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Overnight Urbanization and Changing Spirits:
Disturbed Ecosystems in Southern Jiangsu

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

Key terms: China, non-equilibrium ecology, disturbed ecosystems, temples, spirit mediums, urbanization

China's urban population increased by 38% over just the first decade of the twenty-first century, but urban population density increased by only 1.5% (World Bank Group 2015, 146–47). This could only happen because China's cities rapidly occupied and utterly transformed the rural landscapes on their edges. Several hundred million new migrants from around the country account for much of the influx of urban population. At the same time, however, this process has created many millions of displaced nonmigrants – those rural people who lived at the urban edge but suddenly find themselves resettled into high-rise apartment complexes and surrounded by an unfamiliar urban world. They may still live very close to where their ancestors long settled, but their ways of life have been utterly and rapidly transformed. There has been almost no scholarly attention given to such people or to the characteristics of the new environments in which they live.[1] Here we

address only one small aspect of the issue: the ways that such disturbed ecosystems have created unexpected innovations in local relations to temples, deities, and the dead.

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

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

Our cases come from the newly urbanized outskirts of three major cities in southern Jiangsu Province: Changzhou, Changshu, and Suzhou. These three cities and their rural hinterlands occupy the northeast quadrant of the land around Jiangsu's enormous Lake Tai, and are currently only about an hour away from each other. They are linguistically, historically, and economically closely related. Arrayed across the sprawling wetlands created as the Yangzi River approaches the sea, rural areas in all three places were known

for their water crops and fish. Now each has a population of a million or more; the urban core of Suzhou, the largest, is about three times the size of Changshu, the smallest.

This is one of the regions that has benefitted the most from China's rapid economic growth, and each city has expanded to take over and reconstruct nearby rural townships. Unlike the pattern of "villages within cities" (城中村), which characterizes some other wealthy cities like Guangzhou and Shanghai, villages and townships in this area have usually been dismantled as political units, and fully merged into urban political hierarchies. Thus, unlike the "villages within cities," the areas we are examining have not been able to maintain ownership rights over their original property or any of the institutions of local politics, like village committees.

As a result, earlier structures have been demolished and the people resettled into new housing developments. The irrigation canals that were so characteristic of this region have mostly disappeared, as have most of the agricultural fields that they supported. High-rise buildings have replaced villages that aligned with the waterways because everyone needed boats for transportation, just as roads, highways and high-speed rail have replaced the old canals. Temples and graves have been bulldozed along with the houses.[2] At the same time, the old social spaces have been dismantled, so that people no longer meet their friends while sitting in front of their houses on warm nights, or hang out in the open spaces in front of temples or on old rice threshing grounds. People see each other now on

stairwells instead of village paths, and live in completely new environments even though they may never have left the land where their ancestors lived. In a sense, however, they are even more uprooted than the migrant workers who travel to the city, because they have no rural home to return to. Instead, everything that was familiar to them was dismantled in front of their eyes and they found themselves in a completely new world almost overnight, with their memories of the old places still fresh. It is easy to see the utterly different logics of the older rural and newer urban systems from these images of our Suzhou field site, the first taken in 2002 and the second in 2016 (the bulk of the changes took place very rapidly,

Fig. 1, Chefang 2002

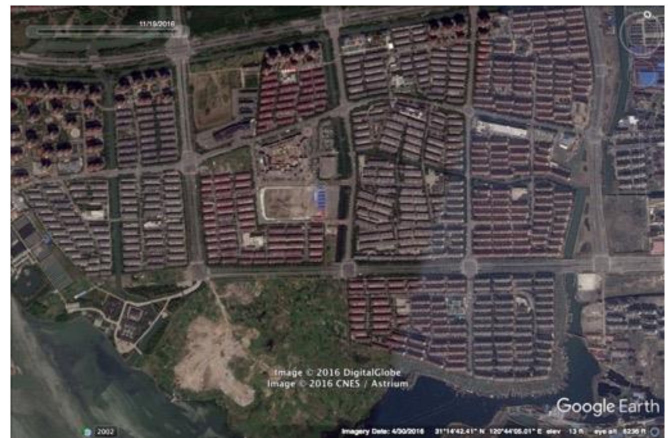

Fig. 2, Chefang, 2016

primarily between 2005 and 2009).

The cases described here are based on fieldwork between 2010 and 2018, in places that had been rural farms just a few years earlier, but were densely settled and highly urban at the time of our research. We had open access to temples, and it was quite easy to make connections to spirit mediums from there. Wu has worked in Changzhou and Suzhou for several years on this and other projects, where she has had extensive contact with religious experts (including mediums) and temples. The Changzhou case stems from her work. Weller made connections to the Changshu case, which is based on multiple long

meetings with and observations of the medium we discuss, along with some of his followers and contacts. The Suzhou case is based on joint fieldwork conducted by both authors together, beginning in 2014. It is based on repeated meetings with dozens of spirit mediums and repeated visits to all the temples in the area.

Disturbed Environments, Non-Equilibrium Ecosystems, and Social Change

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

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

separate spheres, in this case above all the spheres of nature and culture, of physical environment and human society.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What we are calling an ecosystem can thus include more than one ecology, that is, more than one way of understanding what constitutes an ecosystem. Here we draw on recent work that, like ours, combines ecological and ontological interests – not removing non-human actors from the realm of the social, but also not assuming that ontological worlds are unified and shared. The synergy we identify between official temples (and the urban planners who fostered them) and spirit mediums is an example of what Blaser and Cadena call a pluriverse: "heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology

of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity" (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 4). Sprenger and Großmann prefer the term plural ecologies, which they write "exist in parallel, and inclusion or exclusion is thus a matter of practice, sometimes even of choice. It is also a matter of hierarchy, power and value" (Sprenger and Großmann 2018, x). They suggest that the differences between plural ecologies "become salient and often clearly defined in moments of conflict" (Sprenger and Großmann 2018, x). We suggest broadening this notion to a more general understanding of disturbed ecosystems, instead of the more limiting concept of conflict. Our focus is thus on such practices as they lead to both the manifestation of latent potentials and the creation of new synergies at moments of ecological disruption.

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

Ghost City

When China's national CCTV network did a story on the country's largest "ghost cities" (鬼城) in 2013, Changzhou was number two on the list. The story featured an urban expansion into the rural periphery that was so rapid, so colossal in scale, and so far beyond market demand that street after street of tall, modern buildings stood almost entirely

empty. Their use of the term "ghost," like the English use of "ghost town," was entirely metaphorical. Ours is not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Network of Mediums

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

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

Like many spirit mediums, Chen struggled during his youth. He was frequently sick, starting at age 8, and began to grow healthier only as a teenager, when he started attending to visions and dreams of Sakyamuni and other deities, who would appear to him regularly. Over the course of many years, they gradually taught him everything he needed to know. Chen stressed that all of his knowledge came directly from the gods. He had no family tradition of mediumship to draw on, and he had no human teacher. Unlike other parts of China where local temples may have extensive training programs for mediums, Chen's

story is typical for contemporary mediums in southern Jiangsu.[15] All of the ones we have spoken to stress that the gods chose them directly, and that they never learned from family members or any other spirit medium. Of course, this may not be entirely true in practice. As we shall see, Chen himself builds a sort of institution; in addition, as we see anywhere that spirit mediums are widespread, there are always challenges to their legitimacy (e.g., Wolf 1992). Nevertheless, it is still crucial for mediums in this area to assert that only direct inspiration from the deities matters. The claim insists that there can be no possible institutionalization of the charisma of spirit possession. It guarantees that spirit possession can always be understood as a fount for creativity and invention by rejecting any human institution of control.

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

Beyond the spirit mediums, his network includes several dozen Daoists, groups of people who recite Buddhist sutras (locally called "big Buddhism" [大佛]), and groups who chant "precious scroll" scriptures (宝卷, locally called "little Buddhism" [小佛]). In

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

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

In general, of course, this modernist agenda has not been good for people like incense heads and spirit mediums in China, who have been criticized, harassed, and sometimes actively repressed. Chen's own altar received a visit from public security

officials sometime around 2010. Someone had told the police that he was conducting "feudal superstition" at his house. In fact, Chen has quite good relations with the police in general, as he does with all kinds of different people. As a successful incense head, he is a master of relationships, both human and divine. As Chen told it, the officers felt somewhat awkward about coming to see him, but they explained that after an official complaint had been filed, they had no choice. At the time, his temple was housed in the same building as when we visited, but it was far more elaborate inside, with statues of dozens of different deities offering a kind of department store for divine services – whatever you needed, he had the right god. The police made no attempt to shut down his business, but asked that he simplify his altar enough that they could consider it just as a private shrine for personal use. That is when the temple took on the form that we saw, with a straightforward altar to Sakyamuni, his primary deity.

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

charge told us that about half of this had been raised locally, and the other half came from the township government. That is, the urban planners had taken advantage of the disturbed environment just as powerfully as Chen and his network.

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

The transformed environment thus stunted the growth of village temples, but encouraged the growth of two other forms: Chen's large network of spirit mediums and a massive new Buddhist temple in which Chen plays a large role. In spite of the People's Republic of China's constant criticism and occasional harsh repression of spirit mediums, in Changshu the relationship between local government and Chen turned out to be unintentionally symbiotic, with each using the other in ways that has helped it grow. The newly emerging ecosystem has made space for plural ecologies that continue to negotiate

with each other in spite of their mutual tensions and misapprehensions. It is an example of the new relationships and dependencies (with their own sets of new opportunities and tensions) that can develop as a disturbed ecosystem adjusts to the transformations in its environment. Note that this new ecological moment involves changes in the physical world (like the new forms of transportation and communication that enable networks like Chen's to expand), the social and political world (like Chen's relationship to the Buddhist establishment or to the police), and the divine world.

A New Ordering of Gods

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

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

Nevertheless, just as urban plans are not cities, the Daoists' standardization was compromised in practice. The temple we know best, called the Gaodian Temple (高垫庙),

was riddled with alternate spaces that the Daoists could not standardize because they were actually controlled by local incense heads, rather than directly by the priests. Despite the unifying and standardizing efforts of the Daoists, the alternate spaces in this temple range from large rooms with new images carved to match those of the Daoists, to basement rooms filled with small altars of mixed statues, and even to storage closets with incense pots and crudely painted scrolls showing various deities.[20] The image on the left below shows some of the standardized images; the one on the right is one of the small altars controlled by an incense head and located in the basement.

Fig. 3, Standardized gods

Fig. 4, Incense head altar

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

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

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

We can see another sort of manifestation of the latent in the use of tobacco. Unlike most of China, cigarettes are everywhere on the altars of these two new temples. Methods of using them as offerings have not yet become very conventional. Some people place an entire pack on the altar table. Some stand a single lit cigarette on end, as if it were a stick of

incense. Some balance the cigarettes – just a single one or sometimes the contents of an entire pack – on the edge of the table and set them alight. A few people stand them in antique water pipes while they burn down. Some spirit mediums smoke five to ten cigarettes before getting possessed and others have to burn a whole pack as offerings to their deities daily. No informants could give us a clear idea where and when this use of cigarettes started. Most of them just claim it was a demand from the deity. Cigarettes as offerings have occasionally been reported elsewhere in China, although used in rather different ways (usually for ancestors or ghosts).[21] That is, drawing some kind of parallel between cigarettes and incense seems like a latent possibility in Chinese practice, but one that is only occasionally realized, just as certain phenotypes will not appear unless environmental conditions change.

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

Fig. 6, Altar with cigarettes

Fig. 7, Deities with eyeglasses

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

Just as we saw in the other two cases, the new environment has encouraged the spread of mediums. As several of the local incense heads said to us, the gods have to possess bodies now, because they have lost their houses. Even though many of them got new images made and properly placed in the newly erected temple, most of the deities' former bodies were buried underground and their previous abodes were destroyed. They

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

Conclusions

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

from the ground, new seeds will blow in from outside, and new phenotypes may appear out of the older gene pool).

Much of what is happening with people, temples, and deities is not new in southern Jiangsu or in China more broadly, but the ecological disturbance here is more drastic than ever before, making these changes more than just a return to earlier ways of life after a crisis passes. The ecosystem itself has changed permanently. Thus, for example, temple destruction is not new in this region of China. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries at least thirty-seven such incidents have been documented in Suzhou and the nearby Songjiang region (Wang 2010, 203–8). Nor are attempts to bring people like incense heads and spirit mediums under the control of licensed clergy. Nevertheless, we do not have a simple oscillation that continues an old pattern, a return to the steady state. Crucially, the villages that supported the old temples and their reconstructions in the past no longer exist as physical or social communities, or as biological/agricultural ecosystems. Bulldozing those water-based villages and replacing them with an urban grid has had some obvious direct effects on religious practice. Purely agricultural deities like the Lord and Lady of the Fields (田公田母), for instance, have disappeared. In addition, new transportation and communication networks have allowed incense heads to expand beyond village temples, as has the resettlement of many villagers into urban relocation housing, where the villages are no longer separated.

The less obvious effects are perhaps even more important. Thus, we now have an urban planners' attempt to replace the old pattern with what they consider to be appropriate religion, housed in very large Buddhist and Daoist temples and controlled by licensed clergy. State attempts to control clergy are not new in China, but this modernist

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

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

We are not trying to suggest that these changes in southern Jiangsu mark the beginning of a new form of equilibrium, any more than they can be a return to a status quo

ante. Seeing this suddenly urbanized world as part of an ecosystem with plural ecologies points us toward the constant potential for change (Sprenger and Großmann 2018). Roads have replaced waterways, high-rise buildings have replaced rice paddies, ghosts have been uprooted, and gods have lost their homes. Many aspects of an earlier life with deities and ghosts survive, but the social base in village structures and routines is gone, probably permanently in this region.

The resulting burst of creativity is perhaps only surprising in light of older expectations that a move from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* could only spell the death of strongly territorial and community-oriented practices like Chinese temple worship, and would be part of a general weakening of urban religion. Such expectations have been misleading in part because they do not allow enough room for agency – both the agency of the people involved and of the gods and ghosts who make them ill, or grant their wishes, or compel them to serve as mediums. In fact, such creativity may not be unusual at all with urbanization, as when Robert Orsi writes that

> [M]uch of what is characteristic of modern American religion has developed in cities. Pentecostalism, settlement houses, Christian Science, the various modern forms of American Judaism, gospel and soul music, immigrant street shrines and festivals… are all phenomena of the cities… Religious practice in the cities recasts the meanings of the urban environment as the city re-creates religious imagination and experience… The world of the modern city has necessitated, encouraged, or simply made possible a tremendous explosion of religious innovation and experimentation (Orsi 1999, 43–45).

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

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

Second, thinking about our cases as disturbed ecosystems suggests two specific mechanisms of change that may apply in other contexts altogether, and may serve to enrich Ingold's "ecology of life" by considering the specific dynamics of disturbance: disturbance creates spaces where previously latent potentials can become manifest, and it leads to new synergies, interactions, and assemblages – plural ecologies – that may themselves foster further changes. While Sprenger and Großmann (2018) correctly point out that conflict

tends to delineate the differences among these ecological views more clearly, expanding the notion to deal with disturbed ecosystems of all kinds, instead of just conflict, enables us to see how all kinds of negotiations and compromises are possible along with the inherent tensions.

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

Let us briefly mention just two such studies – one involving urbanization and the other postsocialism – to suggest how they might mesh with our approach to disturbed ecosystems. Lin Wei-Ping (2015) documents a rural spirit medium who migrates to the city. Separated from the strict training regimes and close ties to the community-run temple in the village, he becomes free to set up his own altar and to innovate many new ways of treating people, including new techniques for the rapid production of healing talismans and creative uses of phones and social media to expand his network far beyond his new home base. Like our mediums in Jiangsu, urbanization (in his case through migration) has freed him to develop potentials that would have instead lain dormant. On the other hand, by thinking of the ecological contexts more broadly, we can also see how Taiwan's very different political constraints on religion alter the possibilities for ecological change. For example, Chen in Changshu in some ways resembles Lin's case as an entrepreneurial

medium building a large following, but his development of a separate shrine was curtailed by the police, and he moved instead toward synergy with a Buddhist temple. The resulting pattern is thus quite different from what happened in Taiwan, and reminds us that ecosystems are inherently local and can thus change quite differently even given similar starting points.

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

Our focus on the specific processes of disturbed ecosystems thus may let us specify Ingold's insights further. Like us, he sees an ecosystem as something in constant flux: "The most fundamental thing about life is that it does not begin here or end there, but is always

going on. And for the same reason,… environments are never complete but are continually under construction" (Ingold 2000, 172). Building on that, the specific analysis of disturbed ecosystems reminds us that "continuous" need not mean "steady," and that sudden changes can alert us to their own dynamics – not just revealing the latent and constructing new assemblages at moments of crisis, but reminding us to look for those potentials at all times.

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Endnotes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[9] For a brief description of several other Changzhou cases, see Wu (2015). Roughly similar cases have been reported in many parts of the world (e.g., Morris 2000, 305–12).

[10] It is not simply Gu's experience that leads us to speak of an epidemic. Many other mediums in the area have had similar increases in business. Chen, the medium we discuss

in the following section, for example, told us in 2014 that "evil things" (邪东西, meaning ghosts and demons) had increased during the urbanization of the past dozen years. Scholar Wang, whom we discuss in the section on Suzhou, is another example.

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

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

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

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

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

[16] Except for reference to the broader anthropological or sociological literature, we are using the term "religion" carefully here to refer specifically to the institutions that the Chinese government formally recognizes as religion, based on a modernist agenda for what religion should look like – rationalizing, voluntary, belief-centered, text-based, and so on. This includes the official Buddhist, Christian, and Daoist temples and churches that we mention here, but emphatically not village temples or incense heads. The local people do not use the term "religion" to describe their activity, and sometimes even adopt the government's pejorative term of "superstition" to describe their practices, but with no

apparent negative meanings. See especially Goossaert and Palmer (2011) for an extended discussion of the problem of "religion" in China.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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