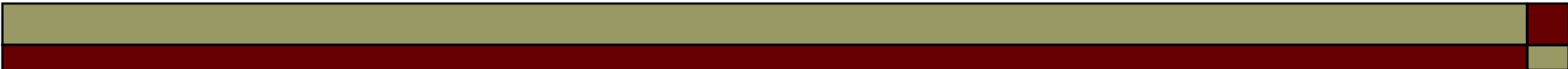


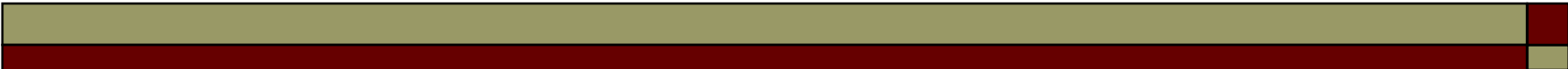
Chinese Religions at the Grassroots

Lecture 4: Making Religious Spaces in Contemporary China

Questions

- What does the practice of Chinese religion mean to the social lives of its adherents and *the spaces* in which these practices take place? (Terence Heng) → sociological focus
→ need to place religion in a sociological imagination (race/ethnicity perspective)

- 
-
- “Sacred space is social, political and cultural – it is constructed through the actions and imaginations of individuals who inhabit and dwell in that space, thus also often associated with the act of place-making.” (Heng, 2021, p. 5)
 - Kong (2001:213) notes that “nothing is inherently sacred” because the sacred “is at the nexus of human practices and social projects”.
 1. sacred space is as imaginative as it is material
 2. sacred space is highly visual
 3. sacred space is both subversive and controlling



Imagination and Materiality Intertwined

“Individuals’ imaginations are crucial to seeing and feeling a physical space as something more than the mundane – that the sacred inhabits and textures the space because of the presence of spiritual actors (God, ghost or otherwise). At the same time, such imagination is not enough to establish a space as sacred. The sacred must be manifested in ways that engage the senses – sight, sound, touch and taste. That the sacred is made material is nothing new – vernacular spaces that are most commonly cited as “sacred” are those that have some kind of marker [...] associated with them. Whether it is an architectural structure (church, temple, mosque) or a more modest set-up (roadside shrines, memorial flowers, plaques, etc), the sacred needs to be shown.” (Heng, 2021, p. 6)

“Materiality thus becomes one of the proxies by which imagination is visualised. ” NO

Sacredness

- “sacredness is neither constituted by the discovery of the numinous properties of a landscape, creating a natural aura where that impacts on the wellbeing of humans—this is, for example, the basis of *fengshui* 風水 (literally “wind and water”) in which the physical environment is perceived to be a real dragon, and the ultimate purpose of *fengshui* is to locate the cave or lair of the dragon.” (Jansen)
- sacralization does not mean the “imposition of an arbitrary framework of symbolic meaning upon reality” (Geertz, quoted from Ingold, p. 178).
- sacralization arises from involved activity within a landscape; it arises from the specific relational contexts that people create through practical engagement with their surroundings. Sacred place requires that people respond to an environment, experience it, and re-new and share these experiences across time by writing about them; by inserting them into the memory connected to a specific place.

Dwelling Perspective

The first hut

- ❑ integrative view on people's practical engagement with their lived environment
- ❑ constant pragmatic engagement with the constituents of the environment we inhabit
- ❑ 'building perspective': objectification of nature and negation of the influence of the environment on the ways in which humans make the environment their home
- ❑ Within the 'building perspective' we impose an externally conceived cultural framework, a worked-out plan onto the world (e.g., architect's design)

Building, dwelling, living • 183 •

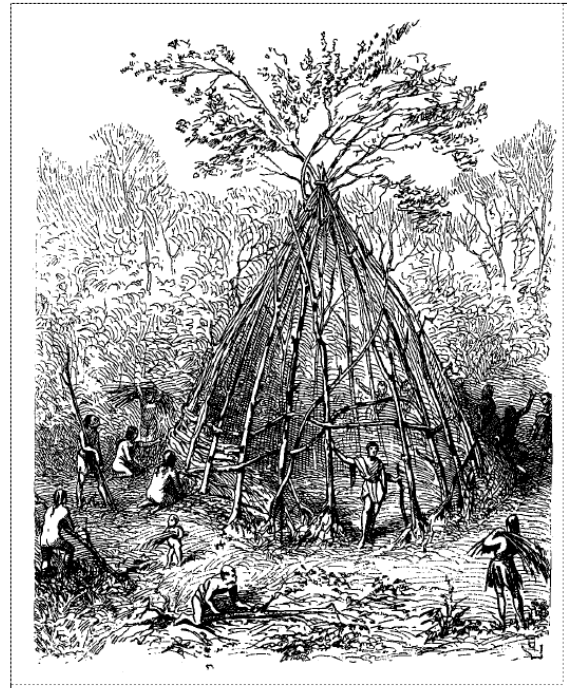
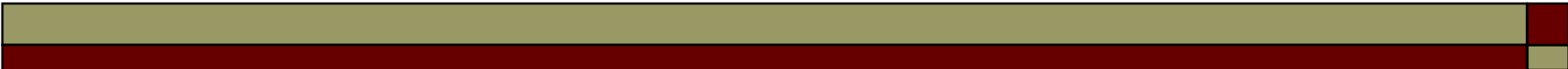


Figure 10.6 The first hut, as depicted by Viollet-le-Duc.

From *The architectural theory of Viollet-le-Duc: readings and commentary*, edited by M. F. Hearn, published by MIT Press, 1990, p. 26.



Singaporean approaches to space

- ❑ consistently authoritarian approach to space and the uses of space
- ❑ Singapore is highly planned, every parcel of land is carefully denoted for specific uses in an urban masterplan
- ❑ Plot ratios determine building density
- ❑ Buildings are purpose-built; no deviation from their intended function (unless given explicit permission)
- ❑ sacred place-making woven in the fabric of everyday life

Old Paulinum – Leipzig University, Before 1968



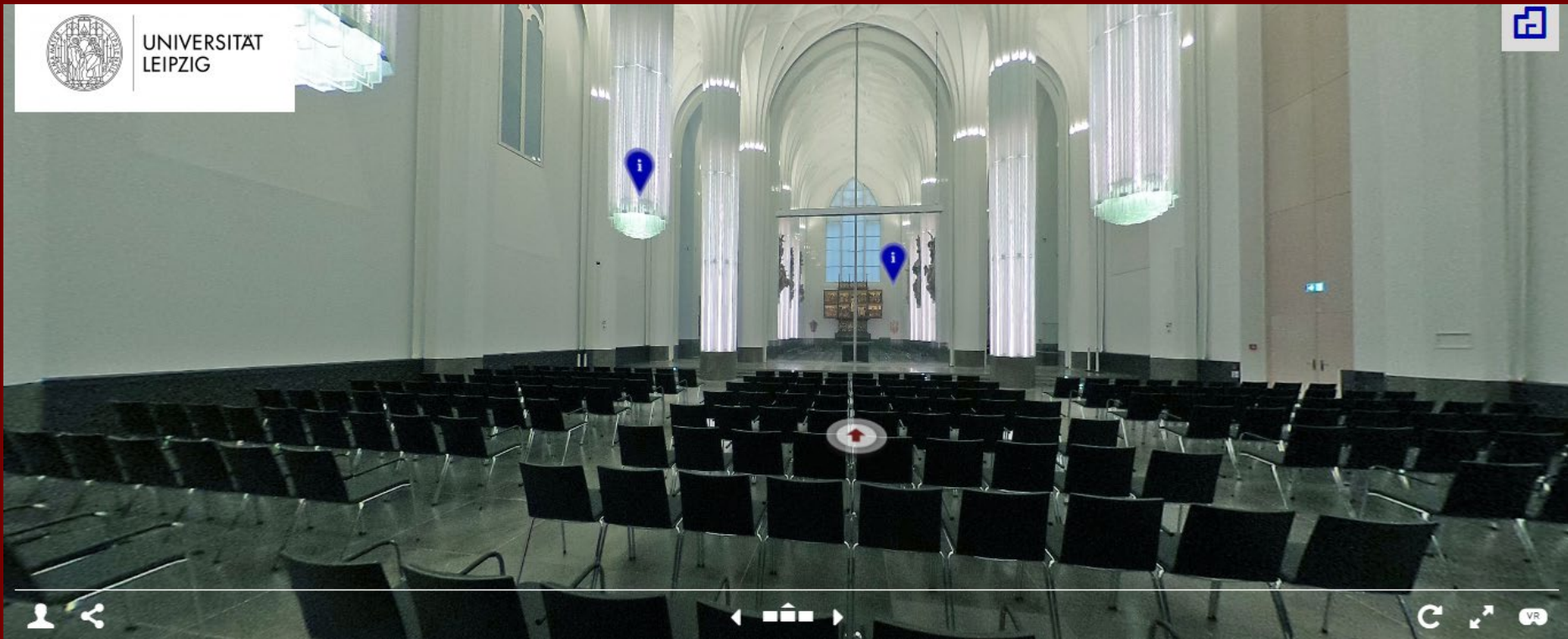
Leipzig University Today



Sacred and public space combined



UNIVERSITÄT
LEIPZIG



<https://tour.feelestate.com/view/fullscreen/lid/224647>

Novena Catholic Church, Singapore



- Gothic building referencing medieval Europe
- Colonial memorialisation?
- Appropriate style in contemporary Asia

Contested Sacred Spaces

Primo by Ex L x ProQuest Ebo x MS Reports x Hosting as a x RefWorks x V Of Gods, Gift: x Of Gods, Gift: x Scholars call f x + -

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FIGURE 2.4 “Combined” temples

At the same time, physical spaces are planned for relentlessly. As Soja (1996) notes – these are firstspaces – the spaces of maps, rules, and drawings. Spiritual places such as temples, churches and mosques cannot be built without permission, and only on parcels of land designated by the state. Given the lack of supply to demand, the state now tends to lease these parcels to the highest bidder in intra-religion auctions (see Haila 2015). Groups who are unable to win parcels of land sometimes combine their bids, choosing to share land for their temple rather than not have any at all. This photograph shows the result of one such successful bid, each doorway an entrance to a separate temple with its own history and identities.



FIGURE 2.8A and B Everyday homescapes – transitions

HDB estates are also characterised by multiple transitory and liminal spaces – many of which have become rich sources of literary engagement and imagination (see Cheong 1996). “Void decks” are empty ground floors that act as communal spaces for multiple temporary activities like funerals, wakes, weddings and parties. “Common corridors” are long passageways that link multiple households together, but through the dwelling of residents, take on their own histories and identities.



Figure 2.10 Hidden sacredness

Nonchalance is balanced with the understanding that the sacred has a role to play in the everyday life of individuals. Although not obvious, shrines and other offerings are peppered throughout the island, hidden from view or in plain sight. Car parks in many commercial buildings will commonly house a shrine, set up by workers and service personnel.

Ritual Theatre



FIGURE 7.11 Informal ritual theatre

External events are frequently punctuated with highly performative rituals, perhaps both as a way to cement the significance of the event, as well as to validate the effort and cost of staging it. *Hai Lian Tua* transmogrifies ritual effigies of objects meant for the ancestors of its followers. The cage is so large it is sited away from the main staging area, accessed by a ritual *yew keng* (see Chapter 8) around the neighbourhood.



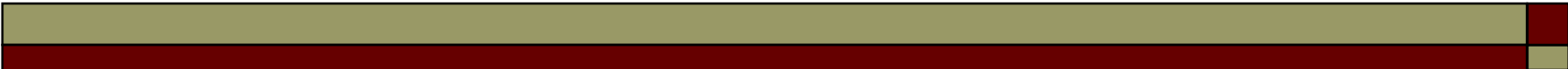
FIGURE 1.1 Visually stunning, wherever the place – Nine Emperor Gods Festival, temporary site on a beach





“Such beliefs, I would argue, do not simply co-exist with modernity, nor are they some kind of vestigial premodern superstition that will somehow disappear in the modern city; they are part of what it means for Singapore to be modern. In other words, Singapore’s modernity and its urbanism is ghostly, haunted, just as it is magical and vampiric.” (*Pile 2005:134–35*)

→ *Sacred space intermingled with everyday, mundane life*



Questions for discussion

- How do the spaces in which religion happens shape how people practice and experience religion?
- What are the implications, spiritual and social, of moving religious activities from a cathedral into a vernacular space (e.g., a parking lot or a shopping mall)?