religion, since doing so would mean that the participants were breaking the law by not gathering in religious activity sites. In most cases, the participants in these activities also do not label themselves as practicing religion or indeed, in many cases, particular religions like Buddhism. It is really mostly scholars who label the activities of private religious groups as “religion,” “religiosity,” or belonging to a particular religion. By contrast, in religious activity sites like the Temple of Universal Rescue, whatever takes place is religion and Buddhism because the state defines it as such. But the state does not define the content of what counts as religion or Buddhism in those sites. In this way, in Buddhist religious activity sites, “religion” and “Buddhism” can mean anything from the revival of Maoist social morality to the rules and norms of an alternative social community. These sites function as spaces for the expression of a wide range of aspirations in the changing climate of post-Mao China. However, they only function as such when the participants remain in those sites: as Wang and Li realized, any potential to organize in Buddhist religious activity sites an alternative public sphere that could be a substantial social force outside those sites was minimal, because of both the lack of common aspirations of those who gather there and the political impermissibility of moving an organized social force into secular public space that would critique or challenge the dominant aspirations of the state. In this way, the aspirations expressed in publicly designated urban Buddhist religious sites remain largely invisible to those who participate in public life outside their walls.
NOTES

1. Though this distinction is certainly also stark in other cities over which the central state exerts strong and direct authority, like Shanghai, as Francesca Tarocco’s chapter 2 illustrates.

2. In theory, the only people who are excluded from participation are Communist Party members, who are forbidden from practicing religion. In practice, however, I met many party members who were practicing Buddhists, though they sometimes worried that co-workers or bosses would discover this fact.

3. Here I define the city center to include the area within the innermost three Beijing ring roads. In this area there are four designated Buddhist religious activity sites: the Temple of Universal Rescue, the Source of Law Temple (Fayuan Si), the Tongjiao Temple, and the Tianning Temple. Of these, only the Source of Law Temple requires an entrance fee. Some historical Buddhist temples such as the White Dagoba Temple (Baita Si) require entrance fees, but these are not designated religious activity sites; they are registered as museums. In other parts of China, including in the larger Beijing municipality, it is common for designated religious activity sites to collect entrance fees, in some cases even from practicing Buddhists (see Fisher 2011).

4. On average, the socioeconomic status of the courtyard participants was the lowest among the different groups that frequented the temple. The results of my survey showed that temple goers engaging in devotional activities exhibited the greatest range of both incomes and levels of education, with some being very affluent and well educated and others having very low levels of education and/or income.

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A new form of urban aspiration is emerging among China’s middle-class professionals in the midst of rapid and often disorienting socioeconomic transformations: namely, an intense interest in and fervent pursuit of personal happiness in the name of science and well-being. This “happiness craze” (xingfu re), which often calls for professional intervention, is taking place against the backdrop of a society that is increasingly competitive and distressed as unprecedented surges in material wealth are coupled with mounting social inequality and moral crisis. These changes are magnified in the cities, where competition for resources is fierce and palpable. Novel notions, mostly imported from the West, such as “the science of happiness” and “the happiness index,” are being introduced to urban Chinese by psychologists and psychotherapists who have recently discovered positive psychology and fusion styles of healing approaches to well-being (much inspired by Buddhism and Daoism) brought from Japan and the United States. These hybrid therapeutic techniques, which attempt to blend science with secularized religious teaching, claim to be not only efficacious in promoting better emotional outlooks and quality of life but also suitable for Chinese social and cultural conditions. By reducing anxiety, stress, and other existential suffering, they aim not to just eliminate illness but to foster a richer sense of well-being, or what Martin Seligman calls authentic “human flourishing” (1991).

This chapter explores the logic, practice, and impact of this zealous quest for happiness by addressing the following questions: Why is the search for personal happiness quickly gaining such a salient place in contemporary Chinese urban life, especially among educated professionals? What fusion techniques of self-cultivation and well-being
do they embrace and reinvent? How do they make sense of and reconcile “scientific” and “religious,” “modern” and “ancient” elements or claims in these practices? What does this new trend tell us about the possibilities and limits of reinventing the self and cultivating “the good life” in a globalizing China? My account draws from two sets of materials: research on how positive psychology, Buddhist psychology, and the new study of happiness are making their way into everyday life in urban China; and ethnographic data I collected through participant observation and interviews during my fieldwork in the city of Kunming in southwestern China between 2009 and 2013.

The current robust pursuit of happiness beyond material wealth, I suggest, is largely driven by Chinese middle-class urbanites’ desire to live the good life and by the mounting distress they are experiencing in a time of profound urban restructuring—with a market-driven economy, the loss of job security, increasingly fragile family and kinship ties, higher health care costs, and the pressure to accumulate more things, to name just a few. In this context, the notion that there are proven methods to increase happiness or well-being becomes particularly appealing to these individuals. I further argue that the effort to blend modern psychotherapeutics with Buddhist and Daoist techniques in this quest suggests that spirituality is not retreating today; instead, it constantly finds its way into diverse domains of urban social and mental life in secularized forms. These innovative, eclectic approaches to the cultivation of emotional well-being both in and beyond China may further recast urbanity in a way that integrates rather than conceals spiritual practices and may provide a space for meditating on the possibility of a modernity in which science and spirituality are not opposed but come together to enhance human experiences. However, there is an interesting paradox here: while many Chinese psychotherapists and their followers are allured by the modern, scientific aura and claims of new hybrid healing methods, in practice they do not seem to be deeply concerned about efficacy. Instead, it is the promise of healing and living a good life beyond material success that sustains the search for a path to happiness.

XINGFU RE

The pursuit of happiness or well-being has long been a theme of human experience. Yet how happiness is conceived and the ways in which people strive to attain it vary across times, places, and cultures. Throughout the past century, Chinese people have pursued various forms of happiness in everyday life, but never before have we seen such an explosion of discussion about happiness and the possibility of technical intervention as appear today. In the past, happiness was largely produced in relation to family, other collective institutions, or the nation-state. But today it is primarily treated as an individual project (although often relational and embedded in social contexts) that can be analyzed, measured, discussed, and improved through psychotechnical means. This turn represents two significant departures: a shift away from the single-minded national focus on economic growth and material comfort that we have witnessed over the past three decades,
and a move toward a psychotherapeutic regime of well-being that addresses questions of the self and the meaning of life through our psychic and emotional experiences.

The scale of this new “happiness craze” (xingfu re) is massive. Books, magazines, websites, talk shows, conferences, and workshops devoted to the pursuit of happiness and the good life have been mushrooming. Recently, the word xingfu (happiness or well-being) even appeared in a major speech delivered by China’s new president, Xi Jinping, at the Twelfth National People’s Congress, as he elaborated on his ambitious vision of “the Chinese dream”—“realizing a prosperous and strong country, the rejuvenation of the nation and the well-being of the people” (Sebag-Montefiore 2013). To get a sense of the magnitude of this fervent turn to happiness, consider the *Time* article “Chinese Flock to Free Lectures on Happiness, Justice” (C. Jiang 2011). It reported that a popular Chinese internet portal, NetEase, began to offer Open University–style lectures in English on a variety of topics in 2010. It was expected that most Chinese netizens would rush to pragmatic seminars on marketing, robotics, trade, communication technologies, and so on. But to many people’s surprise, the two top courses were on happiness, delivered by the Harvard psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar, and on justice, taught by the Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel. An estimated three million people had watched them by the time the article appeared. Ben-Shahar’s lecture series, “Positive Psychology: The Science of Happiness,” is popular because it strikes a chord with young and middle-aged Chinese professionals who are eager to find both success and happiness. When I was in Kunming in the summer of 2014, I noticed that a pirated version of this course with Chinese subtitles was already available in many DVD stores. Ben-Shahar’s *New York Times* best seller *Happier: Finding Pleasure, Meaning and Life’s Ultimate Currency* was translated into Chinese in 2007, the year of its publication, and featured prominently in local bookstores.

There are more indicators of this rising interest in the quest for happiness. A nationally popular magazine, *Xinli* (Psychologies), which caters to urban middle-class professionals (especially women), has published several feature articles on inner well-being. The most intriguing one (in the June 2010 issue) is an extensive discussion of the 2009 Chinese Happiness Index Report, jointly issued by the Jiangsu Satellite Television Station and the Horizon Research and Consultation Group. Based on a survey of 15,801 urban and rural individuals who returned their questionnaires, this report is the first of its kind and thus attracted a great deal of media and public attention. Two of its significant findings are that the overall sense of emotional well-being among Chinese citizens today is very low, and a high income (more than fifteen thousand yuan per month) does not lead to a greater sense of happiness. Thus, the heated debate concluded that it is imperative for China to shift its focus from gross domestic product (GDP) to gross national happiness (GNH). Further, since material wealth does not necessarily foster a subjective experience of feeling happy, it is necessary to unlock the secret of well-being by studying how less “developed” places like Bhutan can emerge as reportedly the happiest country on earth.

In 2012, the Second Chinese International Positive Psychology Conference was held in Beijing with the theme “Positive Mindset, Happy China.” In the same year, China
Central Television (CCTV) launched a popular special series titled *The Happiness Lessons* (*Xìngfú ke*), which invited international and Chinese psychological experts to talk about how to obtain authentic well-being and a positive mind-set, cultivate self-fulfillment, and raise optimistic children. All of this indicates that by now the happiness talk has gone far beyond the academic sphere and caught the popular urban imagination.

One cannot help but ask, Why is the happiness craze emerging in Chinese cities today? And how might it redefi ne Chinese urban life? While I am reluctant to resort to a simplistic causal explanation, it is important to understand the socioeconomic context in which this “fever” is taking place. Let us first look at the statement of the Second Chinese International Positive Psychology Conference, which attributes the interest in happiness to the following structural changes that China has undergone in recent years: the intensification of multiple contradictions embedded in the new economic system, the slowing down of economic development, mounting social confl icts, escalating interest competition among different social strata, and the increasing difficulty of the party-state to govern Chinese society. These macro structural transformations and ruptures are bound to be felt on the micro, personal level and thus to profoundly impact the individual psyche. The city is where all these contradictions embedded in the pursuit of postsocialist modernity and urbanity are crystallized and where yearnings, agonies, and struggles are negotiated constantly. It is also where new internet technologies, mass media, a reading public, and global infl uences are readily available. All of these help to increase the spread of the discourses on happiness and the need for psychological intervention. While the literature on the reconfi gurations of Chinese urban life has focused on the economic, social, spatial, and political dimensions, it has given little attention to how the aff ective elements—emotions, spirituality, and mentality—are transforming. We need to know more about how city dwellers feel and how they attempt to cope with these external changes and distress.

When I spoke to people of different backgrounds in Kunming, I frequently asked them how they would characterize the overall state of being—both of the society and of themselves. The two words that came up most often to describe their aff ective experiences were *fuzao* (impetuous or restless) and *jiaolu* (anxious). Both suggest a strong sense of uncertainty, precariousness, and uneasiness with reality and the future. As Liu Hui, a high school teacher in her thirties, put it,

I feel that everyone is running after something or going somewhere, so I have to catch up too—getting a bigger house, buying a nicer car, getting my child into the best school. There is simply no end and no purpose. But I feel like [I’m] in a sea of people and the waves just keep pushing me to move. I do not have a moment that I can slow down or stop in order to really feel life around me and get in touch with my inner feelings.

This fear of falling behind and the pressure to compete and rush forward can be exhausting emotionally. Several middle-class women in Kunming shared similar senti-
ments and social anxieties with me. As one of them said, “We are now worried about how the new property policies are going to impact our life. We are also worried about our children’s future, since the competition facing them is so severe. They must fight for the best education, yet there is still no guarantee in the job market.”

Like these women, many other middle-class Chinese feel trapped by and alienated from the world around them, a world that is supposed to be developing and improving materially—more roads, more high-rises, more cars, more housing, more food, more clothing . . . Yet the sense of happiness, security, and contentment they have anticipated does not follow. Instead, they are troubled by a sense of confusion, emptiness, and uncertainty, despite living a materially comfortable life (Liu 2002; Zhang 2011). One day I ran into a young professor of economics at a local university. She put the dilemma of the Chinese middle class this way: “We seem to have everything now, but actually something important is missing. We are living in a society that lacks justice, safety, and fairness. Just look around: the environment is deteriorating, food safety is questionable, health care is unaffordable. . . . How can one be truly happy?” In short, this anxious and precarious urban environment gives rise to the desire to search for personal happiness and well-being. To gain a sense of control, some people also resort to fortune-telling and the feng shui practice of ensuring good luck by getting auspicious numbers (for their phones, car license plates, wedding dates, etc.), identifying lucky house locations, and making sure that their domestic arrangements will bring blessings and happiness. But these efforts tend to generate only a fleeting sense of luck and protection instead of a long-lasting sense of joy and security. Others also seek temporary happiness in the countryside by leaving the crowded and stressful urban living environment and getting in touch with nature.7

“A SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS”

What is distinct about the current trend of cultivating happiness is its claim on science via modern psychology and its simultaneous openness to incorporating the wisdom of spirituality. On closer examination, it is not difficult to see that much of the language and the logic of the happiness quest is directly imported from certain therapeutic strands based in North America and modified to fit Chinese society. Here I trace three important therapeutic threads and the connections among them: positive psychology, Buddhist psychology, and a recent neuroscientific study on the effect of meditation on the mind and the body. I also examine the role of what I call cultural and therapeutic brokers, who play a critical role in the global circuits of healing knowledge and practice. It is important to note that while my inquiry largely focuses on Buddhist (and to some degree Daoist) elements among other indigenous cultural influences on psychotherapeutics, I by no means claim that these are the only significant forces in shaping the happiness and well-being craze in contemporary China. Indeed, as other scholars have shown, Daoism, Tai Chi, qigong, and yoga, among other practices, have also been quite popular in the quest for personal well-being among the Chinese (Chen 2003; Palmer 2007).
One of the key figures in spreading “the science of happiness” to China is Kaiping Peng, a professor at the University of California–Berkeley and the founder of the Berkeley-Tsinghua Program for Advanced Study in Psychology. Having grown up in China and later trained in the United States, he is in an ideal position to translate psychology between the West and the East and is widely regarded in China as an authority on the science of happiness. In a recent interview he declared, “We want to switch the focus in China from the gross domestic product to happiness, from the culture of competition to the common good. We are seeking to correct that imbalance by spreading the science of happiness in China” (Bruce 2010). He is confident that positive psychology can provide much-needed answers to social problems facing Chinese society in transition. He also believes that it is much easier for Chinese people to embrace positive psychology than Freudian theory because the former emphasizes the constructive potential and optimism in humanity and shuns the dark aspects and the heavy sexual overtones of the latter. Further, the Chinese government welcomes positive psychology because it meshes well with the official notion of building a harmonious society. As a public intellectual, Peng has been a frequent guest on prominent Chinese television talk shows and has been interviewed by major Chinese newspapers. He argues that raising popular awareness of psychological well-being and finding reliable methods to achieve positive emotions are pressing issues, since Chinese society has become too materialistic, too utilitarian, and spiritually unfit.

So how and why is positive psychology spreading so quickly in the world today? Dissatisfied with the dominant trend in psychology and psychiatry that focuses on pathology and what is wrong in people, as exemplified by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), proponents of positive psychology state that its aim “is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 5). The critical task is thus to explore what enables well-being and how to nurture the strengths and optimism that lead to resilient individuals and communities (Seligman 1991). Positive psychology claims that it can teach and instill traits such as courage, wisdom, spirituality, perseverance, self-determination, optimism, and gratitude.

What fascinates me here is the rising passion among some psychologists for importing positive psychology into developing countries like China, India, and Vietnam. For the reasons I have discussed, this shift from the language of mental illness and suffering to a focus on well-being and flourishing seems particularly alluring to the emerging Chinese middle class, which is grappling with profound societal changes. Positive psychology is often treated as the scientific basis of the new happiness craze, although it is unclear what exactly constitutes its scientific foundation beneath the “modern” and “Western” aura.

By now, positive psychology has been widely applied to different social settings across the globe, in the hopes of producing optimistic children, happier workers, and resilient soldiers. Martin Seligman has further declared that positive psychology is not just about happiness or feeling good but is more about well-being, which encompasses a deeper sense
of fulfillment and purposefulness (1991). With this new attention to meaning, a therapeutic approach seems no longer adequate; a spiritual dimension is also called into play.

**MINDFULNESS, MEDITATION, AND SPIRITUALITY**

Besides positive psychology, another major current in the pursuit of happiness is what some have called Buddhist psychology, which seeks to blend the notion of science with the wisdom of Buddhist teachings. A central figure embodying this fusion approach is Jack Kornfield, a renowned meditation teacher and prolific author based at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Northern California. He trained as a Buddhist monk in Thailand, Burma, and India and later obtained a PhD in clinical psychology. In the epigraph of *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology* (2008), he cites the Dalai Lama: “Buddhist teachings are not a religion, they are a science of mind.” Kornfield is very successful at dancing between science and religion. He seeks to secularize religion by bypassing its language in order to retain the power of spirituality and craft “a science of mind” that combines modern psychology, neuroscience, and ancient Buddhist teachings. While fully recognizing Buddhism as a centuries-old religion, Kornfield aspires to demonstrate that it is also a “living psychology” that “makes no distinction between worldly and spiritual problems” and can offer rich insights into the growing dialogue between Eastern and Western psychology (3–5). His books have been translated into Chinese and embraced warmly by readers interested in the new psychology of the heart, not just the mind or brain.10

Another prominent figure who seeks to integrate psychotherapeutic and spiritual approaches to healthy emotions is Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.11 Less imbued with a Western therapeutic language, he articulates the ethos of Zen as a way of life with a language of simplicity and clarity (Kabat-Zinn 1991; 1994). He attempts to articulate what he sees as a core component of Buddhist teachings—mindfulness—without having to carry the baggage of religion. He is one of the pioneer teachers who have successfully secularized the notion of mindfulness. He offers innovative methods to connect the body with the mind and an everyday path for cultivating positive affective experiences and reducing stress, depression, anxiety, and tension. His writing is gradually making its way into East Asia and shaping some therapists’ practice there.

A third person who has made a major contribution to combining neuroscience with Zen Buddhism is a Japanese psychiatrist, Tomio Hirai. He believes that the goal of psychotherapy coincides with that of Zen Buddhism—namely, to achieve a tranquil state of mind and be free of suffering—and that by attaining the true self through meditation, one can reach this state of being (Hirai 1989). His passion is to validate and demystify the therapeutic effects of intense meditation through what he sees as scientific and positivist methods. His research has involved psychophysiological experiments on
forth-eight Zen priests and their trainees in a Japanese temple. His team used electroen-
cephalograms (EEGs) to record brain waves, respiratory functions, galvanic skin reflexes,
and other physiological phenomena before, during, and after meditation. These studies
show that the slowing of EEG patterns during meditation and an absence of habituation
together indicate specific changes in consciousness. Hirai, who is heavily influenced by
the Zen master D. T. Suzuki, suggests that satori (the state of enlightenment), the ulti-
mate goal of Zen, is an altered state produced through meditation. Yet it is a state not of
disassociation or trance but rather of “relaxed awareness accompanied by constant
responsiveness,” made possible by the so-called storehouse consciousness (Hirai 1989,
101).12 Hirai concludes that Zen meditation proves to have “therapeutic effects on the
human mind and mental fitness” (157).

With new advanced technologies, many scientists continue to research the effects of
intensive meditation on mind and body. One noteworthy attempt is the Shamatha Project
led by Dr. Clifford Saron, a neuroscientist at the University of California–Davis. His team
has found that intensive meditation helps sustain attention, regulate emotions, and
improve psychological well-being and health-related biomarkers.13

The above efforts reveal a trend of using scientific research to validate meditation and
other spiritual experiences.14 There is an implicit attempt to bring certain practices out
of the religious domain and into the broader popular spiritual sphere. In this approach,
science has assumed a dominant role by secularizing religious practices and demonstrat-
ing their therapeutic effects. But can we fully explain the power of meditation, mindful-
ness, and other Buddhist practices through science alone? Kornfield and Kabat-Zinn
represent a fusion effort that takes spirituality seriously by recognizing its vital role in
healing and well-being without subjugating it to the judgment of science. Their goal is
not to test or validate spiritual practices through the notion of science but to broaden and
strengthen the path to well-being and to invite us to reflect on the hegemonic Western
claim on health in the name of science.

This everyday approach based on self-cultivation and mind work couples well with the
eff ort to indigenize psychotherapy in East Asia.15 In Japan, a culturally specific therapy,
Naikan, has been successful in combining secularized religious practices with cognitive
psychotherapy. As Ozawa-de Silva’s study shows, the cultivation of love and compassion
is central to this therapy, which has deep roots in Buddhism (2010). Its goal is to address
suffering on an existential (rather than medical) level, by “facilitating a transformation
in subjectivity, that is, a change in the manner in which the subject experiences his or
her existential circumstances” (159). Next I discuss how some Chinese practitioners and
the Chinese public have taken up the spirit of such fusion approaches.

BRIDGING THE SPIRITUAL AND THE THERAPEUTIC

Lin Liuchen, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a private counseling center in
Beijing, observed that four of the therapists there engaged in some kind of religious or
spiritually oriented activities, such as hand-copying Buddhist texts, taking annual pilgrimages to the sacred Putuo Mountain, or participating in fortune-telling by using Tarot cards or reading the *I Ching* (2012, 130–31). During my fieldwork in Kunming, I also noticed that Daoist and Buddhist teachings and practices are permeating the field of psychotherapy and popular psychology in multiple ways, sometimes subtly and sometimes obviously. The Daoist world view and the Buddhist approach to relieving suffering influence many therapists to varying degrees, even those who do not necessarily identify as Buddhist or Daoist.

More than ten years ago, a team of Chinese psychiatrists and other mental health workers got together to develop what they called “Chinese Taoist cognitive psychotherapy,” a distinct approach that seeks to “blend empirically validated forms of psychotherapies, especially cognitive therapy, with aspects of Chinese culture that may be therapeutically useful” (Zhang et al. 2002, 116). A total of 143 patients diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) from four mental health centers participated in the resulting study. While this approach proposes to borrow Daoist values (such as following natural laws and letting go of excessive control) to help patients regulate their affect and cope with reality, the study is carefully couched in scientific language and method.

In Chinese bookstores today, it is not difficult to find plenty of books that explore the intersection of religion, therapy, and well-being. For example, *Buddhism and Mental Health* (Shi and Liu 2005), coauthored by a Buddhism scholar and a psychology professor, is a typical one that caters to readers interested in applying Buddhist wisdom to psychological health on a rudimentary level. Another current trend is to spread spirituality and happiness talk through popularized writings by Tibetan lamas. The most noticeable such book is the best seller *Living through Suffering* (2012), by an iconic Tibetan Buddhist figure, Khenpo Sodargye (see Smyer Yu 2013). His writing has been enthusiastically embraced by segments of the Chinese urban middle class, including college students and faculty as well as educated young professionals, who aspire to learn how to lead a happier and more meaningful life in the face of intense competition and a fast pace of living.

The Chinese translation of “psychology” is *xinlixue*, literally “the study of the heart” (or the psyche). Some Buddhism scholars argue that since Buddhist teaching is also about the heart (*xin*) and the religion’s ultimate goal is to relieve human beings of suffering (*ku*), Buddhist thoughts have much to contribute to modern psychology. For this reason, some Chinese college students regard Khenpo Sodargye as *xinling de yisheng* (the doctor of the soul or the heart; Smyer Yu 2013). From this perspective, distress of all kinds (depression, stress, anxiety, anguish, and so on) derives from *xin*, polluted by worldly desires and attachment. Thus, if we can constantly do the work of the heart, tranquility, clarity, and freedom will naturally arise. As one psychotherapist in Kunming explained to me,

*I appropriate everything that is useful in my therapy, including Zen [chanzong]. As ancient folks pointed out, all problems can ultimately be summarized in one word, *ku*. And there are many methods to relieve the *ku*. The approach of Western psychology and psychiatry*
is more technical (drugs, talk therapy, and other therapeutic techniques), but I think it is more important to focus on the understanding of the person, the self, and the affective experiences from a philosophical and spiritual perspective.

Yet even those who hope to integrate religious elements into their practice are careful about how the fusion method is presented and perceived. To understand why, one must not forget the traumatic fate of religion in the Chinese socialist context. As Smyer Yu has argued extensively, religion was largely relegated to the realm of “superstition” under Mao and thus lost public legitimacy in social and political life (2012).16 Even into the reform and opening-up years, which have been marked by various religious revivals, the specter of this troubled history has constantly come back to haunt people. The desire to use science to validate Buddhist practices in the therapeutic regime is in part a reaction to the social marginalization of religion shaped by socialist modernity. Perhaps scientific claims can recast Buddhism in a different light.

EMBODYING FUSION TEACHING

Over the past four years of my fieldwork, I have been closely following Cao Jing, a respected psychotherapist in Kunming. I have had extensive conservations with him and have participated in several workshops that he has led on sandplay therapy, hypnosis, and art therapy. He is the head of a counseling training center that offers specialized workshops for those who have just passed the standardized test and obtained their counseling certificates. He also conducts private counseling sessions. Among all the therapists I have met, Cao impresses me the most, with his remarkable ability to blend elements of Daoism, Buddhism, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), art, and Jungian psychology in his teaching and counseling practice. He deeply believes that it is imperative to develop an indigenized form of therapy, in order to treat mental distress and foster happiness in Chinese society.

Cao is a Kunming native who did many things before becoming a self-made therapist. He was a factory worker for about ten years after graduating from high school. Then, under the parental pressure, he took charge of the family business of selling women’s nightgowns and bras. He felt very confused and unhappy about his future throughout those years. In his spare time, he studied the I Ching, fortune-telling, and TCM and read Daoist and Buddhist texts and classical Chinese literature extensively. “I drifted for years until I accidentally discovered psychology and counseling. I felt as if I had finally found my calling and the path to enlightenment, a state of being that Buddhism calls wu or juewu,” he said. Against his family’s wishes, he gave up the private business and devoted himself to the full-time study of psychological counseling in the late 1990s.

When psychology and counseling entered contemporary China, diverse theoretical schools and therapy techniques were introduced. Chinese psychology learners were exposed to them briefly during their initial training. A few approaches (such as the Satir
family therapy, the Jungian-inspired sandplay therapy, and a modified cognitive behavior therapy) gained traction quickly because they were regarded as more fitting for Chinese social norms, values, and cultural expectations than other approaches (L. Zhang 2014). Cao discovered that Jungian analytical psychology and sandplay therapy were extremely appealing to him, as they allowed him to explore the new realm of Western therapeutics while integrating the wisdoms of Daoism, Buddhism, and traditional Chinese culture. In 2004 he enrolled in an advanced training workshop under the guidance of Professor Shen Heyong, an eminent psychotherapist and the authority on Jungian psychology in China (see Shen and Gao 2004; Shen 2004). Since then, Cao has consistently striven for an integrated therapeutic orientation in his teaching and practice. Several times he told me, “For me, all things should be considered as long as they are useful for treatment. I see profound connections between the spirit of Chinese religion/philosophy and the core of Jungian theory. This is not surprising, because Carl Jung himself was deeply influenced by the writings of the I Ching, Daoism, and Buddhism.”

Elsewhere I have provided a detailed account of what I learned about Cao’s fusion approach from his training workshops, which usually consisted of lectures and interactive counseling practices (L. Zhang 2014). His teaching was a mixture of Jungian analytical psychology, sandplay theory, and his own interpretations that largely relied on writings by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi and stories in Buddhist texts. He frequently used Jung’s notions of archetypes and the collective unconscious to elucidate the rich and deeper meanings of what emerged during his sandplay and art therapy (see Jung 1981). We spent countless hours together analyzing important images in Chinese culture—such as the lotus, the bridge, the fish, the temple, the pine tree, and Guanyin—by joining personal affective experiences and collective cultural history. Cao focused on how to cultivate a healthy heart by working on deep and true emotional connectivity (qinggan lianjie). For him, the root cause of all psychological problems is the broken connections of emotions, which lead to the formation of a “knot of the soul” (xin jie). For example, during a long therapeutic process that involved sandplay, hypnosis therapy, and poetry communications, Cao traced the emotional disturbance of the client (a middle-aged female intellectual) to her emotional disconnect from her father. The spirit of Buddhist wisdom permeated their poetic writing. Fu (Buddha) and Guanyin (a female bodhisattva) appeared frequently as key symbols that transformed and enlightened their souls. As Cao reflected, “The true power of salvation is intrinsically compatible with the nature of psychotherapy.” He acknowledged that this therapeutic encounter was very healing for both of them and contained certain powerful yet mysterious experiential elements that psychotherapy simply cannot replace. In sum, Cao’s teaching accentuates the notion of whole well-being and emotional connectivity. He recognizes no boundaries between philosophy, religion, art, and psychology—past or present, Chinese or Western.

In addition, he often relied on traditional Chinese medicine theory on the intrinsic relationship between the heart and the qi (known as xinping qihe) to illuminate how to adjust one’s mind-set to reach a state free of anxiety and suffering, which is also the goal
of modern psychology. We practiced the manipulation of qi to regulate emotions during workshops and were encouraged to integrate it into our everyday living.

**MEDITATING FOR SUCCESS AND HAPPINESS**

Like Cao Jing, Ling Guang takes a blending approach to his practice, but in a more subtle way. His expertise is training local employees of enterprises to foster a positive outlook on work and thus cultivate a sense of happiness in life. Every year he and a team of four to five psychotherapists hold a series of workshops, which are well funded by a few large state firms in Yunnan Province, at some fancy resorts. The most popular theme is how to generate *zhichang xingfu* (workplace happiness). *Zhichang* is a depoliticized term that has appeared over the past fifteen years or so. It does not refer to the personal or familial realm yet is closely tied to one's sense of fulfillment and success. Linking *zhichang* to the notion of happiness is also novel in the Chinese cultural context because work under socialism was regarded as part of the larger revolutionary project rather than a path to personal happiness (Rofel 1999).

The bulk of Ling's teaching consists of basic ideas in positive psychology and the Satir model of family therapy. He presents it in modern, scientific terms, although he draws specific examples mostly from contemporary Chinese experience. His lectures are largely based on Seligman's positive psychology, with a focus on three specific aspects: how to create positive emotional experiences, how to acquire positive personal traits, and how to foster positive organizational systems. At the workshop I attended, students received a booklet compiled by Ling, with some lecture notes and several tests for measuring emotional state, stress levels, and communication styles. They were also each given a copy of the Chinese translation of Tal Ben-Shahar's wildly popular book *Happier*. Regarded as the Bible of the science of happiness, this book has been endorsed by many Chinese politicians, social scientists, artists, entrepreneurs, and celebrities. Ling introduced the Satir model of therapy to help participants foster positive habitual responses to emotions and improve their communication skills. These abilities were touted as keys to professional success and personal happiness. The aim of Ling's training is to help the clients augment their positive emotional experiences and create positive social relationships.

Each of Ling's workshops lasts for three days and has about thirty participants from a given local enterprise. They are designed to be participatory (*canyu*) and experiential (*tiyan*) and include two short periods of guided meditation, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Participants are told that meditation is highly compatible with positive psychology and the Satir model of therapy, and thus it is the first must-learn lesson. It is presented as an effective way of reducing stress and anxiety, enhancing cognitive capability, and creating a tranquil, joyful personal world. Ling makes it clear to his students that he is not interested in religion per se and that the meditation he teaches is not religious in nature but only for modern therapeutic purposes. As a guru of creating a successful personal life and a positive enterprise culture, he seeks to rescue meditation from
the religious domain and endow it with a scientific aura. Visual imagination and positive associations for physical and mental relaxation inspired many of the breathing techniques used in the meditation. The stated goal is practical and secular without the intent of calling for a deeper spiritual exploration. Yet given the speed and stress of contemporary Chinese urban life, such meditation practices are refreshing and appealing for many participants. As one young woman explained during the break at a workshop, “This is starkly different from the past dull political thought education I have attended at my firm. Rather than being lectured by a cadre, I get to do something with a counseling expert that actually benefits my own body and mind. I can almost immediately feel a positive energy flowing through my body.”

A man in his thirties said that meditation helped improve his ability to focus and memorize and thus work more efficiently. What attracted him most was not the potential spiritual healing that meditation promises but the benefits of living a more competitive and successful life with the aid of meditation and psychological tools of self-improvement. In this fashion, meditation is increasingly incorporated into postsocialist everyday urban life for therapeutic and nontherapeutic purposes. In fact, practicing meditation has become a new middle-class marker for some young Chinese urban professionals who aspire to enhance their quality of life through various forms of self-care (Farquhar and Zhang 2011). Today, although the notion of inner spiritual life has lost its appeal for many urban Chinese, some people still find it powerful in transforming their lives, while others find it promising when it can yield practical gains in a hypermaterialist world.

**CONCLUSION**

The recent proliferation of *xingfu* talks and projects is inseparable from the emerging postsocialist urban aspirations for personal success and well-being in China’s increasingly anxious society. It is also rooted partly in urban professionals’ pursuit of a new kind of self that is not only successful but also capable of managing its emotional and social life. Although more and more people have realized that success does not necessarily lead to a sense of *xingfu*, the quest for happiness is still largely tied to the ideal of material success. As the chief editor of the Chinese magazine *Psychologies* stated in a special issue (June 2010) on *xingfu*, “Our ultimate goal is to help readers strengthen the twin wings of success and happiness.” To this end, positive psychology, Buddhism, Daoism, and other cultural practices can all be mobilized to cultivate the good life. But what does the good life mean for urban Chinese today—is it simply a mirage? Not many people I spoke to have a clear answer. To achieve this idealized mode of life, both psychotherapeutic and spiritual practices have become particularly useful, because they promise to bring inner transformations to individuals without necessarily changing their social or economic circumstances. Thus, the selling point of therapeutic technologies in this context is not the treatment of illness but the generation of good feelings and a sense of well-being through expert intervention and self-initiatives.
The anthropologist Peter van der Veer has argued that the “appropriation of spiritual traditions to cater for the newly emerging middle classes,” as seen in India and China, is a creative “response to new opportunities and anxieties produced by globalization” (2009, 1117). This insight is helpful in explaining why and how science, religion, and spiritual practices have been appropriated in recent years to shape the new happiness craze across Chinese cities and beyond. It is in the context of China’s unprecedented urban socioeconomic restructuring and cultural change that psychological experts and lifestyle gurus come to capitalize on the spreading anxiety and desires that ruthless market competition and new possibilities create (Yang 2013). Further, my research shows that the happiness project is quite unevenly engaged and has different implications for different people. While some are able to delve deeply in a fusion approach and acquire an authentic experience of transformation and well-being, in many other cases I observed, people had highly commercialized spiritual practices for practical purposes or frequently invoked the notion of science but without vigorous engagement. In other words, the many versions of xìngfú I have observed are far from the vision of well-being originally articulated by positive psychology or Buddhist psychology. Rather, they are oriented toward fostering a sense of feeling good and lack further searching for meaning or self-empowerment in order to cultivate a long-lasting sense of well-being.

In the broader sociopolitical context, it is not surprising that the Chinese state welcomes this particular psychological approach to a “happy” self, for two reasons. First, it sees this as less threatening to the status quo than what therapeutic approaches that are oriented toward addressing victimization and empowerment might generate. Second, the happiness craze has a strong element of individualization and is unlikely to turn into an organized mass movement. These largely individual-oriented practices are thus seen as not political and do not appear threatening to the established social order.

I am troubled by my observation that few Chinese urbanites today have expressed serious concerns about whether these diverse cultural traditions and therapeutic orientations are compatible with one another, or whether they will eventually lead to the good life or enhance the crafting of a new self. It seems that in a postsocialist world marked by a large number of eclectic ideologies and practices, anything goes, as long as it promises a path to an imagined happier, successful life. Yet one cannot easily dismiss the power of this promissory lure of the psychological and spiritual approach, because it produces tangible effects in shaping people’s life experience.

NOTES

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benefited greatly from engaging discussions with the faculty and students at the Murphy Institute at Tulane University.

1. Jie Yang’s recent research shows that underprivileged people in China also are called to pursue happiness by engaging in psychological self-help to unlock their positive potential (2013).

2. This chapter uses the terms happiness and well-being interchangeably because the Chinese translation of “well-being” (xingfu gan) is almost identical with that of “happiness” (xingfu). Well-being, however, conveys a sense of health in addition to a sense of feeling good.

3. Compare Foucault’s study of the proliferation of discourses on sexuality and the rise of psychomedical disciplines in French history as positive mechanisms that produced knowledge, generated power, and constituted new subjects for regulation (1990).

4. Along with this happiness fever is a related craze for “positive energy,” which appears widely in the personal, interpersonal, and national political spheres (see Du 2014).

5. Horizon is based in Beijing and specializes in conducting large surveys for domestic and international researchers.

6. A few exceptions include Jie Yang’s work (2013) and some recent books such as Deep China (Kleinman et al. 2011) and Chinese Modernity and the Individual Psyche (Kipnis 2012).

7. This form of popular leisure activity is called nongjia le (seeking happiness in the peasant family life) and offers rural landscapes, organic food, and relaxation away from the city.

8. Robert Emmons, a psychology professor at UC Davis and the chief editor of the Journal of Positive Psychology, has been working on the science of gratitude and recently received a grant of $5.6 million from the John Templeton Foundation to study how to cultivate gratitude to improve human life.

9. Martin Seligman has been invited as an expert to speak to the United States military, teaching soldiers how to resist torture, evade interrogation, handle trauma, and endure battlefield stress (Greenberg 2008).

10. There has also been a global traffic of Buddhist literature into China in recent years. The most influential books on how to live a happy, wise, and enlightened life include the Chinese translations of works by Pema Chodron, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Sogyal Rinpoche.

11. He obtained his PhD in molecular biology from MIT in 1971 and has trained as a Zen Buddhist student with a passion for meditation and yoga.

12. Storehouse consciousness is the eighth and most fundamental of the eight conscious-nesses in the Yogacara school of Buddhism. It is regarded as ripening consciousness or root consciousness with transformative power (T. Jiang 2004).

13. For more information, see http://mindbrain.ucdavis.edu/labs/Saron/meditation-re-search.


15. As Hwang and Chang (2011) have pointed out, self-cultivation practices derived from the traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism have been a core component of indigenized forms of psychotherapy in East Asian societies.

16. Even though Buddhism is one of the five state-recognized religions in China, it does not, in practice, completely escape the shadow of superstition.
There are several terms corresponding to the form of meditation practiced: jingxin, jingzuo, dazuo, and mingxiang. These are quite different from the widespread qigong meditation in the 1990s that Nancy Chen documented (2003).

David DeSteno has noted the irony of using meditation for competitive advantage: “Gaining competitive advantage on exams and increasing creativity in business weren’t of the utmost concern to Buddha and other early meditation teachers” (2013).

See Nikolas Rose’s extensive analysis of the relationship among psychology, power, and the remaking of the self (1990: 1996).

Gareth Fisher’s chapter 16 shows how public religious spaces allow alternative expressions of hopes and fears for the uncertain future in postreform Beijing. Nicholas Harkness’s chapter 18 discusses the connection between spiritual/religious pursuits and rapid urbanization and rising urban anomie in South Korea.

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MEGACHURCHES IN THE MEGACITY

This chapter considers the role of semiotic differentiation, class, and denominationalism in the coterminous and interrelated social phenomena of the rapid postwar urbanization of Seoul and the rapid growth of Protestant Christianity in South Korea. I structure my account in terms of three religiously anchored views of the changing city. I argue that these views of the city manifest as perspectives on other Christians—or, in a sense, “Christian others,” those who claim one’s own Christian faith but appear alien or antithetical to it. Specifically, I link these views to worship styles that invoke, for Protestant Christians, other kinds of Protestant practices and churches in the city. Alongside the introduction of millions of strangers to a growing urban population, the expansion of Seoul following the Korean War (1950–53) meant the introduction of Christian strangeness to what was a fairly small population of Protestant Christians residing there before the war. I show how the preaching and prayer of other Christians are understood to map on to specific times and places in the expanding city. My argument concerns not the forms of worship themselves but rather the way they are taken up as signs of urban difference.

The story of South Korea’s transformation from one of the poorest countries in the world into one of the richest in just a few decades is well documented, but it is important to rehearse some basic facts. In 1960, the annual GDP per capita was $155; by 1990, it was $6,153; in 2012, it was $22,590. In 1960, South Korea was 28 percent urban; in 1990, nearly 75 percent. Between those years, the population grew from twenty-five
million to nearly forty-four million (a 74 percent increase), and the urban population more than quadrupled, rising from seven million to just over thirty-two million. In 2012, approximately 83.5 percent of the country lived in urban areas. Currently, more than half of the population of approximately fifty million lives in or around Seoul. The common term in Korean studies for this rapid transformation of politics, economy, and society is “compressed modernity.”

During this major transformation of town and country, city and state, one of the most striking developments was the growth and persistence of Protestant Christianity, specifically the now ubiquitous spectacle of the megachurch. In 1960, Protestant Christians are estimated to have accounted for somewhere between 3 and 5 percent of South Korea’s population; by the late 1990s, approximately 20 percent of the population reported themselves to be Protestants. Some generous estimates set the growth rate of Protestant Christian church members from 1960 to 1970 at more than 400 percent, jumping from around 625,000 to around 3.2 million in just a decade. These days, it is regularly reported that many of the largest Protestant congregations in the world are in Seoul and that more than twenty thousand South Koreans are serving as missionaries abroad.

Scholars have marveled at the growth of South Korean Protestant churches and have sought various means to explain it. They point to the missionary establishment of the first Western medical and educational institutions; to the role of Christians in the Korean nationalist movements during Japanese colonial rule; to Korean Christians’ fierce anti-communism; to the needs of populations thrust into modernity by economic transformation and industrialization; to specific missionary models, such as the Nevius system; to South Korea’s domestic evangelical campaigns; to inherent cultural tendencies toward spirituality; and to urban anomie combined with congregational loyalty within a general culture of neotribalism. Whatever the intersecting sociocultural, political, or psychological influences on the expansion of this particular line of faith, the story of Protestant Christianity in Seoul is inseparable from the postwar migration of South Koreans en masse to the city. Despite the presence of Protestant Christianity throughout the country half a century prior to the Korean War, the current face of South Korean Protestant Christianity in the form of massive evangelical congregations is a thoroughly urban phenomenon that emerged as we know it during the second half of the twentieth century.

Starting with the overlap of the expansion of Seoul and the growth of Protestant Christianity, I consider three churches and the dissonances of worship style among them as a means of illuminating different perspectives on Seoul’s urbanization. The differences among these churches, which I will introduce shortly, are, of course, linked to obvious denominational, congregational, and class differences. Such differences are ubiquitous throughout the world, where all sorts of socioeconomic differences, sometimes framed in terms of class or ethnicity, may be linked to religious differences. While such differences are interesting in and of themselves, what I want to show here is that active differentiation of worship style by congregants is linked to the emergence of new religious institutions in particular times and places in the postwar urban migration to Seoul. For
many of my informants, different forms of Christian worship have served as powerful signs of Christian others, locatable in the rapidly changing urban environment.

The churches that I consider are Yŏndong Church, established by Western Presbyterian missionaries within the city walls in 1900; the Yoido Full Gospel Church, established by Pentecostal seminary graduates in a shantytown tent in 1958; and Somang Presbyterian Church, established by Christian intellectuals in the newly developed Kangnam area of Seoul in 1977. All three are active presently, yet all three point to different spiritual and social orientations that have captivated large portions of the city at particular points in urbanizing time and space.

More than mere rings in a metaphorical tree trunk of the metropolis, these churches and their members provide an active view—a moral judgment—of the others. That is, they do not just mark points in time and space but also view one point from the perspective of another. They are narrative landmarks in the chronotope of the city. Within this synchronic variation in Seoul, we find an ideology of urban diachrony. In my account, it is the sound of worship—specifically preaching and praying—that serves as a powerful index of temporalized and spatialized urban Christian otherness.

URBAN EXPANSION AND SIGNS OF DIFFERENCE

Mr. Ahn witnessed early signs of Seoul’s rapid urbanization through the alien sounds of preaching and prayer. Born in 1955, he grew up in the rawness of South Korea after the Korean War. His family belonged to the small population of Protestant Christians who attended one of the churches (mostly Presbyterian or Methodist) established by missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1910, only 1 percent of the Korean population was Protestant Christian; this number grew to more than 3 percent by 1945 but remained around that level throughout the 1950s. Ahn’s family was Presbyterian and attended Yŏndong Church, whose founding pastor was a Canadian named James Scarth Gale (served 1900–1927). Yŏndong had been established within the old city walls, near the great east gate (Tongdaemun). Gale was prominent in the intellectual and religious life of early Korean Christians. He was the first president of the Korean Young Men’s Christian Association, founded the monthly Korea Magazine, founded the Korean Music Society, and wrote numerous books, including a Korean-English dictionary, a Korean translation of the New and Old Testaments, and a History of the Korean People. This intellectual legacy shaped Ahn’s experience with Protestant Christianity in Korea.

As a young man, Ahn attended special sermons by pastors from around the city who were invited to preach at different churches by a few wealthy Christian high schools around Seoul. These events were usually calm and quiet, the preaching reserved and erudite, and the audience attentive and composed. Ahn recalled attending one of these sermons at Saemunan Presbyterian Church in 1969 or 1970 (he could not quite remember which). He was in his third year at Kyŏnggi Junior High School, the oldest modern secondary school in Korea, which opened in 1900. Saemunan is the oldest Protestant
church in Korea, established by the missionary Horace Grant Underwood in 1887. Like Gale, Underwood was a teacher and a scholar in addition to being a missionary. He helped translate the Bible into Korean, was the first president of Yonsei University (then called Chosŏn Christian College), established the YMCA with Gale, and wrote a number of books.

As a young, elite Christian at the oldest Protestant church in Korea, Ahn looked around him and saw that the usual number of students had doubled. Many of the new students who had crowded the pews seemed different from him—neither their faces nor their demeanor were familiar. And when the pastor began to speak, Ahn heard something he had never before heard from a pastor—a sort of rough, hissing sound in the man’s speech. The preacher raised his voice and called out passionately to the audience. The new members of the audience called back, praying together loudly. Ahn looked around at the new faces and saw veins nearly bursting from their temples and cheeks wet with tears.

When recounting this story to me in a relaxed, informal social setting in 2013, Ahn contorted his face and reproduced the rough, hissing sounds that he had heard. “Sh-sh-sh,” he quoted breathily. This sound, a voiceless postalveolar sibilant fricative ʃ, which was the result of palatalization in the pastor’s speech, was one of the things he remembered most clearly about the event and one of the things that gave him a feeling of forceful repulsion. This was not the sound of the Christianity he knew. It was the sound of David Yonggi Cho, the founder and former head pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which now claims to be the largest Protestant church in the world.

In the 1950s, Ahn became familiar with churches in Seoul that had been established by defectors from the North, where Pyongyang had earlier been known as the Jerusalem of the East for its large Christian population. He explained that although these new postwar churches (e.g., Yŏngnak Church) were clearly marked as “refugee churches,” they still were acceptable to the established Christian Seoulites, in large part because they represented a Korean Christian tradition that, despite the splintering of the Presbyterian Church into multiple factions, many Seoulites saw as continuous with their own. But the sound that Ahn heard at Saemunan Church as a junior high school student was something completely unfamiliar to him. To him, the “sh-sh-sh” was the sound of the chŏnmin: the caste at the bottom of the social hierarchy of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), which included slaves, actors, shamans, and kisaeng (female entertainers and courtesans). For Ahn, the sound of Cho’s preaching was a sign of difference, a shibboleth of stigmatization in a rapidly changing urban environment. It was a negative sign of the postwar masses entering the city walls.16

When Ahn encountered the “sh-sh-sh” of Cho’s speech as an early sign of Korean Pentecostalism, Protestant Christians accounted for only around 6 percent of South Korea’s population but were poised to swell dramatically over the next two decades.17 By 2005, when I began conducting ethnographic research in Seoul on the role of the human voice in Korean Protestant Christianity, this percentage had nearly quadrupled. This
proportional increase was due in part to the growth of megachurches like Cho’s. By this
time, Korean Pentecostalism had become a known presence in Seoul—if still somewhat
strange and other to the more orthodox Presbyterians whom I knew.

Another sound I commonly heard in Korean speech captured some of this persistent
otherness—a sound that many speakers took to be a powerful demographic shibboleth.
I eventually called it the fricative voice gesture (FVG). As I have shown elsewhere, the
FVG serves for many younger, educated Koreans as a sign of otherness that is still inher-
etly Korean. When I asked people some basic questions about this sound—who made
it, in what contexts, when speaking with whom—they often gave normative accounts of
its speakers. They said that it usually was made by older, working-class men (and some-
times older women), especially if these men were drinking. Of course, I heard this sound
produced by many more kinds of speakers and in many more contexts than those listed
above—women and men, rich and poor, sober and drunk, young and old—but it was
quite telling how my interlocutors stereotyped the relationship between the sound and
its producers. Initial responses about the FVG often simply pointed to class, age, and
gender differences between the wealthy, educated, younger speakers I spoke to and those
beneath their social stratum—such as older speakers who lived on as an example of the
hypermasculinity of South Korea’s militarized past—in whose speech and behavior they
perceived roughness and coarseness. But it also became clear that the FVG could serve
for younger, wealthier speakers as a shibboleth, in large part because it represented for
them a certain period of South Korean history during which Koreans were poor.

It was telling that these younger, wealthier speakers often gave me instructions on
where in Seoul I could go to hear this sound. They characterized these places as the
prototypical sites where the stereotypical speakers could be found. They mentioned
T’apkol Park, where older men congregate, a sulchip (bar) where they drink, and Seoul’s
large markets—such as Namdaemun and Tongdaemun Sijang—where the narrow path-
ways are bustling with full-throated, working-class vendors. And they often mentioned
loud and raucous churches, especially the Yoido Full Gospel Church, and its founder and
former head pastor, David Yonggi Cho. For these informants, the FVG was a powerful
shibboleth of Christian others, because it fit into a broad, recognizable social register of
speech sounds and behaviors that formed the phonosonic residue of an older, impov-
erished population of Seoul which had arrived from the countryside. For my informants at
the beginning of the twenty-first century, the FVG was a sound of a receding past; for
Ahn, the “sh-sh-sh” was a sound of postwar shantytowns and the future of South Korea’s
Pentecostal explosion.

SOUNDS OF THE SHANTYTOWN

The Yoido Full Gospel Church is often referred to as the largest Protestant congregation
in the world, once boasting more than eight hundred thousand members before a
number of satellite churches became independent. In 1958, after graduating from the
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Full Gospel Seminary, David Yonggi Cho and Jashil Choi (Cho’s future mother-in-law) established the church next to Choi’s house in a slum in Taejodong in the northwest of Seoul. During the first decades of Seoul’s rapid postwar urbanization, shantytowns sprang up throughout the city. As people flocked to the capital, a word emerged to describe and pejoratively evaluate this behavior: mujakchŏng, “without any definite plans.” So widespread were shantytowns that some have estimated that as much as 20 to 30 percent of the South Korean population lived in slums and squatter settlements in the 1960s and 1970s.21 These settlements emerged quickly, but most were eventually destroyed as the city government carried out plans for development and beautification.22 Slums, evictions, and redevelopment are part of the story of South Korea’s rapid transformation. Shantytown memories are memories of this precarious, risky past. And the willful erasure of this past is part of present-day policy-level urban aspiration in Seoul.

The structure of the original church was a tent that the U.S. Military had discarded. The church’s mission and its evangelical message related directly to the conditions of its impoverished congregants—people who represented a large portion of the country’s population. Consider this scene of postwar “devastation when most people despaired in emptiness and frustration,” as one proponent of Full Gospel Theology summarized it:

Cho recognized that residents around his church needed not only spiritual salvation but also material blessings, including food and healing. He boldly proclaimed Pentecostal faith with emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the subsequent signs like speaking in tongues with divine healing and blessings based on his threefold gospel: spiritual blessing, divine healing, and blessing. His message of the holistic salvation of Christ in both spirit and body gave enormous comfort and hope to the poverty stricken people who were suffering under absolute poverty and disease. How he began to preach a fivefold gospel and the threefold blessing was deeply based on his unique contextualization of the gospel in the context of his ministry in 1958. Soon six hundred congregants who were poor, sick, and uneducated gathered in the church in 1960. In 1961, the church membership reached to 1,000 and the regular worship attendants were 600, which was more than the total number of people living in the village. The tent became too small and had to be enlarged.23

Just as South Koreans often narrate their experiences of increased wealth with stories about the expansion of their living quarters (see below), South Korean Christians often narrate their experience of church growth with stories about the expansion and replacement of church buildings to accommodate swelling congregations. The Taejodong congregation grew to such a size that construction on a new church with a fifteen-hundred-seat chapel began in 1961. This church was in a historical area of Seoul named after the old west gate, Sŏdaemun, and opened in 1962 on the site of a revival that had taken place in 1961. According to the church, by 1964 it had three thousand members, and although the building was soon expanded to seat twenty-five hundred, by 1968 the church had to offer three services on Sundays to accommodate its membership of eight thousand.24
The Sŏdaemun church, like Seoul itself, was overcrowded. In 1973, as the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God of Korea, Cho announced to the Pentecostal world that the Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul had reached eighteen thousand members, that it was completing a new building that would seat ten thousand, and that this building would host the Tenth Pentecostal World Conference in September of that year. The new Full Gospel Church building was constructed on the island of Yoido, an empty, sandy strip of land in the Han River that earlier had served as an airstrip for the Japanese colonial government. In that same announcement, Cho predicted that South Korean churches would grow to be the largest churches in Asia within one generation.

The Yoido Full Gospel Church is the prosperity gospel enacted in the context of post-war South Korea: congregational growth, architectural expansion, and movement from North Seoul toward the center of the city and then southward to an island on the Han River. The story of the Yoido Full Gospel Church mirrors with great precision the story of the South Korean population overall, with the urban migration of peasants from the provinces and those made homeless by the war. The urbanization of Seoul begins with absolute, dire poverty and suffering and ends with relative wealth and stability.

Take, for example, a conversation I had in September 2009, when I was staying in an apartment in Seoul owned by a pastor who served at one of the Yoido Full Gospel satellite churches. The apartment, which was in the Yŏnhŭi neighborhood of the Sŏdaemun district, was the earlier residence of the pastor and his family, who now lived in a newer, larger apartment nearby provided by the church. The older apartment is on the top floor of a five-floor apartment building, which the pastor owned. At that time, the family was using the older apartment mostly for storage. I noticed that it contained multiples of nearly everything of which one would normally need fewer: four televisions, three refrigerators, two microwaves, and so on. The pastor’s wife (honorific: Samonim) told me that they were gifts from God. She and her husband received food from the congregants at nearly every church service. Indeed, the three refrigerators were fully stocked.

One evening, after Samonim had sliced a few apples and pears for us to share, she explained to me that Korean Christians were worried about America. She said that America used to be the source of Christian values—after all, it was largely North American Christians who had sacrificed their lives to bring the Gospel to Korea. According to her, the Holy Spirit had led these missionaries to Korea and thereby transformed the country. But now the United States was growing distant from the Holy Spirit, and it was up to Korean Christians to bring the Gospel back to the United States, as they were doing for the rest of the world. South Korea was to be the new Christian leader of the world. And her church, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, was at the center of this effort. The problem was that the United States had grown too comfortable in its prosperity. She worried that South Korea also was growing too comfortable, as exemplified by the numerous churches throughout the city that claimed to be Christian but did not exhibit the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. They were quiet, calm—even scholarly. But when the Holy Spirit was present, she said, there was no way to remain quiet and calm. One had to surrender
to the spirit and pray fervently, with all of one’s heart. Indeed, as pastors at the Yoido Full Gospel Church often preached, one should beware of growing too comfortable, because that is when Satan appears.

Samonim discussed the awful poverty experienced by her parents and grandparents, who had moved to Seoul from the rural south. At that time, she told me, South Korea was “as poor as India.”27 There were homeless people throughout the city, living in the most informal and uncomfortable dwellings. People simply did not have enough to eat. Now that the country was rich, she said, it was South Korea’s time to help, and she mentioned the medical student from India who occupied one of the rooms in her building and whom she enthusiastically was trying to convert. Samonim spoke about the Korean Peninsula as if it were an axis mundi, linking heaven and earth. And at the center of this axis was the church—specifically, for her, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which presents itself as a leader in the evangelicalization of South Korean Christianity and of the development of the nation.

At the Yoido Full Gospel Church, I saw how each service restated the church’s dual role as Christian and urban pioneer. The services began with an animated video narrative projected on a giant screen behind the pulpit, depicting the construction of the new church on Yoido Island in 1973, when there was nothing else there. First there was an empty island, then the Yoido Full Gospel Church (1973), then the National Assembly building (1975), and then the high-rises and office buildings that now cover the island—sometimes referred to as the Manhattan of Seoul. The video depicted the church as leading the development of the city as it urbanized. The kind of prosperity that Samonim had described in her apartment as “gifts of God” was directly linked to this large-scale socio-economic transformation of the country and its visible manifestation in the city of Seoul, especially in the form of the wealthy Korean megachurch as, at first, a specifically urban social formation.

Korean society has often been construed as historically located at a geopolitical periphery—of China, of Japan, and of the United States. Yet since the end of the Korean War, it has come to see itself more and more as a center of things—of manufacturing (e.g., Hyundai), of technology (e.g., Samsung), of the culture industry (e.g., the Korean Wave), and of religion, in the form of Protestant Christianity. Korean Christians like Samonim are well aware that their country was missionized, that the Gospel was brought to Korea, and that the religious practices of Koreans before missionization were definitely not Christian. Samonim was raised Buddhist and converted to Christianity only after meeting her husband. Most Christians whom I spoke with were comfortable with the fact that Christianity had come from somewhere else. They usually said that the Gospel was something that they had received and now it was Korea’s turn to pass it on to others.

But for many other Christians in Seoul, the evangelical style of the Yoido Full Gospel Church is the style of a particular point in the city’s rapid urbanization.28 For those who attend churches more associated with the rise of the middle class, the reserve of their worship style is one of the most emblematic features linking their faith to their
understanding of their country: peaceful, serene, and enlightened. For these members of newer churches, the sounds of Full Gospel worship are linked not only with the impoverished origins of the church and its congregation but also with the purportedly superstitious, even shamanistic tendencies of its theology. For many Korean Christians, the Yoido Full Gospel Church is an example of the dangerous religious syncretism that emerged in South Korea following the war, as the rural flooded the urban, bringing along indigenous, unenlightened, shamanic “folk” practices and superstition. Along with the postwar growth of Christianity, Korea saw the emergence of what Christian traditionalists understand to be heretical cults or sects, which are usually presented as new forms of Protestantism, where the head pastor claims to be an incarnation of the Messiah or at least to have some revelatory access (e.g., the Olive Tree Church or the Unification Church). Some pejoratively characterize these churches as shamanism in a Protestant guise. Others view positively the infusion of “indigenous” elements into the church, as an important localization and contextualization strategy for gaining missiological traction in Korea—even if Cho denies adamantly that there is any shamanic influence over his church.

For the larger Presbyterian churches that have been established since the Full Gospel Church moved to Yoido, and for the smaller Presbyterian congregations that were established before the postwar urban migration to Seoul, the Yoido Full Gospel Church is a dangerous Christian other. It has come to represent a particular point in Seoul’s history, making it both a strange and a familiar presence in the city.

**A NEW CHRISTIAN CENTER AT THE URBAN PERIPHERY**

Members of Somang Presbyterian Church often referred to the Yoido Full Gospel Church as noisy, strange, and scary. When discussing Korean Pentecostal worship with me in 2008, congregants at this church of approximately seventy thousand in the wealthy Kangnam neighborhood of Apkujŏng pointed to the rough, hissing sounds of the preaching and to the full-throated group prayer that seemed to border on, if not enter directly into, glossolalia. In worship services at Somang Church, when Christians prayed together, they often whispered quietly together. At the Yoido Full Gospel Church, by contrast, yelling, chanting, and wailing marked the worship—sounds my informants at Somang Church considered unbecoming to a Christian population that saw itself as advanced, spiritually mature, and cosmopolitan.

Occasionally, however, these congregants were made to confront Christian otherness in their own church. For example, on a choir retreat into the mountains around Seoul that I attended, a junior pastor led the choir in a praise session and encouraged them to jump, shout, pray out loud, and cry while he played the guitar. Many of the older choir members explained to me that this was far different from their experiences with the church, which they attended in part for the quiet, reserved character of its worship style. They participated as best they could but during the breaks would complain that they
would have much rather sat quietly to discuss the Bible. If they had wanted a more ecstatic prayer experience, they would have attended a different church.

Occasionally, members of Somang Church reported experiencing Christian otherness during their own English-language service. This was held on Sunday afternoons and ministered to members of the church who wanted to practice their English. The service was led by an American Baptist from Missouri, who often called on the congregation to respond with a loud “Amen!” after certain cadences in his sermon. His requests usually fell on unresponsive ears. Many of the congregants reported to me that this style of preaching—a kind of rough, confrontational way of speaking—felt like it belonged to a different church, a different form of Christianity. It was something they were uncomfortable hearing, something unbefitting the history and character of Somang Church. That sort of behavior, they said, not only felt strange and unfamiliar within the church walls but also was linked with certain kinds of people and parts of Seoul that reminded them of their country’s developing and urbanizing past.

Just as the Yoido Full Gospel Church is depicted as an urban settler, pioneering the postwar expansion of Seoul beyond the Han River to the island of Yoido, Somang Church is a kind of pioneer of the Kangnam churches that sprouted up in the late 1970s and 1980s in direct relation to the improving South Korean economy and the ongoing expansion of the city. Somang Church, literally the “church of hope,” was founded in 1977 as a prayer group led by Reverend Kwak Sŏn-hŭi in the Hyundai apartments of the upper-class neighborhood of Apkujŏng, south of the Han River. These apartments are famous in Seoul, having been constructed in 1975 as luxury apartments for the middle and upper classes as a part of the Seoul Metropolitan Government’s push to expand the city beyond the Han River and alleviate overcrowding and substandard housing north of the river. Apkujŏng was incorporated into Seoul only in 1963, formerly belonging to the surrounding Kyŏng-gi Province. The Tongho Bridge, which connects northern Seoul to Apkujŏng, was completed only in 1985. Photographs from the late 1970s show farmers in Apkujŏng plowing the land with cows against the backdrop of newly constructed apartment buildings. In 2010, the census reported that Kangnam was the fourth-most-populous district in Seoul, with 527,641 people, and the third largest in area, covering 39.5 square kilometers.

Like other Presbyterian megachurches that minister to the educated middle and upper classes in Seoul (many of them in Kangnam), Somang Church achieved exponential growth during the 1980s and early 1990s. The congregation grew from a small prayer group to nearly forty-five thousand registered members in approximately two decades. In 1987, the main church building, which had been completed in 1982, was expanded from its original size. According to the promotional video The Story of Somang Church, membership was about sixty thousand persons in 2006, but news coverage regarding the church usually estimates its membership as seventy thousand.

Just as the establishment of Somang Church belongs to the matter-of-fact story of how the once-peripheral location of Kangnam became an urban center of Christianity in Seoul, it is also part of an aspirational story of how a once-peripheral South Korea can
become a spiritual center of global Christianity. This narrative of the shift from global periphery to spiritual center is made explicit by the stained-glass window in the main building of Somang Church, which depicts the Korean Peninsula, darkened and enlarged in relation to the rest of the world, at the center of a world map (see Harkness 2014, 63, for an image and full analysis).

Situated at the intersecting narratives of urbanization, Christianization, and ethnonational advancement, South Koreans’ stories of personal prosperity, like those of ever-increasing church congregations and buildings, are often structured by movement through the city to ever-larger living quarters. For example, Su-yŏn, an upper-middle-class informant in her late thirties who directed a choir at Somang Church, described to me how she had grown up in a modest building in an area called Yak-su, a dense, hilly older neighborhood just north of the Han River. She described the memory of living with her family in cramped quarters and of the poor in substandard housing all around her. Her narrative of her family’s class ascent from simple merchants—her father began by importing tropical fruit—to affluent property owners was punctuated by their moves from smaller to larger apartments, much as the story of Somang Church was told through the expansion of the city into Kangnam and through the expansion of the church building as Kangnam expanded. The family began in an apartment of about 285 square feet (8 p’yŏng) and, after numerous moves, ended up in one of about 1,600 square feet (45 p’yŏng) just south of the Han River in the affluent neighborhood of Chŏngdam-dong, to the east of Apkujŏng-dong. Part of their ability to ascend came from lucky investments in the newly built high-rises that replaced the small houses and shacks that surrounded their original neighborhood. As Su-yŏn told this story, she revealed suddenly that she did not know where those who had been evicted from areas zoned for redevelopment and beautification had gone. Certainly they could not have afforded to move into the newly built high-rises, she said. But where had they gone?

This kind of story was common among the more affluent of my informants: clear awareness of their parents’ and grandparents’ firsthand suffering through Japanese colonialism, civil war, and postwar hunger; clear memories of the receding backdrop of poverty as their families managed to hook into South Korea’s economic transformation at the right time and in the right way; poetic structuring of these narratives by pointing out the ever-increasing size of their living quarters (and protein content of their food); and, in the telling of this story, a sudden and sometimes uncomfortable realization that they did not remember what had happened to less affluent others, even other Christians, who also inhabited their memories.

Somang Church draws a fairly strong line between itself and the Yoido Full Gospel Church, not only in terms of denomination and location but also in terms of the causes of its growth. Whereas the Yoido church celebrates its cell strategy, which relies on small prayer groups, often led by women, as a means of recruiting members and growing the church, Somang Church denies having a growth strategy, instead claiming that their mature spiritual interest draws modern intellectuals to it. According to Somang Church
ethnohistory—narrated officially by promotional materials but also confirmed by many of my informants—early congregants appreciated the quiet, reflective atmosphere of its worship as befitting their status as ethnonationally advanced and spiritually mature Christians. Missionary strategy is another point of contrast: whereas the Yoido Full Gospel Church engages in direct missionization and church planting overseas, Somang supports overseas missions but does not aspire to expand by maintaining satellite churches abroad. Its missionary model explicitly outlines an exit strategy, of leaving when the churches that it has helped to support and grow are self-sustaining. In this church of seventy thousand wealthy elites we see a model of South Korea not as a small group of Christians within the old city walls, nor as hungry, impoverished masses crowding a tent after the war, but as an “advanced nation” (sŏnjin’ guk)—a term often repeated by Lee Myung-bak, a former president of the Republic of Korea (in office 2008–13) and an elder at Somang Church.

For many of my informants at Somang Church and other churches like it, the character of the Yoido Full Gospel Church’s worship practices and the theological positions put forth in its sermons and books had the scent of shamanism—and shamanism was associated with the lower class and poverty, with the rural, folk, and superstitious, and with spiritual settings of earlier times. Somang Church makes both a spiritual and an ethnonational break with any traces of such past forms of religious practice. Take, for example, the following statement by the current Somang pastor, Kim Chi-ch’ŏl, which I have translated from Korean:

In the past in our country, the mental and spiritual leadership was too weak to generate motivational power. It was a country of a lot of idol worship. It was a country of ghost-worshiping shamanism. There were countless people who frequented fortune-tellers whenever hardships and difficulties arose. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ penetrated the hearts of our people. Inside them was a spiritual thirst. The Protestant population doubled and the church grew. The churches developed to lead in the promotion of the values of social change in the twentieth century.

For upper-class Christians like those of Somang Church, the association of shamanism with the past, with the lower classes, and with the unenlightened countryside is strong. When I played field recordings of the Wednesday morning “healing worship” service at the Yoido Full Gospel Church for some of my wealthier Presbyterian informants, they quickly condemned what they heard as noisy and even scary. If they did not directly link the sounds of Korean Pentecostalism with shamanism, they still characterized the repetitive chanting as juvenile and immature, invoking a narrative of spiritual maturity structured in relation to a narrative of ethnonational advancement. To their eyes and ears, the differences between their style of worship and that of the Yoido Full Gospel Church was based not only on class and denomination but also on time and space. For them, the rough, loud preaching and ecstatic prayer at the Yoido Full Gospel
Church were signs of a population bound to the ethnonational past, located at a prior point in the development of their country and the expansion of Seoul.

CONCLUSION: THE RINGS OF A RELIGIOUS CITY

For Korean Christians, the growth of Korean Christianity is the growth of the nation. The emergence of South Korea from the ashes of war and its transformation into an economic and spiritual center is, according to them, because of the grace and blessings of God. The stories that these churches tell about themselves are also about the social, economic, and political transformation of their country. But the respective perspectives of ethnonational advancement that the churches put forth are linked not only to their class and denominational positions but also to specific spatiotemporal points in South Korea’s ascendance that are hooked into the urban expansion of Seoul. These churches represent different points in time, different locations, and different perspectives on the urban aspirations of their members.

I began my discussion with the way certain sounds of preaching and praying that one group of Christians associated with another group of Christians were situated in a history of urbanization and the growth of Protestant churches in Seoul. The sounds and sights associated with the Christian practices of one group exhibit, for another group, the qualities of Christian otherness in the urban environment. That Christians are able to recognize, report on, and even mimic the seemingly odd or different behaviors of other Christians is, of course, no surprise. But such practices of semiotic reportage are ethnographically telling, in the way that certain groups, organized around and institutionalized in terms of an explicit faith, can map and sequence forms of Christianity in terms of the time-space of their city.

Western missionaries established a number of early Protestant congregations before Japan annexed Korea in 1910. Predating the evangelical boom of the megachurches in Seoul, during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, these early churches, such as Yŏndong and Saemunan, entered a religious space and an urban environment far different from those of postwar churches like Yoido Full Gospel and Somang. The former churches were established in the center of the city, within the city walls, north of the Han River, when both Yoido Island and Kangnam consisted of sandy flats and muddy farmland. Ahn belonged to one of these churches and was astonished when he encountered the first signs of the Korean Pentecostalism that would quickly become one of the most striking and well-known examples of Christianity in his country. A Pentecostal pastor’s wife, Samonim, for her part, saw her faith and her church as directly in sync with God’s plans for her country. The Holy Spirit was at work in her and Christians like her, and it could be sensed and seen in the powerful preaching and fervent praying of the worship she knew best. In the whispers of the newer, Kangnam Presbyterians, Samonim heard signs of a creeping coldness and complacency that troubled her, for it signaled her country’s growing distance from the Holy Spirit. And these whispering Kangnam Presbyterians,
like Su-yŏn, heard Samonim’s Pentecostalism as a sign of the suffering past, when Seoul
was chaotic and filthy, the people were poor, and the country’s stability and safety were
constantly under threat. Su-yŏn and Christians like her viewed their church as forming
a new Christian center of Seoul in what was once the city’s periphery, just as the advanced
nation of Korea, once perceived as peripheral to global affairs (even if the “forgotten”
Korean War formed a center of global conflict), was emerging as a new spiritual center
of world Christianity. Each perspective sits at the intersection of the expansion of
Seoul and the growth of Protestant Christianity at particular points in time and space.
And from these points, each perspective views the religious landscape of the urban
environment in terms of a self-anchoring narrative of advancement. Through semiotic
differentiation, these Korean Christians locate other Korean Christians as external
Christian others in an interlaminated story of personal, urban, and ethnonational
aspiration.

NOTES
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Research Council or the John Templeton Foundation.
1. For more detailed studies of the semiotics of Korean Christian worship practice, see
Harkness 2010; 2011; 2014. For accounts of the link between semiotic and social differentia-
tion, see Irvine 1982; Irvine 2001; Irvine and Gal 2000; on the semiotics of religious difference,
see Keane 2007.
reports/tableview.aspx#.
reports/tableview.aspx#.
7. Jung (2012, 13) notes that there was an increase in the number of Korean religious ad-
erents at this time.
adherents by the late 1960s.
10. Center for the Study of Global Christianity 2013, 76. See Han 2009 for a critical discus-
sion of these estimates.
11. For accounts of Christianity’s appeal in Korea, see Conn 1966; K.-O. Kim 1990; K.-O.
Kim 1993; K.-O. Kim 1998; Baker 2006; Grayson 2006; W. Kim 2006; T. S. Lee 2006; T. S.
Lee 2010.
13. Bakhtin’s (1981, 84–248) notion of the chronotope, denoting “the intrinsic connectedness of the temporal and spatial relationships in literature” (84), is helpful for the ethnographic analysis of narrative formulations of social life (e.g., the expansion of a city over time) that are invoked by or made explicit in the narrated social biographies of individuals and groups (Agha 2007; Harkness 2014).
16. Ahn and other Korean Christians later explained to me a commonly held theory that Cho had developed his characteristic style of palatalization by appropriating the phonology of English-speaking missionaries who preached in Korean with markedly foreign accents.
26. See T. S. Lee 2010, 111–12, for a similar statement made by a Korean preacher during the 1988 Crusade, which took place in the same year that South Korea hosted the Summer Olympics.
27. See Han, forthcoming, on the way that Korean missionaries characterize the targets of their missions as resembling their own country’s past.
28. For an important example of fervent prayer and glossolalia predating the urban expansion of Seoul, see T. S. Lee 2010, 15–23, on the Pyongyang Great Revival of 1907.
30. See Kendall 2009 on the labeling of shamanism as superstition in South Korea. See van der Veer 2013 for comparative ethnographic examples from Mumbai and Singapore that counter the notion that cities are necessarily sites of secularization.
32. For an ethnographic example of the leakiness of these categories in practice, see Kim Harvey 1987.
37. Osmer 2005, 68.
38. Such as in S. Lee 2008.
39. The current head pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, Lee Younghoon, was the head pastor at its satellite church in Los Angeles until he was made head pastor at Yoido in 2008. On January 1, 2010, the Yoido church released twenty satellite congregations, reducing the size of its congregation (www.charismamag.com/site-archives/570-news/featured-news/12072-pruning-the-worlds-largest-church, accessed November 1, 2013).
40. See Harkness 2014, 55, for a discussion of the context of this sermon and the original Korean. Reverend Kim, a professor of theology, was made a joint head pastor in 2002 and became the head pastor in 2003 when Reverend Kwak retired.

REFERENCES


At 8:30 p.m. on October 5, 2012, sitting in a currency exchange shop, I opened the New York Times website to read the latest news. The United States’ latest unemployment figure was the front-page headline. The data released by the U.S. government showed that in September 2012, the U.S. unemployment rate fell from 8.10 to 7.8 percent, with 114,000 jobs added to the economy. The figures came out just after the first U.S. presidential debate of that election season, in which Barack Obama had fared poorly against the Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney. I told the owner of the money-changing shop, whom I refer to with the pseudonym Aamir, about the report that had just been released, showing some positive signs in the U.S. economy. We both realized that this meant the U.S. dollar would get stronger against other currencies. Aamir asked me if this was authentic news. I replied that the U.S. government had released the report, so it must surely have authenticity. The next day as I arrived at his shop, Aamir told me that he was just thinking about what I had said about the dollar. He seemed tense as he tried to decide whether he should sell euros and pounds immediately, as they were showing signs of weakness against the dollar, or if he should wait for a day or two. Later in the day, he decided to sell his euros and pounds to secure a profit before their value dropped further. He called his partner in Dubai, where Aamir had invested the money, and told him to sell the euros and pounds. The term Aamir uses for selling currency is the Urdu katai, literally “cutting,” the same word a farmer would use to describe harvesting his crop. For Aamir, the crop was ripe for katai, and it was time to harvest his profits. He did not want to take the risk of waiting for higher rates, because he did “not want to be a
laalchi [greedy person].” So, as ordered, the dealer in Dubai sold Aamir’s currency and delivered the profit in Pakistani rupees in Karachi.

This mundane instance reveals a key tension in the life of a merchant like Aamir, who struggles every moment to reconcile his desire for financial success, which he believes is driven by greed, with obtaining satisfaction in same-day spot trading. As a spot trader, Aamir strives to be in the moment, dealing largely in cash, having a tactile and bodily experience of the currency trade, and relying less on credit and borrowing. Spot trading offers him a sense of control over financial activities that can spiral rapidly into tense speculations, given the imaginary nature of financial markets. Spot trading also offers Aamir an experiential ground for executing transactions that are future oriented. However, his volume of futures trading is very low compared to that of his spot trading. In contrast to the practices of conventional futures trading, Aamir does not speculate on currency that he does not own. First he buys foreign currency as material cash and then waits for its value to rise before selling it in the market. Yet his interaction with the currency forecast, as shown above, seems to depend largely on his state of being, influenced by a moral discourse on greed, rather than speculations about the direction of the market. Aamir does not risk his sense of satisfaction for extra profit; hence, his transactions do not fully fall in the futures trade.

This chapter explains Aamir’s temporal sensibility and the way it shapes his financial practices. It demonstrates how traders shape their subjectivity to determine their spot and futures trading. The shaping of subjectivity depends on cultural milieu. However, there are instances when people consciously cultivate their subjectivity in order to determine its course. In Aamir’s case, this effortful shaping is done through spiritual exercises taught by a Sufi master, Baba Jamil, who has transformed the way Aamir see himself and his relationship with money. I argue that Aamir’s trading practices are fused with the spiritual exercise of zikr (remembrance of oneself; also spelled dhikr), which he has been practicing every night for the past fifteen years. One significant aspect of the meditation is keeping an awareness of one’s subjectivity in the present. Focusing on the breathing facilitates this. Aamir and Baba Jamil believe that the more one pays attention to one’s breathing, the more one’s subjectivity aspires to come to rest and peace in the now. Living in the present, by orienting the attention to breathing/aspiring, inside the future-oriented currency market, in which traders aspire and hope for profit (Miyazaki 2006), becomes an ambivalent exercise.

The generally accepted definition of aspiration involves an orientation to the future, driven by “wants, preferences, choices, and calculations” (Appadurai 2004, 67). Arjun Appadurai notes that the “capacity to aspire” depends on how much capability to achieve economic development and progress a given culture offers its individuals and communities (64). Poor people living in urban slums have been granted significantly less capacity to aspire to material and economic success or to a better life than have materially rich classes. Thus, for Appadurai, the capacity to aspire is a “navigational capacity” that a culture offers a particular community to strive for a better life (69). Indeed, one can see similar motivations in many urban and rural areas where people inspired by global consumer culture are leaving their traditional and customary ways behind to adopt a modern
lifestyle. In Appadurai’s conceptualization of aspiration, then, we see material progress as the underlying idea. This means viewing aspiration as a progression of capitalist development. Every culture, however, offers different amounts of capacity to its people. In fact, for some the idea of aspiration is contested, and they disagree with the given definition involving the amassing of material goods and a future-oriented way of being.

Aspirational theory is grounded in a model of “the good life” based on the incessant pursuit or imagination of the attainment of material wealth and success. Aspiration as striving to follow cosmopolitan trends, access global consumer brands, and lead a technoscientific lifestyle has been the conventional way of understanding the ambition of the low-income populations largely concentrated in urban spaces of the postcolonial South. Often these social aspirations are fused with religious idioms and practices to give a sense of sacredness to this striving.

In basic terms, aspirational theory is grounded in the idea of becoming and striving. Aspiration can be either material or moral, with the goal of the latter being to reach the highest standards of virtue. In this framework, ascetic practices are an aspirational technique of becoming (Singh 2011). Thus what was historically seen as fundamentally a process of negating the self, becoming nonbeing, is now perceived as becoming. Naveeda Khan’s book Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Urban Pakistan is a classic example of the teleological understanding of becoming, though one that does not specifically refer to economic progress or material well-being. This becoming is rather the orienting of oneself in a given religious sensibility through theological discourses. Drawing on Henri Bergson’s conceptualization of time as duration, “the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances” (1922, 5), Khan sees becoming as internal to Islam, as open to dialogues, debates, and interpretations, and with an “open future and a tendency toward experimentation.” Although offering an optimistic picture, or at least to some extent annulling the perennial anxiety that Islam is static, this model is rooted in the hermeneutics of the social order. According to Khan, “Becoming means coming to terms with the trajectories and crystallizations of tendencies within the transcriptions of the state and in public culture” (2012, 7). Becoming, then, is always predetermined by a cultural logic that subjects are thrown into and must figure out how to navigate. Focusing on people’s everyday lives, Khan argues that “religious argumentation may be seen as expressive of ongoing striving” (11).

In this chapter I offer a definition of aspiration different from the generally accepted one. The notion of aspiration as oriented toward the future arises from the presupposition that people are always already living in the present. However, this chapter demonstrates that unless one makes a conscious effort to be in the present, the past and the future are the dwelling places of a subjectivity stretched between experiences and potentialities, the weight of which, regardless of their nature, clogs the ability to truly aspire or breathe and be in the present. I argue that aspiration, which comes from the Latin aspire, “to breathe,” instead of being future oriented, is an act of living in the present. Since aspiration is breathing and breathing only happens in the present, it is not the future to
which people are aspiring—rather, our aspirations seek to take us to the present. This chapter thus takes aspiration in the literal sense of the term: breathing, a vital act that nourishes life. It shows, through the life of Aamir, that the nature of aspiring/breathing subjectivity in Pakistan is being relatively at rest amid the disastrous effects of capitalism and religious extremism gripping the country.

These forces are part of the contemporary nature of Pakistan’s cities, where the crushing effects of greed and fear, unleashed on human subjectivity, obstruct the very foundation of life: breathing/aspiration. Karachi is often referred to as “Pakistan’s bleeding heart” or “the world’s most dangerous megacity,” thanks to its homicide rate: 12.3 per 100,000 residents (Hashim 2012), despite the presence of thousands of law-enforcement personnel breathing down the population’s necks. This atmosphere of fear and anxiety has gripped people’s subjectivity, smothering their total sense of being. Thus, for Karachi’s citizens, fear is a lived reality, an actualized certainty, an experience usually expressed as “Nothing will change; things will go on like this.”

Freeing one’s as well as others’ subjectivity from this atmosphere is understood as breathing life into the city of death (maut ka shehr). The more Aamir unearths himself from the smothering nature of greed and fear, the more he is able to aspire or breathe. Thus there is a direct connection between his act of breathing, practiced during his daily zikr, and his performance as a transmitter of life into the city of death.

MONEY, SURVEILLANCE, ISLAM

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a money-changing shop is risky because of the sensitive nature of currency exchange and security concerns involved in handling large amounts of cash. Money merchants’ work has become more difficult in the wake of 9/11, which prompted the U.S. government and international organizations to curb what they considered the illegal transfer of money used for financing terrorism. The events of 9/11 brought the U.S. government’s and the Western media’s sharp focus on Pakistan’s informal economy—well known to be larger than its formal counterpart—where money circulated relatively free from interference or control by the Pakistani state. The militant Islamist networks of the region were reportedly using this economic space to fund their projects against the West. Thus, tropes of Islam, violence, and tribalism became strongly associated with both Pakistan and the ways in which its people did business and handled money. Recent research on Islamic extremism also suggests that jihadist organizations globalized their fundraising through market mechanisms as enablers of moral and political projects (Devji 2005; Iqtidar 2011).

In an effort to stamp out terrorist funding, the Pakistani state inserted itself as a security arbiter between the rationally organized architecture of global finance on the one side and the “shadowy” indigenous network of informal finance on the other. This enabled it to deploy counterterrorism strategies that criminalized informal money transfer operations, with dire implications for mercantile activities. This process resulted in the refor-
mulating of merchants’ customary networks of capital flows. Under pressure from the United States and multilateral institutions such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the Asia Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APGML), the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) enacted new legislation, particularly the Anti-Money Laundering Ordinance of 2002, which establishes both punishments for violating the new regulations and jurisdiction over these cases. SBP also issued Prudential Regulations, a best practices “know your customer” (KYC) model to reinforce due diligence while starting a relationship with a new customer and maintaining and continuing relationships with existing customers. These due diligence procedures represent an effort to ground and “recontextualize offshore activity in a social reality of social connection and of regard” (Maurer 2005, 476). Moreover, the state brought currency dealers under the formal regulatory ambit by converting them into exchange companies. These companies are currently subject to regulatory requirements similar to those of other financial institutions that incorporate capital and KYC requirements: proper record keeping, periodic reporting to SBP, and above all, on-site examination by SBP officials. Moreover, under the Charities Registration Act, the state has intensified its surveillance of merchants’ ceremonial gift exchanges with religious charities, Sufi orders, mosques, and seminaries to ensure that they have no links to designated terrorists or terrorist organizations.

While the state casts its security net over the informal economy, it also forces the mercantile communities to seek corporate channels and technologies that integrate the flow of global capital. By exploiting the legal and financial ambiguities opened up in the wake of 9/11, multinational corporations have overextended themselves—for instance, Western Union has opened seventy-five hundred registered branches across Pakistan. Such results of financial reform limit the mercantile community’s ability to defend its interests and challenges the ways that merchants handle money. As a result, a net transfer of wealth from local merchants to national and foreign corporations is under way.

Although political Islamic groups are present in the social landscape, the image of merchants financing terrorist networks is far from the lived realities of Pakistan’s largest wholesale market, Bolton Market, in the country’s financial capital, Karachi. Framed by a colonial-era urban setting meant for a population one-tenth Karachi’s current size, this dense social space hums with commercial activity structured by kinship relations and cosmologies and ritual practices that have little to do with the representation of Islam that dominates the global airwaves. For example, currency traders sell “guess papers” of lucky numbers believed to be endowed with supernatural powers, which are used for trading. Such esoteric/cosmological practices shape financial exchange that operates largely through the customary networks of informal money transfer systems such as hawala, or hundi. In the past decade, the Pakistani state has intensified its efforts to survey and discipline such vernacular practices and to replace them with the tools and techniques of modern finance. These efforts, although only partially successful, have created a cultural dynamic that threatens to change the nature of popular trading spaces like Bolton Market and the affective experiences of the bodies that inhabit them.
Aamir, who is now in his mid-thirties, opened his shop in the late 1990s with the support of his father, who was a trader in the 1980s and 1990s. As an Urdu speaker with no experience in the currency business, Aamir hired a Gujarati manager with experience and a network of contacts in the currency exchange business. Historically, Gujarati money lenders and money changers (sarraf) were the sole agents of currency dealing in South Asia. But in recent years, members of the Urdu- and Pashto-speaking communities have ventured into the business. As a new entrant, Aamir had sought guidance from a Gujarati manager, who left for Dubai after a few years. Now Aamir and his cousin run the business. I visited their shop on a regular basis for two years. Although in the first months I was mostly observing the activities, as time went by I also learned how to deal with customers and was given increasing responsibility.

THE CITY AND THE MARKET

The sixth largest city in the world, home to eighteen million ethnically and linguistically diverse people, Karachi is Pakistan’s commercial and financial hub, feeding large amounts of revenue into the state’s coffers. Its marketplaces are of commercial and historic significance. Their history dates back to the late nineteenth century, when indigenous Hindu Sindhi merchants (amil) and Gujarati bankers (sarraf) operated the transregional trade networks (Cook 2007). The geopolitical reconfigurations resulting from Indian Partition altered these centuries-old networks. For instance, the majority of the Karachi-based Hindu merchant class left for India in 1947, so the bazaars’ contemporary religious composition is solely Muslim. In the hopes of linking the country with international trade, Pakistan’s fledgling state turned Karachi into its principal trading port by investing heavily in industries and manufacturing there. The country’s largest wholesale bazaars emerged as the financial and commercial center of the city. Today the Muslim merchant class—composed of Ismailis, Khojas, Bohra, and Memon—runs the bazaars. Other merchant groups there are ethnic Punjabi and Urdu speakers, while the daily wage earners are ethnic Pukhtun and Baloch. These groups’ diverse forms of Islam, ethnicity, and kinship weave the rich and complicated tapestry of the marketplaces.

Bolton Market became a significant site for exchanging foreign commodities in the 1970s after Dubai, the Persian Gulf city, developed a free trade zone. Built against the backdrop of an oil boom, the city-state of Dubai still serves as a regional trading hub. Shipments from Dubai to Karachi of gold and consumer goods—electronics, health and beauty supplies, apparel—shape the contours of Pakistan’s middle- and upper-class consumer culture. Capital and commodities flow between these port cities mostly via informal merchant channels. For instance, Bolton Market’s traders pay Rs 500 ($5) per kilogram to Karachi-based carry dealers, who manage and deliver secure and tax-free commodity shipments to that city. Occasionally, to evade customs duties, traders bring commodities through khaip, informal trade networks. Similarly, both merchants and workers use informal money transfer (hawala, or hundi) to send money to Pakistan. The
interface of kinship, commerce, and culture between Dubai and Karachi marks a new chapter in the biography of Indian Ocean trade.

Because of its commercial appeal and ethnic diversity, Karachi continues to attract immigrants searching for a livelihood, who generate new settlement patterns. For instance, the traditional merchant class, from a Gujarati-speaking background, and working-class Baloch Sindhi predominantly occupy the old parts of the city; expanding outward from them are the areas settled by the Urdu-speaking Mohajir, who migrated from India after the 1947 partition; farther still are the Pukhtun and Bengali Bihari migrants who came during Karachi’s industrial and construction boom of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s; and on the outskirts are the recently arrived refugees displaced by the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s tribal areas. The city is a cultural mosaic of almost every ethnic group found in the region.

The relationship between the city and the markets is defined by a rich tapestry of myriad networks, all too difficult to place in neatly defined categories. Despite this analytical challenge, one thread that speaks volumes is money, and by extension, greed, which ties various stakeholders together in a tight knot. The markets are lucrative sources of revenue for merchants, the state, political and religious parties, and criminal gangs. Each actor struggles against the others to secure a greater share: profits for merchants, taxes and bribery for the state, fees for banks and financial corporations, extortion and protection money for political parties and criminal gangs, and charity for religious groups. The desired object for everyone is money. Aamir is no different, and this chapter demonstrates how this currency trader negotiates his existence, engages some aspects of himself in greed, and involves himself in charity and social service.

**BEING NORMAL**

As he did each evening, Aamir began his preparations to complete the daily closing of his accounts. He then planned to go to the airport to deliver US$20,000 in cash, known as a packet, to a trusted friend who was traveling to Dubai. In Pakistan, currency dealers sell their dollars and other major currencies, such as euros and pounds, to money changers in Dubai, which in the past decade has emerged as a regional financial hub catering to South Asian and Middle Eastern businesspeople. The exchange rate of major currencies is higher in Dubai than in Pakistan, making it more lucrative for these currency dealers to sell their money abroad. Through trusted networks of family and friends, they send their money to Dubai. There are also carry dealers who travel frequently to Dubai (six to seven trips per month) and charge Rs 7,000–9,000 ($70–$90) to take a packet to a designated money changer. Once a carry dealer delivers the currency in Dubai, Aamir gets a confirmation in Karachi. This is a faster and easier way to send currency than formal banking, which takes a few days, charges a heavy fee, and, most important, leaves a paper trail. However, there is another important impetus behind using carry dealers to send money across borders. It is generally considered good camaraderie for a well-to-do
merchant to help others get established or at least to offer waseela (a channel or a medium) for rozi roti (livelihood and provision) to small traders in the market.

Before leaving for the airport, Aamir stacked a couple of packets under his shirt and gave me two to put under my shirt as well. They were quite fat and bulged from my shirt. This was the first time I was carrying Aamir’s cash. I said to him, “Now I have to stop breathing, to keep the cash level with my stomach.” He laughed, made fun of how nervous I was getting, and suggested that I “stay normal,” which meant try to appear as if I were not carrying money. In a city where everyone has experienced at least one mugging, traveling about with bulging stacks of foreign currency is a dangerous business. Despite the certain danger this practice poses, all of Aamir’s clients use similar methods to transport money. Often the clients arrive with cash strapped to their bodies with the help of elastic bandages. Occasionally they carry large amounts of foreign currency in a lunch box. Another method of appearing normal is to carry the cash under dirty clothes in plastic shopping bags, as if one were on the way to drop off one’s laundry.

It goes without saying that carrying cash is a nervous experience in Karachi. Even the most heavily guarded banks are not immune from the state of nervousness caused by the fear of robberies, usually carried out by the same security guards who are assigned to protect the property. The larger the amount of cash, the heavier the fear bears down on one’s senses. In other terms, carrying cash is carrying fear, or to be more precise, carrying cash makes fear seep into one’s entire body. In Karachi, the sense of fear is palpable when we hear of acquaintances getting killed, mugged, or kidnapped. Being subject to a robbery or other crime is no longer a distant experience. Everyone feels touched by it in some way or the other, despite living in a gated community or driving in bulletproof cars, which in recent years have become common in Karachi.

Despite the fatalist sensibility’s becoming prevalent in certain sections of the population, it is human nature to protect oneself from danger. When Aamir carries large amounts of foreign currency, he secures his safety by “staying normal.” Basically, for Aamir this means disembodied his mind from Karachi’s urban infrastructure of fear and anxiety, which permeates so deep and continuously into the sensory organs that it now surfaces as most people’s secondary nature. Aamir’s resignation from the affective plane comes through the technique of aligning the mind with the activity of breathing or aspiring, which I had tried to avoid doing when I placed the stacks of cash under my shirt. He believes that being aware of one’s breathing stops the mind from drifting into thoughts of fear and keeps the attention on the self. Breath brings Aamir to himself, a ground of conscious awareness from which he can easily negotiate with his fear and safely deliver cash currency.

**SULAH, OR RECONCILIATION**

Besides protecting himself, staying in the present with his breath, or “being normal,” allows Aamir to be better attuned to various aspects of mercantile activities. For instance,
he does not feel timid in offering his expertise as an arbiter to solve conflicts between shop owners and tenants. Once a shop owner and a tenant arrived at 9:00 p.m. at Aamir’s shop. He listened to both parties quarrel for some time before he decided to step in. The issue was that the tenant, after renting a shop for a month, had decided to evacuate and was asking the owner to return his advance. The owner, who was unhappy with the tenant for evacuating the shop after only a month, was refusing to give back the advance immediately and was also unwilling to give any time frame within which he would return it. The tenant kept insisting that the owner should, at the very least, indicate a time for returning the advance. But the shop owner continued to resist this demand. After they argued for a few minutes in Aamir’s office, their discussion became quite heated, and they were on the verge of a physical fight when Aamir came out from his room to intervene. However, he was unable to assuage the quarrel, so he asked a senior shopkeeper, Salim, to come and help restore some calm. Salim was aware of the problem and also tried to calm down both parties, but to no avail. Then he asked both of them why they had done no paper work, such as a lease, at the time of renting. This would have bound both parties in a legal contract under the watchful eyes of the state.

It is true that if they had done the paper work, the issue might not have arisen, partially because of the threat of the state. But using a legal contract in the marketplace is indicative of a low level of trust between merchants and thus not seen as a good practice. In other words, the more amicable and trustful the relationships are among merchants, the less the state is involved in the markets. The shop owner and the tenant are expected to trust each other and share a mutual understanding that evacuating a shop after only one month is against the tacit market rules. The tenant, who may technically have had the right to get his advance back, did not follow the tacit market understanding that one should keep a shop as a tenant for at least a year. The owner, who was upset with the tenant’s behavior of breaking the bond of trust, reciprocated by not offering a time frame for returning the advance.

Since Aamir had called them into his office, it was his responsibility to come up with a solution that would satisfy both parties. This is a market rule: if a person is willing to be a mediator, then he should play an active role in offering a solution. After ten minutes of arguing between the tenant and the owner, Aamir offered a solution. He would pay the amount of the advance to the tenant, and the owner would pay the same amount to Aamir after a year. Both parties agreed to this solution. In this way, Aamir resolved the conflict: the tenant got his money immediately, and the owner had one year to pay back the advance. Both walked away happily, leaving Aamir behind with the weight that comes from lending money to someone. The key question is, what did Aamir gain from the reconciliation? By lending his money, he in fact implicated himself further in the issue, because he would not be paid back for at least a year. Perhaps by reconciling (jislah) these parties, Aamir desired to gain a good reputation in the eyes of the market shopkeepers. In the market’s atmosphere of trust, one also strives to gain symbolic rank and status. However, it seems too rationalistic to presume that a subject does good for others only
because he wants to improve his reputation. Another explanation is that Aamir was merely doing these people a favor as a good gesture, and whatever symbolic capital might come with it was far beyond his calculation.

The next day when I asked Aamir about his motive for resolving the issue, he quickly rejected my guess that it was to gain goodwill in the market. Nor, he emphasized, was he keen on raising his profile. Moreover, he did not care much about the money bonded for a year. Rather, because he was aware of how much each party owned, he was quite certain he would get his money back. What drove him to solve the issue was something else. According to Aamir, he did it only to _khuda ki khushnudi hasil kernay kay liye_ (gain God’s happiness). Resolving conflicts in the marketplace, creating and maintaining a collegial environment among peers in order for economic activity to continue, is seen as a way of acquiring God’s happiness. Thus for Aamir, the question of ethics, care for others, is not separate from the worship ( _ibadat_ ) of God. However, he believes that God ( _khuda_ ) resides in his self ( _khud_ ), as the words also imply a close relationship, and according to him, one needs to return to the self in order to find God. In a way, God’s happiness ( _khuda ki khushnudi_ ) is the happiness of the self—here Aamir’s self, which derives joy from resolving issues in the market. Hence what appears to be an act of good, done for the sake of God, is fundamentally an act of pleasure, done for subjective satisfaction, which Aamir himself is fully aware of.

**KHUD-BA-KHUD, OR EFFORTLESSNESS**

A satisfied or content subjectivity engenders a sense of effortlessness in matching one’s existence to the rhythms of everyday life. When he has an effortless subjectivity, Aamir is basically a medium through which actions happen. According to him, “If we let our _khudi_ to do its job, then we can live effortlessly.” To describe his effortless life, he uses the term _khud-ba-khud_ (literally “self-by-self”; also translated as “of oneself”): “Whenever I speak or do actions, it is with _bay-baki_ [spontaneity], which means that without putting my mind into a thinking process, I experience effortlessness [ _khud-ba-khud_ ].” _Khud_ means “self,” understood here not as a modern, atomistic self of egotism but as a self that is an entire universe in itself. An Urdu and Persian word for God, _khuda_ is believed to come from _khud_, thus self and God are imagined to bear a strong connection. In the same way, for Amir, _khuda_ is part of his _khudi_ (subjectivity), so any mediation other than that by his self, even that of a religious God, activates the thinking-I, which only hampers the feeling of effortlessness. For Aamir, effort is the work of the mind, while _khud-ba-khud_ happens by itself. The use of the mind basically interferes in one’s performance, because it activates the consciousness of an individual subject, or, to use Aamir’s term, _nafs_ (ego). The more one suspends the thinking-I, the more one can experience the state of effortlessness. All of Aamir’s work happens _khud-ba-khud_, whether it is running his currency business, solving conflicts in the market, taking care of his family, socializing with friends, or practicing spirituality.
Aamir believes that his subjectivity has assigned him a duty in this world. “I try to do exactly what my khudi tells me to do,” he says. The duty is primarily to offer his self as a servant (*khadim*) in the service (*khidmat*) of God’s creation (*khalq-e-khuda*). For instance, occasionally his khudi demands that Aamir offer free food (*langar*) to hungry people in Karachi’s Khuda ki Basti (God’s slum), on the outskirts of the city. It also inspires him to be more generous (*sakhi*) on religious occasions, such as during the Islamic month of Muharram, when it made him offer several cauldrons of biryani (a traditional dish of rice and meat), costing him Rs 60,000 (US$600). I accompanied Aamir when he distributed the biryani in the slum. As he parked his pickup truck, dozens of children gathered from the alleys to get the free food, which was packed in plastic bags. Aamir did not want to distribute it to the children on the streets, so he decided to go door to door and hand the food to the women of the house with his own hands. In this way he would know how many houses got the langar. Once in a while he would repeat, “They are God’s creation—feed them all.” He saved a few bags for his family and friends. On our way back from the slum, Aamir stopped at his friends’ houses to give them the food. I asked him why he didn’t distribute these bags in the slum as well, since his friends and family can afford biryani. He replied, “Are they not God’s creatures?” Offering langar is a practice that Aamir has cultivated. However, he does not take pride in his action, because he believes he has no power to feed anyone; in fact, he is merely a servant obeying the commands of his khudi.

Karachi’s urban space is filled with hundreds of shrines, free food centers (*langar khana*), and restaurants that generously feed thousands of people every day, particularly on Thursday nights, which the Islamic belief system considers auspicious. Restaurants in the city that serve traditional Pakistani food are especially known for feeding the hungry, usually when other people pay for them to eat. In recent years, social workers–cum–businesspeople from Karachi’s Gujarati community have taken a leading role in setting up formal food distribution spaces (*dastar khawan*) at various busy intersections of the city. The most prominent are the organizations called Silyani and Chhipa, which, among other services, offer free food to anyone. When I asked Mohammad Younus, the owner of one of Karachi’s oldest and most famous restaurants, Sabir Nihari, why he lets customers or anyone else pay for the hungry people sitting outside his shop, he replied, “Khuda tarsi” (God’s compassion). There is a general sensibility of khuda tarsi among the traditional merchant community defining what they consider ethics, care for others. At one level there is the moral economy of khuda tarsi, based on a cosmological order and appearing free from selfish interest, and at the same time there is a market economy, which is certainly rational and operates on a calculable logic of greed. Parry and Bloch suggest that these comprise two related but different transactional orders: “on the one hand transactions concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order; on the other, a ‘sphere’ of short-term transactions concerned with the arena of individual competition” (1989, 24). So on the one hand, khuda tarsi can be considered a sense of being ethical, as imagined by merchants like Younus, while on the other hand
it certainly provides good business to places such as Sabir Nihari. By offering a service to feed the poor, merchants increase their profits, all in the name of khuda. In the final analysis, despite the use of the seemingly transcendental category of khuda, in both, the ethical and the financial instances, it is Younus’s subjectivity that benefits from the practice of khuda tarsi, making him feel ethical and earning him money.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE: ZIKR

Aamir’s everyday states of being normal, satisfied (mutmain), and effortless (khud-bakhud) come from the meditative practice of zikr, the remembrance of one’s self or knowing the self (khudi ko janna). After three months of daily visits to Aamir’s shop, I began accompanying him to attend zikr every Thursday night at his friends’ house in Sultanabad, a lower-class neighborhood of Karachi. Usually there were six or seven other men, from various parts of Punjab, who worked and lived in the city to support their families in the villages back home. On my first visit to the zikr practice, one of the men told me to “take as many notes you want, but doing will give you a unique pleasure.” I decided to perform zikr with them and closed my notebook. Zikr begins at midnight. We sat in a circle, turned off the lights, and slowly chanted the first guiding principle of Islam, “La ilaha ill Allah,” which means “No God but God,” as we rotated our heads counterclockwise. After reciting this for twenty minutes, hardly maintaining my focus, given the amount of thoughts my brain was carrying, I decided to stop and observe what the others were doing. After a few minutes’ pause, the chant dropped the first half, “La ilaha” (No God), and continued with only the last half, “ill Allah” (but God). The recitation and the counterclockwise rotation of the heads continued for another twenty minutes before the chanting ended on the word Allah.

After the chanting stopped, the men silently recited “La ilaha ill Allah” with breathing; inhale represented “La ilaha” and exhale signified “ill Allah.” Thus the most fundamental act of living, breathing, turned into the spiritual exercise of zikr. When aligned with the air, subjectivity acquires atmospheric properties of invisibility and light. The arrested subjectivity disappears into effortless experience, making itself irrelevant to the existing order. Being agnostic offers objective space in which to release the subjectivity, which suffocates under the damaging effects of capitalism and morality. Hence, the aspiring subjectivity devalues both the moral universe of desire for God and the capitalist universe of desire for money.

After finishing zikr, Aamir explained that the chant we were reciting is a simple formula. It is basically nafs and asbat, negation and affirmation, or simply “No God but God.” He elaborated that “the negation of God means transforming our hasd [jealousy], laalach [lust], shahwat [lust], takkabur [arrogance], numaish [self-promotion], khauf [fear], and ghussa [anger] into a positive force, or asbat, which is the heart [dil or qalb].” All of these gods are collectively labeled nafs, which may be translated as “ego,” and are equated with the mind. “You have to reform [islah] the nature [fitrat] of nafs and generate yaksoi
[oneness] with your heart, the affirmation,” Aamir said. In Sufi Islam, it is believed that the heart is the house of God, an affirmative place, free from desires. The way to enter into the abode of God that resides inside the body is by practicing zikr, which synchronizes one’s scattered consciousness with the self. For Aamir, the practice of zikr has opened up a new dimension in himself, which allows him to see who he is and the nature of the lifeworld in which he lives. Pierre Hadot suggests that “spiritual exercises” develop “a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things” (1995, 83). The counterclockwise rotation of the head precisely reverses the normal state of mind by retrieving the consciousness, absorbed in the moods of everyday life, and putting it in an objective moodless state, which no thoughts penetrate. Thus practitioners of zikr see meditation as an inward journey that takes the subject away from everyday life and into the primeval state of the now-time, or present.

I wanted to know what Aamir received in return for his practice of zikr. He immediately replied, “Tum mera zikr karo, mein tumhara zikr karonga,” the Qur’anic verse that means “Remember me, and I will remember you.” He used this metaphorical language to explain his strong belief that he gets his wage (mazduri) and on top of that receives a gratuity, which he calls karam. He pointed out the status and prestige that he enjoys among his market peers and the number of people who come to ask him for some kind of help. He thinks that the reason people come to him or show him respect is because God reciprocates when Aamir recites his name. “Just see Saleem Bhai, who has given me 70 lakh [7 million] rupees—why? Because he trusts me,” Aamir said. “This is because of my practice of zikr. God in return is doing my zikr, by providing this kind of status in my life.” I asked Aamir if, when he helps someone, his nafs/ego makes him feel proud and arrogant. He replied, “Yes, of course it does happen, but I remind my nafs again that God gave you this ability and you have to continuously thank him.” He recited another line from the Qur’an, “Khuda ka shukar bhi karo,” meaning “Also be thankful (or grateful) to God.” Aamir believes that worldly status and rank do not and never will satisfy him, because someone who lives on praise (tarif) from other people is standing on precarious ground, which does not take long to crumble.

Aamir learned the technique of zikr from his Sufi master, Baba Jamil, who lives in a small village in northern Punjab. Aamir considers Baba Jamil a spiritual father and gives him more respect than his biological father. When I asked Aamir how he met Baba Jamil, he said,

It was 1999, when my business was suffering from heavy losses. I used to get up every morning with countless wishes and desires [khuwahish], but none of them was getting fulfilled. Then one day my friend told me of a pir who gives medicine to sick people. I went there to get some medicine for my mother, and there I met Baba Jamil, with his eyes glowing red. Baba Jamil saw my face and said, “Do not be worried—we are not on drugs.” I was comforted by the fact that these people were not high on drugs, which is often the case with many who call themselves Sufis.
Aamir started to visit Baba Jamil regularly with the hope of being given an elixir for getting rich. At that time he owed Rs 7,500,000 ($75,000) to various people in the market. However, he had no way to return their money. “I asked Baba to show me a way in which I could make a large amount of money so I could pay back my debts,” he explained. Baba Jamil replied, “I am going to give you a technique that will give you wealth in both the exoteric and esoteric worlds.” Aamir thus learned the technique of remembering one’s self: the practice of zikr, which involves reciting “La ilaha ill Allah” (No God but God) every night—in fact, this chanting should occur with every breath that goes in or out of the body. According to Baba Jamil, the only way to live in the present is to be with the breathing, or aspiring. The amount of time it takes to inhale/inspire and exhale/expire is exactly the length of the aspiration, or the present. Thus living in the present means being in a synchronous, nontemporal state of rest. Time only occurs when our senses are distributed in thoughts, giving a diachronic nature to our subjectivity.

Practicing zikr is not common among merchants or even among the general population in Pakistan. In Karachi’s bazaars, the merchants usually follow the established religious beliefs and rituals of a particular sect or organization, such as Barelvi, Deobandi, or Wahhabi. The merchants from Shi’ite backgrounds—Bohra and Ismaili—follow their spiritual leaders, Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin and Karim Agha Khan, respectively. In fact, I was surprised to learn that Aamir has been part of a Sufi practice for almost fifteen years without his peers in the market knowing where he goes every Thursday night. It was because of my interest as an anthropologist that some of them heard of Aamir’s zikr practice and murshid (guide). When I asked him why he keeps his spiritual practice separate from his mercantile activities, he replied, “I do not like self-promotion [numaish].” He also mentioned that some people express their religious beliefs openly in public only to appear pious and virtuous. He disliked the public displays of many so-called Sufis, the fraudulent pirs, who try to appear as Sufis by wearing a long beard on their faces, growing their hair long, and wearing rings on their fingers, only to use human suffering to make money. During my numerous conversations with Aamir, his spiritual brethren, and Baba Jamil, I discovered how much they dismiss established Sufi orders, their teachings, and book Sufism for not freeing souls from the clutches of desire.

CONCLUSION

In Pakistan, currency traders like Aamir aspire to connect with the global financial markets. However, because of the technological resources needed to connect with international finance, they negotiate the local terrain for data and knowledge to generate profit. This does not mean that they are completely divorced from the world of capital. As the above pages demonstrate, these currency traders rely on their broad embedded networks, which are more sustainable and perhaps more ethical than the precarious and dehumanized mechanisms and models of Wall Street traders. The aspirations too of Pakistani traders in general are in sharp contrast to those of currency and futures traders in
Western metropolises. As is evident from Aamir’s case, such aspiration is not violently expansive, ignoring the ethical and moral orders of society in favor of the incessant pursuit of profit. In some of Aamir’s transactions, thoughts of charity and financial support for the poor become internal to trading practices. One could see this as an aberration of capitalism itself, extending its tentacles under the labels of charity and giving. Aamir, who practices the contemplative exercise of zikr every night, to reflect on his actions and attributes, is mindful of the capitalist logic in fetishizing charitable projects and thus accumulating symbolic capital of prestige and rank. That is why in his own acts of charity, he shows indifference as a giver, helping the poor with his profits generated from the currency trade. The word *indifference* actually does not do justice to his view on charity. He performs a radical ascesis of negation, deleting every trace of being the giver and rather reminding himself that he is the receiver and medium of the higher power.

Being a medium of God’s blessings is not limited to Aamir alone. Many traders and shopkeepers publicly mention God’s invisible hand behind their engagement in business and charities. Nor do they have to practice negation every night to make themselves feel like a medium or servant through whom God channels his wealth to the poor. In Aamir, however, we are able to see the shape and the direction of desire, or what I earlier called aspiration. The desire for profit does not swell inside the realm of finance capital for him, as it does for Wall Street speculators, who are seen as extending this reason to unimaginable scale in their pursuit of profit. Instead, a nonmaterial economy of compassion and care for the other, known as servitude, propels Aamir’s desire, which expands in this regime of value with a peculiar logic. If the desire in the world of finance is for money, then in servitude it prompts the sacrifice of accumulated money to express nonmaterial values. Aamir uses the word *khud-ba-khud* (by itself) to describe his experience of negotiating monetary accumulation and philanthropy. He is unaware of how contradictory practices happen together; on the one hand he is totally absorbed in the currency business, while on the other he offers free food and distributes other rations.

I saw Aamir dabbling in extreme forms of both capitalism and spiritualism, accumulation and expenditure. At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I discovered the spiritual side of his life, I was completely baffled by the way these seemingly contradictory practices could exist alongside each other yet stay separate, or at least appear to, while Aamir never appeared tense or conflicted. When I asked, “How do you keep both things together?,” he responded with one word, “Khud-ba-khud.” In other words, he is not aware of the relationship. Maintaining one’s subjectivity in such a radical dichotomy may be seen as work of endurance and perseverance, which has the potential to collapse under the weight of two opposing contradictions. In this situation, the subjectivity could either become totally ascetic or turn completely capitalist. However, Aamir’s view of khud-ba-khud implies that there is a unity of existence, a nonduality, containing the complimentary differences within one’s subjectivity. In a way, he neither accumulates nor gives; everything happens by itself.
NOTES

1. The city’s size, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and settlement patterns have generated complex political representations, particularly in the form of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the sole representative of the Mohajir and one of the strongest political-militant forces in the city.

2. Barelvi and Deoband are two versions of Islam that stem from North India. The former promotes Sufi learning and practices, while the latter adheres to a literal interpretation of Islam. Wahhabi, on the other hand, is a puritanical and anti-Sufi ideology imported from Saudi Arabia. In recent years, Wahhabi and Deoband ideologies have come into direct conflict with that of Barelvi on the issue of sainthood in Islam. Yet despite promoting Sufi devotional practices, Barelvis are also strict in many ways.

REFERENCES


Cities are nodes of commerce; Seoul and Hanoi—like most of the cities considered in this volume—are nodes of global commerce. Cities are nodes of commerce, sometimes global in scope, for a variety of sacred goods. The first statement is commonsense: the modern city emerged as a site of complex markets; it is all but impossible to disaggregate “city” from “market,” particularly when the history of Asia is being rewritten as a story of contact through trade (Andaya 2006; Duara 2010; Sen 2010). The second statement rubs against the grain of another assumption, extrapolated from a northern European experience, the Weberian presumption that engagement with the modern urban marketplace is a rationalizing and secularizing experience. The association of cities and markets comes bundled with the expectation that goods and services and the human relationships through which they are produced, distributed, and consumed become commodified in urban terrain, an alienated urban gesellschaft gaining ascendency over a communal gemeinschaft. Walter Benjamin’s (1969) disquisition “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” resides within this dichotomy; the mechanically reproduced commodity, as a product of transparent and consequently disenchanted processes, is the antithesis of the object produced through esoteric and often secret practices instantiating anima, magic, or power. Does this mean that sacred things are never commodities or that magical goods are absent from modern urban markets?

Here (again) Asian experiences complicate European commonsense assumptions. From perhaps as early as the fifth century, Chinese Buddhist practice engendered temple markets where offering food and other votive goods were sold and artisans used shortcut
production methods (Gernet [1965] 1995, 23–25, 196). By the sixth century, Chinese stone carvers were producing ready-made Buddha images in standardized forms (Swer-gold et al. 2008, 55), and the earliest known example of wood-blocked votive paper coins dates to a seventh-century Chinese tomb (Cave 1998, 2). In other words, for more than a thousand years, concentrated markets were stocking sacred goods and Chinese artisans were mass-producing them, employing available technology including some of the methods used today, to accommodate a high market demand.

To a self-consciously modern consciousness, the deployment of statues, talismans, offerings, and votive paper for auspicious or protective ends may be the most indigestible element of Asian popular religious practice. Even so, markets in most contemporary Asian cities reveal a brisk traffic in the production and consumption of sacred goods. Consider Stanley Tambiah’s description of the traffic in amulets in late twentieth-century Bangkok, “reaching the pitch of fetishistic obsession among those same fevered urban-ites” (1984, 3), or the omnipresent purveying of charms and talismans in contemporary Japan that Ian Reader and George Tanabe Jr. have described (Reader 1991, ch. 7; Reader and Tanabe 1998, chs. 5 and 6). Vineeta Sinha’s study of markets in Hindu religious goods reveals that “Singapore is a place where a number of religious objects, as products and commodities, are ‘assembled’, ‘finished’ and manufactured” (2008, 182) in a highly commodified local market with numerous transnational connections. One need not wander far in the markets of any thriving Asian city before encountering vendors of candles, incense, offerings, and other ritual paraphernalia. Like most aspects of popular religion, urban marketplaces in sacred goods reflect the abundance, variety, and creativity exhibited in other forms of contemporary consumption.

In this chapter I discuss the production and circulation of sacred goods and services in two contemporary urban Asian settings—Seoul, South Korea; and Hanoi, Vietnam—paying particular attention to how producers and distributors have accommodated expanded demand and rationalized production processes. I consider how notions of sacredness, magic, and efficacy are expressed and experienced in these settings through two similar but not identical domains of popular religious practice, those of spirit mediums (female: bà đồng; male: ông đồng) in and around Hanoi and of shamans (female: mudang, mansin, posal; male: paksu mudang) in and around Seoul.1

I begin with a brief discussion of place, how spirit mediums and shamans are situated within urban space, and how these popular religious practices foster the production and consumption of different kinds of religious goods and services. I then describe how production and distribution have changed in recent times and how these changes have been experienced and interpreted in both places, paying particular attention to the provision of services at ritual sites and the production and consumption of sacred images. Ritual sites are a part of the sacred landscape in both cities, but they have been subject to different regimes of management and control in each. In both cities, deity images are ritually animated; devotees regard them as seats for the active presence of a god or Buddha. This applies to temple statues in Vietnam and paintings in Korean shaman shrines;
both are considered central to the work that practitioners do, to the ability of a costumed
mansin, bà đòng, or ông đòng to engage with and manifest the deity in a ritual setting
(Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2008 and 2010; Kendall and Yang 2014).

TWO CITIES

With a population of ten and a half million, Seoul is an Asian megacity (see chapter 14),
the capital of the country with the world’s fifteenth largest economy by GDP.1 A glitzy and
ever-expanding urban fabric testifies to the success of the South Korean industrial and
high-tech project begun in the 1960s under conditions of military dictatorship. If little
trace remains of the impoverished refugee city of the post–Korean War years and the
hardscrabble conditions of rural migrants in the early decades of the industrial transfor-
mation, the memory of hard times is kept alive in media portrayals, museums, and
evocations of the dead, speaking through shamans (Abelmann 2003; Kendall 2009, ch.
6). With a population of nearly six and a half million, Hanoi has seen the conditions of
material life improve dramatically since the initiation of “renovation” (đô môı) policies
in the late 1980s, which encouraged a market economy and relaxed many social strictures,
including those that had constrained the practice of popular religion. But relative to South
Korea, the country is poor, with an economy ranked only fifty-sixth or fifty-seventh by
GDP, and has far more recent memories of extreme hardship during war and under a
subsidized economy.1 Vietnam today, with a relatively cheap, educated, and disciplined
workforce, is producing light industrial products for a global market in a manner that
recalls South Korea in the 1960s—indeed, South Korean conglomerates have been eager
investors in Vietnam. The relative cost of labor in the two countries bears on our story.
Some Vietnamese know South Korea primarily through television soap operas, which
they see as portraying the fulfillment of an Asian fantasy of comfortable middle-class life.
South Koreans, equally unrealistically, regard Vietnam as a source of innocent, docile
brides for otherwise unmarriageable South Korean bachelors, women with whom the
prospective spouses believe they have a cultural affinity although not yet a common
language.

AFFINITIES AND RESONANCES IN POPULAR RELIGION

The sense of cultural affinity between South Korea and Vietnam is not coincidental. Both
were once kingdoms in the Sino-centric Confucian world order and adapted notions of
Chinese statecraft, Confucian ethics, cosmology, and certain forms of popular culture,
including perceptions of gods, their power, and the ways that humans seek the favor of
divine beings. As ritual, the Vietnamese lên đồng and a Korean shaman’s kut have many
broad structural similarities: the practitioner dons a series of appropriate costumes, calls
a sequence of deities into the ritual space, and for each god in sequence, strikes appropri-
ate postures, mimes, dances, and in the case of the Korean shaman, banters with the clients
and delivers divinations. Although the costumes, music, performance styles, and general ambiance of these traditions are each distinctive to their place of origin, even a casual observer familiar with only one would be struck by some familiar visual cues in the other. Both traditions costume their gods in bold, symbolically potent primary colors, and sometimes the gods deploy nearly identical weapons and accoutrements, based on antique Chinese prototypes. These similarities, superficial in and of themselves, hint at affinities in East Asian popular religious practice: gods are conceptualized and hierarchically organized in a way that recalls earthly social and political regimes that were themselves links—always imperfect—to an abstract cosmic order. In both traditions, some gods appear in the guises and equipages of kings, queens, officials, warriors, and court ladies. Gods expect to be feasted and entertained during lavish and colorful rituals where music and dance combine with food and decoration to make the ritual itself a meta offering.

A relationship with a deity is necessarily unequal; a god with the power to protect and advance one’s interest is a god who commands tribute. As in relationships with influential humans, the devotee curries favor with gifts and other tribute as a means of averting affliction and acquiring blessing. By honoring divine obligations, devotees also circumvent anger and retribution, which can be experienced as illness, domestic problems, business setbacks, trouble with authorities, and other difficulties. In Vietnamese Mother Goddess worship, the notion of divine punishment is more muted than in Korean shaman practice, but the logic is present. Both Korean shamans and Vietnamese spirit mediums hold that a portion of the material benefits bestowed on the practitioner by the gods should be given back as gratitude in the form of celebratory rituals, new costumes, and more elaborate altar fittings, all read as indications that the practitioner is well favored by the gods whom she or he serves. Not surprisingly, rising horizons of consumption are manifest in the circulation of ritual goods and the inflation of the cost of religious goods and services (Endres 2010 and 2011, ch. 4; Kendall 1996 and 2009, chs. 5 and 6).

As a broad generalization, one can say that both traditions are concerned with the production of auspiciousness or blessing (Vietnamese: lộc; Korean: pok) in the form of health, family harmony, and prosperity. Despite significant contrasts in their relative wealth, both South Korean and Vietnamese entrepreneurs experience the market as a place of risk; business aspirations and anxieties have been a marked presence in contemporary accounts of both Vietnamese women who become or follow spirit mediums and clients who seek the assistance of Korean shamans (Endres 2011, 80–81, 101–102, ch. 6; Kendall 1996 and 2009, ch. 5; Nguyen 2007, 555–56; Pham 2007; Taylor 2004, 12, 87–88). In this sense, the work of Vietnamese spirit mediums and of shamans in South Korea is a manifestation of the contemporary phenomenon of wealth-oriented religious practices noted in Asian settings, including the so-called prosperity religions (Hefner 2010; Weller 1994). But here too, and unlike with similar developments in contemporary Christianity, we are not talking about a new thing. In East Asia, prayers for wealth and good fortune have long been part of a talismanic imagery of fertility and abundance, of fat children, grain, strings of coins, gold ingots, and wads of paper money. Circumstances
may mute or accelerate such aspirations; in Vietnam, high socialism muted both the market and the activities of spirit mediums, while in an urbanized late twentieth-century South Korea, business anxieties predominated over the concerns for health and family harmony that had motivated rural shaman rituals a few decades previously.

From early modernity, practitioners of popular religion in Vietnam (Malarney 2002, 80–84, 105–7; Marr 1981; Pelley 2002, 228–29) and Korea (Ch’oe 1999; Kendall 2009; Walraven 1995 and 1998) have been objects of disapprobation from progressives and revolutionaries; indeed, antipsychotherapy has been part of a pan-Asian modernity ideology that spans regimes of both the right and the left, colonial and national, and has been present in the region for a very long time (see, e.g., Cohen 1991; Kendall 2009, ch. 1; Pigg 1992 and 1996; Tambiah 1990; van der Veer 2013). In South Korea, the most vehement opposition to shamans came during the Park Chung-hee regime’s New Community Movement in the early 1970s, when local authorities interrupted rituals and threatened shamans with arrest, while local zealots torched shrines. These excesses were checked by the efforts of South Korean folklore scholars who won recognition for Korean shamans as exemplars of “national culture,” an identity they bear despite the disapprobation of South Korea’s now significant Christian population. Vietnam’s 1986 renovation initiated a new era of market economics and relative tolerance of many previously prohibited practices, enabling an elaboration and continuous improvisation of popular religion despite a continuing tension between popular devotion and state ideology (DiGregorio and Salemink 2007; Endres 2011, 119–137; Tay 2004, ch. 1; Lê 2007; Malarney 2002, 2–3, 100–106, 119, 137, 146; Malarney 2003; Taylor 2007, 7–15).

Since the 1990s, Vietnamese folklorists have been active in efforts to preserve the work of spirit mediums in the Mother Goddess religion, making a familiar argument for their rituals and performing arts as “national heritage,” acting in cognizance of the South Korean experience and encouraged by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s program of world intangible heritage designations.

RITUAL SPACE AND RITUAL SERVICES

The urban fabric of old Hanoi included temples honoring a variety of tutelary and other deities, most of whom the state officially recognized (in effect, appointed). Some of these temples and those in the homelands of significant gods are home to deities that the Mother Goddess religion recognizes, and these temples are active sites for lên đồng rituals. In the years of high socialism, many temples were either abandoned or transformed for secular purposes; lên đồng were held quietly and without elaboration, so as not to attract attention (Endres 2011, 164). Some of these temples are now regarded as heritage sites of historical and architectural significance, and the caretakers—many of them spirit mediums—are regarded as officially sanctioned proprietors, if not civil servants. Successful mediums and devotees have made a visual mark on the life of the city, both with the refurbishment of old temples and with the addition of Mother Goddess temples to
Buddhist temple sites that did not have them in the past (Endres 2010, 122; Pham 2006, 52). Altars to the Mother Goddess are popular places where prayers for wealth can be unabashedly tendered, as they might not be in front of the Buddha. Increased prosperity and better roads have opened up the possibility of traveling easily and frequently to a god’s home temple, a more potent and consequently more auspicious site for lên đồng, and organized groups of mediums and followers in private cars and chartered buses create webs of mobile practice that link Hanoi mediums to a larger sacred landscape beyond the city.

The temple keeper is at the center of the operation. A skilled and experienced temple keeper guides a novice medium through lên đồng. Master mediums garner a following of junior mediums and, although they deny this, are reputed to expect significant compensation when followers use their temple space. Major Mother Goddess temples have become multiservice sites for ritual practice, renting costumes and equipment to spirit mediums who cannot yet afford their own, catering meals, providing in-house votive paper makers, and calling on their own stables of musicians. A medium who favors an outside musician over those on the temple roster pays a compensation fee to the temple. Similarly, mediums weigh the skill and beauty of an outside votive paper artisan’s work against the difficulty of transporting these large and fragile paper and bamboo sculptures to the temple. Endres (2010), commenting on the sum of these developments, describes a nostalgic discourse among spirit mediums who recall a more equalitarian atmosphere in the remembered past; they chafe under what they see as an increasing commodification of the relationship between master mediums and their followers. I similarly encountered followers who commented favorably on their master medium’s good heart even as they described anonymous greedy master mediums and temple keepers. Some held that the gods would punish master mediums who misled clients, temple keepers who overcharged them, and craftspeople and tailors who did not give them the quality they had paid for or who encouraged them to buy beyond their means. Greedy mediums, some said, would lose their ability to divine (Kendall 2011; Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010, 80).

Temple sites do not form the backbone of shamanic practice in Korea as they do for spirit mediums in Vietnam, and shaman shrines were not a part of the institutionalized urban fabric of late traditional Korea. The Confucian reformers who established the Chosŏn Kingdom (1392–1910) banished shamans and monks from within the four gates of the capital city, although they were far from effective (N. Yi [1927] 1976). Reports from an early modern antisuperstition campaign suggest that by the end of the nineteenth century, many shamans were maintaining private shrines in Seoul (Walraven 1995). In the Korean shamanic world view, the most profound charge of divine power comes not from the animated statues in a temple but from sacred sites on pure and high mountains, and secondarily from the personal deities who inhabit paintings in the shaman’s private shrine. The periphery of the Chosŏn capital did have a number of shrines to tutelary deities, notably a site on South Mountain (supplanted in colonial times by a Shinto shrine), one on the pass leading from Seoul on tributary missions’ route to China,
and several along the banks of the Han River (Pak 2001; C. Yi 1996). The office-holding elite commissioned shamans to perform kut in these shrines in honor of the resident deities. In the waning days of the Chosŏn Kingdom, shamans paid fees to the shrine keepers to use these spaces to perform kut for their own clients (anonymous 1903). With the collapse of the kingdom, some notable shrines were given over to private entrepreneurship and became kuttang, modern commercial institutions that rent space for shaman rituals. Like Vietnamese Mother Goddess temples, they rent costumes and equipment, prepare offerings, and cater meals. Some of the proprietors have deep ties to the shamanic world, some are shamans themselves, and some run their businesses as though they were restaurants or inns. From the 1980s, kuttang on the mountainous peripheries of Seoul proliferated when cramped apartment spaces, noise ordinances, and the complaints of Christian neighbors made it difficult for shamans to hold kut in private homes, as they had once done in the wide courtyards of low-rise traditional Korean houses. Private cars also facilitated the use of mountain kuttang, particularly the new ones with adequate parking space. Cars and good roads also meant that shamans and their clients could visit sacred sites all over South Korea with only a few hours’ drive. Some mountain sites are now not only crowded with kuttang but surrounded by a sprawling city (Kendall 2009, ch. 7).

Today, like much of the rest of urban life, kut are private events, and the woman who sponsors one may at best have seen only snippets of shamanic dancing on television. One hears complaints in and around the shamanic community that poorly trained shamans are taking advantage of naïve clients and exacerbating the problem by initiating novices of their own. In some quarters, kut has become a pure commodity, not a therapeutic ritual that engages clients and their family and neighbors in an encounter with gods and ancestors but a matter of busy people dropping off the money for the ritual, which the shaman performs in their absence (Kendall 2009, 122). As in Hanoi, all of this provokes dyspeptic comparisons between past and present in and around the shamanic world—indeed, such nostalgic conversations are a modern way of talking.

SACRED SHOPPING IN SEOUL AND HANOI

Sometime in the 1960s, an old shaman told the folklore scholar Chang Chu-gun (1994, H) how in the distant past she had carried a sack of rice to a Buddhist temple where a monk used it to make offerings to the Buddha, invoking blessings for the work that he would undertake to produce the divine images that she would hang in her shrine. Well into the twentieth century, Seoul shamans went to Buddhist temples and commissioned monks to paint. The sacred space of a mountain temple and the monk’s purity, which he achieved by bathing and chanting sutras before undertaking the work, were regarded as enhancing the efficacy of a painting that would house a god. The sack of rice was presented in the manner of a temple offering, blunting the edge of commerce. Shamans who perform in the tradition of Hwanghae Province use painters who have a close,
sometimes familial relationship with the shamanic world and are seen as having an uncanny ability to produce images of the god.

The shamans that I knew in the 1970s usually went to “5-ga” for their paintings, costumes, and other paraphernalia, buying from shops on the fifth block of Chongno, a major east-west Seoul thoroughfare, where tanned country people poured off buses and into the nearby East Gate Market. Several shaman supply shops dotted the south side of the street from the fifth block all the way west to the third; their cramped interiors beckoned with gilt Buddha statues in the window and sometimes a festive pink lotus lantern over the door. “Shaman supply shop” is a descriptive translation of an enterprise that dared not speak its name when the government regarded shamanic practices as superstition and vehement campaigns against shaman shrines were a recent memory. The shops called themselves manmulsang, “purveyors of all kinds of things,” and advertised Buddhist paraphernalia and dance equipment. These things they did sell, and there were some obvious crossovers in the hourglass drums, cymbals, and gongs that are basic to both Korean folk art performances and shaman rituals. Likewise, Buddha statues, incense pots, and offering vessels are found in both Buddhist temples and shaman shrines. But the manmulsang is primarily a place that sells the necessary paraphernalia of shaman practice: prints and paintings of shaman gods and the robes, hats, hoods, and armor that shamans wear to incarnate these gods in kut, along with the fans and weapons the gods carry. Today the shops on Chongno 5-ga have largely disappeared, owing to the high key money for business space in the area. Instead, manmulsang are broadly dispersed throughout the South Korean landscape, “like supermarkets,” the proprietor of one of the remaining Chongno 5-ga shops remarked. Some of the new shops, in less expensive locations, are far more expansive than their predecessors were, even as costumes and shrine fittings have become more elaborate.

The shops sell ready-made paintings, but the proprietors also act as middlemen for workshops that produce paintings to order, matching the gods seen in the shaman’s visions. By the 1970s, these commercial workshops (kongbang) dominated the production of shaman paintings, but cheap commercial prints were also available in the shops. The new workshop painters were trained commercial artists, cartoonists or painters of signs and lurid movie house façades rather than visionaries who attempted to give shape in their mind’s eye to gods already glimpsed by the shaman client and conveyed to the painter through a one-on-one consultation (Chang 1994, G; Yoon 1994). Commercial artists work from patterns and copy from photographs and books, including illustrated scholarly publications about shaman paintings; they are not attentive to religious taboos or purifications. For many mansin, possibly most who commission paintings, the manmulsang proprietor acts as an intermediary, taking the order and transmitting it to the workshop, making the act of acquiring a painting a commercial transaction far removed from the country shaman’s visit to a temple bearing a sack of rice. The proprietor of one shaman supply shop described his paintings to Martin Petersen as “just commodities” until shamans call the deities into them in their shrines (2008, 221, 234). Proprietors
acknowledge that all too many apprentice shamans return their paintings to the shop when they fail to summon the gods during the initiation ritual.

It is not difficult to find a manmulsang proprietor who regards this work as just a business, like any other commercial enterprise, just as most contemporary painters of shaman paintings are commercial artists only. But a more varied picture emerged when I interviewed the proprietors of two shops, in each case on the introduction of a well-regarded client with long experience in the shaman world. In both cases, the proprietors described themselves as having a special or divine energy (ki, singi) that enabled them to do this work. One Seoul proprietor, in a conversation that recalled others in Hanoi, described his work as part of an ethical relationship with shamans and gods and his most important role as providing the necessary guidance that the spirit mother who initiates and trains a young shaman ought to provide but that many do not these days. A couple, a musician who played at kut and a woman who was a destined shaman but avoided the calling by doing this work, contrasted themselves with proprietors who lack proper reverence for the gods:

People like us offer a rice cake to the gods on the first day of every month. And before doing business, say we were going to open our shop tomorrow, then today we would make an offering of pig's ribs. We might even sponsor a kut. If we do not make offerings [chŏngŏng] like that then the esteemed gods [sinryŏngnim] will not let us succeed in business. But there are those other shopkeepers who do not so much as offer a bowl of clear water on the first of the month. There are even people who do this work and go to [Christian] church.

I have no way of knowing whether the proprietors’ actions matched their words, but the shaman and the shrine keeper who provided my introductions to them held them in high regard. I do find it significant that in at least some corners of the manmulsang trade, there are those who present their work as something more than just a business.

In the new millennium, most of the costumes, statues, fans, talismans, offering bowls, and incense pots sold in the manmulsang are made in China, and even the workshop painters are being underpriced by Korean Chinese living in the Korean Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China, a reflection of South Korea’s position in the global market. One painter described the products of the Korean Chinese painters as cheap works reproduced over printed reproductions; they are all alike and in that sense not the “real” paintings that enable shamans to effectively venerate their gods. Even so, it is difficult for Korean painters to compete. One shop proprietor related that one of the three Korean workshop painters with whom he still maintains contact drives a cab.

I interviewed two traditional painters who both claimed that although they were not shamans, there was something uncanny about their relationship to the gods they paint. Kim Hwabaek, who paints both for shamans and for Buddhist temples, finds his clients through manmulsang commissions, word of mouth, advertisements in shaman...
association newspapers, and a website. He describes himself as “half a monk” (pan sŏnim) who, in the manner of a temple painter, begins his work by bathing and going to pray in a temple, praying earnestly throughout the work, and marking its completion with another visit to the temple. When he is painting, he does not go outside, for fear of seeing something inauspicious or unsettling, like an accident or a brawl, and avoids other polluting activities, including meat eating and sexual relations. The second painter, An Chŏngmo, is probably the best-known living painter of shaman paintings in Korea, producing for shamans in the Hwanghae tradition of northwestern Korea, who regard owning his paintings and those attributed to his father as a mark of distinction. According to another painter, the gods came out in 60 percent of the initiations for which shamans commissioned paintings from the An family, a very high success rate for a ritual that is often unsuccessful. Like Kim, An approaches his painting in a ritually clean state and observes taboos. He rarely goes out, because his temperance and dietary restraint have limited his social life, and describes himself as living simply and quietly in a manner conducive to focusing his mind and heart on his work.

Both painters see themselves as practitioners of a special and disappearing sacred art. An’s son works for a construction company, and none of the art students or commercial artists with whom An has worked have stayed long enough to approximate the rigorous training he received over many years. Kim does not have successors, and he estimates that there may be no more than ten Korean painters left who do this work. Does it matter? Many shamans—those who have hung workshop paintings, colored prints, and even photographs in their shrines—would agree with the supply shop proprietor who considered preanimated paintings “just a commodity.” Shamans generally agree that the primary factor in the efficacy of the painting is the shaman’s own capacity to call in the god. Most shamans would probably also agree that the painting is an empowered object that must be treated with respect and must be an accurate representation of the god who has chosen to work with a particular shaman. Among my conversation partners, those shamans who could afford specially commissioned paintings insisted that a truly efficacious painting required the work of a painter who had observed all ritual precautions and had poured his soul into the work.

Turning to Hanoi, one finds a long, symbiotic relationship between the city shops and the densely populated villages of the Red River delta that produce specialty goods including temple statues, votive paper, and costumes for spirit mediums. Votive paper is still sold along Votive Paper (Hàng Mã) Street, while Fan Street (Hàng Quạt) now offers a variety of spirit medium costumes, ancestral altars, votive images, and other paraphernalia. Producers and distributors of ritual goods are frequently devotees of the Mother Goddess, and this fosters trust with clients. In addition, I have met statue carvers, votive paper makers, and costume makers who double as spirit mediums with their own private temples, embracing this role in acknowledgment that their entrepreneurial success is blessed by the Mother’s favor (Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2008 and 2010; Nguyên 2006).
The market in sacred goods was attenuated under high socialism, owing to both the lack of resources and the legal consequences of engaging in “superstitious practices.” Votive paper was produced discreetly and in small quantities and was assembled behind the closed doors of out-of-the-way temples for lên đồng rituals. Fearing detection, mediums went to lên đồng carrying only a single costume, disguised as an ordinary bundle, and longtime shopkeepers on Hàng Quá Street recall how, to avoid detection, they would pitch bundles of completed costumes out the window to customers waiting in the back alley. Early in the reform period, carvers commissioned to repair statues in damaged and decaying temples would sometimes have to outrun the local authorities. Today an expansive market in sacred goods travels along networks of supply and demand that are both national and international, bringing silks for spirit medium costumes from China to Vietnamese tailors’ workshops and sending statues, completed costumes, and temple fittings to Vietnamese spirit mediums in Silicon Valley, (see e.g. Endres 2010, 121, 125–29; Endres 2011, 176–77; Fjelstad and Nguyen 2011, 113; Kendall 2011, 109–14; Lê 2007, 508; Nguyen 2006; Salemink 2008).

Votive paper production for both funerals and lên đồng, although it remains technically illegal, is an expanding cottage industry in villages surrounding Hanoi, including places where it was not produced in the past (Nguyen 2006). Different village households perform different tasks, such as molding or sculpting basic forms, painting recycled paper, producing decorations, and assembling the final products. Spirit medium costumes are part of a similarly complex enterprise, with shops along Hanoi’s Hàng Quá Street at the hub, their back rooms filled with textiles, costumes, and a supply of costume parts from village workshops. The village workshop that I visited in 2009 claimed to draw in piecework from another hundred village households and to distribute throughout Vietnam (Kendall 2011, 110–13).

Son Đồng Village, now a part of Greater Hanoi, is known for carving statues and other temple fittings, activities that have resumed and expanded after a hiatus under high socialism. With the demand for statues in new and refurbished temples, other villages have also begun to produce them, and several Hanoi dealers carry their goods. In the recent past, many mediums could not afford wooden statues for their personal temples and used crude wood-block prints of the deities that were activated by a ritual master but regarded as less efficacious than a statue that has undergone a complex ritual animation. (Similarly, Korean shamans without paintings use slips of paper inscribed with the gods’ names.) Relative prosperity and the rationalized production of less-expensive statues mean that more mediums are able to install wooden statues. Spirit mediums and carvers generally agreed that an unanimated or deanimated statue is “just a statue,” not or no longer an agentive divine image, much as mansin in South Korea regard unanimated shaman paintings. Also as in South Korea, these conversations revealed considerable ambiguity about just what a divine image is and the degree to which commoditized production reduces or compromises its sacred potential.

Traditionalist carvers described how statues made according to traditional methods were more linh (sacred, numinous) than statues mass-produced for the market (Kendall,
Mr. Hà, a traditionalist master carver, claimed that because the completed statue will become an object of veneration, he must do his best to make it “as clean as possible,” enforcing workshop taboos intended to convey respect for the gods and insure a good outcome. This included keeping a tidy workshop and prohibitions against bare-chested carvers, cursing or inauspicious talk, the hanging of clothing above the statues, and the touching of statues by menstruating women. He also described a production process punctuated by ritual procedures, from his initial petition of his ancestors and patron deity through a ritual first cutting of the wood to the client’s inspection of the completed statue, offering to the gods, and petition of the Buddha, the Mother Goddess, and the ancestors for permission to bring the statue to its intended altar on the first or second day of a lunar month. I am reminded of the old shaman in Korea hauling her sack of rice to the temple as a form of religious offering to commission a painting. Hà describes his craft as a quasi-religious act, “doing the gods’ things,” and states that a deceitful practice would earn the gods’ punishment (Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010, 80).

With the swelling market for religious goods, some family workshops in Sơn Đồng are turning out ready-made statues of variable quality for sale off the shelves of their own workshops or in the shops on Hanoi’s Hàng Quat Street, and some also accept direct commissions. These workshops seem less concerned with choosing an auspicious day on which to begin carving and are less likely to take ritual measures when they cut the wood for a statue. The proprietor of one such commoditized workshop asserted that so long as the work was of good quality, an absence of workshop ritual would in no way diminish the efficacy of the statue when it was animated in a temple. Dealers, carvers, and spirit mediums recognize clear distinctions between statues mass-produced for the market (hàng cho) with little attention to quality or tradition; statues made to order (hàng đất), which can be commissioned through the shops and are of better quality than the mass-produced statues on the shelves; and statues made according to old processes (hàng thât), which are much more costly. Like Korean shamans, spirit mediums express a range of opinion about how their statues should be produced. As might be expected, old and well-established mediums insist on the necessity of traditional workshop practices (Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010, 76–78, 81).

CONCLUSION

I have made a case for the city as a hub of popular religious activity that is aided and abetted by brisk markets in ritual goods. I have described these markets as marked by the commodification of goods and services, as expansive contemporary markets might be. The rationalized production of temple statues in Vietnam and shaman paintings in Korea has yielded cheaper and more accessible products amid concerns that those who use them are not sufficiently knowledgeable about the tradition they practice. To some, using these new, inexpensive products in place of those produced in traditional ways makes no difference; to others, such products will not work and may cause serious
misfortune. In both countries, practitioners of popular religion complain that temple keepers, master mediums, and shamans themselves have transformed popular religion into a commodity. We could read these two brief case studies from Seoul and Hanoi as teleology about the disenchantments induced by urban life as it moves in the direction of greater commodification and the rationalized production of ritual goods. Hanoi would represent an earlier phase of the nearly full-blown commodification of religious goods and services seen in South Korea. But is this really what is going on?

The Hanoi market in statues and other sacred goods is expansive. Rationalized processes have provided statues, temple fittings, and costumes for a growing community of spirit mediums both domestic and overseas, while the market has preserved a specialist niche for traditionalist statue production. Many artisans and dealers are deeply involved in the popular religious community and describe themselves as subject to a moral code enjoined by the Mother Goddess and Buddhas. Even in Seoul, where most costumes, altar fittings, and props now come from China and paintings are produced by Korean Chinese artisans who have itinerated to South Korea, a precarious niche market in traditionalist shaman paintings persists. Also in Seoul, some painters and purveyors of sacred goods and services maintain personal connections to popular religious practice and to the moral authority of its gods and ancestors. As in Hanoi, this probably earns them the trust of knowing customers. In both cities, the market in ritual goods can only be described as expansive.

Teleology may be the least interesting way of looking at this material and may be wide of the mark if it posits the city as a space of inevitable Weberian disenchantment. The error is in conflating rationalization—a greater efficiency of production—with rationality, an Enlightenment world view that has no place for practices that engage with invisible forces through the deployment of material objects and that Bruno Latour (1993) and Alfred Gell (1998) have famously questioned, each in their own way. Walter Benjamin (1969), who posited a polarity between the magic and mystery of things made in ritual contexts on the one hand and the transparent works of mechanical reproduction on the other, might have given a knowing nod to the cynical statements of contemporary Korean shamans and Vietnamese spirit mediums. He would have found validation in the distance between shamans who acquired their paintings by visiting temples bearing sacks of offering rice and contemporary shamans who transact the purchase of paintings in shops that vend standardized goods or, in Vietnam, between a cosmologically ordered ritual to initiate carving and a rationalized production process that knocks out statues with little attention to ceremony. What might have surprised Benjamin is that the commercially produced paintings and statues and the commodified services provided by Mother Goddess temples and Korean kuttang are intended for sacred and magical purposes in the first instance, that the stakes in using them are dead serious. I have described a bundle of compromises, consumer choices (including commissioning a statue or a painting from a reputable artist), and moral arguments concerning goods and services that have been commodified, all of this taking place inside the frame of contemporary
popular religious practice. Such compromises characterize both spirit medium circles in Hanoi and shaman circles in Seoul and should be recognized as part of popular religion’s continuing engagement with urban life. The discussion is not about the ultimate truth claims of Kut or lên đồng but about whether or not the commodity good or service will work; for practitioners of popular religion in both Hanoi and Seoul, this is a matter of debate. The existence of such a debate may be the most telling feature of this discussion, evidence of these urban practitioners’ continuing engagement with things that are at the heart of popular religious practice.

NOTES

Fieldwork in two places over several years incurs a huge debt of gratitude, which I am only partially able to acknowledge here with thanks to the shamans, mediums, artisans, and shop proprietors who, busy as they were, agreed to talk to me. In South Korea I had the pleasure of working with Dr. Jongsung Yang and Prof. Yul Soo Yoon and with my field assistant, Sungja Kim Sayers. The Jane Belo-Tannenbaum Fund of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and the Committee on Korean Studies, Northeast Asian Area Council, Association for Asian Studies, supported fieldwork in Korea in 2008, 2009, and 2010.

Fieldwork in Vietnam included a consultancy in 2009 and 2010 with the Women’s Museum of Vietnam on a project funded by the Ford Foundation and led by Mrs. Nguyễn Hải Vân and joint research on sacred objects in museums with researchers from the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in 2004, a project codirected with Dr. Nguyễn Văn Huy and funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. On that project, I had the pleasure of working directly with Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm and Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương. Katherine Skaggs, of the Division of Anthropology, AMNH, assisted in the preparation of this manuscript. I alone am responsible for the shortcomings of this effort.

1. A great deal could be said about the distinctions between the Vietnamese bà đồng and ông đồng as “mediums” and the Korean mansin as “shamans.” In brief, shaman implies a relative mastery of the spirits over the relative passivity of the medium as a vessel for the gods. In Vietnam, only recognized master mediums claim the power to exorcise, prognosticate, and initiate new mediums, and some of them might arguably be called shamans, although most Vietnamese scholars resist this association with the religious activities of ethnic minorities.


4. The colors carry symbolic valences derived from the Chinese five-element scheme, which associates them with such things as material properties (earth, wood, metal, water, fire), directions (including center), tastes, and musical sounds. In the Vietnamese Mother Goddess religion, each of the Four Palaces—parallel hierarchies of gods—has its characteristic color (heaven is associated with the color red, mountains and forests with blue or green, water with white, and earth with yellow).

5. For historical background on shaman paintings, see Yoon 1994.
REFERENCES


Can Commodities Be Sacred?


PART 5

MEDIA AND MATERIALITY
In Karachi, where I grew up, there is constant talk in my household and those of my middle-class friends of how in the 1950s our mothers and aunts would go to watch movies without chaperones. They would wear saris showing their bare midriffs, less and less visible in the contemporary public space, and walk without hesitation through the elegant streets of downtown Karachi. Zeenat Hassam, a journalist and author based in Karachi, similarly remembers her childhood in the early 1960s. She mentions how her mother would hand over the younger children to a sister and in the middle of the afternoon take Zeenat with her to meet a friend, who would be ready with her daughter when they arrived, and all four would then walk over to the nearby cinema to catch the matinee show of the latest Indian (or Pakistani) movie.¹

Hassam’s text, published with a series of essays on Karachi, partially explores her childhood in the newly developing middle-class neighborhoods of Greater Karachi. She narrates how as children, she, her siblings, and their cousins could play all afternoon near or far from their homes in the undeveloped plots of the subdivision without any fear or hesitation. This is a representation of Karachi imagined as a space of peace and tranquillity, with fluttering butterflies, blossoming bougainvilleas, and fruit-bearing almond and tamarind trees all over.

Hassam’s nostalgic look at the past is all the more poignant for having been written and first read in the mid-1990s, when Karachi was ridden with intraethnic violence, kidnappings, burglaries, and car snatchings. In contrast to this violence, she offers a calmer past, in a voice tinged with fondness. Such childhood recollections are an explicit

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CINEMA AND KARACHI IN THE 1960S
Cultural Wounds and National Cohesion

Kamran Asdar Ali
topic or a subtext of many essays that recall a Karachi from a period before the explosion in its population in the 1960s, when the city started receiving large numbers of working-class migrants from other parts of Pakistan.²

To be sure, Karachi’s political and cultural history is intrinsically linked with several waves of immigration that have reconfigured the city’s spatial and social politics since 1947. The first massive population increase came in the aftermath of the Partition of British India, when Muslim refugees from various regions of India settled in the city. This pattern continued until the late 1950s.³ A small port city in the late nineteenth century, Karachi grew into a major hub during the Second World War and on the eve of Pakistan’s independence in 1947 had a population of approximately 450,000. At the time, 61 percent of Karachi’s inhabitants were speakers of Sindhi, 6 percent spoke Urdu or Hindi, 51 percent were Hindu, and 42 percent were Muslim. By the early 1950s, all this had changed, as the population in 1951 stood at 1.13 million, primarily because of the influx of six hundred thousand refugees from India. A plurality of the inhabitants were now Urdu speakers (50 percent), and the Sindhi-speaking population had been reduced to a mere 8.6 percent. The Muslim population of the city consequently grew to 96 percent, and the Hindus became only 2 percent of the population. Thanks to their numerical domination, the primarily Urdu-speaking refugees from India soon supplanted the local population (Sindhi) in their grip on the cultural, economic, and political life of the city.

Karachi’s population increased almost 217 percent between 1951 and 1972, the majority of this growth in the 1960s.⁴ The migrants came from a variety of educational backgrounds, social classes, and parts of Pakistan, as Karachi had by now become the major industrial and commercial hub of the country. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and then the Afghan War starting in the late 1970s brought other waves of poor immigrants to Karachi.⁵ These groups populated different parts of the city, including the neighborhoods that were developed in the late 1950s to resettle Karachi’s poor who were occupying the city’s center. These satellite towns were near industrial estates so that their inhabitants could find employment in nearby factories.⁶

The 1970s also witnessed social and spatial processes that are partly reflected in a contemporary politics of consolidation of various communities around the vertical axis of ethnic identification and religious groupings. There is not enough space here to rehearse the history of the rise of various ethnic movements that have played a role in Karachi’s politics in the past three decades. The most important among these groups is of course the Mutahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which emerged in the 1980s and claims to represent the Mohajir (largely Urdu-speaking descendants of migrants from India) population of Karachi.⁷ The early to mid-1990s remains one of the most volatile periods in the city’s history in terms of intra- and interethnic conflict and state-sponsored violence. There have been yet new tensions in recent years as the MQM has encountered the rising Pashtun electoral power and violence attributed to radical Islamists has spiked. This atmosphere of threats and recriminations has led to continued eruptions of ethnic and sectarian violence in Karachi.
Sensitive to this endemic violence, in earlier articles I have explored the contours and possibilities of a future politics for cities like Karachi, which is always on the verge of violent eruption. However, in this chapter I return to an earlier moment in Karachi’s history, the 1960s (the moment that Hassam’s story presents). I argue that the city had gained some distance from partition by that decade, and the ethnic- and Islam-based politics of today had still not overwhelmed its social life. This was also a period when the state used the media (newspapers, radio, the nascent television, and cinema) and the promise of Muslim nationalism to promote its agenda of a common national identity and cohesiveness among an ethnically diverse population. Following the cinema-going habits of Hassam’s family (and my own), I develop the argument through a discussion of a specific film, Behen Bhai, which was released in 1968. I read it thematically, as taking on the task of national integration. This film further allows me to discuss the social changes that the city (and the country) witnessed during the postpartition years and to show how the question of national unity (in an ethnically heterogeneous country) was aesthetically addressed during the rule of the military strong man Ayub Khan (1958–69), with its politics of modernization linked to the state’s emphasis on Muslim nationalism. In the following sections I give a brief overview of the linguistic and cultural diversity underlying the claims of Muslim nationalism and its connections to the story of Karachi in the 1950s and 1960s. I then turn to an analysis of the film in relationship to the city.

THE DIVERSE NATION

Sa’adat Hasan Manto (1912–55), the famous Urdu short story writer, in an introduction to a collection of his short stories published in the early 1950s, looked back at the time he spent in Bombay (twelve years) just before he migrated to Pakistan. He wrote about the city with warmth and a sense of extreme loss yet reconciled to the inevitable fact that he was now in Pakistan. But, he said, coming to the new country was full of uncertainty and anxiety:

No one had given it a thought that after such a revolution things would not remain the same. Whether small alleys would become large highways or their existence would be completely lost, we did not have an answer. Would there be a difference between the governance by foreigners or by those we call our own, about this people were not sure either. How would the new cultural and social atmosphere nurture our thoughts and feelings? What would be the relationship between the state, government, community and the individual? These were issues that we needed to seriously concentrate on.

Manto helps us rethink the moment in Pakistan’s history when contesting voices of uncertainty and confusion, against an emerging nationalist framework, discussed and debated what shape the country’s social, political and cultural life would take in the ensuing years. It was not an easy task, facing the question of how one can think about, write
about, or seek to build a future immediately after witnessing (and in many cases living through) a catastrophe or carnage like the killings, arson, disappearances, and rapes of the partition. Entire communities that until recently had lived together had turned against one another, and the carnage that followed had undermined long-held practices of shared existence and tolerance.

Yet the creation of Pakistan gave its inhabitants access to an imaginary future where Muslimness would be their primary identity. For example, the filmmaker Sabiha Sumar, in a scene from her documentary about women in Pakistan (For a Place under the Heavens, 2003), contrasts the present public arena, where urban women are increasingly donning veils, to that of the newly formed Pakistan. In a voice-over during an autobiographical moment in the film (when she shows a home movie of her family), Sumar asserts that her mother told her as a child that “we are now in Pakistan and we do not need to be veiled—we are all Muslims and the same.” The implicit understanding is that one veils for strangers. Much like Hassam’s rendition of Karachi’s past, perhaps such a remembering of an “unveiled” Karachi of peaceful coexistence is class specific, mostly shared by an emergent middle class that had invested in the politics of Muslim nationalism of the early years of Pakistan’s existence. As suggested above, the subsequent history of Pakistan (and Karachi) in its postcolonial period has been one of contestation and conflict around questions of the national self-determination of various ethnic groups, and the promised or imagined religious (Muslim) cohesiveness and national belonging has never been fully achieved.

Historians have critically analyzed this notion of sameness among the early generation of Pakistanis. David Gilmartin in an important article critically analyzes the employment of the partition events and their transformation into a master narrative of nationalist historiography. Writing about the Punjab (rather than the United Provinces, the heartland of ashraf politics) of the partition era, he argues that Pakistan’s creation was also a partial resolution of the contradiction between the particularism of Muslim identity linked to locality and the construction of a larger Muslim moral community connected to a territorially bounded nation-state. He also says that although the Pakistan movement sought to transcend the divisions among Muslims through the symbol of the emergent state and the formation of a moral sovereign, the diversity of people’s lives and particularistic cultural experiences remained in perpetual tension to this order. The mistrust that the new Pakistani state, wrapped as it was in the ideology of Muslim nationalism, showed toward the diverse aspirations of its people led it to impose a metanarrative of an undivided nation on the populace. One reaction to this political maneuver was the gradual cracking of the constructed ideological edifice of a unified Muslim moral community, especially witnessed during the struggle for Bangladesh’s independence in 1971.

Histories that challenge the unifying aspect of the nation-state, as Shahid Amin reminds us in his rendition of a South Asian event of the early twentieth century, are deleted from nationalist master narratives, inducing selective national amnesia, as these events fit awkwardly into neatly woven patterns. Pakistani historiography, whose major
preoccupation remains the narrative surrounding the country’s creation, gives scant attention to many aspects of national life, such as the emergence of Bengali nationalism. To be very clear, during the struggle for Pakistan’s creation and after its independence, its political leadership emphasized a nationalism of one language (Urdu), one religion (Islam), and one people (Pakistani). The religious facet of Muslim nationalism has been most closely linked with the Mohajirs and the majority Punjabi ethnic group, at the cost of alienating other Muslim ethnic populations, like the Bengali, Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baluchi, that have lived within Pakistan’s borders.\(^{13}\) In this broader context, this chapter presents Karachi, the major commercial center of the country, as a microcosm of Pakistani social life to help us glimpse the unfolding of the nation’s history with all its social and political tensions.

**REMAKING THE CITY**

Pakistan, at its independence in 1947, inherited only 9 percent of the industrial establishment of British India. The state promoted industrialization by providing soft loans and tax holidays and by setting up the Pakistan Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation in the late 1940s with assistance from the World Bank and foreign capital. Because of an early lack of response from local merchant capital, the state also formed the Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC), through which it initiated industrial projects that it then transferred to the private sector at bargain prices.\(^{14}\) The first phase of private industrialization occurred after the Korean War, when Pakistani traders channeled their profits into industrial investment. Special areas were developed in Karachi, such as the Sindh Industrial Trading Estate (SITE) and the Landhi-Korangi industrial area, and their land was sold at extremely generous rates for the construction of factories. Between 1947 and 1955, 774 factories were established in Karachi, representing almost 50 percent of industrialization in Pakistan.\(^{15}\) Linked to the increase in industrialization was the suppression of labor. An example of workers’ living conditions in the early 1950s is seen in a report filed by an International Labor Organization (ILO) representative in 1953.\(^{16}\) According to the report, Karachi was still a city where a large section of the population, being refugees from India, did not have adequate housing. Many among the working poor were living on sidewalks in the center of the city, and the authorities constantly feared mass disturbances and urban disorder.\(^{17}\) The resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees hence became a key preoccupation of Karachi’s urban planners soon after General Ayub Khan, the commander in chief of the army, took over the Pakistani state in 1958.

The military regime opted for a rational urban planning model to lessen the demographic pressure on the center of the city by creating enclaves for the working poor with housing and nearby employment. More specifically, it brought in the famous Greek architect C.A. Doxiadis, who presented a report in December 1958 naming his first project Operation Korangi. Perhaps duly impressed by the generals in charge of Pakistan (Lieutenant General Azam Khan was the minister of rehabilitation), he used military
language in his report, which speaks of invading “hostile territory,” creating a “beachhead,” and even suffering “casualties” to achieve national goals. The war analogy is carried further to argue for a major effort in rational urban planning that would help to create a “reasonable urban way of life in Pakistan” (Doxiadis 1958, 1–2). Operation Korangi, in its plans for “displaced persons” (the official term for refugees from India), was the state’s first attempt at resettling thirty to forty urban thousand families, leading to a larger campaign to address the changing demographic patterns in Pakistani cities due to in-migration from rural areas.18

CULTURAL POLITICS

Along with urban management, the Ayub regime turned its attention to national integration, the major cultural question. While issues related to infrastructure development, the settlement of refugee populations, and national security concerned the state at the time of its creation, debates about Urdu as the national language and Islam’s role in political life continued to play a major part in Pakistan’s internal discussions in the 1950s and 1960s. The state recruited a cultural leadership of artists, poets, journalists, writers, and film producers to “tame” and “harness” particularistic identities (to produce sameness, a unified Pakistani identity in a country that had multiple ethnic and linguistic groups). In this regard, the formation of the National Press Trust and the Pakistan Writers Guild were attempts to bring the intelligentsia around to supporting the cultural policies of the regime.19

One major medium that provided an avenue for this cultural work during this era was cinema. A report by a state-sponsored fact-finding mission in 1960–61 made several recommendations about various aspects of film production, distribution, censorship, and writing. It argued that Pakistani films should be of national importance and patriotic and seek to enhance the reputation of the Ayub regime’s “revolutionary goals.”20 The sycophantic nature of the report aside, the regime’s modernist outlook and changing wealth patterns in Karachi allowed for the growth of an urban-oriented, Karachi-based cinema. Eastern Studio, founded by Saeed Haroon,21 who also started the film magazine Eastern Film, made Karachi into a major film-producing hub that started competing with Lahore.22

I am not going to provide a complete history of cinema during this period, but I concentrate on a particular film, Behen Bhai (1968) to show how Muslim nationalism became linked to modern urban life in this era of developmental politics. Khan’s rule was surely a time of unprecedented growth in the wealth and holdings of Pakistan’s major industrial houses. However, because the industrialization process heavily relied on foreign capital, it faced a major setback when such funds were reduced after the 1965 war with India. Khan’s much-heralded “decade of development” came to an abrupt end in March 1969 when students, intellectuals, the urban poor, and the working classes participated in a massive civil disobedience movement against not only the political bankruptcy of the regime but also Pakistan’s deteriorating economic conditions and increasing inequality in the distribution of wealth.23
The movie *Behen Bhai* (1968), although not financed by the state, can be understood as an attempt to address the question of national cohesion at a particularly volatile juncture of Pakistan's history. It was one of the most commercially successful films of the year and had some of the most popular actors of the time, including the emerging superstar Nadeem, the playful Kamal, and the demure Deeba. The movie starts with partition and depicts a caravan of refugees moving across the tense border. Among them is a family consisting of a woman (played by the veteran character actor Talat Siddiqui) with five children, who most probably was widowed during the partition violence. She sings a song asking for shelter from the almighty ("Ai be kussoN kusson kay wali day day hamain in sahara"). Soon a big storm engulfs the caravan and the family is separated. The children, four boys and a girl, are eventually rescued by different people in the new country. One is given shelter by a physician, one is taken in by the madam of a brothel, a brother and the sister remain together to be helped by a rural family, and the final one ends up in a den of petty criminals. The mother loses her mind and is shown constantly looking for her children.

Years pass, and the mother somehow ends up in the hospital ward of the physician (played by the veteran actor Ilyas Kashmiri), who takes her to his home. A widower, he lives with his grown-up daughter (Husna) and one of the lost sons (Aslam Pervez), who is now a lawyer. The widow becomes the physician's fictive sister. The film then introduces us to all the other grown-up children. One is a pickpocket (Nadeem), another a pimp (Ejaz), and then there are the brother (Kamal) and sister (Deeba) in the village. Through plot twists and turns, the rural brother ends up in the physician's house as well, where the daughter starts to have romantic feelings for him (and his brother is always insulting him). The rural daughter comes to the city looking for her brother and is lured into the brothel where one of her brothers is employed. On realizing where she is and her likely subsequent fate, she sings the song that her mother used to sing. On hearing it, her brother there recognizes her as his long-lost sister. Ashamed of his profession, as he was procuring clients for his own sister, he confronts the madam and a client, who are both killed in the ensuing fight, allowing the girl to escape. Ejaz’s character also runs away from the crime scene and is given shelter by his brother the pickpocket. Eventually the song reunites the entire family, and the lawyer son wins the case for his brother who was accused of murdering the madam and her client. The story ends on this happy note.

There are multiple readings of the film. Its most emotional scene is that of partition and the moment of the nation’s birth, when the mother loses all her children. The storm that tears the family apart can be metaphorically linked to the violence inflicted on women in the era of partition (was it meant to suggest an attack on the caravan during which women were raped?). Let me turn to Manto to explain this further.

In an essay written in the early 1950s, “Mahbus AurtaiN,” Manto takes up the issue of women who were abducted during the partition violence. While the Partition of British
India resulted in the creation of two sovereign nation-states and promised new beginnings for millions on both sides of the border, it also saw carnage, killing, and rape, reminding us of the extreme violence and destruction of which humans are capable. The female body, irrespective of its religious affiliation, became a primary site where communities fought horrific battles to safeguard their honor. Manto, in this provocative and troubling essay, speaks about how, after partition, the divided civilization and culture had to be retrieved and how the remaining creative energies were needed to recoup all that was left, in his opinion, of the wounded and dismembered national body. But the most important task before the nation, he argued, was to recover from both sides of the border those women—daughters, sisters, mothers, wives—who because of the weakness of some and the sexual aggression of others continued to satisfy the lust of their abductors.

Hence we can link the recovery of the mother in this film to the finding of the discarded and fallen by the nation through the father figure, the modern widower physician (a male). The doctor lives with his adult daughter and has a home that becomes a shelter for those who were lost because of the turmoil of history (he also acquires a sister in the process). He surely reminds us of a father figure of the nation (dare I say, the widower Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, who also used to live with his sister Fatima Jinnah and his daughter). Then there is the dispersal of five children (perhaps representing the diverse country) with distinct, ethnically inflected mannerisms. The characters played by Kamal and Deeba (in real life migrants from India’s prepartition United Provinces and Bihar, respectively) are depicted as having a rural Sindh background. The character played by Nadeem lives with gypsies (the actress Rani is his love interest) in a multiethnic poor neighborhood of Karachi, the wardrobe and self-presentation of Ejaz’s character show him as Pashtun, and Pervez plays a modern, English-speaking lawyer. They have all become different, but the audience knows that they all share a history, are children of the same mother, and belong to the same family (nation). Difference is incidental—they are connected through their past (the myth of Muslim nationalism, in which Muslim identity takes precedence over ethnic difference). In this context, Kashmiri’s character (the modern doctor) remains unmarked, the most rational and unaccented, perhaps with a tint of Punjabiness (here one can compare him to Ayub, who came from a Pathan area where the language was closer to Punjabi than in other such places; was part of the military, seen as the most rational branch of the government; as a member of the Punjabi elite spoke an Urdu that is considered unaccented; and tried to take on the mantle of father of the nation after Jinnah).

All the characters’ lives converge in Karachi, the most cosmopolitan space in postpartition Pakistan. As Hassam’s text discussed above also reminds us, not unlike the modern city (Vienna, Paris, Berlin) as it emerged in the West in the late nineteenth century, characterized as a space of opportunity and emancipation, the city in Pakistan by the 1960s was considered the milieu of freedom, individuality, civic rights, and democracy (albeit in a controlled form, through Ayub’s Basic Democracy system of electoral colleges). It is also contrasted with the rural, which remains the space of tradition, feudal
oppression, and superstition. The urban, in a teleological ethos of progress, became the dream of being culturally modern in the Pakistan of the 1960s, with its promise of emancipated lifestyles and bourgeois pleasures (cars, nightlife, marriage by choice).

Along with this desire for the good life, uncertainty is also prevalent in the city, where recently arrived migrants experience changing social relations and a breakdown of support structures (the urban milieu that Doxiadis sought to organize). This painful new form of individuality leads to anxieties about new identities and encounters with strangers (not the same). The film highlights this aspect in a song sung by the pickpocket played by Nadeem (again, in real life a migrant from India), “Kaash koi mujh ko samjhata, meri samajh maiN kuch nahi aata.” It delves into the contradictions of city life as witnessed by the underclass, its lyrics and images speaking about the social and economic divide in the new country.

Let me digress here to make a theoretical point on the moving image and the urban form. The early twentieth-century city constituted a historical and cultural change that manifested a rapidity of movement of people, ideas, and capital. Events at times moved too fast for human experience to keep pace with them. Walter Benjamin (1968) argued that the cinematic image came out of the urban experience. It encompasses such experience in a new aesthetic form where instability becomes the structuring principle. The cinematic image is clearly unstable, as opposed to the stable image of the photograph. It is fleeting and unreliable, and this condition is produced to make us accept multiple stimuli and absorb and respond to them simultaneously. The modern city’s multiple stimuli of a fast-moving world can hence be captured only in this new kind of image, the cinematic image.

Whereas the cinematic image can represent the city in its movement, however, cinema can also give us a reassuring backdrop of permanency (urban landmarks as stable points of reference). For example, a film may use recurring shots of the same location to make the audience feel familiar and comfortable. In Behen Bhai, Nadeem’s song takes us to quintessential Karachi landmarks of the 1960s—the newly built Intercontinental Hotel (with the old Palace Hotel in the background), the National Bank building on Mcleod Road (the newly constructed edifice of state finance in the commercial hub of the city), the Kothari parade in Clifton (a posh beachside area), and Saddar (the center of shopping and leisure activities in those days). It depicts a Karachi that Arif Hasan, who has written on the city’s modern history, reminds us had thirty-seven restaurants, nine bars, eleven billiard rooms, eighteen bookshops, four auditoriums, four discotheques, and thirteen cinemas in one square kilometer in Saddar, its commercial heart, until 1965 (1995).

Despite its critique of class disparities, the song seduces us toward the accomplishments and pleasures of urban life and creates a desire for good living epitomized by the desire to acquire wealth. Embedded in the images are also invitations to touristic voyeurism and a selling of Karachi. Like other famous cities, it is presented to a national audience, which was still largely rural in the 1960s, through a particular presentation of its
landmarks, spaces where Karachiites and visitors would want to get their photos taken during that period, such as the Kothari parade or the Intercontinental Hotel (Abbas 2003). Similar to those old newsreels that showed the state’s achievements (as children we would watch them before the main show), these images, in somewhat more subtle terms, brought people into the fold of the progressive nation-state with their portrayal of the modern built environment and the pleasures of city life. Hence the aesthetics of the city, the lyrics, the story line, and the narrative structure all create a space of fantasy that accommodates not only the joys and frustrations of urban life (the freedom to fall in love, the contradictions of the class divide) but also the common viewer’s desires, aspirations, and possibilities.

The task of producing a certain kind of fantasy further tames the fleeting moving image, by playing on the audience’s familiarity with the on-screen personages (actors) who play roles similar to ones they have had in previous films, a typecasting of sorts. Here we can read Behen Bhai in its intertextual relationship with other films being produced at the time. The audience seems to already know its actors, through their roles in earlier films as mother (Siddiqui), daughter (Deeba), dutiful son (Kamal), caring partner (Nadeem), benevolent father (Kashmiri), and villain (Pervez).

The film further accentuates the urban trope by positing a spatial rupture between the village and the city, the traditional and the modern. Kamal’s character represents the rural and the folk, which a rendition of Pakistan’s national history considers worthy of praise. In a song sequence we see Kamal and Husna move across almost the same landmarks depicted in Nadeem’s song (this time adding Hawkes Bay and Jheel [Lake] Park near Tariq Road, with the newly constructed bungalows of the middle- to upper-class Pakistan Economic Cooperative Housing Society [PECHS] in the background). Along with reiterating the city’s preferred geography and acclimatizing the audience to the urban and its environs, the song “Hello, Hello, Mr. Abdul Ghani” (sung by Ahmed Rushdie and Irene Parveen) portrays the tension between rural life and the urban sophisticate. The song shows Kamal’s character for the first time donning a Western suit, in which he feels uncomfortable, while the physician’s modern daughter seeks to bring him into the world of cosmopolitan lifestyles. In the duet there is a lyrical exchange in which Kamal’s character complains about how we have to call our relatives Uncle and Auntie as older relationships are dissolving (“Mamoo ko uncle boluN, chachi go aunty, rishtay purane sare ho gaye chanti”) and Husna’s character replies that new times require Western food and Western songs and now even the village dweller is fluent in English (“Phar phar English bolai ab gaoN ka rehne wala”). Irrespective of the impossibility of an educated, modern young woman like the physician’s daughter falling for a country bumpkin like Kamal’s character (this truly is a world of fantasy), the main point here is how such scenes play out the developmental ethos of the times. There is a hint of seeking to construct the modern citizen by harnessing the absence of self-control and the excess of passion incarnated in Kamal’s exuberant and uncouth character. The film no doubt celebrates the rural, through the sympathetic depiction of Kamal’s character, yet it also denigrates village life, which one had to surmount to become a modern citizen (his simple ways are not enough for Kamal’s
character to succeed in this new world that is being constructed). As the political theorist Udhay Mehta (1992) argues, to become modern, responsible citizens, individuals need to be embedded in social institutions, especially those of education. It is education (pedagogy), he stresses, that makes natural, untutored imagination (the rural, the irrational, Kamal’s character in the film) submit to conventional authority and social norms. Self-denial, the control of desires, responsibility, and reason are taught and learned, as the physician’s daughter teaches Kamal’s character English and manners to make him a desired citizen of the new nation (Majumdar 2007).

At the end of the film, the first song (“Ai be kussoN kay wali”), invoking the divine and now the figure of the modern physician, brings all the children back into the fold of his house, the nation. This happens in Karachi, the epitome of opportunities and good living, where the mother who has lost her children, and perhaps her honor, can be reconciled with her family. The film shows how a combination of religious faith and modern values intertwined in this new era of progress (Ayub’s tenure) can perhaps bring the fractured nation together (class and ethnic differences are both overcome) and heal its wounds.

CONCLUSION

Of course the city has the underworld, the prostitute, the pimp, the gypsy, and the pickpocket, who survive and flourish in its interstices and negotiate its contradictions in particular ways (as the lumpen characters of Nadeem, Ejaz, and Rani do in the film). In these terms, Behen Bai is a fantasy of the progress that modernity promises us. Yet will this resolution work for the gypsy who falls in love with the pickpocket? How will the class-segregated city treat this lower-class couple in the coming years? Love may overcome class difference in the case of the characters played by Husna and Kamal, but he will have to give up his rural ways and become an English-speaking babu to be accepted into the world she lives in. There is the added issue of the sister: if she is going to be the sharif (respectable) girl that she is portrayed as, then what are her chances of settling down if the knowledge of her having spent a few nights at the kotha (literally “roof,” the brothel) comes out? The city, or the nation, may offer many opportunities to its citizens, but clearly these are not always equally distributed.

The film in its images and narrative structure presents the possibilities of a tranquil Karachi of the 1960s, when an emergent postpartition mostly Mohajir middle class considered the pleasure of coexistence. Such a remembering of Karachi (the potentially unveiled city, according to Sumar’s filmic narration discussed above), with its fantasy of overcoming difference (a difference that in the film is due to the trauma of partition, as everyone belonged to the same family, whose eventual recognition and reconciliation was only a matter of time), perhaps remains class specific, mostly shared, as suggested above, by an elite that was invested in the politics of Muslim nationalism linked to a modernist state in the early years of Pakistan’s existence. Behen Bhai, I argue, remains one of the aesthetic repositories of such memories from that period.
Despite the film's message of creating a unified nation, Pakistan's subsequent history has been one of contestation and conflict around questions of difference (ethnic, sectarian, gendered, religious, or class based). In December 1971 the country was violently divided into two parts, and Karachi witnessed major labor strife and language-based (Urdu) riots in 1972. It is clear that more than sixty-five years after its independence and more than forty years after the creation of Bangladesh, the Pakistani state has been unable to resolve the question of the national integration of its many cultures and linguistic groups.

The recent spate of violence in Pakistan's major cities on the basis of ethnic and sectarian difference has further eroded the idea of a single Muslim ummah, which was propounded in the days that led to the creation of Pakistan. In cities like Karachi, with a high level of endemic social violence, perhaps the art of living together has eroded, and a centralizing authority—or a unifying cultural idiom, as Behen Bhai depicts—that would hold the polity (secular or otherwise) together is not able assert itself. What are the possibilities for contemporary Karachi (or Pakistan), where a diverse multilingual and multiethnic population considers the challenges, pitfalls, and compromises of coexistence? To understand this process of living with disagreement, consider the following excerpt from “Muzzamil the Watchmaker” by the Pakistani poet Haris Khaliq:

His parents would sometimes call Muzzamil, Akhtar
   Oh Akhtaroo, we are Aesup Jai
In our village of Pathans your grandfather was the most respected.
   My unmatched land of Sindh
   With the warmth of a mother’s embrace in its eyes
   Kept on crying blood
When the season of violence came
   Pathans and Biharis fought
   With the killings the markets fell silent
   Curfew was imposed
   When there was no curfew there would be a strike
Survival was difficult
   Everyone was worried
   Gradually some of the shops opened
   And Muzzamil the watchmaker took his cabinet out of the painter Wali Bhai’s workshop
   Scared and hesitant shoppers started to come
There was another attack
   Bullets flew
   Blood would not stop
   Muzzamil watchmaker’s time was up
   He cried out one last time
   Oh Khan Lala, you killed your own
   Can you not see, I too am Aesup Jai?
Khaliq’s important poem captures the ambiguity of identities in present-day Karachi. He wrote it as a tribute to “Mai Dada” by the Urdu man of letters Asad Mohammed Khan. This short story is about a retainer in a Muslim household who is respected as one of the family yet after his death is revealed to be a Hindu. As the story ends in a climax, so does the poem. Both force us to question the fixity of identities and allow us the space to imagine the possibilities of worlds where those we consider our enemies are part of us in profound and meaningful ways. This poem nudges us toward imagining a potential space—a possibility of sorts—of cooperation and mutual support between people of different ethnic backgrounds who seek to share common destinies. This does not mean a world where all problems are solved or where there is blind optimism, but it directs us toward a politics of hope, a spirit of coexistence whereby disagreements can be lived with a general gesture of kindness and tacit concurrence with others about how to get by (Thrift 2005).

My use of Khaliq’s poem is a mere suggestion to creatively think about Karachi at a particular juncture in its postpartition history and a way of pointing out the fractures in Pakistan’s history. It is clear that the rupture and the calamity of the partition created new identities in Pakistan, and the vision of tolerance and compassion that liberals and conservatives alike propagated then—predicated on one language (Urdu), one religion (Islam), one people (Pakistan)—like the one that Behen Bhai depicts (or, for that matter, class solidarity), was an attempted palliative for healing cultural wounds. This remains an unresolved and continuing process.

POSTSCRIPT

What about Doxiadis’s Operation Korangi? In a recent text on Karachi, Instant City by Steve Inskeep, the author goes on an “archaeological” trip to find the model houses that this project built. He perhaps finds one in the densely populated urban poor neighborhood part of Korangi. Layers of other structures had obscured the history of the house and its environs . . . there was also no memory of the project in the area. Much like the politics of cultural integration, rational urban planning had unanticipated ends.

NOTES

3. This discussion of Karachi’s population shift borrows from Hasan 1999.
4. Ibid.
5. During the civil war in Pakistan also called the Bangladeshi War of Liberation in 1971, the Urdu-speaking population of what was then East Pakistan supported the west wing of the country in its political position of denying the Bengali citizens of the country the right of
self-determination. Certain sections of the Urdu-speaking group also aided the military action that the Pakistani government unleashed on the Bengali people. The community consisting mostly (but not entirely) of earlier Muslim migrants to East Pakistan from the Indian province of Bihar eventually bore the brunt of Bengali retaliation and violence directed against the Pakistani government after Bangladesh's independence. Many lost property and even lives, and many resettled in Karachi as refugees (twice displaced in twenty-five years).

6. In the early twenty-first-century, Karachi remains the major port and industrial, commercial, and trade center of Pakistan. It houses approximately 8 percent of the country's population and 24 percent of its urban population (Zaidi 1999, 81). On the one hand, the rich in the city today have segregated themselves in privileged neighborhoods with private security arrangements (a phenomenon that can be witnessed in other parts of the world) and independently managed social services. On the other hand, Karachi’s phenomenal growth has resulted in the maldistribution of civic resources to the poorest of its population.

9. Literally “Sister-brother”; also translated as “Siblings.”
13. However, we increasingly find parts of the Pashtun elite, through their links to the military and civil services in Pakistan, also invested in this interpretation of Muslim nationalism.
17. Although see Qurratul’ain Haidar’s novella Housing Society (in Haidar 1999), about the 1950s, to appreciate how the upper class was allotted lands and accumulated wealth.
18. See Daeshsel 2011 and Hull 2012 for detailed discussions of urban planning in Pakistan during that era.
19. An ex-editor of Dawn (the major English daily) and the secretary of information during the Ayub era (and maybe the ghostwriter of Ayub’s autobiography, Friends Not Masters), Altaf Gauhar and the civil servant and writer Qudratullah Shahab both served the dictator with distinction. Shahab was also the main person behind the Writers Guild, which sought to create cultural legitimacy for the military regime.
21. The youngest son of Abdullah Haroon, a Muslim League leader and the founder of the Dawn Group of Newspapers.
22. Karachi soon saw the addition of a group of educated young men to its film industry, Waheed Murad (producer and actor), Sohail Rana (musician), Pervez Malik (director), and Masroor Anwar (lyricist), under the banner Film Arts Production. There were, of course, other producers of successful cinema in Karachi in the 1960s. But these four stood out with their urbane outlook on life, educated backgrounds, and understanding of new trends in filmmaking. They came together to make Heera aur pathar, Armaan, Ehsaan, Doraha, and Jahan tum
wahan hum, all superhits in the mid-1960s. Waheed Murad's father was Nisar Murad, the film distributor, and Waheed followed in his path. But soon he appeared in a side role in a film he produced himself, Aulad (1961–62). Later he acted in Heera Pathar (1963) as the main lead. The film, directed by Malik, was shot entirely in Karachi, on location and at Eastern Studios. It became a hit and established the four friends as a force in the film industry.

23. According to Amjad 1983 and Burki 1988, twenty-two families controlled 87 percent of the banking and insurance industries and 66 percent of the industrial wealth of the country by the end of the 1960s. Ali 1970 also has an interesting analysis of this period.


25. Sung by the playback singer Mala and loosely translated as “Oh, the savior of the weak, please give us protection.”

26. Literally “caged (or detained) women” (Manto 1990b).

27. In 1960 the Ayub government instituted an electoral college for presidential selection. Its members were the country’s more than eighty thousand Basic Democrats, who were themselves elected on an adult franchise basis and worked at the local level in municipalities.

28. Sung by Ahmad Rushdi and literally translated as “I wish somebody would explain things to me; I do not understand much.”

29. Hawkes Bay is a famous beach in Karachi, and the Tariq Road area was being developed as an upper-middle-class neighborhood in that period.


31. A Bihari-accented rendition of Yousaf-Zai, which is a Pashtun group.

32. The last name Khan is common among people of Pashtun/Pathan ethnicity.

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Religious life in large Indian cities operates in many ways. Among these is the proliferation of small and large places of worship, the growth of new religious movements, emerging relations between political parties and religious groups, old and new tensions among religious communities and factions, and various forms of religious spectacle, performance, and celebration. These phenomena might be described as religious in a straightforward sense.

Cinematic life in Mumbai is also religious in another sense, and this has to do with what we might call cinematic soteriology. By this I mean that Bollywood films represent the city as a site where salvation takes particular embodied and embedded forms. The cinematic version of the problem of salvation is also tied up with the representation of the problems of evil, injustice, and corruption in urban life. Thus salvation in Bollywood cinema can be seen as redemption from forms of darkness and injustice that are both urban and cinematic in form.

There is nothing new in the observation that popular Hindi films offer their own visions of justice, prosperity, and virtue and have done so since the mythological films of the first decades of the twentieth century. What is less familiar is the possibility that popular cinema offers a specific visual and narrative vocabulary through which viewers can experience the logics of salvation in urban life. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that there is value in this reading of the religiosity of cinematic life in urban India, even, or especially, when the topics of such films seem evidently secular.

The population of Mumbai now runs to more than fifteen million, especially if you include the rapidly developing areas to the north and east of the city. It is the capital of
Maharashtra and home to one of the world's biggest film industries, the world's longest-lasting urban fascist movement (the Shiv Sena), and the headquarters of the Western Command of the Indian Navy. It was also India's biggest textile manufacturing center until the early 1980s, when anti-union forces, political thuggery, new textile technologies, and the early phases of globalization and liberalization destroyed this textile universe. The city is multiethnic and multilingual, and even the forty-year history of linguistic xenophobia pushed by the Shiv Sena has not destroyed the life of other languages and cultural imaginaries in Mumbai. At least 25 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty, and half of the population lives in slums. One such is Dharavi, a slum of more than one million inhabitants, which is currently resisting efforts to transform it into an upper-middle-class residential and business enclave and drive out its poor population, which supplies goods and services from rag picking to leather products for high-end brands in the West. Many business and political leaders would like Mumbai to become like Shanghai, a dangerous fantasy that is a way to move the city toward financial apartheid and anti-poor social cleansing.

The battle for Mumbai's future is a battle of dreams. And this battle of dreams is going on in many other global megacities in the global South, such as Manila, Lagos, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Cairo, and Bangkok. But each field of dreams, and thus every battle over these dreams, has its specificities, just as Tolstoy once said of unhappy families. This chapter is a journey through some of these dreams and an interpretation of the stakes in this battlefield. Cinematic ideas about urban salvation take their place in this battlefield of dreams.

For Mumbai's urban poor, life is a constant roulette. The recent hit film Slumdog Millionaire (2008) captures this fact persuasively by using the trope and venue of the Who Wants to Be a Millionaire game. But for most people who live in slums, especially those who live in highly vulnerable housing, the founding dream is the dream of secure housing. Millions of Mumbai's citizens live in shacks, hovels, and other temporary structures, frequently tightly woven together in slums, but others live in different spaces, ranging from aqueducts and tunnels to pavements, railway platforms, and garbage dumps. Their homes are vulnerable to the weather, to the police, to the municipal authorities, to natural and human-made disasters, to criminal slumlords, and above all, to the constant compromise of dignity when family life is lived virtually in public. Mumbai's strongest civil society organizations, some of which I have worked with, are devoted to the struggle for what is called secure tenure for the urban poor and spend a great deal of energy in changing urban policy, law, and politics in favor of providing them with secure housing. At the moment, perhaps one of every thousand underhoused families in Mumbai has succeeded in getting access to housing for the poor with proper legal entitlements and minimum infrastructure. The line is long, and to stay in the queue requires enormous patience and a capability to convert dreaming and hoping into a form of daily politics.

There is also the ostensibly different and dissonant dream that is produced by Bollywood, Mumbai's dream factory, about which much has been written. The dreamwork of
Hollywood is closely connected to the dreamwork of crime in Mumbai, and this space is also connected to a special sort of globality (Mazumdar 2007, 149–96; Mehta 2004, 415–30). Film and crime are tied up in Mumbai even more closely than they were in the golden age of Hollywood, and in the tradition that runs from George Raft to Frank Sinatra and Marlon Brando in the United States. Because the Mumbai film industry still runs substantially on financing that comes from the second economy—which produces unaccounted, or “black,” money—it is one of the known laundries for Mumbai’s criminal underworld and, in addition, is always vulnerable to the world of blackmail, extortion, and long-distance criminalization. For at least two decades now, everyone in Mumbai has known that the city’s criminal underworld is intimately linked with film financing and with the subculture of thugs, molls, and cheap glamour that lies just beneath the surface of Mumbai’s film studios, deal makers, actors, and distributors.

No one exemplifies this plebeian fantasy of Bollywood’s glamour more than the dreaded Dawood Ibrahim, the famed boss of the D-Company, which has been the model for a whole wave of Mumbai crime movies of varying degrees of noirness, ranging from Nayakan (1987) to Chandni Bar (2001) and from Vaastav (2001) to Company (2002). Many of the films produced in Mumbai that are in the gritty realist mode, as opposed to soft-focus movies about youth, love, global travels, or middle-class romance, are interesting because they embody the fantasy of a world without politics and politicians. They imagine a world where police, criminals, and heroes form a triangle and the only real villains are politicians. This is no surprise in an industry that hates the way that the state taxes its revenues, the Income Tax Department harasses its stars and financiers, and the Board of Film Censors keeps a steady gaze on its morality (Ganti 2012, 41–76). For Mumbai’s poor and working-class politicians, these noir films provide a running critique of the criminalization of politics and the politics of criminalization; its grounding fantasy is a fantasy of participation, wealth, justice, and heroism untainted by any form of politics. This is the dreamwork of Bollywood: it is a drama of a Bombay cleansed of official politics, in which power, love, fame, and wealth circulate through force, virtue, and stratagem and not elections, representation, or political parties. This is not a politics of escape, as various derivations of Frankfurt school criticism may suggest. It is rather a fantasy of a postpolitics of image, mediation, and violence, a sort of urban situationist politics.

There is now a rich archive of Bollywood films in which the life of the urban poor is a central motif, and the slum setting of a 1950s Bollywood classic like Awaara (starring Raj Kapoor) seems virtually pastoral in comparison to that of the latest slum romance, Slumdog Millionaire, or a host of recent Mumbai noir films in which slums are the scenes of hyperviolence, hypercriminality, and hypersexualized romance. The dreamworlds of these films and the dreamworlds of the urban poor are linked by the recurrent themes of corrupt developers, greedy politicians, and frequently, the drama of housing, which is also a drama of the streets, since the two are hardly separable in Mumbai’s slums. In one crucial scene in Slumdog Millionaire, for example, when the two brothers at the center of
the plot meet in an unfinished high floor of a skyscraper under construction and look down at the ocean of slums beneath them, one of them remarks that the tall buildings they see have grown right in the heart of the slums where they grew up. In another of the Mumbai noir films, a corrupt developer builds weak structures that lead to building collapses, massive injury, and death, followed by brutal reprisals and retribution.

The nexus of developers, police, politicians, and thugs is ever visible in a series of noir films about Mumbai. We can see in these films that the Bollywood urban dreamscape is not narrowly escapist. It is a populist commentary on a city where people are made and unmade by virtue of houses built and destroyed, mansions for the rich, hovels for the poor, and an ongoing preoccupation with the water’s edge, where freedom, air, light, and love are to be found. True, these are not political films, and they are certainly not part of an organized critique of Mumbai’s housing nightmares. But they are not mere fantasies either. They are a form of cinematic realism into which Mumbai’s poor can insert self-narratives and from which they can add movement, plot, and character to their dreams about new, secure, and sustainable habitation. Indeed, housing is a major site where the dreamwork of Bollywood and the housing dreams of the urban poor come together. If secure housing for Mumbai’s poorest—a roof over one’s head—can define salvation, then it is possible to read a major strand of Bollywood film, from its very beginnings, as tied up not just with urbanity but with salvation. This point needs some elaboration.

The most obvious way in which housing comes up in the Hindi films of the past decade or so is in the depictions of corrupt construction magnates and their ties to equally corrupt politicians, police, and mafias. These portrayals, particularly prominent in the Mumbai crime films of the past two decades, are of the evil forces that define low-quality housing, corruption, and the unavailability of housing for the masses. They are usually fat, cowardly, and venal. On the other hand, some of the most cherished Bollywood characters are slum heroes, street vagabonds, hustlers, and Robin Hood figures, who live in one-room hutments, chawls, or true street-based slums. This tradition goes back to Awaara, in which the great Raj Kapoor combined Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp with the Mumbai slum flaneur. It recurs time and again in a variety of figures, ranging from the lovable Robin Hood types (such as Sanjay Dutt in the beginning of Vaastav) to Hrithik Roshan in the recent remake of Agneepath (2012), as well as a score of Amitabh Bachchan characters who are slum-bred angry young men. This contrast, between evil housing magnates and slum-bred angry young men, is one element of the pantheon of the housing cosmology of Mumbai cinema.

But the housing dreamscape of Bollywood is by no means this simple. In fact, the variety of ways that Bollywood plays out the semantics of the Hindi word ghar reveals the richness of the relationship among hearth, home, family, and native soil in the Bollywood lexicon. Ghar has all these meanings in Hindi, and the cinematic world takes full advantage of this range.

To begin with, the home (ghar) is always closely connected to the idea of the family and is both the mise-en-scène and the primary moral value that underlies the terrain of
Hindi cinema. In some instances, in explicit lines of dialogue, the ideas of the house (makaan) and of the home are explicitly contrasted, with a superior value placed on the home because of its indexical relationship to the family. The home, as the mise-en-scène of the family, is rarely a site of personal privacy. Rather, it is the primary terrain where the social is born, challenged, redressed, and restored. Family relations are invariably domestic relations, and domestic relations always revolve around marriage, motherhood, and above all, the relationship between mothers and sons. In Hindi cinema, it is impossible to separate the house, the domestic world, and the world of primary values and valuation from one another. While the importance of the family and kinship in Hindi cinema has been frequently remarked (see, e.g., Uberoi 2006; Gopal 2012; Dwyer 2014, 184–222), it has not been clearly linked with the spatial forms of domesticity, of which the house is the most important. Both poor and rich are defined by their domestic spaces (hovels, huts, streets, palaces, mansions, and the like). But because the spectrality of housing haunts Mumbai (Appadurai 2000), especially for the poor and working classes, domesticity can be spectral, ephemeral, haunted, and transient.

The spectrality of housing is not just an artifact of shortage, inequality, and exclusion. It is also a product of the multivalent mediatic presence of housing as a site of intimacy, domesticity, and well-being as represented in Bollywood cinema. Mumbai’s poor experience the lack of housing as an absence of well-being in a manner that goes beyond mere lack. It is a lack made more real because of its spectral presence in cinema and its absence in material fact. This is a matter not of causality in one direction or the other but rather of a felt absence, whose fullness Mumbai cinema deepens and intensifies.

This is a good point at which to recall that some of the most important makers of post–World War II Bombay cinema have been from Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and other parts of Islamicized North India and were deeply marked by the events and mythographies of partition. The Kapoor family, which has dominated Bollywood from the days of the patriarch Prithviraj Kapoor to the present-day generation of Karisma, Kareena, and Ranbir Kapoor and has its roots in today’s Pakistani Punjab but also farther back in Peshawar, is perhaps the best example of the lasting effects of the partition on Hindi cinema. Sa’adat Hasan Manto and Kaifi Azmi are only two of the better-known names that brought the experience of loss, division, and a torn homeland to the lyrics and dialogue of postwar Hindi cinema.

Indeed, the emotional associations of home and family are never far from the meanings of the nation, soil, and roots in Hindi cinema, with remarkable continuity from Indian independence in 1947 to today. Thus, though there were some interesting films about partition in the first three decades after 1947, the most popular and powerful on this theme have been produced since 1990 and have revolved around the politics of borders, cross-border romance, terrorism, spying, and politics across every mile of the Indo-Pakistan border, from Kashmir to the Rann of Kutch. The film in this genre that deserves a closer look, though, was made in 1973, was a major bridge between “new” or “alternative” cinema and commercial cinema, and was also a major transition between the socionational films
of the 1950s and 1960s (such as Mother India and Naya Daur [both 1957]) and the borders-
and-terrorism films made after 1990. It is called Garm Hawa, and it captures the vital links
among house, home, soil, nation, and family as few other Hindi films have done.

Garm Hawa is set in Agra and tells the story of several generations of a large Muslim
family. It centers on the problem of Muslim communities in India after independence
and their struggle to find economic and social dignity in a Hindu-dominated world. The
core of the story concerns two Muslim brothers who own and run a leather business. One
of them flees to Pakistan, leaving his brother in grave trouble in Agra because the family
home, which was in his name, is now “evacuee property,” which is taken from his brother.
This also makes it difficult for the brother to find proper marriage alliances for his
daughters and shrinks his sense of a proper location in his own city. At the end of the
film, this brother too chooses to leave India for Pakistan, but en route he encounters a
political demonstration on behalf of India’s poor and joins their struggle. The implica-
tion is that he decides to stay, join the movement, and commit himself to the struggle for
equality and inclusion in India. This brief summary does not do justice to the brilliant
way that the film weaves together themes of nation, city, home, and identity in postparti-
tion India. Above all, it makes the connections among house, home, property, and nation
inescapable, especially for the Muslim middle classes that chose to stay on in independ-
ent India. Garm Hawa is based on a story by Ismat Chughtai, perhaps the most respected
twentieth-century feminist writer in Urdu, who also elected to stay on in the new India.
Her story was considerably altered for the screen by Kaifi Azmi, a major Urdu poet who
was part of the generation that helped to bring Islamic poetic traditions to the scripts and
lyrics of Indian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the 1990s and in the new millennium, numerous Bollywood films have explored
the themes of borders, partition, family, love, and separation, most recently the hugely
popular Veer Zaara (with Shahrukh Khan, Rani Mukherjee, and Preity Zinta), as well as
numerous potboilers about Kashmir, terrorism, and armed conflict between India and
Pakistan. All of these films make the links between home, house, territory, and identity.
What Garm Hawa shows most clearly is that the connection of family, housing, domestic
property, and national identity is based on a grounding narrative that is eschatological
and soteriological in contemporary India, linked to the discourse surrounding the pri-
mary value of the ghar. Other sorts of films take the idea of ghar in different directions
and emphasize different elements of its semantic range: sometimes it is domesticity,
sometimes kinship and marriage, sometimes property and security, sometimes identity
and territory. But it is never mere shelter. In this sense, the cinematic dreams of property
and housing that concern me most are about a deeper sense of the meanings of urban
survival than they appear to be at first sight. They are about space and salvation, insofar
as the idea of the house in this cinematic tradition knits together a series of values that
range from kinship and affinity to shelter and identity.

At first glance, Mumbai might seem far from the experience and memory of partition.
But the partition is woven deeply into the cultural imaginary of Mumbai and of
Bollywood. Mumbai faces the Arabian Sea and Karachi, and many of Pakistan’s most important leaders, including Mohammed Ali Jinnah, had deep roots in Mumbai. The Sindhi community in Mumbai links the city’s commercial world directly to many parts of Sindh, including Karachi, and the attacks by armed Pakistani militants on many hotels and other locations in Mumbai in 2008 violently reawakened the memories of partition. What is more, the geography of Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods in Mumbai is often explicitly connected to the divide between India and Pakistan, with borders, invasions, and attacks within the city during the periodic riots between Hindus and Muslims linking Partition to contemporary politics. Hindi films reflect, restore, and reinterpret partition both explicitly and implicitly in the cinematic geography of Mumbai, in no small part because many key Bollywood actors, directors, and producers were direct products of the division of northern India by the border between India and Pakistan in 1947, as we shall continue to observe.

There is a second major way that Bollywood provides a deep vocabulary about faith, transcendence, and salvation, and this is through a topic that is as fundamental to Hindi cinema as the related themes of family, kinship, and home, the topic of love (Hindi: pyaar, mohabbat; Urdu: ishq). The number of songs, stories, and dialogue moments devoted in one or another way to love is probably only a little less than the number of movies that Bollywood has produced since its beginnings. The topos of love has changed over the decades to include the love of gods and goddesses, the love of mothers and children for each other, the love of siblings, the love of nation, and most recently, youthful love and love in the Indian diaspora. Through all these changes, love in Bollywood cinema has been unimaginable without the important device of song sequences, which are often part of dance sequences, either focused on real or would-be lovers or what are now called item numbers, lavish production numbers with the central feature of an erotic and sexually charged song and dance by the heroine or a supplementary starlet.

In addition to their well-known diegetic function, the song sequences in Hindi films have always contributed a dream element to film narratives, through which they condense, connect, and render plausible sequences that would otherwise seem ridiculously unrealistic. The song sequences are the main equivalent of what we may call the visible unconscious of Hindi films, for they often involve fantasy and prohibited desire, as well as settings, relationships, and outcomes that would be otherwise impossible to develop logically.

Through its role in linking song lyrics with spoken dialogue, the Urdu language has been a key ingredient in the popularity and specificity of the Bollywood formula for most of its history. The scriptwriters and lyricists for Hindi films, especially after 1945, most often came from a small group of serious (if minor) poets from the small towns of North India who had made their way to Bombay in search of work and fortune after the war. Their names include Kaifi Azmi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Sahir Ludhianvi, Hazrat Jaipuri, and then a later generation, often in duos, such as the famous duo of Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar. Even when non-Muslims became scriptwriters and lyricists in Hindi
cinema, Urdu remained its dominant language. An interesting example of the links among Hindu poets, the partition, and Urdu classical poetry is the poet and film lyricist Gulzar, who was born into a Sikh family in what became Pakistan and moved to India at partition. Among his most memorable projects was a film series about the last of the great Urdu poets of the Mughal period, Mirza Ghalib, to whom Gulzar said that he owed his poetic genius.

Rachel Dwyer has thoughtfully analyzed the importance of the Urdu language in shaping the songs, scripts, and dialogue in Hindi films in her masterful study of religion and Indian cinema (2006), an important chapter of which she devotes to what she calls “the Islamicate film.” Her discussion of various Muslim elements that have shaped everything from songs and stories to costumes and historiographies in Hindi cinema is the best of its kind and offers an important insight for my analysis of the soteriology of Hindi film. She notes the importance of the Indo-Islamic couplet called the ghazal for the song sequences of Hindi films, as well as the ways that its Indic form draws on Sufi devotional logics, which blur the lines between earthly romantic love and the love of humans for the divine. Erotic, mystical, and intensely personal, the ghazal is the major link between Hindi film culture and the poetic tradition of the Persian Islamic world before the British. This poetic form and Urdu poetic traditions in general lend to Hindi song sequences and film scripts the sort of depth, allusive richness, and cultural gravity that are hard to imagine in any other mechanically reproduced art form in the world.

The Sufi element in particular and the Urdu romantic poetry tradition in general bring something of the transcendence of the mystical love that unites God and devotee in Sufi Islam to all manner of everyday romance and everyday love in Hindi cinema. This is the reason why romantic love is almost invariably tied up with suffering, loss, sacrifice, and self-abnegation in many Hindi films. To some extent these links exist in other lyric traditions, such as those of early modern Europe, but nowhere are they as highly developed as in the Sufi world, and by extension in the romantic songs and narratives of Hindi cinema. The element that lends to even the most simple and superficial Hindi film plots of youth and romance something of the grandeur of the love of humans for God is their lyric infrastructure, which is essentially tied to the Sufi element in ghazal. This transcendent coloration—whereby human love and attachment to the divine become one and the same—can be seen in numerous films, notably the great ones that depict love, war, and kingship in the Mughal period, starting with Mughal-E-Azam (1960) and most recently revived in Ashutosh Gowariker’s blockbuster Jodhaa Akbar (2008). But this epic quality also comes into the most humdrum film plots, through the suturing power of the romantic song sequences, which always carry the weighty metaphorical and emotional power of the Urdu language and the Sufi ghazal. In this sense, songs in Hindi films are more than a diegetic element. More important, they bring the transcendent element into everyday human romantic bonds, and they do so in the vocabulary of longing, loss, and sacrifice.

The transcendent element in songs and dialogue about love in all its forms—pyaar, mohabbat, and ishq—also makes its way back to the domestic sphere, to the love of siblings...
for one another, of sons for their mothers, of parents for their children, and of husbands and wives for each other. As the transcendent element of Hindi films, love brings house, home, and family back to the discourse of the ghar. In short, both love and domesticity in Hindi cinema, arguably its thematic and narrative pillars, cannot be read outside the deeper preoccupation with those things that we normally take to be signs of the religious in our everyday lives—the dreamlike, the unattainable, the ineffable, the transcendent, and the Real. These two themes are the foundation of what I call the soteriology of Bollywood cinema.

However, Mumbai's dreaming takes many other forms than the cinematic. One that I have already mentioned pertains to the dream of secure tenure for the four to seven million people in the city who live in temporary, illegal, unsafe, or undocumented housing. The short word slum does not capture the huge range of informal housing, whose only common element is that they are not fully documented claims to property and are thus, to one or another degree, insecure. There is a worldwide movement for secure tenure for the urban poor, of which several powerful pro-poor community-based organizations in Mumbai are active members and about which I have written extensively elsewhere (Appadurai 2013, 115–216). Dreaming in this context is deeply political and politicized, since it involves negotiations with the police, with municipal authorities, with slumlords, with developers, and with planners, along with constant friction with the propertied middle and upper classes of the city. Currently in the extraordinary microcity called Dharavi, in the heart of the extended metropolis of Mumbai, about a million citizens are engaged in a huge battle with the state, with global developers, and with local urban planners over real estate that they have developed by infilling marshland with garbage. The state is claiming this land, which is valued roughly on a par with Manhattan real estate, for high-end development, with promises of compensation at prices that are a fraction of the market value and even vaguer promises of relocation and resettlement in unknown places on the edge of the urban sprawl. This dislocation would disrupt a whole host of Dharavi industries, ranging from tanning and leather goods to food, recycling, pottery, and carpentry, and a host of small business operators who provide a major contribution to Mumbai's economy. In addition, Dharavi, which most members of the middle class regard as a cesspool of sewage, poverty, crime, and immorality, is in reality home to more than a hundred highly organized ethnic, occupational, religious, and linguistic groups, which have worked out a complex and durable network of ways to cooperate and cohabit a region of the city where infrastructure and municipal services are of very poor quality. The struggle to resist high-end development has required members of these intricately divided communities to negotiate about their distinct histories of settlement and rights to space and in the process has produced an unprecedented level of shared political cooperation among them. This political negotiation is also a negotiation of dreams, including dreams of the reparation of historical wrongs of many kinds. One example of such dreams is to be found in the Koli community of Dharavi, which regards itself as aboriginal to the area and thus different in its relation to this space from other groups who have migrated to Dharavi within the past century or so.
As in other large cities, it is not only slum dwellers and filmmakers who create and contest dreams in and of the city in Mumbai. Planners and politicians are deeply involved with dreams, and in their cases, the problem of utopia enters the picture. The Shiv Sena, India’s longest-standing xenophobic and neofascist movement, has been part of Mumbai’s politics for almost half a century (Hansen 2001). It is notorious for its negative attitude toward all non-Maharashtrians, its special viciousness toward Muslims and Pakistan, and its violent street politics in favor of its project of Maharashtra for Maharashtrians. It also works through an elaborate strategy of neighborhood-based patronage and service-delivery methods that operate on the thin line between gang politics and civic pride. Its power and influence have waxed and waned in Mumbai, but it has never disappeared as a force in the politics of the city, the state, or even the nation. The Shiv Sena retails many dreams of Mumbai, but for our purposes the most interesting is its longstanding effort to create a sundar, “beautiful,” Mumbai, with a stress on bodily discipline, campaigns against public urination and defecation, and a strange idea of green urbanism. These campaigns and their images and discourses remind us also of the Sena’s efforts to cleanse Mumbai of “ethnic dirt,” especially its Muslim populations. In effect, the clean Mumbai campaigns play with the subtext of a cleansed Mumbai free of Muslims, Biharis, Bangladeshis, Tamils, Malayalis, and other forms of urban dirt. Yet this is not a rural or pastoral dream, since the Sena has an ambivalent relationship with the politics of rural Maharashtra.

The Sena’s dreamworld is also an urban dreamworld, where an army of mostly male Marathi-speaking youth leads the march to an urban paradise of jobs, homes, goods, and services monopolized by the Marathi-speaking working and lower white-collar classes. This dream is linked to the movement for a Marathi-speaking state, which was created in 1956, but it is really about a fantasy city of Marathi speakers purified of Muslim terrorists, Bangladeshis, Bengalis, and other forms of urban dirt. It is in fact part of a complicated negotiation with other forms of dreamwork in Mumbai, about the best ways to balance official and unofficial politics, police power, and organized crime power, neighborhood deals against citywide interests, and the interests of the city against those of the state and the country.

This brings us to the most explicitly utopian of Mumbai’s complex dreamworks, the dreams of planners, designers, and architects who at different times have sought to solve Mumbai’s immense problems with monumental solutions. Among these solutions, some old and some new, are the creation of an entire portion of South Mumbai, the so-called Back Bay, by reclaiming land from the sea; the ongoing effort to demolish slums, which grow back as quickly as they are torn down; the building of flyovers (now more than sixty) to create arteries above the poverty and density of the city; the plans to build sea links between coastal parts of Mumbai that are now linked only by land; and most of all, the
largely failed effort to create a twin city, called New Bombay, which shows how hard it is to enact large-scale utopian design projects in the face of Mumbai's political, economic, and ecological realities. These designs have in common the qualities of abstraction and control, which James Scott identified in his book Seeing like a State (1998, 9–84), and like many state-sponsored dreams, they express the deep desire for a zero-budget start, a fresh slate, a history-free zone that can be remade at will, a planner’s paradise where people obey the rules created by new structures, roads, and infrastructure. In reality, Mumbai always swamps its planners with the realities of its poverty, crowds, commercial hustle, and functional chaos, all of which are realities fed by other voices, other dreams.

Mumbai's battlefield of dreams is no mere museum of fantasies, no mere archive of escape, and no empty superstructure imposed on the urban Real. It is part and parcel of Mumbai's deep politics, which is composed of the tensions between full-blown dreams and their opposition, of lived experiences that these conflicting dreams inform and saturate. In this sense, we cannot isolate dreams, fantasies, plans, and projects from one another. They are all part of the politics of the imagination that provides the fuel and traction for Mumbai's lived complexities. All of these different dreams would like to write Mumbai anew, but it is the negotiation among these dreams that produces Mumbai's Real; this Real is all the more resistant to every one of these dreams because it always falsifies parts of all of them and justifies other parts. We need to unpack this realpolitik of dreaming if we wish to understand how Mumbai survives its nightmares.

The soteriology of Bollywood cinema, as I have argued in this chapter, is not understandable as any sort of escape in this cultural and political milieu. The ideas about salvation that Hindi cinema expresses—in such spheres as housing, love, and justice—are part of Mumbai's battlefield of dreams. In this context, we would do well to recall that religion, throughout history, has not been simply a way for human beings to escape the real. It has also always been a way to measure the shortcomings of the everyday, the mortal, the earthly, and the visible. This need may or may not be addressed for Indian filmgoers by their organized religious practices, which one or another sort of contemporary politics have largely captured. So it is that Hindi-language films, whether we like it or not, remain for many viewers the primary signature of the possibility of salvation.

NOTE

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This chapter analyzes the intertwining of urban aspirations that drive migration to the megacity with religious media practices. Recent work on the anthropology of religion has emphasized the global dimensions of media-sustained religious activism (e.g., Robbins 2009). Against the backdrop of a global megacity, contemporary Twelver Shi‘ite religious activism in Mumbai provides evidence of the importance of global processes of religious mobilization. I draw attention here to the parallels between the motivations behind newer media practices and the aspirational links between globalization and the spread of major religious traditions that emphasize the theme of transcendence. While there is a large literature on the role of contemporary media in processes of globalization—ranging from theorizations of “time-space compression” (Harvey 1989) to considerations of a media-sustained global imaginary (Appadurai 1996) that makes faraway desirable places and possible lives part of everyday sociality—the study of religion has only recently taken what some have called a “media turn” (Engelke 2010). In this strand of research, scholars are investigating the intrinsic links between media and religion, conceived as an interaction between religious practitioners and a religious otherworld, however conceived. Media form an integral part of these interactions, which many people seek to enhance in the present day, hoping for more direct relationships with the divine through the deployment of the latest media technologies. Religious media uses among Mumbai Shi‘ites illustrate this dynamic but also show how the theme of more direct relationships with divine sources of authority exhibits close parallels to how those of migrant background envision their move to the megacity. Media practices are not just domesticated into the established
ritual dimensions of Twelver Shi’ite Islam and the processes of religious mediation they are part of. They also integrate Mumbai Shi’ites into long-distance networks of migration between North India, Mumbai, and the Persian Gulf. In the process, more standardized forms of Twelver Shi’ism have grown, as the influence of networks of marja’iyaa, linking Shi’ites to high-ranking scholars and clerics in Iraq and Iran, has increased. This simultaneous connecting to the divine in seemingly more immediate ways and tighter integration into transnational networks of religious authority through media practices testifies to the close links among religion, media, and the global, links that are especially evident in Mumbai as a megacity.

The religious dimensions of globalization have drawn sustained scholarly attention only relatively recently. Not infrequently, scholars have cast them in a reactive relationship to what many consider the core of globalizing processes, the spread of neoliberal capitalism. Several have assumed that in a globalizing world, strongly perceptible religious practices and identifications have to be understood as stress symptoms among marginalized people whose lifeworlds have become increasingly uncertain and disrupted through processes of globalization. This argument is especially prominent in the study of “fundamentalism” understood in such a reactive sense (Habermas 2003, 32; see also Castells 2004; Roy 2004). But more recent anthropological work on globalization has returned to a more Weberian perspective on the relationship between the religious and the socioeconomic, one in which the religious dimensions of the global play a key role and are taken seriously as driving forces of globalization (Rudnyckyj 2009). Anthropologists have emphasized that increasing numbers of people are interpreting their position and their aspirations in a globalized world at least partly through a religious lens. For example, Joel Robbins (2009) has stressed the homologies between the division of the globalized world into centers and peripheries and the cosmologies posited by some major religious traditions, such as Protestantism. According to him, religious cosmologies that resemble the center-periphery structure of such a world constitute an increasingly attractive frame for making sense of situations of being stuck in a periphery and wanting to reach the desired-for global centers.

It is highly tempting to approach religious activism in Indian megacities in a manner informed by these recent reformulations of the relationship between religion and globalization. Nowhere do such discussions of religion and the global appear more relevant than in the most globalized of all Indian megacities, Mumbai, which for decades has experienced massive migration from peripheral rural areas of India and has been the site of major religious mobilizations. Indeed, contemporary forms of religious activism often emerge from the conditions of urban modernity (Burchardt and Becci 2013), such as the availability of modern education, dense spaces of public visibility and urban soundscapes, and especially the practices of circulating discourse and images linked to them (Coleman 2009; Oosterbaan 2010). Religious activism in the most diverse settings increasingly draws on the techniques of mobilization associated with public spheres (Meyer and Moors 2006; Larkin 2008).
In this chapter I address links between such religious mobilizations and globalized urbanity, drawing on my research among Twelver Shi’ites in Mumbai, with their dense transnational networks. The salience of religious mobilizations in colonial and postcolonial India has often been remarked on and can be traced to a number of interconnected genealogies. Scholars have attributed the significance of religion in Indian anticolonial nationalism and postcolonial politics to a reactive engagement with the superiority of the British colonizer in the political, economic, and scientific realms (Chatterjee 1993). Anthropology and history have also contributed much to an understanding of the role that both Indian intellectuals’ selective appropriation of orientalist scholarship and Western fascination with Indian spiritualities played in establishing religion as a central focus of nation building and anticolonial activism (van der Veer 2001). Religious festivals and processions became a principle means of claiming public space and public recognition not just for emerging communities but also for political activism (Freitag 1989). Religion has also been a privileged space for the self-expression of a Western-educated middle class, an unintended result of what Christopher Pinney (2009) has called “iatrogenic religion and politics.” Strict colonial censorship aimed at the suppression of post-1857 indications of dissent and sedition in print media drew activists toward the putatively traditional and customary sphere of religious imagery, which aroused lesser degrees of suspicion among colonial censors. This nexus of religion and media is a main focus of this chapter, and the spread of media infrastructure has played an important role in recent processes of globalization that have further contributed to the salience of religious practices and identifications in postcolonial Indian politics. Scholars have amply documented how the availability of the latest audiovisual technologies has intensified religious mobilization in the most diverse settings around the world (see Eisenlohr 2012 for a recent overview), including India, where it has occurred against the background of the liberalization and weakening of state control over broadcast media (Rajagopal 2001).

Therefore, in a discussion of contemporary religious mobilizations in Indian megacities such as Mumbai, is it impossible to overlook the significance of media practices. That media practices are an important part of religious practices is to be expected, since religions constitute traditions of interaction between religious practitioners and a realm of the spiritual or supernatural, however conceived. Depending on the particular traditions involved, such interactions can be understood as mediating either between entirely separate worlds, such as in communicating with a realm of the transcendent, or between the two poles of a continuum. The forms of mediation between these different poles or worlds that are intrinsic to religious practice and doctrine necessarily involve media in their technical aspects, such as scripture, images, and now also contemporary audiovisual media and the internet (Engelke 2010; Stolow 2005). Once one takes note of mediation and its technical aspects as intrinsic parts of religious practice (de Vries 2001), the burgeoning of religion in uses of the latest media technologies, such as audiovisual technologies and the internet, comes as no surprise. Several scholarly disciplines also consider the advent and spread of new media technologies one of the main forces of
globalization, a chief means of time-space compression and instantaneous circulation of discourses and images across borders. While such dynamics are certainly important in guiding contemporary media practices, anthropologists of media have pointed out that peoples’ uses of media also have to be understood in terms of a diversity of stances and appropriations that depend on local contexts (Abu-Lughod 2005; Mankekar 1999).

MUMBAI SHI‘ITES AND THEIR ASPIRATIONS

Muslims in Mumbai are highly diverse and do not constitute a coherent community. Muslim traders played key roles in the rise of the city to the status of a major economic, administrative, and transport hub of the British Empire and have been among its longest-established inhabitants. Many are of Gujarati origin and are followers of various Shi‘ite traditions, such as the Isma‘ili Khojas and Bohras and the Ithna Ashari (Twelver) Khojas, but Sunni Gujarati traders such as the Kutchi Memons have also been prominent in positions of trade and leadership. These groups were closely linked to the rise of Bombay as India’s economic capital and finally as a global city, and they spread throughout the Indian Ocean region to the countries of the Persian Gulf, eastern and southern Africa, Madagascar, and the Mascarene Islands, maintaining dense links of kinship, intermarriage, trade, and religious affiliation. These multiple long-distance connections also sustained a dynamic religious economy of competing Islamic traditions and shrine-based networks that sought followers among the rapidly rising migrant population in Bombay (Green 2011). Since the nineteenth century, vast numbers of North Indians have migrated to the city to work in the textile mills that used to be its industrial backbone or to take up other employment. Among these migrants from rural and small-town backgrounds were many Muslims, who have long greatly outnumbered Muslims in the established trading communities of Mumbai, with whom they share a major religious tradition but from whom they are set apart by boundaries of class, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, since the North Indian migrants and their descendants are predominantly Sunni, while the established trading communities mostly comprise Shi‘ites. This migration from the north greatly accelerated after independence and to this day shows no sign of abating. In all, approximately 19 percent of Mumbai’s current population are Muslims, whose prominent role in the city greatly diminished after independence and partition and who suffer from the severe marginalization and discrimination that Indian Muslims in general have experienced since 1947.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid in the North Indian city of Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists in December 1992 was a dramatic turning event that led to riots across India, including Bombay, and to pogromlike attacks in Bombay in January 1993 that killed more than a thousand Muslims and injured many more (Hansen 2001b; Masselos 1994). Large numbers of Muslims lost their homes and businesses through destruction or expulsion in this period, and about 250,000 fled the violence, moving from mixed areas to parts of the city with a Muslim majority, many of them never returning to their old
homes. This ghettoization and marginalization were exacerbated by the 1993 bombings (Rao 2007) with around three hundred victims in the city’s business district and other locations that were widely attributed to the gang of the notorious and quasi-mythical Dubai- and Karachi-based gangster Dawood Ibrahim and were considered retaliation for the anti-Muslim pogrom some months before. Ever since these attacks, the authorities have treated the predominantly ghettoized Muslims as a unified security problem, a position reinforced by the 2006 suburban train bombings and the spectacular November 2008 terrorist attacks on some of Mumbai’s most prominent landmarks. In fact, Pakistan-based Muslim militants were responsible for the latter. Along with the securitization policies imposed by the local and national governments, the largely marginalized Muslims have been on the losing side in the intense contests and struggles over urban space and housing for which Mumbai has become notorious in the academic and non-academic literature, including their violent and criminal dimensions (Appadurai 2000). However, the Hindu middle classes often associate Muslim neighborhoods with mafia-like activities, terrorism, and other forms of crime, this stigma further reinforcing Muslim ghettoization and marginalization.

Much of the literature on Mumbai Muslims has focused on how they, especially the women, have tried to cope with the aftermath of traumatic violence and ongoing forms of severe spatial and socioeconomic exclusion (Chatterji and Mehta 2007; Contractor 2012; Khan 2007; Nilesh 2011; Rajan, Dhanraj, and Lalita 2011; Robinson 2010). The renaming of Bombay as Mumbai in 1996 under pressure from the Hindu nationalist and Maratha regional chauvinist party Shiv Sena, whose followers were among the main perpetrators of the anti-Muslim pogrom of 1993 (Hansen 2001b), was an attempt at not only “provincializing the global city” (Varma 2004) but also downplaying the key role of cosmopolitan Muslim networks of trade, migration, and religious activism in the rise of Bombay. On the other hand, the large shadow of Hindu nationalist violence, securitization policies, and ghettoization does not always feature prominently in intra-Muslim debates on religious authority, morality, and identity or more generally in the socioeconomic and religious aspirations that bring Muslims to the city and that in many ways organize and guide their lives there (Hansen 2001a; 2001b). Indeed, one of the most remarkable findings is the disjuncture between the expectations among many researchers that the recent history of majoritarian violence and marginalization directed against Muslims in Mumbai must play a crucial role in their sense of belonging, and the relative absence of a threatening Hindu other in the production of identities and internal debates among local Muslims, who seem to be more concerned about deep sectarian differences and contesting claims of authority within what outsiders typically conceive as a Muslim community.

Many of the conversations I had during my research among Twelver Shi’ites in Mumbai confirmed this dynamic. Instead of positioning themselves and their aspirations in contrast to a Hindu other, most of my interlocutors appeared more worried about intra-Muslim sectarianism and what they perceived to be intense and troubling anti-Shi’ite
campaigns conducted by Muslim opponents they referred to with the blanket term Wahhabi. With this they designated not only Wahhabi- or Salafi-affiliated Sunni Muslims and the Indian groups linked to them, such as the Ahl-e Hadith, all of which are represented in Mumbai, but also more mainstream purist Sunni reformists, such as the Deobandi-affiliated Tablighi Jama’at, which are also known for their rejection of Shi’ism. In some ways, this is an aspect of global Muslim politics that Mumbai Shi’ites partake in. They have certainly played a role since the beginnings of Bombay as an imperial hub, and they have become only more relevant with the strengthening of major orthodox traditions of Islam and their global networks in recent decades. On the other hand, there is an important, specifically Indian context to this assessment of purist Sunni Muslims as the principal threatening other and the main danger for Shi’ite aspirations. Several of my Shi’ite interlocutors voiced a distinct patriotism grounded in their consideration of India as a favorable environment for Shi’ites because of its marked religious pluralism and the freedom it provides to publicly cultivate Shi’ite traditions, practices, and identities, unlike many other parts of the Muslim world. The repeated instances of anti-Muslim violence and overall Muslim exclusion and marginalization in India seemed at times to be less relevant to them than the laudable absence of specifically anti-Shi’ite violence and discrimination, especially in comparison with neighboring Pakistan.

Just as Muslims in Mumbai are highly diverse, the same is true of Shi’ites in the city. While the large majority originated from northern India, long-established trading communities dominate their elites. These are largely Isma’ili (Nizari and Musta’li), such as the Agha Khani Khojas and the Dawoodi Bohras. Among Twelver (Ithna Ashari) Shi’ites, another Gujarati trading community, the Ithna Ashari Khojas, and an Iranian trading community locally known as Mughals—whose founders migrated from Qajar Persia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and whose members have in the meantime largely moved into the real estate, restaurant, and construction businesses—play such roles (Masoudi Nejad 2012). They have established and control most Twelver Shi’ite institutions in the city and are markedly different in class and ethnicity from the Urdu-speaking Twelver Shi’ites of North Indian background, who are mostly of syed but also of ansari caste background and who constitute the large majority of Twelver Shi’ites. The latter have moved to Mumbai from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, especially since independence, and are overwhelmingly poor. However, some, such as the Rizvi builder family, have prospered and have invested part of their wealth in building religious institutions, so that even among Twelver Shi’ites the networks of religious trusts, mosques, imambaras, and educational and charitable institutions have become rather diverse. All of these institutions are part of larger transnational networks of religious authority in the Shi’ite world that center on affiliations, financial and institutional ties, and relationships of accreditation with senior scholars recognized as marja’-e taqlid (sources of emulation) and the foundations they direct. In Mumbai, as in India as a whole, Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf is by far the most influential marja’, but the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, is also vying for followers and influence among Twelver
Shiʿites in Mumbai, through religious foundations and organizations tied to the leadership of Iran.

The older Twelver Shiʿite trading groups have long led a trend toward greater standardization and orthodoxy, which has had a major impact on the religious practices of the poorer Twelver Shiʿites originally from rural or small-town Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This trend has its origins in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century transformations of religious activism in colonial India connected to the emergence of a modern public sphere. In North India, the British termination of the Shiʿite dynasty of Awadh after the rebellion of 1857 ended court patronage for ‘ulema and Shiʿite institutions of higher learning, leading to a profound crisis in Shiʿite religious life. However, by the end of the nineteenth century a new generation of scholars had successfully positioned themselves as guides of a large Indian Shiʿite public, while new Shiʿite institutions of learning, publishing houses, and volunteer movements were increasingly visible (Jones 2012). The postpartition situation was again one of upheaval and crisis, mainly because of the departure of the wealthiest and most prominent Shiʿite zamindars to Pakistan and the economic decline of the remaining community in newly independent India. Nevertheless, there was a pronounced turn toward more visible piety and orthodoxy in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, this time more strongly connected to transnational networks of marjaʿīyya (the Shiʿite religious establishment). One reason for this intensifying of long-distance links was that in marked contrast to the situation before independence, after 1947 few Indians were able to attain the highest rank of marjaʿ in the world of Twelver Shiʿite Islam (222–23). For Mumbai Shiʿites, the closer integration into transnational networks of marjaʿīyya is also tightly connected to Mumbai’s role as a global city. Long-distance migration and its resulting ties both in India and transnationally, especially labor migration to the Persian Gulf (Hansen 2001a), have contributed to this development. In their display of pious cosmopolitanism centered on a major transnational religious tradition, members of the established trading elites have become important role models for the majority of Mumbai Twelver Shiʿites of rural or small-town background. This cosmopolitanism also constitutes an alternative vision to the severe forms of exclusion and marginality that many of them have experienced as Muslims in the city and in India generally.

Let me give an illustration from my ethnographic work among Twelver Shiʿites in Mumbai that speaks to the intersection between religious mobilizations and socioeconomic aspirations in this global city. One of my main interlocutors, a man in his early fifties whom I’ll call Jafar, in contrast to many others has realized many of the ambitions that draw migrants from different parts of India to the city. Brought to Mumbai as a child from the rural Azamgarh district in Uttar Pradesh (UP), where members of his extended family still live, he has managed to build a small construction supply and scrap metal business that is not only able to feed his family in the city but also enables him to support relatives back in eastern UP. Some years ago, he moved from Mumbra, a poor and remote suburb with a large Muslim population, to a satellite town with a mixed population in
Greater Mumbai. Compared to structurally neglected Muslim-majority neighborhoods and communities not only in Greater Mumbai but also throughout India, this new location offers more amenities and educational opportunities for his children. For example, Jafar was able to get building permissions and a bank account only after moving away from Mumbra. His socioeconomic rise has gone hand in hand with a greater involvement with religious orthodoxy. He has set up a Shi’ite association (matami anjuman) in his neighborhood, having added a floor to his house to accommodate it. Such neighborhood guilds are common among Shi’ites in Mumbai. They not only organize ritual activities during the month of Muharram (the name of such guilds derives from matam, a cover term for various forms of self-flagellation that are part of these commemorations), such as erecting sabil (decorated stalls with water fountains or dispensers in memory of the victims of Karbala, whom their enemies deprived of access to water), organizing processions, and setting up sound systems for the playing of devotional poetry and speeches. They also often comprise Twelver Shi’ites of the same regional origins, thus linking ritual action to the particular places of origin of the migrants.

Jafar’s elder brother has migrated to Dubai, while one of his daughters is now married to an imam who obtained an Iranian scholarship to be trained in the Iranian shrine city and center of religious learning Qum, where Jafar’s two grandchildren have been born, which is a cosmopolitan foreign link he proudly cherishes. Because of the economic success of his family, Jafar’s father was recently able to go on a pilgrimage to the holy Shi’ite sites of Mashhad, Qum, Najaf, and Karbala in Iran and Iraq. Importantly, Jafar has not only financially supported the extended family back in UP but has also built small religious structures there, replicas of an aramgah (place of rest) for Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet who perished in the Battle of Karbala in 680, and of a rauza (mausoleum) for Hazrat Abbas, Hussain’s half-brother and another victim of the battle. These are, as he said, “investments that bring true value.” Jafar’s life history is one in which migration to a global megacity, socioeconomic mobility, and growing involvement in a major religious orthodoxy have gone hand in hand, and they increasingly shape his relationship with the rural periphery in UP that he left behind years ago. For him, the religious investments in his home community in UP are a means of creating long-term value in a context of moral and economic uncertainty and volatility, a dynamic that is widely attested among other Muslim migrant groups outside India, such as the Mouride networks extending from Senegal to other parts of the world (Buggenhagen 2010). This entanglement of religious striving and other social aspirations is hardly exclusive to the postcolonial world, but it is especially relevant there, since the ideal moral and ordered universe and conduct of life that its practices aim at stand in stark contrast to the realities of postcolonial governmentality (Marshall 2009, 14). This is a point that deeply resonates with the context of Mumbai, where state sovereignty intermingles with multiple informal sovereignties on the local level (Hansen 2005), producing a gray zone dominated by informally or semiformally politically connected actors who mediate in often illegal ways between state institutions and marginal populations primarily conceived as caste or
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religious groups (Chatterjee 2004). Muslim men in Mumbai have developed a variety of strategies and models of selfhood in response to these challenging circumstances. They range from plebeian assertion centered on the manly bravado and toughness often associated with the figure of the *dada* (a local strong man with a reputation for violence and success in illegal activities) to pious and more respectable transformations of the self through engagement with Islamic reformist or activist movements (Anand 2008; Hansen 2001b). Clearly, Jafar’s conduct of life evokes the latter image of selfhood. In the next section of this chapter, I focus on one particular aspect of such pious transformations and aspirations to live lives seemingly more connected to centrally located places in a globalizing world. Media practices are highly relevant to the Shi’ite religious mobilizations I am concerned with here and play a key role in accounting for the links between religion and globalization.

**URBAN ASPIRATIONS AND MEDIA**

Uses of contemporary media technology play crucial roles in the link between global dynamics and political theologies, as they testify to the intermeshing of urban socioeconomic aspirations and religious mobilizations. Media practices among Muslims in Mumbai are also diagnostic of the intersections between those ambitions that can be located in the frameworks of globalization. Media practices, in particular those linked to contemporary electronic media, have a capacity to shape senses of being in time and space. They do so by enabling experiences of minimizing temporal and spatial distance to the point that from a phenomenological perspective, such media, if operating in expected ways, may sometimes seem to erase themselves in the act of mediation, affording seemingly direct and immediate access to worlds and interlocutors far removed in time and space, in a movement from “here” to “there.” This dynamic in turn feeds into the cosmologies of center and periphery that are at the heart of the globalized world and in which those on the periphery are looking for means to reach the desired centers. The migration of poor Shi’ites from rural and small-town northern India to Mumbai can certainly be understood as a movement from a global periphery to a global center that has coincided with religious mobilizations, and modern media practices play a key role in both processes.

In Mumbai, the importance of contemporary media practices for religious mobilizations in an urban environment is highly visible. There is above all the multitude of “small media,” such as cassettes formerly and now CDs and DVDs, through which Muslims in the city circulate religious performances, speeches, and other content. Among Twelver Shi’ites in Mumbai, these are recordings of the devotional poetic mourning genres of *marsiya* and *nauha*, which commemorate the tragic events of the Battle of Karbala and in emotionally charged ways express deep sorrow for the death of Hussain and other members of the family of the Prophet who perished in the battle or in its aftermath. Audio or audiovisual recordings of the sermons and speeches of well-known Shi’ite ‘alim
are also popular. Many Shi’ites in Mumbai, for example, listen to CDs of these poetic genres performed at devotional gatherings known as majlis (plural majalis; Qureshi 1981) or view and listen to parts of such performances on local Shi’ite cable television networks, on video CDs, or by downloading such recordings from the internet. Indeed, in the past thirty years, newer media have played an important role in creating an awareness of and a much greater public visibility for Twelver Shi’ite orthodoxy. Some of my older informants pointed out how among working-class Shi’ites in Mumbai, the everyday listening to film songs became a contested activity and was at least in part replaced by listening to such Shi’ite devotional media. The growth of religious audiovisual media use among Shi’ites in Mumbai has gone hand in hand with a greater influence of more standardized forms of religious tradition. For Twelver Shi’ites in Mumbai, this means that doctrines and practices explicitly authorized by leading clerics in the world of Shi’ite Islam who can claim the status of marja’-e taqlid have become much more central to religious and social life.4

One key characteristic of such media use is that the genres and the sensibilities stirred while attending a majlis as a devotional event held at a particular time extend to other, more everyday settings, enabling a cultivation of the emotions and moods that characterize the live performance of the event. In multiple respects, performance is indeed the key term here, because by listening to the mournful genres of the majlis, the listener ideally becomes powerfully transformed by the sorrow and highly charged empathy that the ritual and poetic commemoration of the tragic events of Karbala provoke (Pinault 2001; Schubel 1993). Tears and feelings of mourning for the virtuous members of the ahl-al bayt (the family of the Prophet) who suffered and were murdered at Karbala will turn those subjected to the performative effects of the majlis into better Muslims, who through their bodily experienced attachment to the family of the Prophet will gain enormous spiritual merit (sawab). In many ways, devoted participation in a majlis involves a spiritual journey from “here” to “there,” a vivid and visceral experience of revisiting the events of Karbala as if one had been present there oneself.5 Such performances remain linked to the periodic ritual contexts they have traditionally been part of, especially in the month of Muharram, culminating in the large public ‘Ashura commemorative processions of the tenth of that month. These processions play a key role in marking certain parts of the city as specifically Shi’a, thus contributing to and exemplifying urban processes of “religion tak[ing] place” (Burchardt and Becci 2013), while the ability of actors capable of crossing the internal boundaries of a highly segmented city to read such performances and their material signs is also part of what Hansen and Verkaaik have called “urban charisma” (2009). At the same time, these dramatic performances, with their turning of urban space into Shi’ite localities, publicly affirm the right of Muslims to be recognized as belonging to Mumbai, a claim that Hindu nationalists and Maratha regional chauvinists have violently denied in recent decades. In Mumbai these processions also involve highly dramatic displays of mourning, and in the part of the commemorations that one of the religious foundations of the Iranian Shi’ite community

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organizes, they also feature reenactments of events that occurred at Karbala (Khan 2003). Sound and video recordings of such performances enable them to transcend their received ritual contexts and become integrated into everyday life activities. At the same time, listening to and viewing such recordings often extends the witnessing position that participants in majalis inhabit vis-à-vis the events at Karbala. The desire to gain a more straightforward connection to the events at Karbala through modern media technology points to the widespread paradox of religious practitioners in the contemporary world seeking more direct, “immediate” connections to spiritual authorities through the deployment of ever more complex technical apparatuses (Eisenlohr 2009).

The bridging of the temporal and spatial gap to the events at Karbala in 680 is thus a process of religious mediation in which religious practitioners undergo a rapprochement with a religious otherworld, and media—with their technological and material dimensions—provide the indispensable infrastructure in which this process can unfold. At the same time, religious media such as audio and video CDs with devotional content sustain long-distance transnational networks in the Shi’ite world by disseminating images of marja’iyya and authoritative discourses and statements from religious authorities. There is also a plethora of audio and video CDs circulating that feature recordings of majalis and lectures performed among Shi’ite migrant communities of Indian and Pakistani origin in the United Arab Emirates and Great Britain. Listening to and watching these recorded events is a way of experiencing reformist and contemporary Shi’ite traditions connected to networks of marja’iyya as a web of global linkages, increasing the association of these traditions with more centrally important parts of the world that contrast with the rural or small-town North Indian hinterland left behind for the promises of the megacity.

But contemporary Shi’ite media practices also comprise the watching of television programs that provide direct guidance in practical self-fashioning. In the predominantly Shi’ite south-central neighborhood of Dongri, World Islamic Network (WIN), a Shi’ite media center that began with the distribution of Islamic books and brochures and free evening tutoring sessions for high school students, not only produces and disseminates “small” devotional media such as video and audio CDs, largely recordings of majalis and lectures, but also runs a website and a cable-television channel with its own production facilities. Younger people especially are interested in question-and-answer-style programs with Shi’ite ‘ulema and more “rational” programs that approach social issues and life problems from an Islamic perspective. In terms of aesthetics and forms of participation, these programs are very different from recordings of devotional events centered on lamenting the events at Karbala. The latter are highly emotional performances that are geared to awake powerful feelings of grief and attachment in those who witness them. In contrast, the more “rational” programs, as some of my Shi’ite interlocutors referred to them, are much more sober and professional in their appearance, mainly feature deliberative engagement, and are more popular among younger viewers. As one of the producers at WIN put it, “The youth want logic and less emotion.”
In some sense, such programs are a continuation of the center’s long-standing ambition to promote modern education among Mumbai Shi‘ites, which is evident in the photographs and lists of laureates and high performers at school exams at the entrance to WIN Academy, where after-school lessons and study sessions take place. One of these programs is the WIN-produced *Hadees-e zindagi*, which usually features a young woman in a hijab interviewing a younger maulana (a respected Muslim religious leader, or a graduate of a religious educational institution) in a sleek-looking modern studio setting, asking questions that viewers had sent in by email or were posing via telephone live on air. The questions were above all about practical matters, requesting advice on how to tackle problems in an Islamically appropriate way. Another topic generating interest was the reasons for a particular religiously sanctioned conduct of action. My interlocutors at WIN stressed that these programs are more popular among the younger generation, responding to their higher educational ambitions while also intended to provide support for them. Here Shi‘ite traditions become directly integrated with urban aspirations, such as educational advancement, that bring migrants to the megacity. This recasting of Shi‘ism evident in the program is an example of a more activist tendency in the Shi‘ite world since the Iranian Revolution, which reinterprets Shi‘ite tradition as granting a new sense of agency and ambition to change social and political conditions and therefore to strive to change one’s fate in line with modernist narratives of hope, development, and progress that, among other things, influence people’s migratory movements in a globalizing world. *Hadees-e zindagi* frames aspirations for better education, a greater sense of control over one’s life, and rational self-improvement in terms of religious tradition.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have investigated several ways that Shi‘ite traditions in Mumbai articulate with urban aspirations that bring migrants to megacities in a globalized world. These include the channeling of ambitions for socioeconomic mobility into “investments that bring true value,” as my interlocutor Jafar put it, meaning pilgrimage to Iran and Iraq and the setting up of local Shi‘ite associations by funding buildings and sacred structures in Mumbai and in North Indian places of origin. Further, many Mumbai Twelver Shi‘ites identify the cultivation of standardized Shi‘ite traditions with a form of global connectivity that they experience as empowering and supportive of their urban aspirations while countering their very real marginality in Mumbai and in India generally. In the context of Mumbai, the activist bent that has become much more pronounced throughout the Shi‘ite world since the Iranian Revolution has led to a stress on education as one of the chief urban ambitions. Finally, the links between urban aspirations in the megacity and Shi‘ite tradition crystallize in a range of media practices that permit not only the bridging of the temporal and spatial gaps between present-day Shi‘ites and the pivotal events at Karbala but also the sustaining of long-distance networks through the transnational circulation of recordings of devotional events, lectures, and images of marja‘iyya. As the example of the
WIN-produced *Hadees-e zindagi* shows, there are also newer media engagements that aim at a fusion of Shi’ite tradition and education. Such programs identify Shi’ite tradition with the spreading of rational knowledge to be used for Islamic self-fashioning and for addressing the challenges of contemporary social life in the megacity. Many Mumbai Shi’ites engage with their religious tradition as a form of pious cosmopolitanism that supports the potential realization of urban aspirations centered on the themes of socioeconomic mobility and new imagined lives starkly different from those in peripheral locations that migrants hope to leave behind. At the same time, religious practices, including their mediatic dimensions, provide possibilities for global connectivity that undergird the aspirations that are an important part of life in the megacity. Such practices not only illustrate the dense links between religious mobilizations and globalizing processes but also show how megacities such as Mumbai become privileged settings for their interplay.

**NOTES**

1. Having worked among Twelver Shi’ites in Hyderabad, Toby Howarth has recorded comparable observations: “In an overwhelmingly Hindu nation . . . [Shi’as] feel the heat of a rising Hindu nationalism. At the same time, however, Shi’as often feel closer to Hindus than to Sunnis because of the antagonism between the Islamic sects and because of the devotion that many Hindus show towards Husain and Fatima” (2005, 132).

2. The Ithna Ashari Khojas are a nineteenth-century split-off from the larger and wealthier Isma’ili Khoja community (Masselos 1978, 115), which, like other Gujarati trader communities, spread throughout the Indian Ocean region, noticeably East Africa, and in the twentieth century to Great Britain and North America. The secession of the Ithna Ashari Khojas under the influence of a cleric from Najaf, which was formalized in 1899 with the building of a Khoja Ithna Ashari mosque in Dongri, even led to violence, as had the secession of the Sunni Khojas in 1850 (Daftary 1992, 515). Ithna Ashari Khojas remember as martyrs the two among their community’s founders who lost their lives in the process and have integrated their example into the larger narrative of Karbala (*Khoja Shia Isnaashari Jamaat, Mumbai—India, 1319–1419 a.h., A Centenary Presentation*, souvenir magazine, 1998). See also http://ksijamat.org/, accessed May 5, 2012.

3. The move toward more standardized forms of orthodoxy among Shi’ite Muslims has a long history in the city. For example, nineteenth-century Bombay witnessed the transformation of the Khojas from a trader caste with amorphous religious allegiances and practices into a clearly delineated community of Nizari Isma’ils under the tight control of the Agha Khan, who had arrived in Bombay from Persia in 1844 after a failed rebellion against the Qajar ruler of Persia Muhammad Shah. As a result of the increasing control of the Agha Khan, two groups of Khojas seceded from the main community (see n. 2). In the end, Khojas had aligned themselves with three forms of standardized orthodoxy. British colonial courts played a key role in establishing and ratifying the new boundaries among Khojas (Daftary 1992, 515–16; Green 2011, 173; Masselos 1978).

4. Certainly, the strengthening of orthodox religious leadership has a longer history, which in Mumbai is embedded in a colonial context. For example, in the last decades of the nineteenth
century, neighborhood strong men and plebeian leaders, or dadas, largely controlled the rituals and processions surrounding the making and carrying around of the tabuts (elaborately decorated representations of Hussain's bier or tomb) that were the central component of the festivities of Muharram. Following urban violence and other disturbances between rival groups during the processions, in 1913 the British colonial authorities banned the carrying around of tabuts through the city. The character of Muharram in Bombay then changed from an exuberant folk festival to an Islamic ritual of commemoration, strengthening the authority of Shi‘ite religious leaders (Masselos 1976, 82; Masselos 1982, 58–60; see also ch. 5).

5. Jim Masselos’s reading of nineteenth-century sources on the dramatic dimensions of majalis among Shi‘ites in Bombay makes him conclude that “it was as if Husain and his followers were dying then and there” (1982, 57).

6. For example, several of my interlocutors in Mumbai had viewed the World Islamic Network–produced video CD of majalis by Maulana Sadiq Hasan recorded in Sharjah in 2003 and DVD of lectures by Maulana Sayed Ammar Naqshwani at Bradford University in 2008.


“I hope you are not researching the so-called Internet Hindus,” an upcoming politician in Mumbai said to me, almost as a caution. “A correspondent from Al Jazeera had come here to do exactly this. What a ridiculous project! How can you dub someone an Internet Hindu, and with such a casual charge of criminality?” I stared at my notepad, trying to see reason in his argument. “See the energy of the youth here? Do you think it is just Internet Hindu, whatever that means?” he asked, pointing to a large audience of more than a thousand youth gathered for a political meeting of social media users with avowed Hindu right-wing leanings. The gathering might indeed have been a confluence of varied motivations and energies, but the politician’s defensive demand ironically brought into sharp focus how these energies coalesced as such a fine chorus around the drumbeat of “Hindu nation” and how the relentless online work of such social media users keeps the Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) project alive among educated middle-class youth in Mumbai. Hence, in this chapter I do exactly what the politician wanted me to avoid: trace and unravel the nexus between social media and an emergent group of right-wing “Internet Hindus,” bringing to the fore a range of mediations—technological, social, and urban—behind its making and seeking to avoid, by the same token, the reduction of right-wing sentiments to a flat polemic.

A majority of studies on Hindu nationalism focus on the ideological discourse, organizational strategies, and political philosophy of the Sangh Parivar, a cluster of organizations that fuel the Hindu right-wing movement in India and its allied political outfits, notably the Shiv Sena, which engages in multifarious politics in the urban neighbor-
hoods of Mumbai (see ch. 22; Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 1996). I turn away from this top-down analysis to highlight an unexplored area—the media practices of Hindu activists in the internet age and how digitally mediated agency builds up and maintains the momentum of Hindu nationalist ideology. Specifically, I explore the production of the strangeness of the “religious other” through digitally mediated agency in Mumbai as a form of violence. Building on ethnographic fieldwork in this city with the largest number of social media users in India and a history of violent communal clashes, I show how social media shapes Hindutva politics, which is at once urban, affluent, and unabashedly confident.

My main argument is that social media’s technological and commercial attributes combine with imaginations of India’s place in the global world and the youth force driving the dream of a resurgent “new India” purged of corruption and “Muslim menace” to recast Hindu nationalism as an entrepreneurial, ideological project of net-enabled youth. This entrepreneurial Hindutva unfolds at the nexus of market, technology, and society. The imagined capacity to create public truths endows social media with a force of truthfulness even as Internet Hindus use them, ironically enough, as forums where pseudonyms and alter identities mask their real-world identities as they perform truth claims about the Hindu nation and the Muslim threat. This online Hindutva, I suggest, constitutes a distinctive right-wing politics of social media in India and a troubling continuity in the ideology’s key premises.

In forwarding this analysis, I build on important scholarship by Thomas Blom Hansen (1999), Arvind Rajagopal (2001), and Peter van der Veer (1994), who have shown, among other things, that Hindu nationalism is shaped not as much by the political system or religious field as by the broader public culture, where “a society and its constituent individuals and communities imagine, represent, and recognize themselves through political discourse, commercial and cultural expressions, and representations of state and civic organizations” (Hansen 1999, 4). It is also an arena where media play an increasingly important role, as in liberalizing India, which has seen an explosion of a variety of media (Udupa 2015). Equally, this ethnographic case study of social media users in Mumbai challenges cyberutopianism—the presumption that social media espouse secular individuality with the liberal language of civic contracts and embody the radical redistributive capacity of digital circulation (Turner 2006)—to show how imaginations of religious-political communities and their deeply uneven interlacing with urban politics saturate social media space with heated arguments, often filled with abuse and counterabuse, on the political rights, cultural status, and even sacred history of religious groups. The internet, then, is not growing “apart from the world, but to the contrary is increasingly embedded in it” (Agre 1999, 3). The political possibilities of digital circulation are inscribed by the broader social locations of online actors, despite minor upsets for established authority structures along the way.

In the rest of this chapter, I trace the growth of social media in Mumbai, with particular attention to Twitter, the microblogging platform, to highlight two important aspects
of digital agency of Internet Hindus—net anonymity and what we might call net busi-
ness. I examine how these interlace with the digital market and organized Hindutva and
what ruptures they might provoke. I conclude with broader implications of these online
practices for religious politics in Mumbai and Hindu nationalism in particular.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN MUMBAI: FROM COFFEE TABLE
CAMARADERIE TO OPINION SHAPING

We call ourselves the perfect nationalists.

A HINDU RIGHT-WING TWEETER IN MUMBAI

With eighty million internet users on personal computers (24 percent of the population),
thirty-nine million internet users on mobile phones (12 percent), and fifty-seven million
on social media (17 percent), urban India constituted a growing community of online
media users by the early decades of the new millennium. Needless to say, in a country
like India, access to the internet implies that these users are economically privileged, and
their use of social media implies considerable ease with the English language. However,
with expanding smartphone markets and growing internet penetration, new online plat-
forms for short messaging, microblogging, and social networking have made tremendous
inroads across India.

Mumbai has the most social media users and the highest penetration rate for social
media of any Indian city—a reflection of its large population and its importance as the
country’s economic powerhouse. According to the Indian Market Research Bureau, one
of the largest market research companies in the country, the number of active online
media users in Mumbai grew from 4.5 million in 2008 to 6.8 million in 2012—a sig-
nificant 51 percent growth in just four years. By 2010, various social media platforms had
entered the lives of online users in Mumbai, from Rise, Orkut, Facebook, and YouTube
to LinkedIn and XING. After this first spell of social media expansion, the new microb-
logging site Twitter enticed online users with instant short messaging services along
extended online networks, and WhatsApp modified this niche market to make it even
more aggressive.

Twitter entered Mumbai and other major cities in India at a time when online users
had grown familiar with and quite addicted to Facebook and LinkedIn, where they could
reactivate, maintain, and expand their friendship groups, familial ties, and professional
networks and satisfy, in some measure, their “insatiable nosiness about what other peo-
ples are doing” (Miller 2011, 101). It was not surprising, then, that Twitter, despite its
emphasis on imageless, short messages of no more than 140 characters, was initially
used as an extension of personal networks, yet another online gateway for “real-world”
socializing and snooping. Typically, people on Twitter would post updates on what they
ate, what film they had watched, or where they went shopping. Naved, an avid online
user from a Muslim neighborhood in central Mumbai, once told me, “A lot of people
used it [Twitter] to say we are waking up, going to shower, just wore my shoes, which is really stupid!” Such updates on mundane, everyday routine conformed to the original design of Twitter as an online platform for sending messages to a small group of people with common interests and shared concerns.

In just a year from Twitter’s foray into the Indian market, tweeters in Mumbai grew enough in number to encourage some enterprising users to take the next step and propose off-line gatherings. In the middle-class neighborhoods of Chembur, Ghatkoper, and Bandra, with a large majority of educated Gujarati, Marathi, and Tamil residents, tweeters assembled for off-line tweet meets, endearingly calling them coffee tweet-ups and dinner tweet-ups. Some business-minded tweeters gathered to discuss budding technology projects. After such a gathering, they would typically go out to a movie or a restaurant and lounge chatting with their cyberpals till the wee hours. These closed-group tweeter meetings were driven by an assurance that they would be small, attended by those with common business interests or a shared cultural taste for movies and restaurants.

The terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008 was a turning point. A medium couched comfortably for coffee table camaraderie became a potent site for organizing quick relief work. Shocked by the sudden crisis that had descended on the city, enterprising tweeters exchanged and coordinated a swell of online messages to reach out to people who were anxious to know the plight of their friends and family caught in the dramatic terrorist capture of four prominent locations in Mumbai. Tweeters with experience organizing tweet meets swung into action and spent hours on Twitter to connect the surging online queries with those for whom they were intended. They searched their lists of Twitter followers, alerted their friends on Facebook, or pulled up phone numbers from the network, creating a flow of information and connections that stood distinct from state channels and those opened up by mainstream mass media. This same voluntary relief work of informational service repeated during the floods of Mumbai in 2011, when tweeters managed a huge flow of queries and messages to arrange housing for people stranded at train stations or in their offices. After 11/26 and the Mumbai floods, a section of tweeters were convinced that they could achieve something with their own effort and knowledge of networks.

Twitter’s transition from a platform for “silly updates” to one with the capacity to organize voluntary work—at least among English-educated middle-class groups during crises—was significant in the brief social trajectory of the microblogging site in Mumbai. By 2010, it had experienced yet another transition. Although routine updates and the impulse to organize tweeters for social causes or business interests did not disappear, Twitter came to be perceived more as a platform to share information, opinionate, and remain up to date on “hard” news. This transition coincided with Twitter’s official branding in later years of its inception as a “real-time information network” where the user can “have access to the voices and information surrounding all that interests her/him.” The rapidly changing new media landscape and new smartphone applications were crucial for this branding, since Twitter had to distinguish itself from more fun-driven, frivolous,
and at times outrageously intrusive new media services. Soon Twitter users commenting on politics and news events or tagging stories on “current affairs” were more common. Twitter became a high ground for opinion exchange, as opposed to what was increasingly seen as frivolous Facebook—a result of assigning “political moralities” to different media technologies (Miller 2011). Many online users in Mumbai had little doubt when they said that “Facebook is timepass; Twitter is for serious people.” Despite the circulation of commentaries and “serious” content on Facebook, it was still largely seen as a platform for connecting intimate networks of friends rather than a public forum for serious matters. It was indeed the supposed public nature of Twitter, with its potential to open up channels of anonymous connections through pseudonymous and hidden handles (Twitter IDs), that confirmed its status as a “serious forum for serious people,” as one social media user described it. In practice and in corporate branding, Twitter mimicked the repertoire of news and its claims to public opinion shaping, wrapped as such in tiny packets of 140 characters. What was more, like other interactive new media technologies, Twitter embodied an arena where recursive relations between virtual and off-line interactions were possible (Marshall 2001).

It was in this context of Twitter’s market-mediated self-fashioning as a forum for opinion exchange that many celebrities entered the Twittersphere, to connect with the public and their fans without the mediation of mass media, and aspiring opinion shapers joined to post their comments and communicate directly with political leaders and cinema stars. Cybertalk trivia and market promotions continued on Twitter, but a section of politically savvy youth seized the opportunity to air their views without the filtering barriers of organized media, on a platform that promised to take them beyond tightly weaved online networks of friends and acquaintances. Such was the enthusiasm around this new short messaging service that the practice of chalo ek tweet dalenge (okay, let’s just toss a tweet) became a sort of urban common sense. Yet this juvenile celebration of tossing a tweet and the dikhawa (display) of thumbing cell phones inherited Mumbai’s deeply fractured political and cultural legacies: tweeting expanded in a megacity that was at once the quintessential symbol of postcolonial modernity and cosmopolitanism, the seat of India’s dream factory, and a symbol of the very crisis of this secular developmental vision (Hansen 1999).

Excited by the possibility of directly connecting with mighty political leaders on a “publiclike” forum, a new generation of English-educated and technologically alert Hindutva sympathizers confidently plunged into the Twittersphere. In many cases, these sympathies were not preconstituted. As they tweeted and met with more tweeters online, they were drawn into the broad web of an emergent collective consciousness. Diverse as they were in their levels of ideological commitment, motivations to come online, and online style and poise, they nonetheless joined the growing group of online right-wing tweeters who engaged in Hindutva politics as a discursive practice. Some openly declared that they were right-wingers, self-christened themselves as “tweeple” (people who tweet), and used shared Twitter handles, notably “Internet Hindu,” and similar handles and
hashtags such as “The Proud Nationalist,” “The Saffron Knight,” and “Ex-Muslim.” This mission statement, for instance, flashes below the Twitter ID “Internet Hindu”: “Reclaiming my motherland from Pseudoseculars. Bharata, the cradle of every other civilization and human existence.”

By their own account, self-declared Internet Hindus are a growing community in the megacity of Mumbai, where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among social media users in early 2012. “It is pure passion,” an Internet Hindu who was barely in his twenties told me. “We don’t get any money. It is passion—kuch karna he [we wanted to do something].” I was struck by the young man’s enthusiasm and confidence; his energy evoked the alacrity of a youth leader. “Our vision is clear,” he continued. “We are here to change the youth. Many youth Congress [party] people have joined us. [If] you follow us on Twitter, you will also be converted.”

Internet Hindus in Mumbai imagine themselves as heroic warriors fighting an ideological battle on their own terms and upon their own will. To them, these platforms promise a completely autonomous arena where energies can cohere without any top-down mentoring or monitoring, where the youth can find a voice and a means of linking their voices, free of political might and manipulation. “First of all,” an Internet Hindu emphasized, “we don’t have an organization kind of a thing, with a secretary, president, and so on. It’s only people and their passion. People are fed up with the system.” A college student who had joined the discussion added, “There is a lot of frustration with people. We do this because we are frustrated with corruption.” One finds here a deepening of the articulation of Hindutva with the liberalization discourse of the early 1990s (Rajagopal 2001), nonetheless pitched against secular corruption after two decades of liberalization and two continuous regimes of the Indian National Congress party. This is in fact not entirely new or distinct from the strategies of organized Hindutva in India. As van der Veer (1994) and Jaffrelot (1996) have astutely observed, Hindu nationalist politics has oscillated between ethnoreligious nationalism and socioeconomic issues of corruption and economic growth throughout its career in postcolonial India. On social media, these two discourses are brought together, erasing any possible contradiction between them.

THE ALLURE OF ANONYMITY AND THE FORCE OF HASHTAGS

“We are the wheels to keep the communication running,” an Internet Hindu declared in the quaint Mumbai neighborhood of Ghatkoper. “We are the wheels and the engine.” The metaphor of wheels starkly contrasted with the image of leg workers of a larger organizer—wheels signified faster and more efficient movement and a sense of empowerment. To keep the communication running, most Internet Hindus assume pseudonyms and acronyms, often invoking grandiose images of the Hindu nation. For the most part, the romance of secret networks and underground rebels during the liberation movement has translated digital anonymity into imagined heroic politics of individual net
warriors. This self-presentation unfolds in a network, an environment where anonymity is contingent on being inconsequential, since it can be disrupted with some effort to extract personal details, if this is found to be important and necessary. But despite the technological possibilities of decoding online traces and social networking sites turning into spaces where “time-space paths and patterns of interaction . . . become data points in algorithms” (Andrejevic 2013, 159), the network environment nonetheless provides an experiential sense of absolute anonymity. This is especially striking in the Mumbai context, which guarantees relative impunity to Hindu youth, who benefit from the historical bias of the Hindu-dominated police force against Muslims (Hansen 2001). Most Internet Hindus I met in Mumbai were quite assured of keeping their professional careers at a safe distance from their online identities. Varun, for instance, is a retail businessman who runs a small garment store close to his house in Kalyan, a large suburb. Born into a Marwari family, part of a caste group known for strong business networks across the country, he entertains customers from all religious groups, and some of his major suppliers are Muslims: “I am a businessman. As a businessman, I have to work with Hindus and Muhammadans. I want Twitter because I want to be me. I have a hidden handle because they [customers] should not think that ‘kuch karta he, kuch aur sochta he’ [he does something, thinks something else].”

In a savage twist of the virtual and the real, Varun finds in social media his true identity. The network environment not only guarantees experiential anonymity, which emboldens some of these Internet Hindus to be their “real” selves, but also, in its continuous waves of interactions, ensures chance encounters among like-minded online surfers. Sundaran, a civil engineer who owns a construction company in Chennai, had traveled to Mumbai to attend a tweeters’ gathering. He had tumbled into the world of microblogging before meeting any of the “patriotic nationalists” now assembled at the event: “Basically I came to know about Shiv [a fellow Internet Hindu] through Twitter. He started mentioning [a panic exodus of] northeast people and related topics. And then we connected. First we started, then our ideological mind-sets met . . . [and] that kind of [ideologically like-minded] people started following.”

The Twitter field, akin to a magnetic field, brings together like minds with a force of attraction in what new media literature recognizes as “affinity spaces,” where the affinity is to the ideological “endeavor and not other people” (Gee 2004, 84) and its creation can come from site designers and users alike. The term Internet Hindus, then, suggests not any closely bound physical association but net users who cohere around common themes and issues in ideologically efficacious ways.

Many Internet Hindus admitted, in a tone of triumphant heroism, that their strategy in this effort is to first infuse clutter into the public discourse. As soon as an issue erupts into the public domain exposing the seemingly delicate relations between Hindus and Muslims in India, they raise a rapid wave of Twitter messages to drown out the “pseudosecular arguments” of the English-language media and later introduce a more coherent counternarrative by increasing momentum around a semantically rich, provocative hash-
tag. “PappuCII,” a derogatory hashtag for the leader of the Indian National Congress, Rahul Gandhi, was one of many politically charged online efforts of propaganda designed and driven by Internet Hindus to debunk the party’s claimed secular status. During several controversial events, including public rallies of Hindu nationalist leaders in Mumbai, Internet Hindus used shared IDs and together built hashtags to deluge social media platforms with provocative and abusive comments, confronting an equally abusive surge of comments espousing allegiance to Islamic radicalism. Such comments and hashtags kept alive a social media rumble on Hindu-Muslim animosity and hardened the view that Indian Muslims are active participants in international Islamic revivalism—a suspicion that was central to Hindutva activism after Muslim mobilization around the Shah Bano affair and their association with the Iranian Revolution in the 1970s (Jaffrelot 1996, 339).

Significant in this revival of the key tenets of Hindu nationalism is the combination of the feeling of being vulnerable to “alien communities” (Jaffrelot 1996; van der Veer 1994) with newfound confidence around new media as tools for public arguments (or at least rabble-rouosing) that can trump the mediation of organized news production. The new generation of e-savvy right-wingers have thus sharpened the discourse to associate Muslims with violence and threat, which is coeval with their strategy to deepen suspicion about organized English-language media, dubbed pseudosecular, hypocritical, and even blatantly antinational. Often, the producers of these media are derisively summed up by the slang term libtards—liberal retards—who are blamed for glossing minority appeasement and cowardly timidity as liberalism and secularism.

Internet Hindus are not always physically connected with the shakhas, the neighborhood organizational units, of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent right-wing Hindutva organization in India. Shakhas have been the locus of recruitment and ideological power for organized Hindutva, but Internet Hindus rarely attend their daily rituals of patriotic display and ideological grooming. An Internet Hindu took pains to draw the distinction between Hindutva organizations and online Hindutva: “First, Twitter [as a particular form of online Hindutva] is not an organization. There is no hierarchy. It is a flat organization. No identity is required, actually. You don’t need to be an RSS member. You say something good for the nation, society, and the individual, and you see people responding. People know me by my Twitter account and not my actual name. What matters is not identity but the content you post on Twitter or Facebook.”

The absence of formal affiliation with Hindutva organizations suggests that Internet Hindus represent new forms of dispersed agency, which are inspired if not bound by the organizational authority of the RSS. For the RSS, the coalescing affinity spaces on social media are best left untouched—they can expand on their own and fight battles with their own arms. If the RSS has relied on its strategies to forge an alliance among “swayamsevaks, notables and men of religion” (Jaffrelot 1996, 351) on the one hand and continued, on the other hand, its social work and ideological grooming through local organizations, it has regarded the growing number of e-savvy right-wing Hindu youth as an army that both serves and disrupts its centralized organizational authority.
In an old yet affluently furnished building in Dadar, an expensive neighborhood in Mumbai, Pramod Bapat, the regional head of the RSS in Maharashtra, clarified his organization’s position on Internet Hindus:

Bapat: On [the] net, there are the doors. You can knock, you can enter, you can see, you can watch, you can use, you can get involved. [The] sangh does not plan separately or specially for social media. It [social media] is a social entity. It is a social bench. Everybody can sit there, everybody can talk, listen—that is why it is there! And thousands of swayamsevaks [volunteers] are working on that. They are using that media, they have constructed very many communities and groups, they are sharing their thoughts, ideas, and working on causes.

Udupa: What causes?

Bapat: Like, say, love for the motherland. If this is the theme, what are the ways to express your love for the motherland? From media or such social platforms, they are spreading ideas, asking people to get involved, to know more about joining hands. But it is in their individual capacity [that] they are doing [this]. [The] sangh, as a whole and an organization, has not done such community [of “Internet Hindus”] or a page. Yes, we have an interactive website. The number of clicks on our website is increasing.

Partly since the RSS defines Internet Hindutva as a private endeavor carried out by individuals with no official approval or sponsorship, it has not issued a public call for restraint and moderation from Internet Hindus, signaling the deeply ambivalent status of this growing community. In his tiny office on a congested road of Bhendi Bazaar, widely seen as a Muslim ghetto, the Barelvi Sunni leader Saeed Noori lifted his hands and exclaimed, “Kya kare, Madam? Sab log fouji bangeye” (What to do, Madam? Everyone has become a soldier). On a sprawling campus of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party’s training center in Byandar, miles from Bhendi Bazaar and the crowded inner city, Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, a senior BJP leader active on Twitter, commented on his fellow tweeters, “You see, nobody comes with an empty head today.”

The agency of Internet Hindus, and online political actors more generally, thus constitutes a dilemma for the organizational authorities, and its public visibility is always mired in uncertainties. One such moment of disruption and clutter arose when Internet HinduNDTV, a national English-language news channel, invited Internet Hindus to a talk show hosted by one of its prominent anchors. The channel had been trying hard to get these invisible online warriors to the studio and involve them in a debate on social media’s highly effervescent forms of radical Hindu nationalism. It was not successful for a long time—many Internet Hindus told me that they firmly turned down the open invitation by the anchor on his shows. However, a few Internet Hindus were tempted. Their decision to appear on the show raised scathing criticism from a section of right-wingers online. A string of accusations and counteraccusations ensued. The confrontational repertoire hitherto reserved for online battles with “Muslim sympathizers” became
the means of bickering within the community. Some right-wingers felt that representing Internet Hindus on mainstream television would rob them of their anonymity—affixing their agency within the limits of a corporeal body visible on television screens and exposed to asinine anchors. But this anxiety was couched in ideological terms. Online right-wingers asked their fellow Internet Hindus not to pay heed to the request of a “biased” channel that was, according to them, fully under “the control of the pseudosecular Congress party” and involved in “false propaganda.” Even so, a few Internet Hindus braved the opposition from their camp and appeared on the talk show. Months later, one of them told me that his decision was based on “inside information” that the channel was planning to plant dummy Internet Hindus on the show. “Dummy and loose candidates would only [have been] bashed up by the opponents in the debate. This would have done more harm than some of us exposing our identity!” he said, justifying what others saw as a selfish act of hogging media publicity to the peril of collective anonymity.

These digitally mediated agencies, dispersed and diffuse as they are, and seemingly recalcitrant at times, rally behind related structures of authority. In online battles over issues from the territorial invocation of Akhand Bharat (Undivided India) and fears about a global conspiracy of Christian proselytization to the threat of multiplying Muslims and refusal to accept mosques as sacred places of worship, a set of “Twitter heroes” often anchor Internet Hindus. These internet icons tweet the most frequently and in terse, caustic, and provocative verse. Dr. Subrahmanian Swamy, an organizer of the Global Patriotic Tweeples Meet, for Hindu right-wing tweeters in Mumbai, is a chanteur extraordinaire of online Hindutva—an undisputed Twitter hero.

Long sidelined in formal national politics despite his key roles in the economic reforms of the early 1990s and the legal battles in the telecom spectrum scandal, Swamy mastered the art of leading social media users through a tide of quick Twitter updates—posting and responding to comments, tagging links, and inventing an ever growing list of provocative acronyms to deride political and religious opponents. Soon he had amassed close to 270,000 followers on Twitter, with more than twenty-five thousand tweets in just two years. The newfound popularity of leaders like Swamy—at least among a section of net-savvy youth—what might be called net iconophilia, signals an emergent authority in the politics of religious difference in India. The key here is that they respond to individual tweets in a manner that evokes a sense of direct dialogue with ordinary people, exuding confidence that is unchecked and unrelenting. These leaders urge their audiences to pledge to continue their online activism and encourage them to invent new ways of adding force to their online heroism. Activism, after all, cannot remain in the virtual land forever. Twitter heroes regularly assemble crowds on the ground for tweeters’ meets and get participants to reveal not just their names but also their full addresses—a feat that could turn social media marketing companies green with envy. The Global Patriotic Tweeples Meet was thus not a single episode but an itinerant gathering that carried the spirit of patriotic tweets to Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Pune, and other major cities, with fervent calls on energetic youth to march ahead to “transition beyond Twitter.” Such is
the fascination with these new Twitter heroes that when I used the blank side of a copy of Swamy’s speech at the meet, Viren, a self-proclaimed Internet Hindu who had traveled forty miles from a Mumbai suburb to attend the conference, gave me a scathing look. “So you are writing behind Swamiji’s speech copy?” he chided; his towering figure made me quickly shove it down in my cramped bag and take out a disheveled notepad instead. The respectful term of address Swamiji, reserved for Swamy, signals ties of devotion similar to those enjoyed by a charismatic religious guru whose knowledge of history, politics, or theology is never open to challenge and never in doubt.

Many Internet Hindus in Mumbai told me that Narendra Modi from the BJP, who was contending for the prime ministerial position when I was conducting fieldwork and later emerged victorious, was “several notches above” Swamy in commanding social media allegiance, which is partly reflected in the number of his Twitter followers: more than two million. In a speech at the Global Patriotic Tweeps Meet in Mumbai, a professor of finance from the Institute of Management in Bangalore, a premier management school in India, described Modi as a modern-day Arjuna, the charismatic Pandava brother in the Mahabharata, and Swamy as Krishna, the shrewd uncle (and incarnation of Lord Vishnu) who ensured victory for the morally righteous Pandavas against the wicked Kauravas—a ready metaphor for the Congress party. The social media right-wingers gathered at the event responded with thundering applause as the culturally resonant Hindu mythological figures raised a wave of excitement in the audience. Ironically, the sense of net heroism as the work of individual ideological warriors obscures the structures of authority that Internet Hindus submit to and reinforce. Online icons such as Swamy illustrate this vividly. The energies were systematically channeled in later years, especially when BJP strategists set up “social media war rooms” for disseminating propaganda before the national elections in 2014.

While organized efforts to harness the energies of Internet Hindus picked up momentum, the new media architecture inspired practices that continued to mark online Hindutva’s distinctnessness. For instance, Internet Hindus do not prize phases of political moderation in the discourse of the RSS or the politically pragmatic BJP or the general affability of swayamsevaks, which is doubtless partly a result of the privilege of anonymity. After a brief conversation with a leading Internet Hindu in Mumbai at a political meeting, I repeatedly attempted to contact him for a follow-up interview. In a black jumpsuit and shining black shoes to match, the young man in his twenties had looked more affluent than the modestly dressed rest of the audience. A badge for participants pinned on his suit gave his name, Atul, above his Twitter ID. I instantly recognized the ID, letting out an expression that prompted him to remark that he knew online Hindutva activists like him were being watched. Atul wavered between cordiality and downright disgust for an English-speaking academic who flew to India for flaneurlike visits. He would promise me all his support for my project and the very next minute would look at my notepad suspiciously and dismiss me as a pseudosecular academic with no credentials to speak about the lofty endeavor of Internet Hindus. In our brief, heated conversation at the
meeting, I gathered that he owned and ran a social media marketing company in Mumbai. Afterward, I probed his whereabouts on the net and finally traced his cell number. Ready with questions and courteous words of reintroduction, I prepared to pitch an interview date. I was keen on this interview, especially since Atul’s Twitter account regularly sent out the tweets of the Global Patriotic Tweeples Meet and Atul had proudly said he knew social media like the back of his hand. I doubted if he would grant an interview, but when I called, little did I expect to face a tirade on pseudoliberals and angry accusations that I knew too little about social media to merit a discussion with him. The exchange got worse when I evaded revealing my Twitter ID, which added to his suspicions about my intentions and, perhaps, his fears of disclosing his identity to a probing academic. He brusquely hung up the phone with one last piece of advice: “You post at least a thousand tweets and then come to me. You cannot understand us when you don’t tweet.” Shocked by these rude and scathing personal remarks, I turned to a friend-informant, Malini Sriram, a gender rights activist and among the most active tweeters in the city. Hurt as I was, I asked her whether it was true that one has to reach the mark of a thousand tweets before one can begin to understand Twitter. “It’s the most silly, silly, silly thing,” she retorted instantly. “It’s like saying you cannot understand maternity problems without giving birth to a child.” Herself subject to Internet Hindu intimidations on Twitter several times in the recent past, she told me, as a word of caution, “They are fanatics. They believe they are right and they are misunderstood. They use our own liberalism against us. I don’t know if liberalism is the right word here—but after listening to them, we begin to feel ‘Maybe I am wrong.’”

She consoled me that I was there to understand social behavior and not the technical details of a medium, adding, as a final word on the matter, that “Internet Hindus are engineers. They are very binary.”

**NET BUSYNESS**

What is driving the Internet Hindu “binary engineers” to keep online Hindutva—and all shades of Islamic radicalism—as a continuous ideological buzz with the potential to erupt as a loud blare within and beyond social media? Without a doubt, historical-social forces and political strategies have intensified the climate of suspicion and antagonism toward the religious other, but I suggest that there are also market and technological dynamics of new media at work here. In her study of online media usage in rural India, Payal Arora brings to light what she describes as a “ritual of immersing in tech busyness” (2010, 1) that infuses a disjuncture in the conventional (Western) relations between class and busyness, where advanced capitalism sees busyness as a sign of high social status, as opposed to the Victorian leisure class, which valued leisure as a symbol of social honor (Veblen 1899). I will not delve here into what might be seen as a certain leveling of busyness induced by internet technologies, with rural cybercafés in India abuzz with online activities and various class groups busy clicking away. What is important is that a sense
of busyness permeates the worlds of urban youth, like the Internet Hindus we see in Mumbai.

The leisure class, to follow Staffan Linder (1970), is now “harried” by time packed with intense consumption. Partly shaped by the intensification of leisure-as-consumption, online media markets induce busyness through rapidly changing and obsolescing product lines, including ranges of interactive applications, which, among other things, blur the boundaries of paid work and leisure. Furthermore, the participation of users in online media contributes to content flows in ways that merge leisure with labor (Ross 2009). My ethnographic fieldwork suggests that the ideological activism of Internet Hindus resides at such a market-inflected interstitial space—where clicking on and thumbing away online arguments constitute conscious, and at times performative, busyness. Like most other online media users, Internet Hindus tweet incessantly, in ways that make net sociality a fetish and compulsive clicking a ritual. Such feelings of busyness fuse with ideas of the collective action of “networked publics” (boyd 2009) and net enterprise to create a distinct aspect of digital sociality that allows Internet Hindus to present themselves as ideological entrepreneurs, just as it allows notions of “online secular modernity” to flourish—a point that needs a separate discussion.

Notions of online enterprise and busyness should be contextualized with particular attention to Twitter and the market dynamics that privilege short messages for data analytics and mobile phone compatibility, such that brevity becomes a function of market efficiency and an outcome of technological compulsion. The terse prose and confrontational rhetoric to which online users are drawn lead to the gamification of political discourse—“the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al. 2011, 1). Here, constant inducement to participate and compete comes from individual scoreboards for online influence and lively interactive channels with set rules of word limits and ranking algorithms. For Internet Hindus, tweeting is indeed like gaming, although the world they invoke is neither a virtual neverland nor apocalyptic but rather a rashtr (nation) that rightfully belongs to them, their homeland, covered with the dust of “dirty,” secular politics. They exchange IDs, use shared IDs, build hashtags, and shore up masses of followers, setting an eye all along on how they are faring in the Twitter rankings. Narendar in Mumbai and his friend Ajay from Ahmadabad had exchanged IDs several times. “I use Ajay’s ID to abuse people,” Narendar said, looking at me in expectation of a compliment for his ingenious online tactic.

Subindu, an aggressive social media user who also owns a social media marketing company in Mumbai, was at the forefront in organizing the Global Patriotic Tweeples Meet. For about five hours, the event’s hashtag trended not only in Mumbai but also nationally. For Subindu and his team of social media right-wingers, this was a proud moment. “See, it trended nationally. It is still trending,” he told me, flashing his expensive smartphone. The two young students from Mumbai who had helped him in organizing the meeting dutifully peeked at the phone and congratulated him on his commendable feat. Subindu swelled with excitement, his fingers still busy on the touch pad of the
phone, and said, “We have trended the event in a preplanned manner. We have done it systematically. We understand the algorithm of Twitter. The moment you start the hashtag, you get your top guys with five or six thousand followers to start tweeting with the particular hashtag—the tweet gets retweeted and automatically goes up in trending.”

How did they manage it, I asked in bewilderment. Subindu liked my expression. “We have the power to do it,” he said. “Aha!” He clapped and laughed loudly, his mouth wide open, his gleaming eyes declaring his sense of triumph. The tweeple meeting was one of several events and comments that his team had managed to trend with its sharp knack of putting the algorithmic rationale of the microblogging site to optimal use. Like ratings—and their associated wars—in the television industry, social media progress bars offered by aggregators thus deepen the politics of truth claims advanced by quantitative narratives, presenting the seemingly impersonal knowledge of trendometers as evidence of real power.

With no visual idioms and no burden of long prose, Internet Hindus were excited to lead the game of hashtags filled with puns, snide comments, and at times abusive acronyms. They take pride not in badges and rewards of recognition—essential elements of gamification—for their individual IDs, which are pseudonyms in most cases, but in the hashtags they collectively build and trend. The trending hashtags and trolling handles guarantee a sense of participation, but with devices designed entirely for market purposes—to drive consumer retention and product promotion—and through the features of gamification embedded in them, Internet Hindus feed into the discourses that reinforce presumptions about the strangeness of the religious other and “reciprocal tension” (Simmel 1950) between religious communities. “Look at the crowd here,” Subindu pointed out at the Global Patriotic Tweeple Meet. People were busy tweeting inside the auditorium and across the online network, raising the waves of Twitter tags and messages to match the ambitions of the conference. “That is what makes us special. We control it [social media], yaar, hum logon ke paas taakat he [we have the strength],” he said, evoking notions of enterprise culture (fueling entrepreneurial subjectivities) and narratives about hackers as untamable cyber activists (Holmevik 2012).

As the game of trending hashtags shores up a sense of empowerment for these net-savvy youth, with the trendometer on the Twitter website standing as real evidence of their effort and capacity to assemble support online, there arrives a disjunction between online gaming and actual content—gaming overrides content and unleashes a spiral of self-confirmation. This occurs simultaneously with the amassing of volumes of data from various sources, mostly peer-driven, open-source information banks such as Wikipedia or international media such as the Independent (at www.independent.co.uk), to challenge the “pseudosecular” discourse of organized media in India. Using online resources including free storage space, many Internet Hindus build online repositories of information on ancient Hindu kingdoms, popular translations of Vedic scripts, preindependence politics, and communal tensions in the postcolonial decades, with a ready corpus of data on riots, clashes, and state action extracted from Google searches...
and databases and stored on free online platforms such as Scribd. At the tweeple meet-
ing, Subindu sounded exhilarated by the swelling number of online right-wingers ready
with facts and figures and by the ties of affection they shared. Overwhelmed by the
packed audience and how their Twitter strength had drawn such a large number on a hot
Sunday morning in a busy city, he said to me, in a voice laden with emotion, “Hum tweet
carte rahe kaarva banta gaya” (We kept tweeting, our caravan [following] kept growing).

VIOLENCE AND THE URBAN

The confidence in their numbers notwithstanding, the expanding kaarva (caravan) of
Internet Hindus must contend with equally offensive counterattacks by opposing camps
on Twitter and other social media. These diverse exchanges, frequently with people of
hard-to-pin-down allegiance, are often filled with expressions that could put to shame
even the most raucous Bollywood films. In their reactions to the Azad Maidan riots, for
instance, social media users hurled a string of abuse and swearwords in Hindi and Urdu
that almost always invoked images of genitalia, incest, impotency, and violent sexual
encounters to label nations and religious communities. Such comments are indeed so
common that they are signs of a certain masculine camaraderie, and everyone expects to
see this kind of abuse as part of their daily immersion in online interactions. However,
when these comments become viral or are used to shout down disagreeing voices online,
they acquire a malicious edge that can push people, as Sriram described, to doubt their
own liberalism, including closely held notions of tolerance and cultivated indiffer-
ence to religious difference. According to many tweeters I met in Mumbai, Internet Hindus are
the loudest group among these quarreling camps and by far the most likely to troll and
intimidate.

The Hindu nationalist movement as a form of political consciousness in India gath-
ered ground through a variety of sentiments and strategies, including sociocultural work
by the RSS—such as building temples, offering community service, and forging ecclesi-
astical authority structures by rallying leaders of various Hindu sects and Hindu reli-
gious entrepreneurs—and ideological devotionalism and ritual processions involving the
sacred symbols of the cow and the River Ganga. Despite the strategies also geared toward
political expedience, notions of irreconcilable difference and antipathy between Hindus
and Muslims constitute what might be seen as the movement’s ideological core. In many
ways, Mumbai remains both a theater and an artifact of this crisis—a city that has wit-
nessed violent clashes between its communities and terrorist attacks of spectacular mag-
nitude. Perhaps no other city exemplifies as vividly the paradox of religious antipathy
thriving in a cultivated milieu of cosmopolitan modernity and the urban desire for care-
free leisure. Among a new generation of Internet Hindus in Mumbai, this seemingly
unlikely combination of the enterprise spirit of the risk-bearing (maneuvering) urban
and antipathy toward the religious other is ensuring the ideological efficacy of the
century-old struggle to secure a Hindu nation. For politically savvy Internet Hindus, the
ideological buzz of social media shapes and reshapes these sentiments, as the allure of net anonymity and net enterprise create a perfect nexus that allows them to take up Hindutva in their own hands. I suggest that this relentless online work to reinforce religious separation is a form of violence, what Veena Das (2006) has brilliantly described as the constant production of uncertainty over the ontological foundation of the social and, if we may add, the capacity to prosper in the capacious urban.

NOTES

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3. Hashtags are metamedia tags with the prefix #, widely used on microblogging sites.
4. Scholars have argued that Hindu nationalism ascended in the 1990s in close conjunction with the rise of the liberalization discourse that promised economic prosperity for the upper-caste and emergent middle-class groups of India.
5. However, these affinity spaces are not purged of “race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender,” as Juan Paul Gee (2004, 67) and other optimists characterize them. Shaped by a history of Hindu-Muslim conflicts and their reinterpretations in the online world, Internet Hindus use and reframe microblogging sites as potent weapons to connect and scale up their influence in quick time.
6. In 1986, the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act reversed a Supreme Court decision granting alimony to the Muslim divorcée Shah Bano. This judgment had sparked a wave of protest among conservative Islamic bodies, leading the ruling Congress party to uphold Islamic personal law. Contending that this was evidence of minority appeasement, the Bharatiya Janata Party has ever since used this episode to press for a uniform civil code.
7. Shakhas still remain the key points of entry and instillation of ideological and organizational commitment among locally recruited RSS members. Workers take a pledge to remain committed members of the Parivar, the grand family serving the Hindu rashtr (nation), learn to believe in its ideological coherence, and accept its organizational authority.
8. In a multimillion-dollar scandal involving the auctioning of a telecommunication spectrum in 2011, Swamy built evidence against the defaulting and conniving government ministers and other officials.
9. Gamification is used in a wide variety of contexts, from management efforts to design “fun-filled” industrial work to digital marketing strategies to ensure consumer retention. Most studies of gamification draw on Caillois’s concepts of paidia and ludus: “Whereas paidia (or ‘playing’) denotes a more freeform, expressive, improvisational, even ‘tumultuous’ recombination of behaviors and meanings, ludus (or ‘gaming’) captures playing structured by rules and competitive strife toward goals” (2001, 42–60). This agrees with Juul’s definition of a game as “a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different
outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable” (2003). In discussing gamification, I refer not to a controlled network system where every point of data induced by game elements serves an explicit market agenda for data gathering and product promotion but rather to spaces cocreated by divergent social media practices that lie at the loose ends of networks knit by the market. Moreover, many discussions of gamification and countergamification approach the market as the primary locus of online activities. My aim in this chapter is to unravel gamification in contexts where the market conditions online practices but is not their primary subject matter.

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