

Radical Egalitarianism

LOCAL REALITIES, GLOBAL RELATIONS

Edited by

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Economies of Ghosts, Gods, and Goods: The History and Anthropology of Chinese Temple Networks

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Stanley Tambiah's work in linking history and anthropology for the study of Thailand and Sri Lanka has been a constant inspiration for my own attempts to do something of the same for the study of China. In particular, I have been inspired by Tambiah's studies of the interrelations of religious, political, and economic anthropology in ways that force us to rethink our old distinctions between tradition and modernity.

What I will be focusing on in this piece is the history and current workings of temple networks in China. These networks once spread throughout China and Southeast Asia, ran much of local society in China, and played a crucial role in the development of the huge maritime economy in Asia that developed over the several centuries before European colonization. And, right now, the networks are emerging again. The study of these networks opens up several issues in the history and anthropology of China.

To explain why this might be of interest, allow me to sketch a widely accepted narrative of recent history in China—a narrative with which I will take issue in this paper.

Traditions of Modernity

It is often—and I will argue mistakenly—asserted that the connections between early and contemporary China should be explored in terms of a basic distinction of tradition and modernity.

According to such a view, traditional China should be characterized as having maintained an assumption of harmonious monism—in other words, as having seen human beings as part of a cosmos in which everything was linked by chains of inherent correlation, and in which humans and the natural world were in harmony. Such a cosmological vision of harmonious monism was part and parcel, the story goes, of a traditional agricultural world based upon harmonizing with the shift of the seasons, themselves read as the natural movement of the larger cosmos. This traditional world was also a lineage-based system, in which the living were, as the saying goes, “under the ancestors’ shadow.”¹

Modernity, under such a paradigm, would be defined as the breakdown of this assumption of a harmonious, correlative universe and the emergence—for better or for worse—of a humanistic ethos, a free-market economy, and an entrance into a global economy. Things as different as environmental degradation, capitalism, and individualism are often attributed to this shift to modernity. Such a modernity argument still underlies a surprisingly large body of social scientific theory.

I disagree strongly with this paradigm on several grounds, but let me begin with an empirical disagreement. As I have argued elsewhere (Puett 2001 and 2002), there was no assumption of a harmonious, correlative cosmos in pre-twentieth-century China. Such a claim arose during the past two centuries as a means of distinguishing China from either the “West,” or “modernity,” or both. There are certainly texts one could point to from pre-twentieth-century China that argue that the cosmos is harmonious, but these were always claims made against contrary positions, and were never assumptions.

In conceptualizing, therefore, the complex ways that past practices—be they ancestral rituals or temple networks—are currently re-emerging and being appropriated in contemporary China, we need to begin with a different vision of what these earlier practices were, and we need to have a better understanding of the historical appropriation and utilization of the practices throughout subsequent history.

Domesticating Ghosts, Creating Gods

To sketch an alternate view, let me begin with a seemingly odd place: ghosts. Ghosts (*gui*)—often, and equally accurately, translated as “demons”—are pervasive in China.² The landscape in China, from as far back as our written sources go, is a haunted one, a world filled with ghosts.

In fact, ghosts are the natural result of every death: when someone dies, their energies are released and form highly dangerous ghosts, often seething in resentment at those still alive. Their fury is often directed particularly at their close relatives, and to a somewhat lesser extent at others with whom they had associations—those they knew while alive, or those involved in professions similar to those the deceased enjoyed while alive.

Ancestral rituals are an attempt to control these ghosts. One set of souls, associated with the personality of the deceased, is placed in a tomb. The tomb is filled with the objects that the deceased enjoyed while alive, and exhortations are given for the souls to remain there and leave the living alone.

The spirit of the deceased, on the other hand, floats to the heavens. The goal of the rituals for the spirit is to make it into an ancestor, to give it an ancestral tablet, and to place it within a lineage based upon its descent rank. This ancestor is then offered ancestral sacrifices at the proper time, in ranked order with the lineage of other ancestors. With the sacrifices come exhortations to the ancestors to act as ancestors, to support the living as their descendants—in other words, to give the living benefits instead of haunting them and throwing disaster upon them.

Parts of these ritual exhortations involve claims that what the descendants are planning to do is but a continuation of things the ancestors initiated. Such ritual exhortations are undoubtedly the origin of the view that in premodern China the living worked under the ancestors' shadows and saw themselves as simply followers of what the ancestors wished. But this is to take a ritual exhortation as a belief. The reason one makes such exhortations is that one is trying to convince the ghosts to act as ancestors, to see the living as descendants, and to see what the descendants want as a continuation of what the deceased had already begun. One is *making* the ancestors and *creating* such claims, not stating a belief.

But if the goal is to transform ghosts of one's relatives into ancestors, those ghosts who are not domesticated in this way will continue to feed upon the living. Such ghosts are frequently the product of bad deaths, or of people who have died without a family. In these cases, the ghost will often attack those associated with the way the deceased died, or those who are involved in the profession the deceased maintained in life. Sacrifices offered to try to domesticate a ghost of this type would come not from members of the family of the deceased but rather from those associated with the deceased's way of life (or death). To give one of the most famous examples in the anthropological literature, Mazu was a girl who drowned in the tenth century, and who as a ghost would therefore drag living humans to their deaths in the sea as well. Accordingly, it was primarily fishermen—those who had to go on the sea and thus face Mazu's attacks—who initially began sacrificing to Mazu to pacify her (J. Watson 1985).

If the ghost in question responds to the sacrifices, it can often be domesticated to become supportive of the living. Except in this case, the ghost is not domesticated into an ancestor; it is domesticated into a god. Whereas the number of potential supporters of an ancestor-ghost is limited to those who are members of the lineage in question, the number of potential supporters of a god is limited only by the perceived efficacy of the god in question. The larger the number of offerings given, the more likely the ghost would be to continue functioning as a beneficent god or goddess, and the more that god or goddess would be empowered and thus willing, the supporters hope, to use that power on behalf of the living who are making the offerings.

And in this way began the formation of temple networks. As a god or goddess came to be seen as efficacious, more people would start making offerings to it. Moreover, since the god would be associated with particular activities, others dealing with such an activity would be inclined to join in the worship. Once the worship of a particular god or goddess became widespread enough, in fact, one would *have* to join in order to gain the support of others within that profession. Thus, entire crafts and practices would become associated with a particular god or goddess—fishermen with Mazu, health practitioners with Baosheng Dadi (the deity name of the doctor Wu Tao, who died in the ninth century), and so forth (Schipper 1990).

There was thus an inherent tendency toward expansion in the worship of a particular god, both because more practitioners meant more empowerment and domestication of the ghost, and because a

deity with ever-growing power was a deity to whom more and more people would want to make offerings. Rituals thus developed to allow such expansion. Through a *fenxiang* (cutting of the incense) ritual, the ashes used to worship a deity in one temple would be taken to create an altar of worship in a new temple, and the temples would thus be linked in their common support of a particular deity (Schipper 1990). This could go on and on, with the creation of new temples endlessly. Indeed, the network of temples could become so powerful that the networks themselves would fund the creation of yet new temples in other areas.

As Kristofer Schipper has argued,

[T]he great vital and creative forces of exceptional living creatures (animals, humans, or demons) once captured, recovered, and directed towards the good—that is, towards life—will continue to expand indefinitely. Worship—perfect ritual action constantly renewed—contributes to the spiritual power of the gods which in turn results in the spread of their glory and influence. In the beginning, the worship of these demon spirits is primarily propitiatory and purely local. But a minor demon can, through the liturgy of the people, become a great god, a patron saint, a protector of a region or of an entire nation, an archangel, an emperor of Heaven. (Schipper 1993, 42)

Over the past several centuries, the result of this process was the spreading of temple networks throughout China and much of Asia. In many areas, the networks became so powerful that they would run much of local society, including schools, the building of infrastructure, and so forth. In southeastern China, the networks emanating from Fujian ultimately spread throughout Southeast Asia and Indonesia and became the basis of enormous trade networks throughout the South China Sea.³

An Economy of Gods and Goods

A full recounting of the history of these lineages and of these temple networks in late imperial China is beyond the scope of this essay.⁴ Suffice it to say, however, that, as such figures as Kristofer Schipper (1977, 1990), Hugh Clark (1991), and Yuan Bingling (2000) have brilliantly demonstrated, entire economies formed around these networks, and much of the huge Chinese diaspora was based in the temple networks

as well (see, most recently, Kuhn 2008). The networks that spread throughout Southeast Asia were in many ways an equivalent to the Hadrami networks recently studied by Engsang Ho (2006) and the Manangi trade networks studied by Prista Ratanapruck (2008), and they formed a crucial part of the vast Eurasian trade network prior to the imperial expansion of the Western European states. Given their tremendous strength and economic force, it is not surprising that these networks always maintained a complex relationship with the state. In late imperial China, the state would constantly try to promote the gods into its own bureaucracy as a means of appropriating both the gods and their networks, an appropriation that was frequently resisted at the local level (J. Watson 1985; Duara 1988; Szonyi 1997).⁵

More recently, when European powers started moving into the region, the explicit goal was to control the economy of East and Southeast Asia through a colonial structure. The networks came under direct attack at this point. Then, in the twentieth century, successive attempts at dramatic state centralization in mainland China itself, under a call for “modernization,” led to recurrent efforts to destroy the temple networks (Schipper 1990; Goossaert 2000).⁶

So how should we understand all of this? Before discussing the further implications of these temple networks, a theoretical interlude may be in order.

Domesticating the World

I began this discussion with ghosts, and it is to ghosts that I now return.

As we have seen, it is human rituals that transform ghosts into ancestors or gods. Such a statement might at first glance appear to be the product of an anthropological thinking based a bit too much on Durkheim and Girard, overly committed to the view that it is ritual that creates deities. In particular, it may appear to be an overly modernist reading, based upon unmasking the beliefs of traditional societies: in the case at hand, human action is posited as creating the gods who are then claimed to rule society. The problem with such a formulation, of course, is that it fails to take into account the indigenous belief system within which such rituals are understood.

But, in fact, the view laid out here is found explicitly in indigenous formulations, and in a form that is quite different from anything one would find in contemporary Western theory. Indeed, the pri-

mary ritual classic from China—the *Book of Rites*—argues precisely this position (Puett 2005 and 2008). The world in its natural state is fragmented and discontinuous, and dominated by highly dangerous ghosts. Humans thus created rituals to transform these ghosts into ancestors and gods. These ghosts and ancestors would in turn be used as mediators in a larger effort to domesticate the entire world: by taking pieces of what were deceased humans and transforming them into ancestors, families would be able to link themselves to these remains and create lineages, and by taking remains of other deceased humans and transforming them into gods, links could be made to other, unrelated groups. By creating these descent lineages into the past and these temple networks across spatial boundaries, humans would be able to form the groups necessary to domesticate the past and domesticate the natural world. What was once a fragmented world is thus transformed into a unified, harmonious system, in which gods and ancestors serve as the mediators linking humans to each other and to the rest of the natural world.⁷ (The numerous statements in modernist writings that see a monistic, harmonious cosmos as having been an assumption in premodern China come from taking the desired results of such human action—namely, the creation of a full cosmos in which everything would be linked through the domesticating acts of humans—as a starting assumption.)

Far from living under the ancestors' shadow, the vision here is one in which the ancestors and gods are creations of the living, made in order to forge links to the constructed past and to forge vertical and horizontal links to the rest of the world in the present.⁸

Overcoming Discontinuity

But if these are the indigenous formulations, how can they be brought into a general anthropology?

Michael Scott (2007), building upon the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966, 224–25) and Marshall Sahlins (1985), has made a distinction between ontologies based upon continuity and those based upon discontinuity.

For an ontology of continuity, the problem is seen to be one of asserting discontinuity. Many cosmologies are based upon such a claim of continuity, but I would here like to focus on the fact that much of contemporary theory is based upon continuity arguments of this kind. Indeed, all modernity arguments, which posit a traditional

worldview of cosmic order and a traditional society of controlling lineage structures, from which a modern world with its celebrated assertions of individualism and free will is breaking, are based upon such a vision.

Ontologies of discontinuity, on the other hand, are those that see the fundamental problem as being one of creating links to connect what is perceived to be an overly fragmented, discontinuous world. As Scott correctly points out, such ontologies are under-explored and under-theorized in the anthropological literature.

The ontologies from China under consideration here are clearly based upon discontinuity: the world is fragmented and fractured, and filled with capricious ghosts. Within such a cosmology, the goal is to work endlessly to create continuity—to make connections, to form networks, and to domesticate the world such that these networks grow, flourish, and expand.

Stanley Tambiah has noted a comparable type of discontinuity vision in Trobriand thought:

The structuralist view is that since the world out there is in flux and a continuous process, man in his cultural garb imposed on this flux a classificatory grid which introduces discontinuities; the intervals or spaces that divide the categories then become ambiguous, sacred, and tabooed. I wish to suggest a classificatory perspective that accords with Trobriand mental dispositions and proclivities; it gives the structuralist formulation a new twist. It is my sense that Trobriand thought actually operates on and manipulates the classificatory system in such a way that categories already separated are then collapsed or brought into conjunction so that these meeting points are viewed in themselves as, or as sites for, heightened manifestation, extraordinary events, and highly charged “excessive” acts. (1985c, 313-14)

As Tambiah correctly points out, much of structuralist thought has been based upon a continuity vision: the world is continuous, and humans impose discontinuity upon it. But, Tambiah argues, if we take Trobriand thought seriously, we see a vision in which the key is to take a discontinuous series and bring the phenomena that comprise it into conjunction.

In China, one finds entire social practices based upon a comparable cosmological vision, as well as an extraordinary body of ritual theory focused on the implications of such a cosmology. One of the

reasons we have missed this is that by reading China according to a tradition/modernity paradigm, we have blinded ourselves to a fascinating body of thought.

Resurgence

But the problem is not simply that we have failed to deal with a body of indigenous theory that can help explain a fascinating side of earlier Chinese economic history. For recently there has been a tremendous resurgence of the temple networks in southeastern China. As Kenneth Dean has demonstrated beautifully in a number of groundbreaking works on Fujian (1995, 1998, 2003, 2006; see also Lagerwey 2001), the networks are once again beginning to take a leadership role in the running of local society and the development of local economies. Much of the funding for the restoration of the temples and the re-creation of temples' activities in the region came initially from the old *fenxiang* networks. Recently, for example, the Ciji Gong temple, a major node in the huge Baosheng Dadi network, has been rebuilt, with significant support from the *fenxiang* network outside of China. And this has long been the case in Taiwan, where the networks have been thriving for decades (see in particular Sangren 1984 and 1987, Weller 1987, and Chipman 2007).

The full implications of this resurgence will only become clear over the next few decades, but even a quick discussion of some of the possibilities will give hints of issues to consider. The growing significance of the networks for the running of local societies and economies in China has tremendous political implications for the future of entire regions of the People's Republic of China; the rebuilding of the network lines between the southeast coast and Taiwan has obvious and very significant implications for relations between China and Taiwan; the regrowth of the networks among the large diasporic populations in Southeast Asia and southeast China has potentially significant transnational implications; and the resurgence of the trade networks throughout Southeast Asia has tremendous economic implications for the entire region.

All of these developments, meanwhile, are occurring completely out of sight of virtually the entire spectrum of the social sciences apart from anthropology. When economists, for example, look at the economy of China, they do so almost entirely from a modernist paradigm of seeing a China breaking from its traditional, agrarian econ-

omy of the past and allowing rational individualism and free-market capitalism to emerge. They thus focus exclusively on things like the national GDP, the Shanghai stock market, the number of companies being privatized from the state, and so forth.

Such a paradigm not only misconstrues the economy and society of so-called premodern China, it also misses a very significant aspect of the resurgence of these older economic patterns. To account for what is developing, we will need very different economic models. And, in the case at hand, we actually have an extraordinarily rich indigenous body of theory from China that has barely been mined at all.

The Anthropology of History

In his articles “Cosmologies of Capitalism” (1988) and “The Sadness of Sweetness; or, The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology” (1996), Marshall Sahlins has argued that capitalism is itself a cosmology, and that different cultures, with different cosmologies, have played a crucial role in the workings of the global system. Although Sahlins was focusing his discussion on the capitalist system as it emerged in the nineteenth century, his point can be enlarged to discuss both earlier and later periods as well.

Such arguments have not had much influence outside of anthropology, but I suspect that will change dramatically as non-Western economies once again become more and more dominant in the world. Much of contemporary theories of modernity will have to be rethought as these very different economies and cosmologies continue to emerge—many of which are based upon appropriations of very old economies and cosmologies that bear little resemblance to a so-called traditional order over which capitalism and individualism were supposedly triumphing. Suddenly, both the past and future will look very different.

An anthropology worthy of its name is one that will take non-Western theories of the self, ritual, statecraft, and economy seriously and allow them to help us question the Western narratives and frameworks that are still too often taken for granted.⁹ Such an anthropology will also be fully historical, looking in detail at long-term patterns in history that force us rethink our modernity frameworks.

This is a vision of anthropology that has long been espoused by Stanley Tambiah. Let us hope that the rest of us will finally start catching up to the vision he began laying out decades ago.

example the Triple Gem: the Buddha, as the source of sacred words; the Dhamma, as the (perceived) true words of the Buddha as inscribed or transmitted in written or oral form; and the Sangha, as the most appropriate agent for the recitation of these sacred words (1968, 183).

A MUSLIM KING AND HIS BUDDHIST SUBJECTS: RELIGION, POWER,
AND IDENTITY AT THE PERIPHERY OF THE THAI STATE

Irving Chan Johnson

1. In his dissertation, Roger Kershaw (1969) noted that Kelantanese Thais were already displaying pictures of the Thai royal family in their homes and temples in the 1960s. These images were either purchased in Thailand during trips across the border or via itinerant traders at temple fairs or during house-to-house visits. Some pictures were taken from colorful calendars printed by temples and commercial establishments such as banks and businesses. On the cult of the Thai kingly image see Peleggi (2002).

2. In the Kelantanese Thai dialect, young monks who have yet to become temple abbots (*than*) are addressed by the honorific *khun*.

3. Kelantan, like most of Malaysia, still maintains its historic Malay ruling house. The sultan, despite his ritually exalted position, does not hold obvious political clout and is not involved in the day-to-day administration of the state.

ECONOMIES OF GHOSTS, GODS, AND GOODS: THE HISTORY
AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHINESE TEMPLE NETWORKS

Michael Puett

1. The phrase comes from Hsu 1967. Otherwise-brilliant ethnographies of the self in contemporary China will occasionally fall into this paradigm as well when they contrast a modern self with a stereotypical, traditional vision of the self as residing under the ancestors' shadow. In fact, much of what we are discovering in ethnography resonates in very intriguing ways with earlier visions of the self.

2. For full discussions of the interplay of ghosts, ancestors, and gods in China, see Jordan 1972; A. Wolf 1974; Harrel 1974; Ahern 1973; J. Watson 1988; Weller 1987; Sangren 1987; Schipper 1993; Yu 1987; Seidel 1982, 1987; Brashier 1996; Keightley 2004; and von Glahn 2004. My summary here draws on the work of all of these scholars.

3. Schipper 1970, 1990; Goossaert 2000; Katz 1995; Guo 2003, 2005; Naquin 2000; Feuchtwang 1977; Faure and Siu 2003; and Skinner 1959, 1985.

4. For lineage construction in late imperial China, see Szonyi 2002, Faure 2007, and Brook 1989.

5. Unfortunately, tracing the history of these networks is no easy task. Their existence is certainly registered in the gazetteers and archives, but, since both of these materials are aimed at presentations of local phenomena, they do not trace out which temples were linked to which networks. To study this, the only approaches are tracing the networks through inscriptions and records in the temples, and tracing the icons of the gods and goddesses. But the task is made easier by the fact that the networks are very much in the process of being re-created right now.

6. Although such attempts to destroy the networks were made under the claim of modernization, it is worth noting that there is nothing modern about such attempts themselves. Although for space reasons I have avoided mention of the interplay of these networks with the state, suffice it to say that numerous attempts at dramatic state centralization at the expense of the networks and lineage structures have occurred in Chinese history. The dramatic growth of the networks in late imperial China was simply part and parcel of a concurrent loss in state power. The twentieth century saw an attempt to re-assert state power—a continuation of a very old battle.

7. A comparison of these theories with Tambiah's theory of ritual (see 1968b) would be very rewarding.

8. The theories also contain lengthy discussions of statecraft as well, in which vertical links are created by the state through the same techniques of transforming natural elements and humans into gods and ancestors. Thus Heaven is transformed into a deity, and the ruler is transformed into a Son of Heaven as well as a father and mother of the people. For a full discussion see Puett 2005 and 2008. For the ways such theories were employed in late imperial China, see Wilson 2002 and Zito 1997. A full comparison of this vision of statecraft with Tambiah's analysis of "galactic polities" in Southeast Asia is outside of the bounds of this essay, but it is a comparison I will undertake in another forum.

9. For a preliminary attempt to take early Chinese ritual theory seriously as theory, see Puett 2006 and Weller, Seligman, Puett, and Simon 2008, 17–42 and 179–82.

TRADE, RELIGION, AND CIVIC RELATIONS IN THE
MANANGI LONG-DISTANCE TRADE COMMUNITY

Prista Ratanapruck

1. In his mention of "Ec 10," Tambiah was referring to "Social Analysis 10: Principles of Economics," a popular course that fulfilled a core course requirement at Harvard and was a requirement for economics majors.