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Prospects for a Postsecular Heritage Practice: Convergences between Posthumanism and Popular Religious Practice in Asia

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Abstract: By failing to document popular belief in the supernatural attributes of religious sites and by drawing up conservation management plans that fail to attend to such beliefs, current heritage regimes effectively perform a secular translation of them. I argue that the posthuman turn in the humanities and social sciences, and in particular its openness to forms of agency, vibrancy and vitality in the object world, offers prospects for a kind of heritage practice newly comfortable with the vibrancy that belief in the supernatural lends to the things of popular religion. Focusing on the material heritage of popular religion in Asia—in particular in China and Southeast Asia—attitudes of devotees to the rebuilding of temples and shrines are examined. Practices of rebuilding and restoration come to be seen as a form of worship. While ontological differences between worshipers and heritage practitioners remain, it is possible to be positive about the prospects for a postsecular heritage practice precisely because the rationalist authority of established practice is so under challenge by the counter discourses of posthumanism, the new materialism, and related streams of thought.

Keywords: heritage conservation; postsecular; Asia; popular religion; posthumanism

1. Introduction

In much of Asia, including China and Southeast Asia, which are my focus here, the notion of 'heritage', as it is understood today, was adopted as part and parcel of a modernity which was intimately bound up with counter-colonial movements and processes of nation state formation (Anderson 2006; Byrne 2014). Among the region's reformers and educated elites, the enthusiastic embrace of scientific principles was evident in contexts as diverse as those of Siam's reform of the Buddhist sangha under King Mongkut in the 1850s and 1860s and the modernising efforts of the May Fourth Movement of 1919–1921 in China (Mitter 2004). I have argued (Byrne 2009) that modernisation and heritagisation in China and Southeast Asia, the two occurring more or less simultaneously, entailed efforts to disentangle religious sites, ancient and more recent, from popular and local belief systems and bring them over into the secular realm of modern state governance. These belief systems were not merely disregarded in what was essentially a project of secularisation, they were the specific target of energetic anti-superstition campaigns waged by governments, religious hierarchies and reform-minded elites (Goossaert 2006; Ishii 1986; Taylor 2008). On the ground, these campaigns in China saw the destruction of temples and shrines or their conversion to non-religious purposes. In some places, young reform-minded activists of the educated class began going into temples 'smashing all the statues ... which they wanted to show as useless bits of mud and wood' (Goossaert 2006, p. 324). In Siam, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the campaigns took the more subtle form of the government's creation of a centralised, rationalised inventory of ancient and historical religious sites which effectively inserted a wedge between official management of these places and local populations who continued to regard them as sites of supernatural power (Day and Reynolds 2000; Peleggi 2007).

As modern systems of heritage management emerged in China during the republican era (1912–1949), in Siam during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), and in colonial Southeast Asia in the first half of the twentieth century, religious sites deemed to be of historical importance were documented in terms of their literary associations and their epigraphic, architectural and archaeological attributes. The knowledge of them generated by local and foreign experts in these fields became the basis of a 'national knowledge' of the material past, with its focus on monumental sites (e.g., Edwards 2007; Peleggi 2007). The privileged visibility of this knowledge in the public sphere, in particular via new state rituals and the modern public education system, overshadowed local religious knowledge of such places. Present-day heritage regimes in Asia, with their concentrated focus on the physical fabric of the sites rather than on their social value, have continued this attempted effacement of what Peter Jackson (1999, p. 59) dubbed the 'disorderliness of the supernatural realm'. This is a realm in which temples and shrines, old and recent, continue to be popularly seen as material embodiments of spirits and deities, not mere representations of them or venues for their worship. Miracles erupt, for example, out of the material substance of a Buddhist stupa (Byrne 1995), out of the wood of a Chinese god's altar (Lipten 1999), or out of the water of a spring sacred to followers of Philippines folk Catholicism (Gorospe 1992). By failing to document popular belief in the supernatural attributes of religious sites and by drawing up conservation management plans that fail to attend to such beliefs, I maintain that current heritage regimes effectively perform a secular translation of them.

Our understanding of what heritage is has undergone profound change over the last two decades. This began with a move by heritage scholars, led by Laurajane Smith (Smith 2004, 2006), to describe and account for the emergence in the West during the modern era of a system of concepts and conservation practices which privileged heritage professionals and state institutions. This system, described as the Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006), assumed there existed universal ways of valuing heritage, an assumption that obfuscated an understanding of how European ideas and practices of heritage were hegemonically propagated in the Global South via Western colonial and cryptocolonial influence. This critical turn in heritage studies coincided with a push from the 1990s to acknowledge 'intangible heritage' in the form of cultural knowledge, practices and skills which have intergenerational time-depth. This movement, led principally by heritage professionals working through UNESCO's committee structure, culminated in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Aikawa 2004). While in principle the convention opens the way for the supernatural attributes of religious sites in Asia, and their entwinement in the architecture and ritual life of temples and shrines, to be acknowledged and integrated into heritage conservation practice, to my knowledge this has rarely occurred. Interestingly, there appears to have been more openness to documenting sacred sites and incorporating popular religious belief into nature conservation practice than into heritage conservation practice in Asia (e.g., Verschuuren et al. 2010). I have suggested that the reason for this can be traced partly to the embeddedness of an 'antisuperstition' disposition in heritage governance in most Asian countries (Byrne 2009). The vigorous interest and debate around the desacralising effects of the exhibition of religious objects in museums (e.g., Paine 2013; Buggeln et al. 2017) suggests the field of museology is also more open to the implications of the divine agency of heritage objects than is to be seen in the case of those heritage experts who deal with religious sites.

I will argue in what follows that the posthuman turn in the humanities and social sciences, and in particular its openness to forms of agency, vibrancy and vitality in the object world, offers prospects for a kind of heritage practice newly comfortable with the vibrancy that belief in the supernatural lends to the sites of popular religion. Some heritage practitioners may have excused their inattention to the supernatural on the grounds that it is a fading dimension of popular religion in an Asia of rapid economic development. But this position is no longer tenable when so much scholarship indicates that belief in the supernatural is now pervasive, conspicuous and resurgent in many Asian societies (e.g., Chau 2011; Feuchtwang 2001; Jackson 1999; Kitiarsa 2008; Nedostup 2009; Taylor 2004; Yang 2008), not least in the institutions and rituals of late capitalism (e.g., Jackson 1999;

Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Endres 2011). There has, I suggest, never been a better time for heritage practice to get over its problem with the supernatural.

2. Posthumanism and the Supernatural

Heritage practice is grounded in a Western humanist ontology that is profoundly secular and committed, in the Enlightenment tradition, to human emancipation from religious dogma. Heritage practice is not the inheritor merely of a secularising trend in Western culture—it inherits from the last four centuries of Western cultural history an attitude to the materiality of religion which is suspicious of any suggestion that it embodies anything but plain, inert matter. Early in the last century Max Weber (1946, p. 155) wrote, 'The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world".' Weber saw disenchantment as inevitably flowing from a nexus between Protestantism and capitalism, particularly Calvinist capitalism which sanctified worldly economic effort at the same time as it repudiated belief in the presence of magical and sacramental forces in the landscape. Beyond what Protestantism and Counter-Reformation Catholicism achieved in the religious realm, the legacy of Weber and of E. B. Tylor has been a 'dematerialising' approach to religion in which 'the point of studying religion and society is to get beyond matter to higher levels of abstraction and signification' (Houtman and Meyer 2012, p. 10).

This dematerialising, secularising approach to religion sits within the Western humanist tradition. But with the waning of humanist ontology since around the 1970s, there now exists, I maintain, a window of hope for a heritage practice that abandons its missionary stance towards the supernatural. Humanism's secularity has been challenged by alternative spiritual practices (including those emerging in feminism), by attacks on scientific scholarship's claim to objectivity, and by a widespread erosion or rejection of the dualist thinking that has been foundational to it (Braidotti 2013). The latter has occurred as new conceptions of the role of things and matter have gained momentum in the humanities and social sciences. This 'material turn', commonly subsumed under the heading 'new materialism' (Coole and Frost 2010), is witnessed in archaeology, for example, by a widespread interest in the agency of objects stemming from Actor-Network Theory (e.g., Graves-Brown 2000; Knappet 2013) and by the adoption of approaches employing a symmetrical model of human-object relations (Olsen 2010; Witmore 2014). This has seen a dramatic shift from the study of old objects as artefacts of past people to the study of them as co-actors in past events. Although this shift, in archaeology and related disciplines, has immense implications for heritage practice (Harrison 2013) it has yet, as I have indicated above, to significantly impact it. In Asia, certainly, we see a continuance of the familiar old secular-rational approach to the material past of religion, with its effacement of the role and significance of the supernatural. I make a distinction between on-ground heritage practice, in this respect, and those initiatives of bodies such as UNESCO which could be seen as moving to a postsecular position[1].

The problem that Protestant missionaries in Asia had (and have) with the statues, shrines, amulets and other elements of the materiality of popular religion was that devotees 'erroneously' ascribed agency to things Protestantism deemed inanimate (Keane 2007; Reinders 2004). Now that we, in fields such as archaeology and critical heritage studies, have come to credit objects and their matter as agentic and vital, is it not time to revisit old attitudes to the materiality of popular religion? This does not require us to believe in the supernatural or to reject rationality (Tambiah 1990)—it calls for us to find commonality with those who do, based on a shared sense of wonder at the capacities of things, a consciousness of their ultimate unpredictability, and an awareness of our inability to encompass them. Isabelle Stengers (2011, p. 374), for example, does not see the power of wonder as incompatible with a scientific point of view. The illusion of incompatibility came with the European Enlightenment and with a science 'mobilised in defence of public order' (Stengers 2011, p. 374). Modern science,

[1] See for example the UNESCO World Heritage Centre's Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest: https://whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/.

in its capacity as 'blind destroyer of traditional practices did not begin with colonization [of the outlying world] but in Europe, when scientists accepted the role of guardians of an infantile public' (Stengers 2011, p. 375). The concern I have with most current heritage practice is that it takes on exactly this role in its desire to 'manage' the materiality of popular religion, a desire which puts it at odds with the advances represented by new materialism in the core disciplines of heritage studies, including archaeology (Olsen 2010; Witmore 2014) and geography (e.g., Whatmore 2006) and, indeed, with the new materialism in the field of religious studies (e.g., Morgan 2010a; Houtman and Meyer 2012).

It is interesting to reflect that if the divinely animated quality of the materiality of popular religion is captured at all within the ambit of heritage practice as it is currently constituted it would likely be under the category of intangible heritage. However, as the archaeologist Þóra Pétursdóttir (2013) maintains, arguments by heritage scholars that all heritage should be regarded as intangible, although intended to counter an ingrained tendency in the heritage field to focus on the physical fabric of heritage objects to the exclusion, or near exclusion, of their social context and their discursive construction, have nevertheless entailed a turn away from things as independent, vibrant entities. Instead, it situates them anthropocentrically as things taking their meaning and significance from humans. The 'material intolerance' (Pétursdóttir 2013, p. 38) seen in heritage practice amounts to a failure to come to terms with things as 'non-discursive concrete matters of fact' (Pétursdóttir 2013, p. 46). Popular religion is always in danger of being designated 'intangible' by heritage practitioners on the grounds that the supernatural cannot be seen, rendering it a matter of belief rather than a matter of fact. In reality, however, popular religious practice is intensely materialist. It revolves around the performativity of specific objects and materials and its concern is with the tangibility of the divine efficacy embodied in things.[2] This is an efficacy that is so material that, via touch, it can often transmit from object to object and from object to a human body.

3. Immanence and Performativity

Followers of popular religion in Asia have in common a conviction that the places, buildings, and objects they venerate are not merely *associated* with spirits and deities—they apprehend the materiality of these places and objects to be continuous with them and to be animated by a common miraculously efficacious supernatural power. The force that animates these things is held to be immanent in them. Immanence in this sense corresponds with the idea of the numinous, meaning the embodied presence, the within-ness, of spiritual power (Levy et al. 1996, p. 13). It is worth dwelling briefly on this conception since it happens that immanence is also a key concept in the monistic ontology of Spinoza and Deleuze that has so influenced the 'new materialism' referred to above. There, the vitality and vibrancy of objects and their capacity to act is held to be immanent in their thingly nature, owing nothing to entities that are external to or of a higher order than them. This would seem to set vitalist immanence resolutely apart from divine immanence. Thus, for Braidotti (2013, p. 56), 'radical immanence' and 'vitalist materialism' are stances that reject 'all forms of transcendentalism', which of course includes the delegation of a thing's meaning to the God of Christianity. In popular religion, on the other hand, a thing's inner force stems from the spirit that dwells in it and acts through it. Yet, while the supernatural vibrancy of the things of popular religion is undeniably transcendent (it is a force that exceeds material limits) and thus differs from the new materialist understanding of material vibrancy as a force or liveliness that inheres in the material properties of matter, these two different conceptions of vibrancy see the devotee and the new materialist both engaging with the material world in ways that have striking similarities.

One of these has to do with the quality of locatedness. Popular religion is characterised more by belief in manifestations of the divine in earthly terrain than with faith in a heavenly divine being.

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[2] The concept of 'performativity', originating in John Austin (1962) philosophy of language, has been influential in much of the work in anthropology, science and technology studies, and the new materialism, which, in turn, has influenced this paper.

Devotees are interested more in obtaining practical, everyday benefits, such as cures for illness or success in business deals, than in saving their souls. For devotees in the realm of popular religion, be they worshippers at the shrines of miracle-working saints in modern Greece (Stewart 1991) or contemporary Thais making offerings to the guardian spirits of ancient stupas (Wyatt 2001), the divine is grounded in the landscape. The built environment of popular religion is in no way incidental to belief - belief is topographic in nature. The material turn in the field of religious studies has seen a new appreciation of this kind of locatedness. As David Morgan (2010b, p. 8) states with elegant economy: 'religion happens not in spaces and performances as indifferent containers, but as them'. For Braidotti (2013, p. 188), 'The posthuman nomadic subject is materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded—it is firmly located *somewhere*' (my emphasis). This trend creates a commonality between the new materialism and popular religion to the extent we are able to look past the cause of vibrancy to the material fact of it.

Another similarity between the approach to the world seen in popular religion and that of the new materialism has to do with the attention each gives to performativity. In popular religion in Asia, the physical matter of the divine object or place becomes the subject of avid attention on the part of true believers, causing them to engage in observational practices that might be described as constituting a natural history of the miraculous. At the same time, an object that has demonstrated its divine force draws devotees into intimate relationship with the matter that comprises it. A sliver of wood from the door frame of a temple or from the statue of a powerful god, a stone from a sacred mountain such as Taishan in China, a fragment of stucco from a famously efficacious stupa in Thailand: such materials are coveted because divine force resides in every particle of their matter. Commenting on Marcel Mauss's law of magical contiguity, Lynn Meskell (2004, p. 81) describes how, 'an object's essence is found in its fragments, almost like a synecdoche: every flame contains fire, any human bone contains the sign of death. One single hair contains the life force, and so on'. The devotee's attentiveness to the behaviour of matter resonates with the attentiveness of the new materialist.

The new openness to the performativity and vibrancy of things that we see in the new materialism should include an openness to the reality that for millions of people these same things are miraculously performative. In popular religion generally, performance takes precedence over belief (see Feuchtwang (2001, pp. 8–10) on the role of belief in Chinese popular religion). In Asia, one might say that religious objects and places tend to establish their own reputations for efficacy, which is to say that their identity is established by their record of miraculous acts rather than these acts being mere effects of their identity as constituted by religious institutions. This is strikingly illustrated by the role of amulets in Thai popular Buddhism (Chirapravati 1997). The monetary worth of individual amulets and classes of amulet in Thailand's amulet market is established partly by the magical power attributed to the famous monks who have blessed them (Jackson 1999) but also by the miraculous efficacy demonstrated by the objects themselves and frequently publicised via public and social media (Byrne 2014, pp. 190–93). Worn on the body to ward off physical and spiritual injury and to bring good fortune, the biographies of amulets become entangled in human biographies (Reynolds 2011). Equally, they become interfolded with human bodies, themselves held to be sacred sites in Buddhist Thailand (Taylor 2008, p. 172).

The 'things' of popular religion have an unruly unpredictability; their efficacy is eruptive and is known to wax and wane (Chau 2006; O'Connor 1993; Smith 2006). This quality of theirs resonates, to an extent, with what some scholars now maintain is the real nature of things when seen outside the discursive constraints of humanism. Bjørnar Olsen (2010, 2013) and Þóra Pétursdóttir (2013) argue that although much archaeological thought has moved beyond the idea of things as social constructions, crediting them with agency and integrity as actors in Latourean collectives and crediting them with social lives, this has in a sense domesticated them. It has negated or blurred their radical otherness as things in themselves. Olsen calls for a 'recognition of things in their thingly difference' (Olsen 2013, p. 293), in their 'wildness' and 'unruliness' (Olsen 2013, p. 295). While maintaining that it is high time for the heritage field to rethink its whole attitude to things, my argument here is that this

should include not just a willingness to relate non-hierarchically or symmetrically with things but also an openness to the widespread perception of them as enchanted.

Those forms of embodied experience described by the term 'affect' constitute another area of resemblance between popular religion and the new materialism. The theoretical angle on affect and affectivity taken by Deleuze centres on human-nonhuman resonance and interpenetration, including the way external bodies can be present in us (see Seigworth and Gregg 2010, p. 6). The idea of human-thing interpenetration looms large in popular religion. Devotees are not distant or passive observers of the miraculous performativity of things. They engage reciprocally with deities. Prayers and offerings, for example, are made in return for a miraculous response (Chau 2006). These relations are situated in affective settings. According to Seigworth and Gregg (2010, p. 1), 'Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon'. This conception fits, for example, with the sense in which Chinese popular deity temples can be held to be efficacious and fully meaningful only in concert with the prayers recited in their courtyards, the incense smoke that wafts about in them and is inhaled by worshipers, the food offerings laid out on tables, the clatter of divining blocks thrown onto the pavement and the cool feel of the stone floor under the knees of the devotees (Figure 1). Julius Bautista (2010, p. 6) urges us to think of religious objects not as potent in their own right: 'Rather it is the combined effect of object and words, material and chant, or item and song that is meaningful and efficacious'. It is the interactive mutuality of these bundled elements that counts. According to David Morgan (2010b, p. 8), 'Forms of materiality—sensations, things, spaces, and performance are a matrix in which belief happens as touching and seeing, hearing and tasting, feeling and emotion, as will and action, as imagination and intuition'. What is valuable in Morgan's work in relation to fostering a postsecular approach to heritage is that he doesn't labour the distinction between affect and divine effects. Much of the work of heritage conservation, premised as it appears to be on the understanding that you cannot properly conserve a temple until it is extricated from its context in worship, seems determined to prise these elements apart.



Figure 1. Devotees worshiping Guanyin at Longshan Temple, Taipei, 2014. Photo by Denis Byrne.

4. Temple-Building as an Act of Worship

An examination of the temple-building practices of followers of popular religion in Thailand and China indicates that they favour the piling up of fabric upon fabric, renovation upon renovation, according to the logic that spirits and deities are honoured by the labour and funding expended by devotees in the renewal and extension of their earthly sites. Whereas heritage conservation seeks to stabilise built fabric, popular religion cannot seem to abide stasis.

The life of a Chinese temple, whether located in Guangdong, Taiwan, Java, or Sydney, is punctuated by periodic restoration projects undertaken at the hands of its congregation (Figure 2). Very often, these 'restorations' amount to a complete re-construction of temple structures so that the temple, as it were, disappears only to reappear months or years later on the same spot. The agents of disaggregation and decay which occasion these restorations include earthquakes and fire as well as the insects and bacteria that flourish particularly in tropical and subtropical climates and which lead to the relatively rapid decomposition of building materials such as wood, stucco and plaster. These processes of ruin, however, appear to be regarded by the congregations of Chinese temples and Buddhist monasteries more as an opportunity than a problem (Byrne 1995, 2014).



Figure 2. A ceramic tile 'painting' replaces a traditional wall painting in the porch of a temple in Sha Tau Kok, in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Photo by Denis Byrne, 2018.

By contributing money or labour, devotees participate in rebuilding projects and thus accrue spiritual benefits, but they also know that the deities themselves want their temples restored or rebuilt (Rubinstein 2003, p. 194; Chau 2006). This knowledge is conveyed via mediums who channel particular gods, or, as occurs in Thailand, by the appearance of temple guardian spirits and deities in the devotee's dreams (Pruess 1976, p. 72). In Thailand, Buddhist stupas are characterised as a field of merit precisely because of their capacity to decay and thus afford opportunities for the faithful to make merit (for a better rebirth) by engaging in rebuilding projects (Byrne 1995; Moore and Maung 2016). The circular equation of devotional offering and divine response means that temples and shrines are often restored or rebuilt long before they have reached the stage of advanced decay. It means that devotees have a

vital interest in a religious building's dissolution, and it leads to a situation in which the devotee is a constant, restless builder.

There is a sense in which temples and shrines incrementally disappear in the process of being themselves—or, to put it differently, they disappear in the process of their performance as temples. Thinking of temples as material-social-supernatural assemblages helps to show how they endure despite—or rather in concert with—their 'disappearance'. Some parts of a temple assemblage are liable to endure more than others. The idea or conceptual template of what a temple should look like is, for example, likely to endure longer than the actual wooden beams and ceramic roof tiles that comprise any actual-physical temple (although the template is not in itself immune to change). The legend of a god's deeds, depicted in a wall painting, may endure much longer than the wall painting itself—indeed, the act of repainting an eroded or faded image may be central not just to the legend but to the deity's wellbeing.[3] Often the stone pillars or the stone bases for wooden pillars are retained during a temple rebuilding project when elements such as the wooden pillars and roof beams are replaced. The retention of such elements, regarded as being imbued with divine force, serve to 'tie the old temple to the new' (Rubinstein 2003, p. 203). Here, the principle of magical contiguity applies: to paraphrase Meskell (2004, p. 81), the temple's essence is found in its fragments. The disappearance of ninety-five percent of a temple's previous fabric in the course of rebuilding has no effect on its divine efficacy.

The conservation ethic in heritage management problematises decay in a way that is foreign to the ontology of popular religion. Termites, as they progressively devour the cellulose in the wooden pillars and beams of temples, are construed as a threat by the conservator who would ideally like the woodwork to last forever. For the devotee, however, termites are elements of a complex process of decay which is replete with opportunities for rebuilding. Without saying that devotees want termites to hollow out the pillars and beams, it seems clear that the decision to build temples in wood in tropical and subtropical environments like Taiwan, Guangdong and Thailand engages devotees in relations with termites which are in keeping with the idea of the devotee as a constant builder. The wood's capacity to be eaten by termites is symmetrical with the devotee's capacity to rebuild and with the gods' responsiveness to rebuilding as an act of worship. A heritage practice which is blind to gods and to what gods want ends up casting the devotee, as a constant builder, in a negative light and in opposition to the work of heritage conservation.

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In arguing that conventional, preservationist heritage practice sets up a false dichotomy between itself and the building practices of popular religion, I point to the way that, in pitting itself against decay, it inevitably becomes a 'building practice' itself. Its building work is disguised as merely the careful restoration or stabilisation of what already exists—the Burra Charter, for example, defines

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[3] A parallel may be drawn with Australian Aboriginal practices of repainting rock art in parts of Australia (see papers in Ward 1992).

restoration as 'returning a place to a known earlier state by removing accretions or by reassembling existing elements without the introduction of new material' (Australia ICOMOS 2013, p. 3). But it doesn't take much effort to see that new material is, in practice, almost always is introduced, in the form for instance of chemical stabilising agents, membranes inserted in walls to combat rising damp, or mortar inserted between bricks in the course of repointing a wall. Heritage preservation is best thought of as a building practice among other building practices.

Natural processes of decay cause the disaggregation and dispersion of building fabric. Wind and rain, for example, erode mortar and blow or wash away the eroded particles. This dispersion is countered in heritage practice by 'stabilisation' measures which entail bringing new material to the building site, reaggregating the structure. Clearly, this process is additive. Restoration measures that involve removing material (e.g., the removal of concrete annexes added to temples during their conversion to schools and village offices in Maoist China), although they result in a reduction of a structure's mass, produce or build something new insofar as they re-produce a structure as it was (or is imagined to have been) in a former time.

5. Conclusions: Towards a Postsecular Heritage Practice

Rather than putting the supernatural to one side in our dealings with temples and shrines, we might see it as not incompatible with our new appreciation of the vibrancy and 'wildness' (Olsen 2013) of things. I reiterate here the difference between believing in the supernatural (which mostly we do not) and seriously entertaining it as an orientation. Our lack of belief need not make strangers out of us in sacred space. The push for a postsecular heritage practice in Asia—an acknowledgement that the elephant in the room is a supernatural beast—is most likely to come from within the field of critical heritage studies. But change may also come, in a bottom-up fashion, from practitioners confronting the reality that in many Asian societies, as noted earlier, belief in the supernatural is for tens of millions of people a part of modern life (Figure 3).

The situation described involving the relationship between the work of termites and the work of the devotee-as-constant-builder, described earlier, fits the context of what Olsen and Pétursdóttir (2016, p. 41) call 'ruin ecologies'. In this context, termites and devotees can be seen as forming an alliance involving relations of care—'care' being conceived here as a quality distributed across the human and nonhuman spectrum. In choosing to build with wood, devotees provide an environment for termites while, for their part, the termites, in partly consuming the temple, help create the conditions for rebuilding as an act of devotion. The temple scenario differs from the 'ruin ecology' situation, however, in that gods join devotees and termites as members of this ensemble and ecology. This addition is critical. The question central to this paper is that of whether gods and miracles are to be allowed in to the ensembles we study as archaeologists and heritage scholars or that we intervene in as conservators. Under the Enlightenment, gods became ontologically incompatible with science, a situation that continued to be the case with the science of ecology as it developed in the twentieth century. Yet times change and new inclusions become thinkable.

I referred earlier to what I see as a convergence in ways of thinking and acting that are common to Asian popular religion and posthumanism, a convergence that is evident in the re-emergence of animism in the humanities. At its simplest, animism recognises that everything in the world is animated by vital force. In contemporary popular religion in Asia, as in anthropologically recorded contexts in Amazonia and elsewhere, animism involves a degree of anthropomorphism. As expressed in Graham Harvey (2006, p. xi) definition, 'animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and life is always lived in relationship with others'. Elizabeth Povinelli (2017, p. 61) poses the question of 'what happens when we extend one mode of being to all modes of existence. This research received' One answer is that belief in the supernatural-material ceases to be alien to the non-believer. Posthumanism has emerged partly in response to the state of environmental crisis, most evident in the phenomenon of anthropogenic global warming, in which we all live. This crisis has shaken human confidence in our mastery over nature and our estimation of the

agency of things. In the heritage field, I suggest, it fosters circumstances in which the supernatural seems less strange.



Figure 3. A deserted temple building in Wushi village (Zhongshan Prefecture, southeast China), used as a factory during the Mao era, is subject to a fund-raising campaign for its restoration. Photo by Denis Byrne, 2018.

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