

EPILOGUE

In my last book, I used the word “recombinant” to theorize the way social transformations like urbanization occur (Kipnis 2016). The term suggests how a new type of society can have a completely different structure than the old one, yet still be composed of the same elements. Imagine the children’s toy the “transformer.” When we move the pieces around, it can change from a human-like robot into a car or truck; but after the transformation all of the original pieces are still present. This analogy is not perfect. In social and biological transformations, new elements are often blended with old ones in a new formation. But at least the term provides a way of contemplating the inter-relation between change and continuity in social transformations like urbanization.

This book has also examined urbanization, but from the perspective of funerals. It relates the transformation of funerary ritual to the rapid urbanization that has occurred in China over the past thirty years, and uses changes in funerary ritual to provide a lens for viewing this urbanization. Many of the elements of contemporary funerals are not new. There have been ideas about ghosts and spirits, burial practices, strangers and familial relations, and gifts and commodities in China for thousands of years. But rapid urbanization in China has rearranged these elements into a new pattern. The separation of life from death, the rise of a stranger society, the increasing commodification of social relations, economic growth and rising inequality, skyrocketing land values, Communist Party political rule, and an increasingly imposed but not fully accepted secularization have all left their mark.

Another common way of imagining the place of the past in the present is through the metaphor of “haunting.” Through haunting, the ghosts of the past influence the present even if we have forgotten who they were, and especially when we repress our memories of them. In his book *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida

(1994) both criticized and revived the work of the communist philosopher Karl Marx. He revived Marx because he wanted to emphasize that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 did not bring an end to the relevance of Marx's socialist outlook for European politics. Marx's haunting continues. But he criticized Marx for positing that the rise of communism would end the haunting of human societies and for imagining that communism was the only ghost around.

The current Communist Party regime in China suffers from many of the same problems that Derrida saw in Marx. It imagines that its soul should be the only one allowed. While it does notice a few other ghosts around, many of which it labels with the word "superstition," it sees these ghosts as entities whose demise is inevitable but nonetheless should be hastened by the efforts of the Party. The spirit of the Party must live forever; all other spirits are ghostly enemies to be squashed. The ghosts from the Party's own, now repudiated, past, like the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, or the Tiananmen Square massacre, must never be mentioned again. Derrida argued that we must learn to live with our ghosts instead of repressing them, a theme that has been increasingly voiced in psychological anthropology and the analysis of political repression and social subjectivity around the world (Good 2020). I believe that the totalitarian impulse in China to squash all souls other than that of the Party itself can only increase the number of ghosts.

The subject matter of this book demands a blending of haunting and recombination as two ways of understanding the place of the past in the present, two ways of understanding how cultural continuity exists even when the modes of social organization, of organizing life itself, change rapidly. Death always involves specific recombinations. The economic resources (and debts) of the dead must be reallocated among the living. The familial and societal responsibilities of the dead must also be redistributed. The physical body of the deceased must be disposed of in some manner, the remains going into the soil, the air, or the water. The ideals that the deceased stood for, or, perhaps, the ideals that the living wish they had stood for, must also be reiterated, revived, and recreated. But beyond these processes of purposeful reconstitution, death also involves grief—emotions and memories over which we have no control, that haunt our consciousness and permeate our souls. The powers of these emotions and memories preexisted the transformations of urbanization and continue into the future.

Ghosts have a spectral presence. They are simultaneously there and not there, known and unknown. Urbanization might be said to enhance our susceptibility to haunting in many ways. As the spaces of the dead separate from those of the living, we become used to living in worlds where we never see death, until it somehow forces its way into our personal space. The sudden and unwelcome appearance of death makes it more spectral. As more and more aspects of our lives involve interactions with strangers, people or beings whose comings and goings are complete mysteries, more and more ghosts haunt our lives. As urban neighborhoods

are razed and rebuilt again and again, as urban economies are restructured and disrupted over and over, as the pace of societal change increases, the source of memories that haunt us multiply. The political repression of these memories only makes them more spectral.

The analogy of haunting turns our focus to that which is timeless. Ghosts can come from any time and any place. Humans have been living and dying, grieving, and performing funerals for much longer than recorded history. In contrast, the analogy of a transformer, of a recombinant transformation, makes our focus more specific. The processes of urbanization in China over the past few decades are precisely such a recombinant process. In my attempts to analyze the relationship between a specific historical transformation and a relatively timeless aspect of human life, I have wrestled with both haunting and recombination as ways of understanding the presence of the past. I hope their intersection illuminates more than it confuses.