Special Issue: Contemporary Haunting: How Ghosts Reconfigure Space, Memory, and the State in East Asia
Journal of Archaeology and Anthropology • 75:113-122 • 2011

COMMENTARY
Enter the Ghost

Laurel Kendall*

Haunting and modernity, dislocation, reconfiguration, irresolution, and the unquiet dead: in his Specters of Marx, Jacques Derrida (2006) uses the metaphor of haunting to witness unsettled, elided, and troubling histories, a plea for justice on behalf of those who are not there. Half suppressed memories appear and disappear among us in the manner of a revenant, or as in the stage directions of Shakespeare's Hamlet, "Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost" (p. xix). East Asia puts another spin on the idea of historical hauntings. As Heonik Kwon (2008) eloquently demonstrates in his Ghosts of Vietnam and as is abundantly evidenced in these three contributions, in the East Asian World, the unquiet dead and their unsettling histories claim a more literal and agentive presence than Derrida's metaphoric specters. Ghosts are constituted and reconstituted in unstable Cold War borderlands, the marginal spaces of nearly forgotten battles on Jinmen (Chi 2010), massacre sites on Korea's Cheju Island (Kim 1989a., b., 2000), and the bombed and bloodied countryside of central Vietnam (Kwon 2008). They loom up from the mass graves of purge victims in former soviet Buryatia (Buyandelgeriyn 2007) and exert their agency in stories of revolutionary excess in Southwest China (Mueggler 2001). In D.J. Hatfield's and Anru Lee and Wen-hui Anna Tang's ethnography, counter histories emerge from graves unsettled by shifting urban landscapes and developers' schemes, the beautification projects in Lukang and Kaohsiung where parks and public monuments celebrate local history while eliding the claims of the dead. Ghosts muddle pristine visions of hyper-modern urban life. They have been capable of forcing secular bureaucrats, who serve that same vision, to engage with the popular religion of their

* Curatorial Assistant, Asian Ethnology, Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

grandmothers and country cousins; Anru Lee and Wen-hui Anna Tang give a well-intentioned bureaucrat called upon to negotiate with unquiet dead maidens through the repeated tossing of divination blocks.

Ghostly claims on the living carry ethical force, a sense of rights, obligations, and proper behaviors, sometimes contested and sometimes renegotiated between the living and the denizens of the shadow world. But if the plight of ghosts evokes a vision of ethical order projected onto the dead in their relation to the living, the condition of the ghost, of haunting, is a condition of vaporous instability and seemingly irreconcilable paradox. The three studies by D.J. Hatfield, Wei-Ping Lin, and Anru Lee and Wen-hui Anna Tang capture this well for contemporary Taiwan and remind us that modernity is also a spectral thing where "all that is solid melts into air." Ghosts haunt these ethnographies in appropriately spectral ways, sometimes sensed, sometimes glimpsed, sometimes the stuff of urban legend, a conversational allusion, an absence that winks at a presence, a dream, a visitation in the person of a spirit medium, a stubborn response to a toss of divination blocs. The young woman, who, just a minute ago, was sitting in the back of a taxi, vanishes without a trace. Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost.

Ghosts are simultaneously believed, disbelieved, half believed in the evasive conversations that Hatfield describes; they evoke chills among spectators at a séance in Lin's account; they circulate in multiple stories about ghostly maidens hailing taxicabs and motorbikes and visit the dreams of surviving family members in Lee and Tang's account. It is impossible to read this material without sensing the "frisson" of ghost talk. This is also the frisson of the anti-modern, a shaking of contemporary certainties. The ghosts aren't supposed to be there, not today and most certainly not in the recently beautified and hyper-modern urbanscapes of contemporary Taiwan. The possibility of a haunting becomes transgressive; can we think of it as almost a guilty pleasure for modern Taiwanese and possibly for these authors as well? But specter wars are also necessarily ambiguous; this is explicit in Hatfield's account where some of the same people who engage in oblique ghost talk enjoy the facilities offered by the haunted park that claimed space from a graveyard. Lee and Tang describe

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

activities that tack—with seemingly intentional ambiguity—between secular civic commemorations and the ritual placation of restless virgin ghosts. And if the gamblers' dangerous engagement with ghosts has a moral bite, as Lin suggests, it does not efface the possibility of gaining assistance from ghosts in gambling and other speculation (cf. Weller 1994). Albeit, Lin tells us, the popularity of ghost temples has waxed and waned, of a piece with the vaporous and inconsistent presence of the ghosts themselves.

Ghosts can have inconsistent careers and emergent afterlives (Harrell 1974). Lee and Tang describe how the virgin ghosts of Kaohsiung report through mediums and dreams that they have become "enlightened" in the other world and claim the status of minor gods. James Watson (1985) has speculated that Ma Tzu herself began her afterlife as a virgin ghost.

Taiwan anthropologists have described nonfixity—both spatial and social—as a fundamental condition of the ghost (Jordan 1972; Wolf 1974): those without a seat on the ancestral altar—most particularly unmarried women—, abandoned bones, beggar-like specters huddling in simple temple structures that recall the impermanence of a bus shelter. In Lin's account, "good brothers" are collectively euphemized on a ghost temple tablet because no proper ancestral tablet bears their long forgotten names. Bones abandoned at a former cemetery site give rise to an unsettling presence. Some ghosts are known, may even be named, but are no less unsettled owing to the circumstance of their deaths: the mother and daughter who perished in a fire and haunt the neighborhood in Lin's description, the twenty-five virgin ghosts of Kaohsiung who speak to both local memory and national history in Lee and Tang's account. But memory itself can become a vaporous thing. Hatfield's informants offer vague suggestions about the sources of problematic, unclaimed bones in the Lukang Lunhahteng Cemetery: Plague victims? Massacre victims? Did this happen under Japanese rule? Before it?

Lin uses a spatial analysis of ghosts to establish a link between the descendant-less wandering ghost who is an outside normative kinship and the ghost produced by a violent or sudden death away from home, literally outside the house as

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

quintessential family-defined and family defining space. Ritual activities aimed at placating and otherwise dealing with the dead symbolically and exorcistically reinforce distinctions between the insider qualities of home and family, the outcast nature of ghosts, and the necessity of boundaries between these domains. This is explicit in Lin's discussion of how stories about ghost marriages evoke the dangers of "penetration" between worlds, moral tales where a desire for gamblers' wealth precipitated fatal attractions, seduction by a ghostly partner who promises windfall fortune. Even a telephone conversation about gambling advice becomes a conduit of fatal haunting.

But if ghostliness is a condition of non-presence and non-fixity, hauntings occur at specific sites—tombs, former cemeteries, ghost temples, places of massacres and accidents. As I read the studies by Lee and Tang and by Hatfield, I was reminded of de Certeau's (1984) positive invocation of the "superstitions" that muddle official and officially-controlling visions of the landscape. The new public parks that they describe cannot quite shake the presence of ghosts from recently disturbed graves despite all efforts to beautify and de-spookify these redeveloped urban spaces. At the site of Lukang's former Lunahteng Cemetery, ghost talk was very present in the 1990s, as human remains were disinterred, claimed bones prepared for a satisfactory reburial, and abandoned remains deposited in a common commemorative site. In more recent times, ghost talk has itself become a spectral presence, glimpsed every now and then. The park is an active place, a much-enjoyed space, an asset in the transformed urban grid of Lukang, and yet, Hatfield suggests, there is "something" out there, associated, metaphorically with some of the park's living and potentially dangerous visitors—immigrant women from Vietnam.

Lee and Tang's discussion of the complex politics surrounding the "Twenty-five Ladies' Tomb," the twenty-five virgin ghosts interred there, and the transformation of the site into a "Memorial Park for Women Laborers" recalls Pierre Nora's (1989) discussion of *lieu de memoire*, the memorial site that witnesses an official history while effacing local memory. The twenty-five young women who drowned on their way to factory work in Kaohsiung in the 1970s were optimum candidates for ghostly

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

manifestation who eventually began to claim a better status as followers of Goddess Kuan Yin, entities who could be venerated in statue form as demi-goddesses, most appropriately in a temple at the site of their tomb. All of this fit the understandings of their families, who lobbied hard for the maintenance of a temple, and the logic of popular religion in Taiwan more generally. It also resolved the problem of their outsider status and insured that even without descendants, they could receive offerings. For feminist groups, however, the "problem" of virgin ghosts was an artifact of patriarchal ideology that expelled daughters from their natal family and gave them no place on its ancestral altar. Feminists argued for recognition of these women as labor heroines, representatives of all women who had sacrificed their youth in the cause of Taiwan's industrial transformation. For Kaohsiung's local government, however, the aim was to beautify the park as a tourist site, removing insofar as possible any trace of tombs and ghost temples. The result was a compromise with the bones sealed out of sight under a monumental sculpture commemorating women workers. But one wonders if this will prove sufficient, given the unstable and unruly nature of ghosts, the twenty-five virgins' already demonstrated capacity for haunting, and the existence of mediums who continue to operate in their name. The bones under the monument hint once again at something out there.

This association of ghosts with bones and both ghosts and bones with haunted space approaches another paradox: if the ghost is fundamentally vaporous, the realization of ghosts as social entities and the means to interact with them is necessarily tied to material things: temple structures, paper ghost money, food and votive paper offerings, bone fragments, divination blocks, and the living bodies of spirit mediums. Hatfield offers the most explicit discussion of ghostly materiality in his departure from an anthropological tradition that interprets ghosts metaphorically as outcasts and beggars. His concern is with some of the ways people in Lukang engage with ghosts, in conversational elisions and as problematic material traces. Hatfield's discussion plays on fragments—the fragmentary and oblique ways that people talk about the potentially dangerous dead and the literal fragments of their bones. Bones become the origin point for a Taiwanese ghost temple, and unclaimed

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

bones become an unsettling presence that continues to haunt the new park. Hatfield uses Bruno Latour's concept of the "factish," the well-fabricated object that takes on an autonomous existence influencing the subsequent behavior of those who engage with it. Hatfield describes in careful detail the specialist treatment accorded the exhumed bones of known ancestors as acts of factish production enjoining subsequent veneration on the part of descendants. The unclaimed fragments are similarly agentive in their anomalous and subsequently problematic state, the state of permanent irresolution and the omnipresent possibility of haunting. The problem of bones, their irreducible materiality and the enmeshment of that materiality in moral codes and behaviors, looms large in the spectacular development schemes described by Hatfield and by Lee and Tang. The problem of bones in a landscape shared with the dead but increasingly reclaimed by the needs of growing populations of living has resonance throughout the region. Jun Jing (1999) has written of the trauma evoked by relocated graves at a dam site in the PRC. At the time of this writing, ancestral graveyards in South Korea are being effaced to accommodate real estate development. Bones, graves, ghosts, and real estate: this may be the most contemporary concatenation of East Asia's spectral self.

Statues, as they appear in Lee and Tang's account, are also factishes and game changers; as materializations of the ghostly maidens' transformed status into enlightened beings and demi-gods, they enjoin different kinds of worship and reconfigure the ghost's relationship to space. As a little goddess in a statue, she can be brought inside. Some of the drowned maidens have gained readmission to their natal households while others have been placed in temples where, even without descendants, they will receive offerings. If the virgin ghost is the ultimate anomaly in patrilineal ancestor worship, this possibility of apotheosis is probably not so unusual throughout the region.

Ghosts provoke not only material realizations in monuments, temples and statues, they also engender emotional responses, most obviously unease if not fear. But Lee and Tang's account also suggests acts of pity and compassion, both on the part of the dead girls' families and the feminists who want to rectify their identities

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

and reputations. Ghosts and pity, ghosts as specters of injustice, even the injustice of dying young and unmarried, this theme is very present in other recent writing about ghosts—war dead on Jinmen (Chi 2010) and in Central Vietnam (Kwon 2008) and on Cheju Island, South Korea (Kim 1989a., b.). This takes us, full circle, back to Derrida's specters and the haunting irresolution of recent histories.

In sum, these three accounts of recent ghostly phenomena convey a sense of the instability of spectral hauntings as a reflection of the instability of the modern condition where no landscape is fixed for long and no official history unchallenged. The authors build upon a very rich ethnography of Chinese popular religion—this is true even of Hatfield who explicitly strikes out in another direction but cannot excise the insights of an older generation from his discussion. All three presentations also suggest that the study of popular religion—initially the product of a structuralist moment in anthropology and very well served by it—can be enriched through some approaches that were not available to the generation of anthropologists who worked in villages in Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s. The anthropology of space and place and the big question of materiality in relation to human action seem well suited to discussions of ghosts in a hyper modern, commoditized and dynamic Taiwanese landscape. As someone who has not done fieldwork in Taiwan but whose own efforts in South Korea have been enriched by the insights of Taiwan ethnography, I look forward to a larger dialogue about the spectral and not-so-spectral presence of popular religion in contemporary East Asia. Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost.

REFERENCES CITED

Buyandelgeriyn, Manduhai

2007 Dealing with unertainty: Shamans, marginal capitalism, and the remaking of history in postsocialist Mongolia. American Ethnologist 34 (1): 127-147.

Chi, Chang-hui

2010 The Cult of the Patriotic Generals and Collective Memory of War in Jinmen. Paper

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Associatin. New Orleans, LA.

de Certeau, Michel

1984 The Practice of Everyday Life. S. Rendall, trans. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Derrida, Jacques

2006 Specters of Marx. New York: Routledge.

Harrell, C. Stevan

1974 When a Ghost Becomes a God. In Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society. A.P. Wolf, ed. Pp. 193-206. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jing, Jun

1999 Villages Dammed, Villages Repossessed: A Memorial Movement in Northwest China. American Ethnologist 26 (2): 324-343.

Jordan, David K.

1972 Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwanese Village. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Kendall, Laurel

1985 Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

2009 Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Kim, Seong Nae

1989a Chronicle of Violence, Ritual of Mourning: Cheju Shamanism in Korea. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan.

1989b Lamentations of the Dead: The Historical Imagery of Violence on Cheju Island, South Korea. Journal of Ritual Studies 3 (2): 252-286.

2000 Mourning Korean Modernity in the Memory of the Cheju April Third Incident.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 1 (3): 461-476.

Kwon, Heonik

2008 Ghosts of War in Vietnam. Cambridge: Cambridge Univesity Press.

Mueggler, Erik

2001 The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nora, Pierre

1989 Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire. Representations 26 (Spring): 7-25.

Watson, James L.

1985 Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou ("Empress of Heaven") Along the South China Coast, 960-1960. In Popular Culture in Late Imperial China. D. Johnson, A.J. Nathan, and E.S. Rawski, eds. Pp. 292-324. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Unversity of California Press.

Weller, Robert P.

1994 Capitalism, Community, and the Rise of Amoral Cults in Taiwan. In Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia. C.F. Keyes, L. Kendall, and H. Hardacre, eds. Pp. 141-164. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Wolf, Arthur P.

Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors. In Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society. A.P. Wolf, ed. Pp. 131-182. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫