

IN PLACE OF RITUAL

*Global City, Sacred Space, and the
Guanyin Temple in Singapore*

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TWO TEMPLES AND A NEW YEAR'S EVE

The pedestrian street outside the two temples was bustling with makeshift stalls selling flowers and other kinds of offerings and joss sticks of all sizes. Hawkers, when they were not busy touting their religious wares to passersby, were lighting up oilcans to provide devotees with the fire to light their joss sticks. Security officers were setting up metal barriers to direct the expected heavy flow of worshippers. The Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple was lit up with colorful festive lights. Younger worshippers know it is simply as the Guanyin Temple. Older worshippers call it the Si Beh Lor (or Si Ma Lu 四马路 in Hokkien) Temple. *Si Beh Lor* means “fourth road,” referring to Waterloo Street, which is partially closed off to automobiles in front of the temple, turning the street into a civic square.

It was only 9 p.m., but there was already quite a buzz of devotees in front of the temple, praying with and burning their joss sticks before entering the main hall to give offerings to the bodhisattva famously known as the Goddess of Mercy—Guanyin Pusa (观音菩薩). This was the night of the eve of the Chinese Lunar New Year. For the Chinese in Singapore following traditional religious practices, this was the place to be and the ritual to do, if not every year, then at least once in their lifetime. The regulars would also stop in front of the Sri Krishnan Temple, where they would also burn some joss sticks in prayer and bless themselves with holy incense. This very sight, of Chinese worshippers praying in traditional Chinese style in front of the Indian temple, was the attraction of many Western tourists taking a photograph of such a strange practice.

Strange, that is, to modern eyes. I have had friends, local English-educated elites who are Christians or atheists, ask me whether the Chinese who pray to Krishna at Waterloo Street believe in Hinduism, and if so, how they can believe in both Buddhism and Hinduism. The problem is compounded for them when I say that the local Chinese who pray to Guanyin usually also pray to deities of Chinese popular religion and sometimes even to the Virgin Mary in nearby Roman Catholic churches, especially Novena Church. Academic scholarship has long sought to resolve problems of this type by distinguishing between belief and practice. The latest installment is Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon's influential *Ritual and Its Consequences*, which opposes ritual and its "as if" subjunctive world of continuously separating and combining boundaries in creative play to sincerity and its "as is" vision of definitive, totalistic reality that produces absolute boundaries.¹ Thus, the Guanyin devotees in Singapore could be said to be engaging primarily in the ritual mode, treating Krishna and other deities as if they were just as real as Guanyin, rather than in the mode of sincere belief and authenticity of self-cultivation. Such an explanation would sit well with the conventional scholarly understanding of Chinese religion as dominated by ritual and practice over belief and doctrine.

It would also sit well with my Christian friends. Despite their elevation of ritual, Seligman et al. and others who emphasize the dichotomy between practice and beliefs remain stuck in Protestant Enlightenment ideology. Ritual, Seligman et al. argue, should not be contrasted to the modernity of conscious and rational individual autonomy. This would merely continue the conceit of the radical Protestant rejection of Catholic ritualism for sincerity and the secularization of this rejection in the Enlightenment. However, sincerity lies at the heart of the Protestant and Enlightenment projects to arrive at the essence of authentic selfhood. Substituting autonomy with sincerity and keeping the dichotomy would help us better understand ritual, especially in supposedly ritualistic oriental religions. Seligman et al. argue that the tension between sincerity and ritual has driven religious change and reform through the ages. Again, I see a certain Protestant Enlightenment conceit—a teleological history driven by dialectics and hurtling toward modernity.

In this chapter, by ethnographically reading the New Year's Eve rituals in and around the Guanyin Temple and Sri Krishnan Temple, I argue that ritual and beliefs are found combined, inseparable, in spatial practice and produce a dynamic spirituality that is affirmative rather than propositional: "it is" rather than "as if" or "as is." This spirituality absorbs modernity and infects it, thereby domesticating its presence and drive in the state's secularizing urban projects that have been impinging on the temples and their rituals.

The two temples have been increasingly hemmed in by urban redevelopment in the past few decades. The Bugis area to their east, which was once the site of one of Asia's seediest nightlife districts, was redeveloped into a retail shopping complex, sanitized street market, and public housing estate in the mid-1980s. Shopping centers, office buildings, and private apartment complexes sprung up around the temples. Throughout

the first decade of the 2000s, as part of the state's larger agenda to turn the old civic center and neighboring ethnic quarters into a cosmopolitan heritage and cultural hub, so as to transform Singapore into a global city, the Waterloo area to the south and west of the temples, between two metro stations of the Downtown Line under construction, was to be transformed into a hub for the arts.

On New Year's Eve, the Guanyin Temple rituals, already deeply spatial in their everyday practice, spill out into the streets and radiate their spiritual meanings beyond Waterloo Street. How does the religious spatiality of the temple affect the secular urbanism encroaching on it and vice versa? I argue that the state has failed to pin down the religious spatiality as cultural heritage, and instead, the temple continues to infect the secular urbanism with a vernacular spirituality that resists easy incorporation into the developmental state's ideal global city and offers the alternative worlding of cultural sentiments.

GREETING THE NEW YEAR

I arrived at the cul-de-sac that marks the northern end of Waterloo Street that remains open to automobiles. The road leading to the cul-de-sac is bounded by the aptly named Fortune Centre, a multistory square-block shopping center filled with small proprietors, and the Stamford Arts Centre, an old Japanese school of the colonial era converted into a multitenanted arts building. The National Arts Council manages the Arts Centre as part of the Waterloo arts belt. On the other hand, without much planning but by dint of market logic, Fortune Centre has become the place to go for organic and vegetarian Chinese food, because of its proximity to Guanyin Temple.

Entering the square in front of the Guanyin Temple and Sri Krishnan Temple, I experienced a time warp back to the 1980s Singapore of my youth, when I used to attend school in the neighborhood. Street stalls had been set up to sell flowers, offerings, and different types of joss sticks. Hawkers weaved in and out of the stalls and the crowd to tout their wares, while worshippers and tourists—it was hard to distinguish the two—milled about the entrance to the Guanyin Temple. Clouds of incense smoke wafted up from the front of the temple, gradually blanketing the square with their sharp scent and slightly stinging the eyes. I was reminded that this temple was once part of a cultural complex that covered the Rochor and Bugis areas, places of night markets offering cheap goods, entertainment, and food, dotted with mini religious shrines. Urban redevelopment had isolated the Guanyin Temple, as modern shopping centers and public housing blocks now surround it. It is even separated from its sister Sri Krishnan Temple by a private apartment block. So it seems.

It was still early, three hours before midnight, and the entrance to the Guanyin Temple was still navigable. At the center of the courtyard, outside the front doors of the main hall, was placed a giant urn for joss sticks to be stuck into. Already a crowd was milling about the urn. Worshippers bought their joss sticks outside in the square, lit them from fire provided by the hawkers, and came into the temple to greet the New Year. The ideal

spot would be somewhere in front of the urn, on the line running from the Guanyin statue to the urn and out through the main gate of the temple. A worshipper would walk facing Guanyin into the courtyard, turn around with back to Guanyin, *baibai* (拜拜) with the joss sticks facing up to the heavens, turn around to face Guanyin, and baibai with the joss sticks again before sticking them into the urn.

Because of the heavy crowd, the joss sticks in the urn were quickly taken out by workers, still smoldering, and thrown into a metal bin, to clear space for the sticks of other worshippers. A boy turned to his father to ask in Mandarin whether this would affect their family's prayers, as joss sticks are supposed to burn down and join their ashes with the pile of others in the urn. The father replied, "No, as long as we are sincere [*zhenxin* 真心], our prayers will be heard." Before the temple was reconstructed in 1982, candles and incense were burned inside the main hall. The official reason for moving the urn outside was to prevent incense smoke from staining the ceiling.² But there is another explanation: moving a popular ritual outside the main hall. Indeed, at the center of the main hall, toward the front altar, is a rectangular area, specially marked off by beige tiles, with a large lotus motif in the middle, where one is supposed to take off shoes to enter. This is the place for individual quiet prayer and meditation.

One could interpret moving the urn outside as a rationalizing reformist move that shifts a traditional folk practice out as a compromise, so that the hall can be cleared for undisturbed Buddhist meditation while folk worshippers can continue to enjoy incense burning. If so, such an intention would have failed in its modernizing goal. With the urn outside at the door, offering incense now becomes the rite of passage to enter the main hall. Few worshippers skip the step before entering the main hall. If prayers of sincerity in search of the authentic self were expected in the main hall, then they would have to be preceded by ritual. Burning joss sticks is now seen as an act of purification as much as an act of ritual offering, such that one's doing it has become a test of sincerity—the "as if" as a way of discovering the "as is"—as the father's reply to the inquiring son attests.

The modernizing goal also would have failed because the theatrical ritual of jostling to be the first to put a joss stick into the urn at the stroke of midnight to greet the New Year has come to define the public identity and image of the Guanyin Temple. By 11 p.m., the crowd in the courtyard had swelled and packed the area, with everyone holding up large joss sticks above their heads. A temple staff member acted as the master of ceremonies, standing on an elevated platform constructed for the event. Speaking into the sound system, sometimes shouting, he maintained order and tried to keep a path clear of waiting devotees so that other worshippers could enter the temple. He had to disrupt the ritual practices of worshippers a number of times because some took too long to baibai with the joss sticks and were jamming up the pathway, causing consternation to the waiting devotees who thought that the worshippers were trying to usurp the best spot to greet the New Year. Moments of sincerity intruded into the ritual space. When things went smoothly and he did not have to maintain order, the master of ceremonies reminded the devotees that they should go straight into the temple after sticking their joss sticks into

the urn, leave through the side doors and go straight home, and not go shopping outside at the night market farther down the road, to preserve the blessings of the incense.

The tension was building up as those at the back pushed those in front as everyone inched toward the urn. Hot ashes dropped on everyone's heads and shoulders, adding to the tension in the air. By 11:45 p.m., the situation was getting untenable. The master of ceremonies was practically shouting to keep order, while the crowd was exclaiming "*Huat ah!*" (*Fa a* 發啊 in Hokkien), "Prosper!", in rhythmic unison. At one point the master of ceremonies raised his voice to stop some devotees carrying joss sticks from entering the main hall. At another, he had to persuade the elderly, children, and pregnant women to leave the courtyard, telling them that as long as their desire to *bainian* (拜年, "worship the New Year"), to pay their New Year's respects, to Guanyin and Buddha was sincere, they did not have to participate in the ritual, as it was dangerous for them.

Suddenly, at around 11:53 p.m. the crowd became pensively silent. Then, just before 11:55 p.m., a segment of the crowd begin counting down from ten, and everyone joined in. The master of ceremonies panicked and tried to calm everyone down, shouting that it was not yet midnight. But he was ignored. The crowd surged forward, and the master of ceremonies gave in, wished those who had stuck their joss sticks into the urn five minutes early a happy New Year, and turned on the drum music to welcome the New Year. Worshippers began to enter the main hall, but most were still holding out for midnight. When it arrived, after an orderly countdown led by the master of ceremonies, there was another surge, with cries of "*Huat ah!*" The crowd, satisfied, began to flow into the temple. Devotees, with faces and torsos covered in ashes, put their hands together in prayer mode as they walked into the main hall and baibai'd their way to the front altar. The work of the master of ceremonies was not yet over. For more than an hour, a constant stream of worshippers flowed into the courtyard to greet the New Year.

"I GO SAY THANK YOU"

I observed the ritual from inside the main hall, standing in the spacious area behind the center reflection square. Benches were provided for people to rest. This was the liminal zone, the transition space from self-interested, noisy, and pushy religiosity to the quiet, solitary, and reflective prayerfulness of the center square. Here, worshippers who had just gone through the trial of ashes rested and got ready to enter the prayer zone still stinging with smoke but now facing toward Guanyin and quieting down.

Earlier, during the quieter parts of the night, I had noticed a couple with a baby in a stroller walking in to meet six male friends carrying large joss sticks and offerings. The group stood out in many ways. They were young and spoke English, when the most common language heard in the temple was Mandarin. The couple was a Chinese man and an Indian woman, when the more common mixed-race couples worshipping at the temple were a white man and a Chinese woman. More significant, several of the men were dressed in similar T-shirts, adorned with gold chains, and had dyed hair, which Chinese

youths from working-class backgrounds like to sport. They seemed to belong to a close-knit fraternity of young businessmen.

As it turned out, the group was responsible for the premature countdown. When the worshippers who stuck their joss sticks in the urn five minutes earlier than midnight streamed into the main hall, the group came in with satisfied smiles on their faces. One member exclaimed, “We did it!” They congregated, chatted, and patted one another on the back at the rear area. These men had created their own group ritual within the larger ritual, carving out the five minutes of the old year to fashion them into their own moments of the New Year. The five minutes stolen and offered back to the gods became the ritual marker of their fraternity. This is perhaps a clever exploitation of time in the production of things—a magical materialism in affinity with the capitalist mode of production.

But one could also read it as demonstrating a well-honed Chinese sensibility. As C. Fred Blake reflects on the Chinese “material spirit” of burning paper replicas of valuable things, the distinction between the natural and the artificial is irrelevant in the Chinese lifeworld: “That which is real, that which is relevant, that which holds value, is man-made.” There the distinction turns on the “imperfection and perfection of workmanship in creating an *authentic world*” (italics in original).³ The bainian ritual at the Guanyin Temple belongs to the Chinese material spirit of burning valuable things. Waiting while holding the joss sticks, enduring the hot ashes, and risking burns in the rush to the urn is the ritual work that produces the authenticity of the New Year, which is never just about the passage of time. The Dragon passes time to the Snake, handing the world over to his care. What the fraternity who forged their own group ritual did was to carve their own niche in this authentic world of fortune and fate, so that the group could confront the larger forces of the world in solidarity and good faith. There is no distinction between “as if” and “as is” here. Ritual and sincerity flowed and merged into each other to produce a consciousness that was not propositional but affirmative: “it is.”

As the fraternity chatted away, one member suddenly broke away and said to the group, “I go say thank you.” Turning around to face the altar, he put his hands together and lowered his eyes, then baibai’d his way to the main altar. The man paused in front of Guanyin, joining a crowd deep in solitary, quiet prayer. He returned to the fraternity refreshed, and other members took turns to go up to Guanyin to say thank you. It was a sincerity made possible by the ritual of greeting the New Year, and a sincerity that could only be expressed and manifested individually after the group ritual.

Ritual and sincerity melded in front of the altar. Worshippers prayed with their hands brought together, fingers touching each other and facing up, but at different heights. Some held their hands at their chests, close to their hearts. Some held them close to their mouths. Others held them at their foreheads, with heads gently bent. A few held them up high above their heads, which they lowered in standing prostration. Hands were held still, moved ever so slightly, or shook vigorously up and down. Many hands were empty, but some held flowers, young bamboo shoots, or red packets. Some worshippers murmured Buddhist chants, while others prayed for luck, health, or fortune or simply

thanked Guanyin for blessings bestowed. Everyone was oblivious to the presence of the others, introverted into their own worlds of communion with Guanyin, performing their own private rituals to produce the spiritual space of the self.

The presence of others was almost incidental as worshippers focused on the altar. It has a golden statue of Guanyin sitting on a lotus at the center. Buddha, in brilliant chrome, sits behind her on a raised lotus, such that when worshippers gaze on Guanyin, the shadow of Buddha envelops the spiritual space of the self. Hua Tuo, the legendary doctor of the Three Kingdoms period, sits on Guanyin's right, while Bodhidharma, the first Chinese patriarch of Buddhism, credited with founding Ch'an Buddhism (popularly known by the Japanese name, Zen) and Shaolin martial arts, sits on her left. Devotees pray for health to Hua Tuo, whose long black beard accentuates his benevolent gaze. I was standing in front of him when I was nudged by the crowd pushing its way forward to donate money and obtain flowers from pots in front of Hua Tuo to either place at the altar as offerings to Guanyin or bring home as blessings. Others buy flowers from vendors outside the temple and place them in the urns as offerings to replenish the stock.

At the center of the long front altar table, worshippers placed a row of New Year ritual offerings with individualized significance. There were willows, sticky cakes, oranges, pineapples, green bananas, pomelos, fruit baskets, flower petals, and joss sticks, among other things. Because I was not worshipping but taking notes on my smartphone, I was slowly pushed by worshippers edging to the front, toward Bodhidharma's side of the altar, where pots of flowers were also placed for the trade of offerings. While I was standing to the side, observing the proceedings, a man went to the side of the altar, took a red plastic offering tray, and emptied a bag of gold-wrapped sweets on to it. Carrying the tray piled with small gold ingots, with his two hands in a prayerful mode, he walked to the center and baibai'd by moving the tray up and down in a gesture of offering. The mountain of gold ingots joined the other offerings on the front altar table.

SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTERS

The center square marked off by the beige tiles has a border of black tiles with floral motifs. Anyone who enters this prayer zone first removes their shoes. At New Year's, worshippers took on different prayer positions, caught up in their private spiritual spaces of prayer. Some were kneeling up, placing the weight of their body on their knees, while others were kneeling down, with their bottoms on their feet. Some were kneeling in prostration, while others were sitting in a lotus position. As with the standing worshippers in front of the altar, hands were put together at different levels to baibai, moving at different speeds and holding an offering or nothing. A few devotees were holding scriptures and meditating over them.

Spatially, the temple is organized in such a way as to facilitate the different combinations of ritual and sincerity that each individual worshipper might customize. The courtyard serves as the purification space where the folk ritual of joss stick burning is performed

before one turns to the sincerity of solitary, introverted prayer. The rear area of the main hall is the liminal space of transition, where family and friends can wait for one another and the secular is allowed to intrude, with groups chatting and people with their backs facing the altar taking calls on their mobile phones. The center prayer zone anchors the main hall and creates the atmosphere of stillness and quietude. Worshippers going to the front altar have to walk from the sides to approach Guanyin, compelling them to adopt a prayer mode as they pass this zone. Approaching the altar from the side, they are humbled into a denial of the self, walking past either Hua Tuo with his benevolent gaze or Bodhidharma with his martial look, before coming face-to-face with Guanyin. This is quite different from a configuration that would allow worshippers to walk straight up to the altar through the center, in which the self would be in the foreground of consciousness as they approached Guanyin.

Moving worshippers through the sides also makes for serendipitous spiritual encounters. While I was standing by the wall at the side of Hua Tuo taking notes, a mentally and physically handicapped man came up, stood beside me, and went into deep prayer, his hands put together and brought to his murmuring mouth. For some reason, he did not move to the front and was content to be praying at the side. His family members walked up to the front to worship, and he was praying while waiting for them. I became accustomed to his presence and felt a certain spiritual calm listening to his prayerful murmurings. Then I felt a sudden jolt as a man grabbed my upper arm and pulled me toward him rather strongly. He was walking away, and for some unknown reason I did not resist him and went along. We walked a few steps, until the man's female companion shouted and laughed at him for pulling the wrong person. He turned around in shock and apologized. We laughed in good spirits and wished each other happy New Year. He then took his handicapped brother, who was standing beside me, and left, with all of us in smiles.

After I was nudged from the side of Hua Tuo to the other side of Bodhidharma, I stood near the wall there to observe and take my notes. At the appointed hour of 10 p.m., temple staff cleared the front altar area of standing worshippers and the front portion of the center prayer zone of sitting worshippers. Everyone in the center prayer zone stood up, and others lined up on the sides. A group of lay monks in golden brown robes and nuns in dark blue robes entered in a procession to lead the worshippers in prayer in the center square, facing the altar. Their hands were not against each other in the usual baibai fashion but rolled together in a ball at chest level and were moved from left to right to left. Worshippers continued to baibai in their individual fashions. The lay monks and nuns then turned around, faced the main door and the crowd, and continued their baibai with rolled hands. The crowd reciprocated, some bowing, others pressing or rolling their hands together. Some worshippers were waiting for this encounter and left contented to have received the blessings of the lay monks and nuns. The monks and nuns processed out the side door, and the main hall quickly returned to its individualized modes of prayer and worship. To avoid the packed street in front of the temple, the head monk, an old man with a walking stick, left through the side of the altar. As he went, temple volunteers rolled their hands to baibai in greeting, and he reciprocated in kind.

On both sides of the hall by the walls were counters manned by volunteers. They were not doing anything in particular but were observing the worshippers and would help anyone with inquiries. On the counters were wrapped sweets in big bowls. Worshippers could help themselves to the sweets, and these were places of encounter with old friends and acquaintances. It was near the counter on Bodhidharma's side that I met an ex-student of mine. She came up to me while I was writing my notes and gazing at Bodhidharma and greeted me with a beaming smile: "Prof! Happy New Year!" I did not know why, but I was equally happy to see her. I remember her as a student I had to counsel because she was facing some personal problems and was missing class early in the semester. After the talk, she quickly picked herself up and transfigured into an enthusiastic, conscientious, and vivacious student, leading her team of classmates in a community service project for the course. She became a teacher after graduation, seeking to inspire young people to better themselves. I asked, "Do you worship here often? I thought you were a Christian." She replied, "I used to be. But my family comes here regularly, and I found myself loving the peace I get here compared to the emotional release in church. When I am troubled, I like to come here and sit at the center to pray quietly and think about life." I gave her a wide, knowing smile. She did not ask why I was there, as she probably guessed I was doing research. We said good-bye, as her family was waiting for her to leave.

Though I was not at the temple to worship or pray, the two encounters left me with a sense of peace that I have not felt since I was a Catholic youth immersed in meditation sessions at an old village church on a knoll in the quiet countryside. There was something about the transformation of the self that the combination of ritual and sincerity brought about. The veneer of guardedness and self-interest was removed, as was the performativity of self-representation. People encountered one another not "as if" they were fellow Buddhists, not "as is" with their authentic selves. Encounters took place in the immanent "it is" mode, affirming the accident or coincidence of the meeting. There were no implications or consequences to the encounters, only a strange sense of feeling pleased and being at peace with one's place in the world.

Soon after the encounter with my student, a nun in Tibetan Buddhist robes who had been lingering at the sides and observing walked up to a volunteer behind the front altar. She asked whether there was something like a brochure of the temple she could have. The volunteer disappeared to the back and returned with a temple calendar. The nun was pleased, and they bowed to each other. Later on, I saw her in the rear area, sitting on a bench and happily looking through the calendar. Like me, she had come not to pray or worship but to observe, for different reasons. But both of us left the temple with encounters that seemed to have touched us.

LORD KRISHNA, THE GOD OF FORTUNE AND THE WORLD

Outside the temple, devotees lined up between metal barricades to enter the courtyard. It was quite a sight to behold at night, especially when they moved forward in an orderly

and deliberate manner while carrying their smoldering joss sticks, as though in a religious procession. The oilcan fires set up by hawkers added to the processional mood. The line snaked toward the night market. At its tail, latecomers were buying joss sticks to properly join the impromptu procession. Groups of devotees huddled around oilcan fires to light their sticks. This was the induction into the ritual of greeting the New Year.

As a whole, this ritual is a scaled-up version of an everyday visit to the temple. On a normal visit, a worshipper would get small joss sticks from a hawker outside the temple, proceed to light them in the courtyard, baibai with them, place them in the urn, and then enter the main hall. Everything is bigger and longer on New Year's Eve: large joss sticks, large fires, procession to the temple, coordinated collective placing of joss sticks in the urn, and large crowds in the main hall. This reproduces the world appropriate for the temporal scale of the New Year and engenders reflection on the path of destiny that one has been traveling through the years. It produces a search for the authentic self and the coherence of one's fate in the ever-changing material world.

Down the street, at the night market, at the circle marking the end of Waterloo Street, where the market turns and continues toward Bugis village, a giant God of Fortune statue had been installed. Around the base were placed twelve posters presenting the Chinese zodiac fortune readings for the New Year, in both Chinese and English. The reading for those born in the Year of the Ox was as follows:

Ox friends in the year of the snake will be “blessed” with both the good and bad. Good stars are shining on you, bringing good fortune. However, be cautious of villains and mix with the “right” company of friends. Avoid investments and lending money to prevent heavy losses. Focus on the regular income from your job, maintain a low profile and avoid unnecessary arguments. Business partnerships should be avoided in the possibility the partnerships may fail. You will see the “true-colors” of some of your friends and will realize who your true friends are! As for the Ox kids, this year will be a year to achieve outstanding results, do study hard and smart! Always cherish the people around you. Take good care of your health and family members, especially of the elderly! Pray for safety and good health for all! Be extra careful on roads and safety. For those who are single, congratulations! You might meet your ideal partner this year. Marriage couple should be wary of unwanted attention from the opposite sex, especially from the 2nd half of the year. Stay faithful to your spouse to avoid a broken marriage or you might live with regret for the rest of your life!

There was a good crowd of people reading the posters, many of them prior to buying joss sticks and joining the procession. The God of Fortune was the threshold totem marking the turning of the secular, material world into the sacred space of the Guanyin Temple. Here a would-be worshipper walks from Bugis night market, which sells all manner of cheap goods and services, to meet a reading of his fortune. The fortune reading cannot be read “as if” or “as is.” In fact, it induces reflection on one's life and its fragments—friends, enemies, investments, job, office politics, business, studies, family, health, travels, love, and sex—and challenges one to search for some coherence in the New Year ahead.

Thus contemplating the consciousness of the world and one's place and path in it, the worshipper goes down Waterloo Street and buys incense sticks. The worshipper lights the sticks with other worshippers, sharing a fire, all silently reflecting on the fragments for which they are going to seek coherence in the ritual to come. The procession through the dark street continues the reflection as the worshipper looks toward the light emanating from the Guanyin Temple, diffused by the incense smoke from the hopes of worshippers who have gone before. With a resolute stab into the urn, the worshipper abandons the joss sticks representing life's fragments and marks the moment of entrance into the sacred space and discovery of the worshipper's authentic self bathed in Guanyin's benevolence. One may ask for healing, wealth, or good academic results from Guanyin, baibai with red packets or gold ingots, but the worshipper is always thanking her for the blessings already bestowed, for being there in the temple, arriving from the material world and leaving its fragments behind.

For many, the ritual does not end at the Guanyin Temple. They leave in the direction of the Sri Krishnan Temple and make a conscious attempt to stop at the Chinese-style altar constructed just outside its door. On New Year's Eve, whole families stopped at Sri Krishnan to baibai Lord Krishna with joss sticks. The regulars blessed themselves with the smoke of holy incense burning in a hanging pot of charcoal. A few entered the temple to get a bindi (sacred red dot) applied to their forehead by the priests and to buy a tray of ghee lamps for offering to the gods of the temple. With a small donation, worshippers received a red card from the temple that had the God of Fortune inside wishing the recipient a happy Chinese New Year, and a slip of paper notifying Chinese devotees of the dates of the special worship services provided for them. These occur on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, on festival days for the Guanyin Temple, and on Chinese festival days.

In popular discourse, this hybridization of practices has earned praise for expressing the multiculturalism of Singapore. But this attribution of meaning only serves to domesticate a ritual hybridity that does not have any intrinsic meaning. The practices of Guanyin Temple worshippers at the Sri Krishnan Temple must be seen from the perspective of the worshippers, whose consciousness, when worshipping at the Sri Krishnan, is already conditioned by the visit to Guanyin Temple. The offering of joss sticks and ghee lamps must be seen in the aftermath of the production of sincerity that took place in the procession from the God of Fortune to the Guanyin Temple urn and to the front altar of the main hall. Shaped by the consciousness that the world already exists as "it is," the Chinese worshipper passing by Lord Krishna cannot ignore him. It is not "as if" Lord Krishna existed to the Chinese worshipper offering joss sticks but that he exists because he is there, living next to Guanyin, and therefore should be respected and worshipped. It is not "as is" an authentic Chinese that the Chinese worshipper offers joss sticks to Lord Krishna, but, as "it is," Lord Krishna would expect the Chinese devotee to offer joss sticks to him.

If the God of Fortune marked the threshold totem that had the secular, material world fading into the sacred, spiritual space of the Guanyin Temple, then Lord Krishna was the

threshold deity that guarded the exit from the sacred space back into the material world. The exit was not the same as the entrance; the God of Fortune and Lord Krishna were not equivalent. As worshippers exited from Sri Krishnan back into the part of Waterloo Street opened to automobiles, bounded by the commercial culture of Fortune Centre and the state culture of the Stamford Arts Centre, the spirituality they carried slipped out to infect the secular and revive the material spirits of the Chinese lifeworld.

THE FAILURE OF HERITAGE AND GLOBAL CITY MAKING

The only building in the area that has been given heritage conservation status is the Stamford Arts Centre. Billed as one of the twenty heritage schools in the city center area by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, it is known as the Former Stamford Girls' School. Indeed, all heritage school buildings, except the Alsagoff Arab School, have been disemboweled by what the conservation circle would call "adaptive reuse" for commercial and state cultural purposes, seventeen of them carrying the descriptor *Former* in their moniker. My former school, St. Joseph's Institution, at the other end of Waterloo Street from the Guanyin Temple, is now the Singapore Art Museum. The authority writes, in the pamphlet featuring the conserved heritage schools,

School buildings are special places. They are sites of shared memories which bond each successive generation of students who pass through its gates. Schools leave both tangible and intangible imprints on their surroundings, whether they are the sounds of children's laughter as you pass by its doors, or the sight of a familiar clock tower that marks a journey home. Many school buildings have become architectural or community landmarks, lending a physical and social character to their neighborhoods.⁴

The Former Stamford Girls' School building is neither architecturally special nor particularly memorable. Built by the Japanese population in 1920 for the Japanese School, it housed the Stamford Girls' School, established by the government in 1951 as a sister school to the premier Raffles Girls' School (Stamford Raffles being the British founder of the colonial town), from 1955 to 1984 and the successor Stamford Primary School until 1986. Its uses for short periods—twenty years as a school for the foreign Japanese population and just over thirty years for a regular government school—hardly commend it as a heritage building for the local and national community. Its inclusion in the list of heritage schools in the city center helped the authority to round the number to a substantial twenty and allowed the global city center, touted as a unique mix of old Asian colonial buildings and sparkling skyscrapers, to be haunted with the ghosts of cultural pasts to give it its heritage branding. Symbolically, as ordained by the postcolonial politics of multiracial and multireligious representation, it is needed to pair with the Former Victoria School as the only two colonial and secular government schools in a list otherwise full of Christian and Catholic mission schools and ethnic

Chinese, Indian, and Arabic schools with links to their respective temple, religion, or clan associations.

Compared to the Guanyin Temple and the Sri Krishnan Temple, which have been immensely popular with generations of Singaporeans, the Former Stamford Girls' School pales in significance. Yet it is the only conserved building in the neighborhood. The original Guanyin Temple was built in 1884. Over the decades, usage outgrew architecture, but it was only when the state began to redevelop the adjacent Bugis area that the temple was demolished and rebuilt. The new temple building, opened in 1982, was twice as big, to accommodate the faithful. Statues of the three main deities—Hua Tuo, Guanyin, and Bodhidharma—and Buddha were moved from separate altars into a common prayer hall, with Buddha sitting behind Guanyin, which seemed to match the new postcolonial order, in which ethnic and religious communities were now combined as equals into a new nation guarded by the state.

However, while the Former Stamford Girls' School was awarded conservation status in 1994, only the place where the temple sits was designated a historic site by the National Heritage Board, in 2001, mainly to commemorate the use of the original temple as a refuge during the Second World War. In the modern heritage consciousness of the nation-state, the “as is” authenticity of physical architecture with embedded significances is played off against the “as if” imagination of collective memories, just so community lives can be reorganized and reordered for the regime of surplus value secured by the developmental state. The Stamford Girls' School is therefore now the Stamford Arts Centre, serving the function of infusing artistic vibrancy into the global city. The Guanyin Temple stands outside this regime, yet it could not be ignored, because of the central position it occupies in the historical and cultural life of Singaporeans.

Worse still, the practical “it is” engagement with the world that led to its reconstruction in the 1980s confounds the modern heritage consciousness. The temple building is not sacred in itself. Sacred space could be reconfigured, because its sacredness is found in the relationship between the deities (for the statue of Guanyin is Guanyin), the worshippers, and the world. If the mortals had changed, becoming more national and multicultural—thus, if the world had changed, becoming caught up in postcolonial developmentalism—then so the immortals had shifted themselves to form a reorganized cosmic order to accommodate the world. Authenticity resides in changing rituals of relationships, not in the eternal artifacts of culture. Not coincidentally, the temple has played an important philanthropic role in the health, education, and arts fields in the past two decades, often intentionally reaching out to non-Chinese beneficiaries.

The Guanyin Temple is thus given an honorary role in the urban heritage universe of the state, without the “as is” authenticity of conserved status, because it was reconstructed, but with the “as if” imagination of having played its part in the coming of the nation during the war. The fact that it could not be ignored meant that when the developmental state inaugurated the first Singapore Biennale of Arts, in 2006, the Guanyin Temple was chosen as a heritage site to host international artworks. The biennale was

the anchor cultural event for the International Monetary Fund–World Bank annual meetings in the city, titled “Singapore 2006: Global City, World of Opportunities.” Importantly, “belief” was chosen as the theme of the biennale, in part to showcase the racial and religious harmony of multicultural Singapore and in part to highlight the heritage treasures of conserved religious buildings, to give the global city a unique civic glow.

Seen as sensitive interventions in a religious space, three sets of site-specific artworks were placed in Guanyin Temple. First, the Costa Rican artist Federico Herrero painted the walls and columns at the side of the prayer hall’s main entrance with his trademark round colored things with eyelike circles, interspersed with lines that evoke the masses caught up in the urban environment. But domesticated by the temple walls and columns, they looked like representations of the multitude of worshippers flowing in and out of the hall, their eyes caught between the immortals and the world. Simply titled *Painting*, Herrero’s work was less an intervention than an allusion to the spiritual shadows that the faithful cast on the walls of the temple.

Second, the Chinese artist Xu Bing produced a carpet to replace the red carpet at the center of the prayer hall where devotees sit or kneel to pray and meditate, made of a square of 841 characters that can be read in all directions for multiple meanings. It mimics a famous ancient Chinese palindrome but is composed of Buddhist scriptures in Xu’s own calligraphic system: an ironic combination of Roman alphabets into Chinese-like characters. Squeezing the West into the Chinese world, *Prayer Carpet* seems almost to mock the faithful for pursuing Western dreams with the succor of Guanyin. However, the piece was substituted with a carpet with secular writings after the temple leaders felt uneasy that devotees would be trampling on holy scripture.⁵ Xu’s original carpet was instead displayed at the National Museum. Thus, his intervention was subverted by his misunderstanding of the temple space as sacred in itself, the idea that it made logical and aesthetic sense to adorn the sacred space with a sacred carpet. The prayer carpet was always profane; it could not be sacred. Once a carpet has holy text on it, because a holy word in its physical manifestation is sacred, it cannot be stepped on, just like the statues of the deities and the offerings to them.

Third, the Taiwanese artist Tsai Charwei offered *Lotus Mantra*, for which she wrote the Buddhist Lotus Sutra, which is partly dedicated to Guanyin, “onto lotus seeds, roots and flowers, representing the Buddhist concepts of the speech, body, and mind, respectively,” as the curator Eugene Tan wrote. Placed as offerings, they dried and rotted, with the writings disintegrating with nature. Tsai also wrote the sutra on living lotus flowers placed in a pond specially installed in the temple, with the writings preserved along with the flowers. Tan writes, “The juxtaposition between the two different states of existence embodied by the lotus flowers highlights the intricate and complex relationships that exists in systems of belief such as Buddhism, between the living and the dying.”⁶ But such theological conceits about the “as is” essence of self and the universe were lost on worshippers concerned with life and death, live, in the flesh. At most, they were bemused by art tourists, like me, who did not follow the flow of worship and stood

gazing at Tsai's lotus flowers instead of Guanyin herself, "as if" the flowers connected us to the world.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to ritual, modern scholarship on religion has been burdened with the themes and tropes of rationalization, secularization, and performativity. Ritual has been opposed to doctrine, autonomy, and now sincerity. In this chapter, I have quite deliberately juxtaposed the rituals in and around the Guanyin Temple on New Year's Eve to these themes and tropes to show that ritual is not opposed to them but rather willingly and playfully takes part in their making. Thus, the urn moved outside the temple hall to modernize worship only serves to open the ritual of incense burning out into the streets, creating a purification rite of passage and an annual processional ritual that have come to define the temple's identity. Even with the deities reordered to better reflect Buddhist beliefs and space reconfigured around the center prayer square inside the hall, rituals of thanksgiving, praying, and greeting the New Year have only intensified, now flowing around and into the square in the creative melding of spiritual encounters. With the rituals redoubled and spilling out into the streets, the Guanyin Temple has become the anchor of the pedestrianized section of Waterloo Street, which is otherwise hemmed in by the secularizing commercial, residential, and civic urban projects of the developmental state. On New Year's Eve, the street is transformed into a worlding spiritual space stretching, through the procession of giant joss sticks, from the giant God of Fortune to the Guanyin Temple and then out into secular traffic again through the good graces of Lord Krishna.

Attempts by the state to co-opt the temple and its rituals into heritage and global city-making projects floundered because the state approached them in the dichotomous framework of ritual versus sincerity/autonomy. Instead, the temple and its rituals have been participating in the cultural life of the nation, engaging the nation's multiculturalism and secular materialism in their own terms. It would be wrong to say that the temple and its rituals have resisted modernity or, in a syncretistic manner, absorbed modern culture to persist in an eternal celestial mode. Rather, they have been constitutive of the "modern spirit" of Singapore, effectively interweaving the spiritual and the secular with all the attendant tensions and contradictions and breathing soul into an otherwise technocratic cityscape.⁷

I have intentionally approached the study of the rituals not in terms of time—the cultural history of the littoral and overseas Chinese and the evolution of their religious practices and traditions, which is the dominant approach in the study of Chinese religion—but in terms of space. The intention was to avoid essentializing the rituals and to see how they could spill over and transgress cultural boundaries. The result has gone beyond what I could have anticipated. Ritual is literally larger than life and culture and big enough to encompass modernity and its projects. There is something praxeologically fundamental to human *being* and our quest for the spiritual, even in ostensibly secular contexts, and this is played out in spatial practice.

NOTES

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