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AN OVERVIEW**



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Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it.

Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 2008, 7

No scholar in the contemporary field of the social sciences or cross-cultural studies would question Peter L. Berger's observation that "today's world is furiously religious" (Berger 1999, 9). The once well accepted 'modern-ization' theory of the 1960s and 1970s, which assumed that the introduction of market economies in Asia would not only institute state-directed democracy and neoliberal reforms, but also trigger processes of secularization that would push religion out of the public arena and into the private sphere, has turned out to be wrong. Critical reason, a concept shaped by the "philosophical enlightenment" of Kant and others, obviously did not prevail on a grand scale. Instead, "the Internationale of Unreason" ("die Internationale der Unvernunft"; Meyer 1989) and persisting outbreaks of religiously motivated violence nourish scepticism towards such Eurocentric mindsets. This becomes even clearer when seen from a post-colonial perspective, such as that of Dipesh Chakrabarty in his ambitious project of "Provincializing Europe" (1992, 2000). Chakrabarty argues against scientific narratives that implicitly take Europe as a benchmark for all of history: "Europe' remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese,' 'Kenyan,' and so on" (Chakrabarty 2000, 27). Western thinkers like Max Weber and Karl Marx saw 'Europe' simply

as the framework for all historical discovery: "The dominance of 'Europe' as the subject of all histories is a part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world" (Chakrabarty 2000, 29). The actual paradox of third-world social science, according to Chakrabarty, "is that *we* [intellectuals of the third-world countries, PJB] find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of 'us,' eminently useful in understanding our societies" (Chakrabarty 2000, 29). In the so-called post-colonial "periphery", however, the imaginative power of Europe is slowly fading away, making it increasingly less plausible to see one's own future as a mere "variation" on Europe's past (Kaviraj 2005, 525). The hypnotic singular form "modernity" is increasingly being replaced by concepts like "alternative modernities" (Gaonkar 1999), "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt 2000) "vernacular" or "the other's modernities" (Knauff 2002, 2006).

In addition to this new post-colonial terminology, even in the West itself doubt is being cast on the universality of such apparent conceptual pillars of sociological theory as "bourgeois", "capitalist", "modern" or "secularization". While Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (2000) posits a relational link between his "multiple modernities" and the "pluralisation" of the lines of development of



"modernity", Frederick Cooper (2005), in his history of colonialism, sees "modernity" as a completely useless analytical category. In contrast, Bruce Knauft (2002) prefers to see the apparent dichotomy of the terms 'traditional' and 'modern' as in fact interrelating categories, each reinforcing the other. "Alternative modernity" is an articulatory space bounded on the one hand by local cultural and subjective dispositions and on the other by the various opportunities and restrictions presented by the global political economy.

However much academics try to revise such terms as 'modern' or 'modernity', one is still faced with the central and challenging question of locating religion in modernity. That the seemingly inseparable twin relationship of modernity and secularisation has been proven a myth can be seen, for example, in the religious history of the United States. Rather than representing the rule, then, Europe is now more and more regarded as an "exceptional case" (Davie 2000, Lehmann 2004). In other words, it is not the flourishing religious culture of the USA or the "global upsurge of religion in world politics" (Berger 1999) that needs explanation, but the decline of the significance of religion in Western Europe.

Where this chapter presents observations of religious life and practice in Southeast Asia, it does so within the above outlined frame of inquiry, always including a self-reflective component. The investigation of spirits in Asian modernity is of especially great significance in that context. At first sight, this may seem an odd pairing: What does a belief in spirits and ghosts, in mediums and trances etc. have to do with modernity? From a perspective shaped by the promises of Western enlightenment, belief in spirits (or ghosts) is equivalent to superstition and should be fought without reservation, yet without superstition as its counterpart, the Enlightenment would have been unthinkable. As Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002, 2) ascertained, "the disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism". Yet superstition, as from the perspective of Enlightenment, does not refer to an objective factuality, but to a perception shaped and developed from a Christian context. In this perception, reason irresistibly and unstopably marches forward, against all setbacks: as far as spirits are concerned, only children, the mentally disturbed or 'primitive' people would believe in them. Ghosts, spirits, and spectres, I argue, are well suited to reflect on "alternative", or "multiple modernities", and

principally on the location of religion in modernity. Aspects of European and Southeast Asian modernity have to be compared for that purpose, historically, sociologically and anthropologically.

Christian Spirits and faith healers

A spectacular phenomenon of Catholicism in the Philippines is self-crucifixion. In a small number of locations, rituals of this type take place every Easter Week, attracting thousands of pilgrims, ordinary spectators and journalists. Ritualized crucifixion is not a wide-spread practice, but nevertheless has sensation value and so gives rise to disproportionate publicity.

When I visited several locations in the course of my research on Philippine Passion Rituals in order to observe these self-crucifixion and self-flagellation procedures, I soon noticed that labels like 'pre-modern' or 'relic of ancient custom' were quite inappropriate. The people that have themselves nailed to the cross – and, for that matter, the numerous spectators – do not come from a Philippine backwater cut off from national and global events. Kapitangan, the research location, is about 50 km from the capital, Manila, and has a Motorway connection to the metropolis. Its chief industries and sources of income are wet rice cultivation and the production of artificial turf: The latter are much in demand by the middle classes seeking to get out of Manila. The late 1990s were a dynamic period in which mega-malls, vast shopping centres and internet cafes mushroomed, with an increasing ubiquity of attendant mobile phones and TV sets. Much of the local population commutes to Manila every day, and in most families, at least one member is working abroad in the USA, Europe or the Middle East.

The notion that the self-crucifixions that took place in the churchyard of the small town of Kapitangan – in full view of thousands of spectators – must have been some archaic relic of Spanish missionary colonization, turned out to be quite wrong. In fact, they were 'invented' during the extensive post-colonization period in the 1960s that was dominated by intense modernization efforts. In the town of Kapitangan, it was a 16-year-old girl, Lucy Reyes, who was responsible for this 'invention of tradition' in 1977. She had herself crucified every year for the next 13 years and served as a role model for others, chiefly young women. Since then, 3-4 persons on average per year have had themselves crucified in the churchyard of Kapitangan.



Neither the actors on the stage nor the spectators in front of it can be categorized as exclusively belonging to the uneducated lower class. A student of computer sciences was among the crucifiers in 1996-98, and many spectators were distinctly well dressed, with their habitus also indicating middle-class origins. No less surprising was the fact that these self-crucifixions did not appear to be punishment rituals. Instead, it was "spirit mediumship", and shamanism that characterize the underlying pattern of motivation and action. All the actors were healers who themselves had experienced a life-threatening illness in their childhood that had brought them into contact with Jesus – either in the form of a cross-carrying Jesus of Nazareth with a crown of thorns, or, more often, of the Holy Child (Santo Niño). Being healed from their illnesses brought with it the calling to become healers themselves. The healer is possessed by the Holy Child, speaks with an altered voice and is afterwards unable to remember what happened. The call to be crucified comes as part of a trance experience or in a dream; crucifixions are rewarded by an increase in "healing power", while to refuse means a possible recurrence of the childhood illness. As the actors understand them, self-crucifixions are not a matter of individual free choice; to the outsider, they appear to be a shamanistic rite of passage in the course of the healer's career (Bräunlein 2009, 2010).

Filipinos do not see self-crucifixion and self-flagellation as a manifestation of pathology or folklore, but rather as part of the urgent ongoing post-colonial identity debate. "Who are we actually?" is a question that journalists, politicians, churchmen and intellectuals like to bring up every year when the Passion rituals are reported up and down the country on television, the internet and on the front pages of the daily papers. The phenomenon of spiritual healing, of which self-crucifixion is only one dramatic example, is widespread in the Philippines. It is Catholic saints, together with Mary and Jesus, which heal through mediums. The Spanish colonizers brought Catholicism with them and 'grafted' it on to the Philippine cosmology without however 'replacing' this. It was not so much a "clash of civilizations" as an "clash of spirits" (Aguilar 1998). The Catholic saints took on the powers and characters of ancestral or protective spirits and gods (nono, anito, diwata) (Scott 1995, 77-93). The numerous local mischievous and benevolent spirits survived this missionary and colonial "clash" in good health. The worship of saints - characterized by a typical "patron-client"

pattern – but also fear of evil spirits and the need to be protected from them, permeates the whole of society. The traditional trance experts still function today as mediums between the 'here' and the 'other side', between the living and the dead, using a combination of séances, ritualized prayers, amulets and saint worship. Seen against this background, the *imitatio Christi* is an extremely effective spiritual technique, and even the dead Christ is turned into a powerful shaman (Cannell 1999, 200). Catholicism and the shamanism of Southeast Asia are indeed inseparable.

The Philippine spiritual healing complex is neither an exclusively tribal nor a rural phenomenon. Indeed, it was in urban centres that the Philippine Jesuit and social psychologist Jaime Bulatao noticed an increase in the numbers of spiritual healers after the Second World War, coining the term "New Mystics" to describe them (Bulatao 1992, 54-62). This "New Mysticism" is a further facet of the so-called *New Religious Movements* (NRMs) that have sprung up since the 1960s. Successful examples of the latter are the well known charismatic pentecostal groups in Africa and Asia, whose attraction rests on a combination of strict religiosity plus the accumulation of wealth. A clearly structured way of life, proscription of betting and alcohol, the strengthening of family ties and responsibilities, and the creation of networks produce not only social capital but also real monetary value and the chance to rise up the social ladder.

With an estimated 10-15 million members, El Shaddai is one such charismatic movement in the Philippines and one of the most remarkable NRMs in Asia. The founder of this Catholic reformist movement, Mike Vellarde, started off as an engineer and real estate agent. Inspired by American "prosperity preachers" like Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland, Vellarde propagated an out-and-out welfare ideology: belief in God is rewarded not only by doing well in the afterlife, but also in this world. All members of El Shaddai contribute part of their earnings to the movement as a matter of course. A money bill is always slipped in with the prayer request. One of its successful marketing strategies is the priority it accords to worker migration, a matter of immense importance in the Philippines.¹ Passports and visa applications are given public blessing and the decision to emigrate praised as a worth-

¹ Besides Mexico, the Philippines ranks second as the leading nation of labour emigration worldwide. Cf. Martin 1996.



ful sacrifice. Through these migrants, the El Shaddai movement is then able to extend its influence abroad. Its organization methods, featuring the use of in-house radio and television programs, are comparable to those of a commercial corporation.

A rational business approach of this kind would seem at first to have little affinity to belief in spirits. However, the discussion of miracles and participation in local debates on spirits² form an important part of El Shaddai: It is evil spirits that are responsible for family quarrels and the use of illegal drugs. The El Shaddai radio programme not only conveys to people's homes the blessings of its charismatic founder figure Brother Mike, but will expel nocturnal demons too (there is a 24-hour service). It pays off to invest money in miracles (Wiegele 2004).

Development experts like to see the Philippines as a neo-feudal form of state, incapable of reform and hopelessly backward in comparison with the Tiger States of Southeast and East Asia – not least due to the influence of the Catholic Church. The phenomena that we have mentioned above are commonly described as 'pre-modern' and, in combination with corruption, nepotism and the obligatory 'laziness' seen as obstacles on the road to global modernity. The Philippines was and is an "anti-development state" (Bello 2005), and therefore presumably "a changeless land" (Timberman 1991).³

Vengeful Fetus Spirits

However, a look at the industrially and technologically well-developed societies of East and Southeast Asia shows that spirits are also extremely lively in these regions.

Helen Hardacre (1997) and Mark Moskowitz (2001) point to the significance of a ritual complex in Japan and Taiwan connected with the return of aborted fetuses in the form of terrifying spirits. The attacks of these fetus spirits (ta-

tari) bring sickness, accidents and unhappiness. While abortion is legal in Japan, the *mizuko kuyo* ritual is offered nevertheless by Buddhists, Shintoists, Shugendo ascetics, representatives of New Religions and independent specialists like *ogamiya* (healers) and *uranaishi* (soothsayers). Ritual services to appease fetus spirits have been in great and increasing demand since the 1970s, the applicants being chiefly young unmarried women, and personal shrines have been erected. These remembrance rituals have been carried out in full view of the public, and resulted in an open debate on values, taking in questions of Buddhist ethics, abortion, the position of the family and the changing role of women. The commercialization of the ritual services has also been criticized (Harrison 1995, 1999; Green 1999). Jane Hardacre disagrees with William le Fleur (1992), who states that the *mizuko kuyo* ritual is related historically to Bodhisattva Jizo worship, thus giving it recognizable historical continuity.

She shows that the reaction to abortion is not mainly derived from Buddhism; instead she refers to a particular feature of the more recent 'feto-centric' debate, where mother and fetus are separated in terms both of medical science and of society, this discussion having been initiated by the invention of ultrasonic visual technology.

Taiwan's religious landscape is characterized by an anarchic mixture of "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors" (Jordan 1999). Awe, and in any case respect for these entities, is wide-spread in all walks of society and appropriate temple cults that are growing *pari passu* with the national economy help to define both local and regional identity (Katz 2003). Aborted or misshapen still-born fetuses turn into vengeful spirits (*yingling*) bringing bad luck or death. Fetus 'demons' (*xiaogui*) form an even more terrifying category, reputed to be conceived and manipulated by black magic. Women obviously feel the need to be protected from them. Damage limitation in dealings with returning fetus spirits is offered by Daoist and Buddhist experts and institutions. The Taiwanese fetus spirit cult was taken over (or revived) from Japan in the mid-1970s. Just as in Japan, behind the fetus spirit appeasement rituals there lie a whole row of social problems: pressure on women to produce a male heir, the ostracism of single mothers, the Confucian ideal of filial piety, and the Buddhist doctrine of the sinfulness of abortion. And again, just as in Japan, criticism has arisen against the creation of an atmosphere of fear by religious leaders and

² The "El Shaddai School of Exorcism", an internet publication of a Malayan branch of El Shaddai, gives vivid information on the dangers of evil spirits and how to ward them off. The author is Brother Ivan Kennedy, who describes himself as Chief Exorcist and warns against the influence of traditional healers. Cf. www.elshaddai24hrs.org/NewsLetter.htm [26.08.07].

³ With a view to the political history in the Philippines between the sixties and eighties David G. Timberman (1991, xii) comments: "There is a sad constancy to the poverty, inequity, and injustice that characterize Philippine society, particularly in the countryside."



against the commercial exploitation of women's bad consciences.

Spirits of resistance

In the 1970s and 1980s electronic components began to be mass-produced in the free trade zones of Malaysia in factories, a success story that facilitated the country's entry into the global economy. However, the female workers in these factories rapidly developed symptoms incompatible with the general boom euphoria. These took the form of varieties of individual and collective obsession that manifested themselves in outbreaks of violence. Under the name of *latah*, this bundle of symptoms, which included loss of self-control, manic mockery of authoritarian behaviour, the use of obscene language and destructive urges, has been known since colonial times. Together with *amok*, *latah* has been seen as a culture-related pathological syndrome with a certain biological element - by outsiders: the native population connect it to spirits and possession, an interpretation that fits in well with current academic orientalist debate in which spirits, trance and violent outburst stand for irrationality and pre-modern tradition (Williamson 2007; Winzeler 1995).

These periodic episodes of 'possession' in the high-tech firms of Malaysia have been reconstructed and interpreted by Aihwa Ong (Ong 1987). Following the loss of 8,000 production hours through the destruction of machinery and failure to comply with work regulations on the part of possessed female workers, the managers decided to act and, after initial hesitation, put traditional experts - *bomoh* - to work. The slaughter of chickens and goats proved ineffective however. The rampant spirits did not allow themselves to be contained in this way. The managers felt obliged therefore to resort to more drastic measures: women who had been possessed more than twice were summarily dismissed - for "security reasons" (Ong 1987, 204, 209). In the new proletariat composed of former peasant women who were urged to function as factory workers Aihwa Ong discerns "spirits of resistance" facilitating "a mode of unconscious retaliation against male authority" (Ong 1987, 207). The female workers had been put in a position of dependence on new authority figures. Traditional Islamic religion and family relationships had lost their value as identity-giving attachment supports for these young women who had been forced to give up or postpone marriage and plans for a family in favour of

factory work. Factory discipline took over their bodies, leading to a painful merging of the local with the global. It is the "spirit of capitalism" that drives people mad, and a subversive rebellion to bring about humane working conditions turns into a survival strategy.

Spirit cults and "prosperity religion"

Rates of economic growth are of course highly skewed in Asian countries. But in places where an economic dynamic gets underway, the local religions do not remain unaffected. In Thailand, for example, in the 1980s and 1990s, the economic boom was accompanied by a remarkable religious creativity. The connection between a booming market economy and a booming religious market was noted by Richard H. Roberts in 1995. The collapse of the communist Soviet empire, the stimulus that this gave to the expansion of trans-national capitalist systems, and religious dynamism in the countries affected are directly connected. Roberts speaks of a "resurgent capitalism" having "assimilative and creative power with regard to religion and religiosity in the new synergies of various forms of 'prosperity religion' which may lend substance to claims to speak of a 'new spirit of capitalism'" (1995, 1). Different forms of this "prosperity religion" were examined by Peter A. Jackson in Thailand during the boom years (1999a,b). "Prosperity religion" spawns "popular movements that emphasize wealth acquisition as much as salvation" (Jackson 1999b, 246). Consumer attitudes and behaviour are both imbued with religious significance.

It was not only the official state religion of Theravada Buddhism that was affected (and denounced for its commercialism); Chinese gods also came to be worshipped, and a cult of King Rama V was encouraged with the aim of increasing earthly happiness through financial windfalls. Spirit mediums have enjoyed an unparalleled boom - in 1995 alone, according to one well-known newspaper, the people of Thailand spent 800 million dollars on the services of such mediums. All strata of society, including the political and academic elite, have sought to increase their knowledge, level of protection and chances of happiness through contacts with spirits. This has at the same time been accompanied (for over 150 years) by a Western Enlightenment-style criticism of belief in spirits traditionally preached by the Royal Family and the Buddhist organizations, and later joined by the media, television and newspapers. Belief in spirits has



been subjected to the harsh "reality check", and fraudulent mediums exposed – with mixed results. One popular saying is: "You may not believe, but never offend the spirits" (Kitiarsa 2002). The discourse about spirits has definite formative effects on this society and challenges scientific categorization. The current socio-economic and cultural changes suggest that it is no longer particularly helpful to make a distinction between a complex, state-propagated Theravada Buddhism (with its 'practical' tinge) on the one hand and a pre-Buddhist magical 'Thai supernaturalism' on the other, which have consequently been merged under the heading 'traditional Thai syncretism'. 'Hybridization' is perhaps a better concept, used by Pattana Kitiarsa as a borrowing from post-colonial theory, by which he seeks not only to describe the variants of Thai religiosity today, but also to show that a purely Buddhism-focused perspective, which of course goes hand in hand with the doctrine of syncretism, is necessarily obscurantist. The Thai 'spirit medium cult' is a multifarious phenomenon involving manifestations, in varying hierarchies and combinations, of a galaxy of spirits of departed Buddhist masters and kings, Indian and Chinese gods, and local helper and protective spirits. It is not monasteries and temples that mirror the rapid change occurring in the realm of religion but "department stores, shopping malls and market places [...] where popular Thai religion is commodified, packaged, marketed and consumed" (Jackson 1999a, 50). The most effective catalyzers of religious hybridization processes "in the direction of more prosperity oriented religion" are, according to Kitiarsa (2005, 486), the mass media with their commercial advertising spots for the services of trance mediums. In spite of the contradictions thrown up by economic crises and the criticism expressed by high-ranking representatives of Theravada Buddhism, it is just this notion of religion seen as a commodity that Peter A. Jackson interprets, not as a symptom of a capitalism-induced "crisis of modernity" (Tanabe and Keyes 2002) but as "the productive core of new highly popular expression of religio-cultural symbolism and ritual" (Jackson 1999b, 248). Kitiarsa also sees evidence of open rather than closed articulatory spaces in the urban spirit cults that arose during and following the boom. Efforts to bring these under control reflect both cosmopolitan capitalist policy and national sensitivities. In this view, religious hybridism, which finds a common expression in the "cosmopolitan life-style and irresistible desires corresponding to the resur-

gent spirit of global capitalism" in spirit cults, should be seen as "appropriately relevant and meaningful in contemporary Thailand" (Kitiarsa 2005, 487).

Possession by Spirits and the Trauma of War

Vietnam has been for some decades now one of the most economically successful countries in Southeast Asia. The opening-up of the country initiated by the Sixth Party Congress in 1986 set in motion rapid economic and social change. These reforms, marked by the catch-word *Đổi mới* (Renovation), led to the lifting of the US economic embargo in 1993, boosted tourism and gave foreign firms an incentive to invest and set up production in Vietnam. Since then the country has shown the highest rate of growth in the whole of Southeast Asia. Vietnam's entry into the global capitalist network was accompanied by a general cultural liberalization, which in turn led to the partial relaxation of previously rigid religious laws. Religious practices are no longer stigmatized as 'superstition' or a social evil, but are, up to a point, exploited for political purposes. The renovation of traditional places of worship, the renewed popularity of pilgrimages, participation in public and private rituals, the sale of religious objects, even the founding of new religions are all no longer forbidden. It is not only the economy, but also religious life that is booming in Vietnam in multifarious forms (Taylor 2007). Philip Taylor has devoted a whole study to a pilgrimage in honour of Bà Chúa Xứ, a goddess whose monument in South Vietnam attracts more than one million pilgrims a year. For Taylor (2004, vii) this shows a "phenomenal growth in interest in recent years in female spirits". 'Phenomenal' is in addition the only possible word to describe the revival of rituals in which spirits can be contacted through trance mediums. Possession and the work of mediums were both strictly forbidden before the *Đổi mới* reform, being vilified as superstitions and 'socially harmful' by Communists and Confucians alike. Before the reform era, spirit mediums were only able to practice their belief at night or in secret (Nguyen Khac Kham 1983; Norton 2002).

One of the recently revived trance rituals in Vietnam is the *len dong* ritual that is connected with the cult of mother goddesses⁴. *Len dong*

⁴ No religious history of *len dong* has yet been written for the whole of Vietnam. While it appears to be lively in the South, albeit mainly practiced by Northerners, it is in the



believers worship the female rulers of the four domains ("palaces") of the Universe (Earth, Heaven, Water, Mountains). These Four-Palace-Goddesses are in turn linked to a hierarchically organized royal court composed of princes, princesses, mandarins and so on. In the course of a 4-hour *len dong* ritual, members of this court are incarnated in the medium, whose performative actions are accompanied by music and song. To sponsor one of these rituals costs a lot of money. In return for their aid and favours, the spirits demand votive offerings, clothing, jewellery and various accessories. The spirits' appetite for consumer and luxury goods is immense, but a *len dong* ritual includes a redistributive element: in return for offerings and devotion, the spirits hand out "blessed gifts" to the participants in the form of money and other material goods. *Len dong* rituals have high performative qualities and seem to be of therapeutic value (Endres 2007). The good luck that people are hoping to find there is not only in love, partnership and family harmony, but also has a material side – sponsoring a *len dong* is supposed to guarantee financial success and promotion at work. The mediums themselves get the chance to use the centre stage "for ritually acting out personal vanities and striving for social status" (Endres 2006, 93). In addition, the rituals can be seen as creative strategies "for addressing a variety of personal concerns ranging from bodily illness and emotional distress to existential fear and the quest for the meaning of life" (Endres 2006, 93).

The appeal of the "Religion of the Four Palaces" – as it is now called (Nguyen Thi Hien 2002) is quite remarkable. A first scientific overview can be found in the collection *Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities* (2006) edited by Karen Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien, according to which the *len dong* cult is well on the way to going global: in Silicon Valley, California, for example, where the ritualized possession of mediums can be found among the Vietnamese expatriate community (Fjelstad/Maiffret 2006). The ethnomusicologist Barley Norton has recently published the first in-depth monograph on *len dong* and Vietnamese mediumship (cf. Norton 2009).

As in Thailand, elements of 'prosperity religion' are also present in the Vietnamese spirit cult. The chance to get rich from one day to the

next – so near, yet so hard to capture – needs well-disposed spirits to make it possible. Investments in money and in spirits go hand in hand.

The liberalization of the market in religion is by no means left to chance. The Communist party attempts to impose regulatory measures, criticizes spirit beliefs as outdated customs or superstition, while at the same time propagating the cult of national heroes, in particular of Ho Chi Minh. The fact that the latter turns up as a god in temples and speaks to people in séances through spirit mediums is neither intentional nor 'politically correct' – but seems to be a logical consequence of the incorporation of Ho Chi Minh in the pantheon of spiritual beings (see Lauser 2008). The ancestor cult that kept family and society together has continued uninterrupted all through the Communist era. 'Contact with the spirits of the ancestors' is not just a pretty figure of speech, but signifies an actual process of communication. The culture of remembrance is accorded great political significance, particularly now that the collective identity of Vietnam has been largely moulded by two major wars. The selfless spirit of sacrifice for the common good in the face of overwhelming odds continues to be called up and celebrated. Wars, however, also destroy families and threaten ancestral continuity, and the 'bad deaths' that occur impersonally and in huge numbers on battlefields give birth to restless, dangerous spirits. The anthropologist Heonik Kwon (2006) illustrates this with the after-effects of the My Lai massacre, where the civilian victims received neither national recognition as war heroes nor the dignity of reburial after the war. The dead occupied an uneasy middle ground somewhere between harmful revenant and ancestor spirits. The need to get to know the place of death and the whereabouts of the body has in recent times brought good business to 'ghost seekers' who serve an urgent demand of many people.. Talented experts in this area are asked to locate the bones of the dead on the former killing fields and to facilitate communication with the deceased. The late 1980s and 1990s witnessed a veritable 'reburial movement'. Appeasing the restless spirits of the dead is not only difficult but also an existential necessity. Peace for both sides, the living and the dead, can only be brought through successful

North that demand is greatest. In Central Vietnam it remains banned by the authorities (with the exception of Hue). I am grateful to Kirsten Endres for these observations.



ritual contact.⁵ The traditional form of communication, as in the whole of the Chinese cultural sphere, is the giving of ghost money to the dead (Gates 1987, McCreery 1990). "Hell Money", so it is said, allows the restless ancestor spirits to take their proper place in the social hierarchy on the other side, freeing them from the painful burden of the past. The ritual burning of this hell money as a family activity is on the increase. Heonik Kwon (2007) even notes the remarkable phenomenon of a "dollarization of Vietnamese ghost money" and explains how "the dollarization of virtual ritual economy and the dollarization of actual political economy" are related (Kwon 2007, 87). The expression of social and cultural life in actual money terms here and now has an effect on currency dealings 'on the other side': it seems that the ancestors, gods and spirits have a predilection for the dollar.

Ghosts in the Cinema

The above examples serve to make clear that spirits play a major role in the religious life of Asia, not in spite of, but because of the process of modernization. So far we have talked of faith healers, the aborted fetus cult, forms of "prosperity religions" and of ancestor worship and remembrance of the dead – all phenomena of explicit religion. We now turn to a non-institutionalized and non-ritualized type of 'implicit religion' in the form of popular culture. Here, it is the mass cinema-going culture in Asia that seems to be of most interest, indeed the barometer of felt culture.

When the film *A Chinese Ghost Story* appeared on the big screen in Taiwan in 1987 it had the same effect on young people as *Star Wars* had on Americans, in the view of Marc L. Moskowitz (2004). Every Taiwanese knows this film, which adapts the literary ghost stories of the 18th century *The Remarkable Tales of Liaozhai* by Pu Songling (1640-1715). Virtuoso sword fights, frightful demons and the tragic fate of unredeemed spirits – this is the stuff the film is made of. Set in ancient China, occupying a place some-

where between "Eastern" and "Fantasy", the film stands in the thousand-year-old tradition of Wuxia literature combining knight-errant adventures, martial arts and ghostly horror.⁶ The golden era of Wuxia films, apart from some forerunners in the 1920s, coincided with that of Hong Kong cinema in the 1960s and 1970s (Rehling 2005).⁷ Along with Wuxia films, where contact to spirits, ghosts and the Kingdom of the Dead is obligatory, and which have been serialized for mass TV consumption in South and East Asia, a new sub-genre of spirit film has become popular since the 1990s. This is a type of film that combines elements of thriller, horror and mystery, achieving considerable box-office success not only in Asia, but increasingly also in Australia, the USA and Europe. The action in such films often takes place in the middle-class, white-collar world of the contemporary big city.

Hideo Nakata's *Ringu – The Ring* (1998), the biggest Japanese hit of all time, set the trend for this kind of film. It tells the story of the female journalist Reiko Asakawa, who investigates a series of teenage murders. There are various clues and rumours. It is said that a certain video cassette brings death within seven days to anyone who possesses it. The reporter manages to get hold of the video, on which a mysterious woman is to be seen. Asakawa discovers a murderous family drama and realizes that it is indeed the case that the video is burdened with a curse. Time is short. Both the reporter and her ex-husband, who comes to her aid, as well as her son have seen the video and come under its deadly spell...

Ringu, unlike the usual type of horror film, has no explicit scenes of violence. It was a sensational success not only in Japan, but also became an international hit in a Korean dubbed version

⁵ Sasanka Perera (2001) reports on war, terror and the appearance of spirits in Sri Lanka, where a direct connection can be seen between political violence and spirit possession. The combination of possession and the memory of political terror is to be found primarily in zones that are lacking in all forms of institutional justice or medical provision. Perera sees in the appearance of spirits a compensation for and a reflection of sufferings caused by injustice, powerlessness and terrorist force.

⁶ When the first *Star Wars* film was shown in Taiwan, spectators there 'decoded' it as a Wuxia film and it is possible that Lucas' inspiration did in fact come from Hong Kong films. Wuxia is the original generic term for chivalry' novels. The main characters are solitary heroes or heroines who use their swordsmanship and supernatural powers to restore order and justice, in the course of which they come into conflict with existing authority. The 14th century was famous for Wuxia novels. Tales like *The Marshes of Mount Liang* are common knowledge and continue to be retold in popular culture and the media. On the Wuxia genre in Chinese literature, see Liu 1967, Portmann 1994, and also the website: wuxiapedia.com

⁷ Wuxia films are now being produced in the People's Republic of China, and have also proved hits in the West – like Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) or Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (China 2002).



and as an American remake.⁸ Shimizu Takashi's *Ju-On - The Curse* (2000) also deals with the consequences of a bloody family drama. In a Tokyo suburb, the primary school teacher Kobayashi goes looking for a pupil who has been truanting for a long time. He finds the boy (Toshio) lying injured in a wrecked apartment. Reading Toshio's mother's diary, he gathers that she had secretly fallen in love with him. Discovering her dead body in a cupboard, he panics and tries to leave the apartment with the boy, but is interrupted by a telephone call from Toshio's father, who admits that he has murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy, and also confesses that he has just murdered the teacher's own (pregnant) wife. While Kobayashi is still listening in horror to all of this, Toshio changes shape in the background, and the story continues on its terrible course. Years later another family moves in. It becomes clear that some unspeakable Evil drives everyone who comes in contact with it to madness and death. There is no happy end, and the horrors continue...

Ju-On was so successful in Asia that Sam Raimi, the director of *Spiderman*, made a note of the plot and later bought the rights for the American and European market. In 2004 he remade the film as 'The Grudge' with a star American cast.⁹ Chen Kuo-Fu's *Shuan Tong – Double Vision* (2002) gave the Taiwanese public the same recipe that *Ringu* had given the Japanese. This most expensive Taiwanese film production of all time is characterized by a series of mysterious murders. A company director is found dead in his office on

a hot summer's day - well wrapped up and, as turns out, drowned. A politician's mistress rings the fire brigade to tell them that her room is in flames. She dies, but no trace of fire can be found. The third victim is a Catholic priest, who has been disembowelled and sewn up again. The Murder Squad in Taipeh don't know what to do and ask the FBI for help. Kevin Richter (played by David Morse) an expert on serial killing, flies in from America and goes on the hunt with his Taiwanese colleague Huo-Tu (Tony Leung Ka-Fai). The track leads to an apocalyptic-daoistic sect that believes it has discovered the secret of immortality. The contrast between Western scientific rationality and Eastern mysticism is played out in the pairing of the two policemen Richter and Huo-Tu: this theme becomes more and more important as the film goes on and forms a running obbligato to the question 'what is real and what is imaginary?'. The success of this type of film in Japan and Taiwan encouraged other Asian countries to follow suit. The Thailand-Hong-Kong-Singapore co-production *Jian-Gui – The Eye* (2002) tells the story of a blind girl Mun who receives a retina transplant that restores her sight. However, the retina has been taken from a successful woman medium, and Mun is now able to see frightening scenes from the world of the Dead. She sees not only the way in which souls are 'snatched' from dead bodies, but also the torment undergone by those who have died a 'bad death' – suicides, and victims of accidents and murder.

In the Thai film *Dek hor – Dorm* (2006) the 12-year-old Chatree is exiled to a depressing private boarding school following a quarrel with his father. The boy is jeered at by his fellow pupils and ostracized; he lives an unhappy outsider's life made worse by panic attacks at night when he hears that the school is haunted – there are rumours of a boy that was drowned and a girl who was hanged. Chatree makes friends with Vichien, another outsider, and they try together to fight against fear, malevolence and mobbing – until Chatree becomes aware of Vichien's dark secret.

In *Yee do hung Gaan – Inner senses* (Honkong 2002), Yan, a young woman, sees ghosts and in desperation seeks the help of a psychiatrist. This man, the highly regarded Dr. Jim Law played by Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing, does not believe in ghosts. As he falls in love with his patient, he himself begins to have terrible visions of ghosts. Tormented by visions and depression, the psychiatrist jumps to his death off a high-rise building. This film became really notorious when

⁸ The literary model for the film was a novel by Koji Suzuki, written in 1991 and adapted for television in 1995. Oddly enough, it was a Hollywood horror film *Poltergeist* (1982) that inspired him. *Ringu 2* followed in 1999, and in 2000 Norio Tsuruta directed *Ringu 0: Basudei*, which narrates the prologue. The first foreign country to show the film was Korea, where a home-made perennial, *Ring Virus*, has been produced. A US remake, *The Ring*, was directed by Gore Verbinski (*Pirates of the Caribbean*) in 2002, with Naomi Watts (*Mulholland Drive*, *King Kong*) in the lead part, followed by *The Ring Two* in 2005.

⁹ In the US remake (which was incidentally directed by Shimizu Takashi) it was an American exchange student, Karen (played by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Sarah Michelle Gellar), who is hired to look after a senile American lady and so finds her way into the haunted house. In the USA the first eight weeks grossed 140 million, four times more than the production costs. *The Grudge 2* followed in 2006. Today there are six different versions of *Ju-On* worldwide. For the symbolism and socio-cultural contextualization of *The Grudge*, *Ringu* and other Japanese horror films see Kalat 2007 and McRoy 2008. Knowledgeable individual analyses of Japanese horror films can be found in a reader by Jay McRoy (2006).



Leslie Cheung, a well-known star all over Asia, threw himself off the roof of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel leaving a suicide note in which he mentioned unbearable depression.

There is a long list of ghost films of this kind that make up a considerable part of film production in Asia today, particularly in Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, and South Korea.¹⁰ These blockbuster movies attract a mainly young audience that is educated and upwardly mobile, and the aspirations and worldviews of the expanding middle-class are reflected in the plots. The kind of content that has been described above ought not, according to classic modernization theory, to appeal to bankers, teachers, economists, marketing experts, computer people and designers. These, after all, live in a rational world and share its values. Yet it is the 'other side' – haunted houses, the revenge of the undead etc. – that at the beginning of the 21st century is one of the corner-stones of the entertainment industry of Asia. Ghosts and their grip on the living, even Hell (Jordan 2004), are not the subject of comedy but are paraded before the viewer's eyes in full factual cinematic detail.

There can be no question that the Asian film world is here in some way reacting to the "American semiotic empire" as Wimal Dissanayake (1996) calls it. Ghosts, the Supernatural and Evil are big business in Hollywood too. Films like *Ghost*, *Se7en*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Mothman Prophecies* or revivals like the highly praised *The Exorcist* (1973, revived in 2001) have become box-office hits in the West and served as inspiration for producers, script-writers and directors in Southeast and East Asia.¹¹ It would however be a gross oversimplification to see such films simply as peripheral 'responses' to the nerve-centre of pop culture in Hollywood. In Asia, the various social and cultural interfaces are a good deal more complex than in America: the precursors of trans-

nationalization were neither one-way streets, nor obvious homogenization procedures. "High capitalist poetics" (Wilson 1991) are increasingly expressed in original Asian linguistic terms that themselves give aesthetic impulses to the West. "Newer cultural postmodernities and discrepant cosmopolitanisms" (Dissanayake 1996, 110) are produced.¹²

Even when popular cinema is "only entertainment" it still without any doubt constitutes a productive resource of cultural identity (Jackson 2006). The passions, longings and fears that we see on the screen do not merely reflect the shortcomings of reality – or try to compensate for them – but also provide models for reality. Identity in the postmodern world is not formed by a search for solid, over-arching rational essence, but by exercising options: "identity as choice" as Lash/Friedman put it (1992, 7). 'Lifestyle' and consumer orientation are in this way turned into major areas of social self-placement. Seen from the point of view of media anthropology and 'cultural studies' it becomes clear that humans do not only take upon themselves an active role in the production of goods, but also in their consumption. Consumption is the active generation of meanings (Hepp 1999, 70): and this insight throws light on the demand for ghost motifs in bestseller-books, comics, and films.

SPIRITS IN THE MODERNITY OF ASIA

Closing Remarks: The Case for Research

There are many good reasons why spirits, ghosts and specters in Asia's modernity deserve to be given more attention and research space. In the following, I shall outline some promising areas for future research.

What does it mean 'to believe in spirits'?

The study of public spirit rituals invariably raises one fundamental question: which concept of religion is used by the scientific observer? A famous minimal definition of religion was given by Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871: "belief in spiritual beings". *Belief in God* has been the central identifying tenet of Christianity since the Council

¹⁰ A good overview of the Asian film industry in the various countries mentioned can be found in the reader edited by Anne Tereska Ciecko (Ciecko 2006). Further topics of interest are contained in the collections of Andrew Jackson (2006) and Eleftheriotis & Needham (2006). Details of individual films are given on a variety of websites, such as asian movies [www.molodezhnaja.ch/asian.htm], asiancineweb [www.asiancineweb.de], or asianfilmweb [asianfilmweb.de] etc.

¹¹ The reasonable question why *western* postmodern movie and TV productions do such good business with ghosts, mediums, vampires etc. (Blade, Ghost-Whisperer, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, Medium, X-Faktor, X-Files and others) is beyond the scope of the present paper.

¹² The history of the Japanese film is a good example of this. According to Dissanayake it was early on capable of stylistically reflecting back on Hollywood and subversively undermining the "semiotic imperialism" of the USA.



of Nicaea in 325 and given permanent form in the Creed. Under Protestantism, a 'we-hold-this-to-be-true' attitude has given *belief* an even sharper definition. Scholars coming from this tradition see 'belief in' something as an essential feature of every religion. Tylor's seemingly innocuous definition has led to the twin notions of 'spiritual beings' and 'belief' becoming constructs of religious theory that are practically axiomatic. Religious theory, moreover, has a definite Christian touch and in addition suggests an evolution from primitive belief in spirits into a highly developed belief in God. In other words: without 'real' belief there can be no 'real' religion. Essentialism of this sort was criticized by Rodney Needham as early as 1972. More recently, Catherine M. Bell (2002) pointed out the problematic nature of this perspective in connection with 'belief in spirits' in China, arguing that 'religion' is not just a mental process or cognition, but that it can have an equally firm base in everyday, pragmatic concerns. The so-called paradox that we have described in this paper whereby people declare, on the one hand, that they don't believe in spirits but, on the other, that they must pay tribute to them in order to avoid damage, can be more readily understood against this background.

Spirits, Religions, Rationalities:

Scientific research into spirits has been marked by omissions and theological prejudice. For example, European religious history has never taken spirits (always plural!) to be 'good', but, at any rate since the Fall of the Angels (Auffarth / Stuckenbruck 2004) to be agents of Evil, which is seen as a singular institution whose destructive machinations can only be warded off by the 'true religion', namely institutionalized Christianity. The magical manipulation of spirits – not to mention demoniacal pacts – is a matter for damnation: witness the persecution of witches, demonological tracts or even Goethe's *Faust*. Frazer's separation of religion and magic in his "Golden Bough" (1890) has had major consequences here with its systematic divorce of 'popular' from 'high' religion and an accompanying evolutionary ranking in the history of civilization. 'Real' religion is the humble worship of God and gives a moral base to the community. Magic on the other hand involves the self-seeking instrumentalisation of spirits and, in the evolutionary terms just mentioned, has to be relegated to the pre-civilized state of peasants and primitives. A conflict of principles is the

logical result: magic and belief in spirits are irreconcilable with 'real' religion (based on self-reflective theology) and are bound to disappear when confronted by modernity.¹³ Magic and spirits perish in the hard light of science: religion receives its *raison d'être* in the life of the private individual and also becomes a fundamental factor of communal moral cohesion. Seen this way, spirits simply don't fit into the modernity of Asia. Concepts of religion are essentially influenced by monotheistic Christian and especially Protestant Christian thought. This in turn makes clear that models of institutionalized or monotheistic religion are quite unsuitable as point of departure. Instead, there are "coexisting informal – or differently organized – patterns of orientation and interpretation" (translated from Gladigow 1995, 25) that have to be taken into account. As a matter of principle, cultural theories have as well as "sociological conceptions of secularity been to a high degree interwoven with self-descriptions of post-Christian European modernity" (translated from König 2007: 92). The consequences of such impregnations by Christian theology, European enlightenment and ideology of progress and modernity have to be taken into serious consideration when spirits and Asians' modernities are scrutinized. A further essential subject of research will be the sources (western or Asian) that provide material for the critique of the spirit cult – both within and outside institutionalized religions in Southeast Asia.

Spirits, the Salvation Economy and the Upwardly Mobile Middle Class:

The effect of the 'spirit of capitalism' on spirits is a distinctively favourable one – as can be seen from the phenomenon of 'prosperity religion'. The examples we have cited show that spirits adapt with great resilience to economic change. The customer base of spirit mediums is to a remarkable extent made up of middle-class people. The increasing role of money in the world of this class in Asia is reflected (inter alia) in a monetarization of spirit cults. Spirits, money and religious practice are by no means mutually exclusive. Research work on spirits in the modernity of Asia is therefore by definition research into value-orientation, search for identity and economic factors in the middle classes. Communica-

¹³ Reflected in the title of an influential study of religion in early modern times: *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Thomas 1971).



tion with spirits and ancestors does not only show the usual pattern of exchange of gifts and accumulation of merit, but also the logic of capitalism and of trading relations.¹⁴ The histories of religion and of economy are interwoven. To gain an insight into interfaces of this kind it is well worth making a study of the emerging sub-discipline of the Economy of Religion (e.g. Iannacone 1998; Bourdieu 2000; Kippenberg 2002; Koch 2007). It should be noted here that research into middle-class world views and value systems need not be restricted to the fields of work, economy and education, but that leisure and consumption patterns can be equally revealing. Ethnologically based media studies – on cinema, television, video and computer games – can make a valuable contribution to research into the middle-class world view.

Agency, Gender and the 'Autonomous Individual':

Any anthropological research into the phenomenon of possession is obliged to look into the question of "agency". Otherwise it gets bogged down in problems of pathology. Who exactly is it who is talking/acting through a medium? Within what fields of power are mediums operating? What subject concepts are there? In what gender role do spirits appear, and what sex-specific needs are served by spirit cults? In her book 'The Hammer and the Flute' (2002), Mary Keller developed the concept of *instrumental agency*. Instead of asking "Who is acting – the possessed one, the spirit of the ancestors or God?" she asks: "What is aimed at, and with what means?" According to this theory the subject is used, either as a hammer or as a musical instrument to be 'played', and it is from this apparent passivity that the possession medium derives the specific ritual authority accorded him by the community. The 'autonomous individual' seems to be more a European invention (Koepping et al. 2002); at any rate it is of only limited application in the case under discussion. 'Instrumental agency' has become a useful cross-cultural concept as well, because 'agency' is not only a matter of free will, as Marilyn Strathern (1988) has shown in her anthropological critique of western notions of individuality, in which she put forward the con-

cept of the "di-vidual". Here, the singularity of individual existence is played down, and the relational aspect – a dominant one in many non-western societies – is emphasized.

The Anthropology of Possession:

Spirits, to achieve a social effect, are tied to mediums, shamans and priests. Thus it is the task of the anthropologist not only to look at the institutional side of spirit cults, but also the purely ritual side – their realization through performative and theatrical techniques. The mimetic potential of possession, through which art and therapy come together to form a meta-commentary on perceived reality has been described by Fritz Kramer as a kind of indigenous ethnography (Kramer 1987). 'The Other' is mimetically depicted and represented in masquerades and possession cults. Kramer reaches this conclusion following the investigation of such seemingly disparate areas of African culture as ancestor worship, pop culture, secular dance, behaviour towards foreigners, and possession phenomena. The incorporation of spirits allows experiences of alienation and power to be acted out.

Impertinent Modernity:

Processes of change and modernization are dealt with and commented on in spirit and possession cults. These commentaries are on the one hand expressed in the voices of 'gods, ghosts and ancestors' that speak through trance mediums and tell people what to do in money, family and other personal matters. On the other hand, there is an ongoing meta-commentary from the rationalist camp – made up of politicians, scientists, journalists or representatives of the established religions – that criticizes the booming spirit cults and their adherents. Ethical questions and the relationship between tradition and change are dealt with at both levels. Spirit and possession cults are always in addition reflections of the Self and bring up the question, awkward for both the individual and for society: "Who are we and what do we want to be?" Spirit cults, possession phenomena and ghosts in films all throw a strong light on the relationship of religion and modernity of traditions in Asia. Questions arise not only about the meaning of 'religion' – whether in its common or in its scholarly sense – but also about the concept of modernity itself. Secularity and modernity can be seen in a variety of ways. The foundation and consolidation of an

¹⁴ Michael J. Walsh (2007) is working out a theory of salvation economy in Chinese Buddhism. Although Walsh's approach is a religio-historical one – in which he looks at monasteries, lay people, donations and notions of merit accumulation – his ideas can just as well be applied to the present.



ethical code based on the spirits of the ancestors can no longer be treated merely as the mark of a 'pre-modern' society and relegated to the outmoded traditions of 'the other' – but should force 'us' to ask questions about 'our' attitudes to our ancestors, and about 'our' late modern secularity and its cultural roots. We need to reflect on the Self and the Other, on tradition, on modernity, and on the place of religion in the late modern global village – and what could be a more suitable field of inquiry than the anarchic and ubiquitous spirits in the modernity of Asia?

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