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The Wutong Cult in the Modern and Contemporary Suzhou Area

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The Wutong 五通 (Five penetrations) are the object of one of the most prominent cults in the Lower Yangtze (Jiangnan 江南) region. The "Five Penetrations" are five brothers, also known by the alternative names of "Five Manifestations" (Wuxian 五顯), "Five Saints" (Wusheng 五聖), "Five Numinous Lords" (Wulinggong 五靈公), and sometimes "Five Lads" (Wulang 五郎), or just Five Elders (Wulaoye 五老爺). Along with their mother, the Grand Dowager (Taimu 太姆), they possess spirit-mediums and grant riches, healings, and other blessings.[1] This possession cult has been already well studied from an early modern historical perspective, with notable articles dedicated to the history of Wutong beliefs from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, attempts at appropriation and domestication by different religious traditions, their persecution by the state officials, and their reflection in the vernacular literature

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[1] We systematically use the generic term Wutong here, even though other names can be found in the sources we quote.

of the Ming and Qing dynasties.[2] However, Wutong beliefs and practices in modern times have been scarcely studied from ethnographic and anthropological perspectives. Very few scholars have paid attention to the current state of the cult and its impact on local society.[3] The domestic worship of these deities remains the most understudied form: extant field reports just give a basic outline, without a proper discussion of the origins and special features of this cult.[4]

Because the historiography has so far focused on elite sources very hostile to spirit-possession cults such as the Wutong, scholars have tended to see it as marginal and contentious, while fully recognizing the moral ambiguity constitutive of the cult. By contrast, this article argues that in modern Jiangnan the Wutong cult has long been and remains pervasive and well-accepted in social life, and that it is well structured, coherent, stable over time, and extensive. Thus, we propose that in order to understand Jiangnan local society, one must place spirit-possession cults, and the Wutong in particular, at the centre, not (as is still sometimes done in the scholarly literature) at the periphery of descriptions of lived religion. We do not start from the categories of "immoral" or "perverse" (*xie* 邪 or *yin* 淫) often used in scholarly

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[2] Major studies of the history of Wutong deities are Jiang Zhushan 蔣竹山, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen: Qingchu zhengzhi jingying daji tongsu wenhua de ge'an" 湯斌禁毀五通神——清初政治菁英打擊通俗文化的個案, *Xin shixue* 新史學 6, no. 2 (June 1995), pp. 67–112; Ursula-Angelika Cedzich, "The Cult of the Wu-t'ung/Wu-hsien in History and Fiction: The Religious Roots of the *Journey to the South*," in David Johnson, ed., *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), pp. 137–218; Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), chaps. 4–5.

[3] Shen Jiandong 沈建東, "Shangfangshan xianghuo jinxi tan" 上方山香火今昔談, *Suzhou zazhi* 蘇州雜誌, 2008, no. 5, pp. 63–65; Yang Derui 楊德睿, "Xie'e de muqin: Suzhou Shangfangshan Taimu chongbai yanjiu" 邪惡的母親：蘇州上方山太姆崇拜研究, *Gudian wenxian yanjiu* 古典文獻研究, 2016, no. 1, pp. 194–208; Chen Yongchao 陳泳超, "Suzhou Shangfangshan Taimu xinyang ji yishi wenyi de diaocha baogao" 蘇州上方山太姥信仰及儀式文藝的調查報告, *Minsu quyi* 民俗曲藝 200 (June 2018), pp. 201–55; Cai Limin 蔡利民, ed., *Suzhou minsu caifenglu* 蘇州民俗采風錄 (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2014), pp. 241–62.

[4] Yu Yongliang 虞永良, "Heyang baojuan diaocha baogao" 河陽寶卷調查報告, *Minsu quyi* 110 (November 1997), pp. 67–87; Yu Dingjun 余鼎君, "Jiangsu Changshu de jiangjing xuanjuan" 江蘇常熟的講經宣卷, *Mazu yu minjian xinyang: Yanjiu tongxun* 媽祖與民間信仰：研究通訊 2 (Taipei: Boyang wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 2013), pp. 49–114; Qiu Huiying 丘慧瑩, "Jiangsu Changshu Baimao diqu xuanjuan huodong diaocha baogao" 江蘇常熟白茆地區宣卷活動調查報告, *Minsu quyi* 169 (September 2010), pp. 183–247; Rostislav Berezkin, "On the Survival of the Traditional Ritualized Performance Art in Modern China: A Case of Telling Scriptures by Yu Dingjun in Shanghu Town Area of Changshu City in Jiangsu Province," *Minsu quyi* 181 (September 2013), pp. 103–56.

descriptions of the Wutong, but attempt to understand the cult from the ritual practice and its scriptures, and the perspective of the ritual specialists (most importantly spirit-mediums and storytellers) and their patrons.

To build this argument, we analyse the multiple forms of worship of these deities that are still practised by the people of the Suzhou area, and their evolution from the last decades of the Qing to the present (while noting longer historical continuities). We elaborate on previous historical studies by closely conjoining field observations, literary ethnography, newspaper reports, and scriptures used in the cult, most importantly the narrative *baojuan* 寶卷 (precious scrolls) that are recited as part of services to the Wutong and their mother. The *baojuan* are prosimetric texts telling the lives of the gods and expounding moral values, recited during all kinds of domestic and communal rituals by semi-professional storytellers found in several places of the Jiangnan region.[5] These various sources reflect on one another, and together show the coherence of local practices that would otherwise remain hidden. In particular, we want to point out that the scriptures that explain the living cults and their values are widely available in the field but were never published before the twenty-first century (they have been mostly in manuscript form).

The geographical focus of this article is on the Jiangnan region; Wutong cults also exist in other parts of the Chinese world (such as Wuyuan 婺源, northern Jiangxi province, where it has deep historical roots), but we do not assume they are fundamentally similar and we did not find any connection with shrines and specialists outside Jiangnan when doing fieldwork or reading the documentation; comparison between regions will have to wait for further research.[6] Specifically, we look at the Jiangnan epicentre of the cult, Shangfangshan 上方山 (a hill in the suburbs of the Suzhou metropolis), as well as on local and domestic practices in the nearby region, notably within the Changshu 常熟 area, formerly a county under the jurisdiction of Suzhou prefecture, where these beliefs are still flourishing. We also use materials from the neighbouring areas, including Kunshan 崑山, Taicang 太倉, and Shanghai. This double focus is necessary because the cult is rooted in domestic and village-level practices, but these practices require regular visits to the temple at Shangfangshan and constantly refer to it, visually and discursively. Our research is primarily based on fieldwork conducted during 2011–2015 in these areas, which included observation of religious services, interviews of religious specialists and common believers, and collection of written materials. While the rites we observed were in different settings

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[5] Depending on the area, the storytellers are called master of scroll recitation 宣卷先生 or master of telling scriptures 講經先生. We use the latter as a generic term in this article.

[6] Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, chaps. 4–5, has contrasted the Wuyuan and the Jiangnan identities of the Wutong.

(in a domestic or pilgrimage context), they are similar and employ the same specialists (primarily spirit-mediums and storytellers, sometimes Daoists); we have studied them by observation, photographing and subsequent study of the ritual manuscripts, and informal interviews with specialists and patrons. Building on collaborative work and a combination of historical, liturgical, and performing arts texts, we engage in the type of historical anthropology (defined as observing the living practices and searching for documents in the field) that has for a generation renewed our understanding of Chinese society and the role of religion in its modern historical development. The analytical framework of such an approach is to make the best use of the documents found in the field in order to reconstruct the logic of cults and rituals as social practices embedded in specific places and informed by moral values. We add that we do not aim to use the Wutong cult as a case study of transformations of popular religion in contemporary China, and we do not engage with the fast-growing literature on this topic; while this would be a worthy endeavour, we prefer within this article to keep a focused attention to this particular cult in its local and historical context.

Today, Shangfangshan remains the central place for the Wutong worship in the whole region and operates as a year-long vibrant pilgrimage site, so we start with a brief overview of the site's history, concentrating on the role of spirit-mediums who bring pilgrims and are themselves enshrined there. Section 2 provides an ethnography of the cult at Shangfangshan in the twenty-first century, and section 3 is devoted to a very common ritual that links the domestic Wutong cult to the mountain—that of "contracting a loan from the other world" (*jie yinzhai* 借陰債): people who have performed this rite must both establish a domestic altar and accomplish the annual pilgrimage. Section 4 moves to these domestic altars in Changshu and describes the different types of rituals performed there. The two most important ritual specialists involved are spirit-mediums and *baojuan* storytellers. Section 5 is devoted to the *baojuan*, which are recited during the rituals and their representation of the Wutong, focusing on an early version of the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* (*Taimu baojuan* 太姥寶卷), an unpublished manuscript that we have discovered in Nanjing Library. In conclusion we address the question of the identity and nature of these gods and how ritual practices, both at Shangfangshan and in a domestic context, as well as scriptures used in the rituals, drawing a coherent picture of divine beings morally ambivalent and yet at the core of the value system of Jiangnan villagers.

1. A Historical Overview of the Cult at Shangfangshan

The history of the Wutong cult can be traced at least as far back as the Tang period (618–907). According to most historians, the Wutong were originally conceived as powerful and malevolent nature spirits, who could grant wealth to their believers in

exchange for immoral services. For example, during the Song period (960–1279), stories of husbands who grew rich because they consented to their wives giving their favours to the Wutong circulated in the Jiangnan region;[7] naturally such stories likely reflected situations in which women were manipulating claims of illicit relations with spirits. There are alternative views of the Wutong's origins, though. For example, Edward Davis has argued that they were never malevolent, but only described as such by elite writers, who despised this cult and its lower-class followers.[8] Whatever their origins, the Wutong have been described from the Song onwards as five brothers who bestow wealth.

In some cases, the Wutong were seen as mostly benevolent deities: for example, in Wuyuan county (in today's Anhui province), they were worshipped as plague-expelling deities since the time of the Tang–Song transition.[9] For this reason there were multiple attempts at legitimizing this cult through different means, including Daoist, Buddhist, and state canonization. The Wutong cult in Wuyuan, for instance, was legitimized by Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1100–1126) in 1109, who bestowed on them the title of Wuxian,[10] as a part of the larger movement of canonization of the local deities.[11]

During the Southern Song (1127–1279) and Yuan (1260–1368) periods there were also attempts to differentiate between two versions of these gods: the malevolent Wutong and the benevolent Wuxian.[12] However, these attempts at Wutong's "transformation" did not fully succeed, as the transgressive nature of the gods always was preserved in the people's memory. Most sources of the Ming and Qing dynasties lump

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7 Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 186–88.

8 This monograph by Davis has not been published yet.

9 Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 189–91.

10 Ibid., p. 189.

11 On this, see Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Hamashima Atsutoshi 濱島敦俊, *Ming Qing Jiangnan nongcun shehui yu minjian xinyang* 明清江南農村社會與民間信仰, trans. Zhu Haibin 朱海濱 (Xiamen: Xiamen daxue chubanshe, 2008; original edition in Japanese: *Sōkan shinkō: Kinsei Kōnan nōson shakai to minkan shinkō* 総管信仰：近世江南農村社会と民間信仰 [Tokyo: Kenbun shuppan, 2001]); Robert Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

12 Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 197–204. For the later period, see Vincent Goossaert, "Daoism and Local Cults in Modern Suzhou: A Case Study of Qionglongshan," in Philip Clart, ed., *Chinese and European Perspectives on the Study of Chinese Popular Religions* (Taipei: Boyang wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 2012), pp. 199–228. We cannot discuss this complex and twisted process in detail here.

the Wuxian together with the pernicious Wutong. The motif of exchanging women for wealth remained central to stories (at least among literati) about the Wutong cult even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[13] State officials attempted to eradicate the Wutong cult, which they proclaimed "illicit" several times. Nevertheless, the Wutong remained popular in several regions of central and southern China, especially in Jiangnan.

Since approximately the Yuan dynasty, Shangfangshan, located ten kilometres southwest from the erstwhile Suzhou walled city, has become the centre of the Wutong cult in the whole Jiangnan area (see fig. 1); there were other temples, but none is described in historical sources as drawing comparable numbers of pilgrims. Shangfangshan is a low ridge (highest point: 92 metres), running along the western shore of Shihu 石湖 (Stone Lake), a famous scenic spot that has attracted men of letters for many centuries. Its summit is also called Lengqie Mountain 楞伽山 after the Buddhist monastery that existed there in the early medieval period, Lengqiesi 楞伽寺 (later also called Baojisi 寶積寺). Lengqie Monastery became especially famous for its seven-storey pagoda, which was built in 607, rebuilt in the late tenth century, and substantially renovated in the period from 1636 to 1640, after the site had already become the major centre of the Wutong cult.[14] The pagoda stands atop the hill, while the monastery is down on the lake shore.

It is hard to determine when the first Wutong temple was built on the site of this Buddhist monastery. A 1642 gazetteer claims that it was built there around 1265–1274, which is credible.[15] Building a Wutong temple on the premises of a Buddhist monastery was not unprecedented.[16] Another unanswered question is when this temple became the major centre of Wutong worship in the Suzhou area. According to Richard von Glahn, it emerged as a major regional pilgrimage centre only during the

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[13] Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 204, 223–24, 234–41.

[14] Wang Deqing 王德慶, "Suzhou Lengqiesi ta" 蘇州楞伽寺塔, *Wenwu* 文物, 1983, no. 10, pp. 83–85.

[15] Niu Ruolin 牛若麟 and Wang Huanru 王煥如, eds., *Wuxian zhi* 吳縣志, 1642 woodblock edition, reprinted in *Tianyige cang Mingdai fangzhi xuankan xubian* 天一閣藏明代方志選刊續編 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1990), vol. 16, *juan* 21, p. 21a (741); see also Wu Xiuzhi 吳秀之 et al., eds., *(Jiangsu sheng) Wuxian zhi* (江蘇省) 吳縣志, reprinted in *Zhongguo fangzhi congshu, Huazhong difang* 中國方志叢書・華中地方 (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1983), vol. 2, *juan* 36.b, p. 11b (575).

[16] Cedzich, "The Cult of the Wu-t'ung/Wu-hsien in History and Fiction," pp. 159–61; von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 183–85; Jia Erqiang 賈二強, "Fojiao yu minjian Wutong shen xinyang" 佛教與民間五通神信仰, *Fojiao yanjiu* 佛教研究, 2003, pp. 122–28. The earliest attestable reference to the Wutong cult appears in Buddhist works.

Fig. 1: A general view of Shangfangshan, 2016

late Ming (late sixteenth–early seventeenth centuries).[17] However, early Ming records already testify for the development of mass pilgrimage. For example, Zhu Fengji 朱逢吉 in his essay "You Shihu ji" 遊石湖記 (*c.* 1404) describes sacrificing to the deities of Shangfangshan in the following way:

> In front [of the pagoda], there was a small temple, where five god statues were placed. Starting from the previous dynasty on, men, women, children, and oldsters from inside and outside the city of Suzhou, as well as from the villages as far as hundreds of miles away, in the months of spring and summer, organized in groups, and came by boat from both near and far. They carried wine and food and various musical instruments and theatrical props with them; or they travelled by foot or rode horses and mules, or bamboo palanquins, they rushed ahead with the wine jars, boxes and dining ware, climbed the hill to celebrate the god's birthday, so that their shoulders rubbed and feet stepped on each other, and when they finished [worshipping], they held banquets and travelled around, celebrating with the great joy, and nowadays the custom is continuing.

[17] Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, p. 230.

> 前闢小殿，列為神像者五。自前代時，城內外暨村落百餘里間，男女稚耋，當春夏月，遠近各相率舟行，載酒殽，雜樂戲具。徒行，乘馬驢竹兜，競以壺榼食器自隨；或登岸以樂神日，肩摩跡接，畢則宴遊，以樂太平，逮今如之。[18]

Thus, we know that at the beginning of the fifteenth century at least one temple for Wutong existed at the foot of the ancient pagoda and that it attracted pilgrims from many places in and around Suzhou. However, the modern date of the temple festival in fall (eighteenth day of the eighth lunar month, henceforth 8/18) apparently still did not exist at that time, and the pilgrimage was organized spontaneously in the spring-summer period. The temple for the Wutong on Shangfangshan is also mentioned in the Suzhou gazetteer printed in 1506.[19]

According to a later record, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the site already consisted of two major halls, one devoted to Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音, and the other to the Wutong.[20] Another record demonstrates the flourishing nature of this cult: "music of pipes and strings fills the air; wine and blood drench the ground. Each year countless numbers of animals are slaughtered for sacrificial offerings to the gods."[21] This record shows that "bloody sacrifices" continued to be the norm, even though they were opposed by both Buddhists and Daoists. The latter, who advocated for the generally benevolent nature of the Wutong, demanded that these sacrifices should be substituted with vegetarian offerings, as was the rule within spaces managed by Daoist or Buddhist clerics. This was notably the theme of a campaign waged by the leading early Qing Daoist in Suzhou, Shi Daoyuan 施道淵 (1617–1678), where the Wutong claimed through a medium that they had converted to vegetarianism.[22] How the Buddhists who ran the monastery accommodated meat sacrifices in their precincts remains an open question.

While the gentry typically rejected spirit-possession cults and the Wutong in particular, some of them actually engaged with it: the Suzhou scholars Huang Wei 黃暐 (late fifteenth–early sixteenth century) and Lu Can 陸粲 (1494–1551) wrote that both well-off families, including the gentry (*shidafu* 士大夫), and commoners

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[18] Chen Wei 陳暐, *Wuzhong jinshi xinbian* 吳中金石新編, in *Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), vol. 683, pp. 8b–9a.

[19] Wu Kuan 吳寬 et al., eds., *Gusu zhi* 姑蘇志, 1506 woodblock edition, reprinted in *Tianyige cang Mingdai fangzhi xuankan xubian*, vol. 12, *juan* 9, p. 5a (697).

[20] Xu Mingshi 徐鳴時, *Hengxi lu* 橫谿錄, 1629 edition, reprinted in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 (Jinan: Qi-Lu shushe, 1996), *Shibu* 史部, vol. 234, *juan* 4, p. 6a (646).

[21] Qian Xiyan 錢希言, *Kuai yuan* 獪園 (manuscript in National Library of China, Beijing), reprinted in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu*, *Zibu* 子部, vol. 247, p. 686.

[22] Goossaert, "Daoism and Local Cults in Modern Suzhou," pp. 217–18.

in Suzhou took part in the cult, which involved sacrifices and singing performed by female spirit-mediums.[23] This did not prevent a series of anti-Wutong campaigns by officials, as part of the late imperial state policy of fighting illicit (or immoral) cults (*yinsi* 淫祀).[24] The most famous attack was led by Jiangnan governor Tang Bin 湯斌 (1627–1687), who in 1685 went to the Shangfang temple and destroyed statues of the gods in person: wooden effigies with fire and terracotta statues with the club. Tang Bin's most important charges against the cult and its followers concerned: (1) the attraction of shopkeepers and merchants from many places, who travelled to Shangfangshan to take "loans" from the god; and (2) susceptibility of women to demonic possession ascribed to the Wutong brothers.[25] However, the cult on Shangfangshan revived after this persecution. A new eradication campaign took place in 1732, launched by another governor-general of Jiangsu, Yin Jishan 尹繼善 (1695–1771). In 1835, the Mongolian governor of Jiangnan, Yuqian 裕謙 (Yutai 裕泰, 1793–1841), tried again to ban the Wutong cult, but also with little success.[26] The next suppression took place in 1928, when the Wu county governor destroyed the images of the deities once more.[27]

The temple of Shangfangshan also housed female deities that played a major role in the cult, namely the spouses of the Wutong and their mother, the Grand Dowager, also known as the Great Mother (Tai furen 太夫人, Taimu 太母 or 太姥, and Taima

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[23] Huang Wei 黃暐, *Pengchuang leiji* 蓬窗類記, in *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), *Zibu* 子部, vol. 1271, *juan* 5, p. 617; Lu Can 陸粲, *Gengsi bian* 庚巳編, in *Yuan Ming shiliao biji congkan* 元明史料筆記叢刊 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), *juan* 5, pp. 51–54.

[24] On the illicit cults of Jiangnan, see Hamashima, *Ming Qing Jiangnan nongcun shehui yu minjian xinyang*, pp. 34, 64–68, 89; Zhu Haibin 朱海濱, *Jisi zhengce yu minjian xinyang bianqian: Jinshi Zhejiang minjian xinyang yanjiu* 祭祀政策與民間信仰變遷：近世浙江民間信仰研究 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2008); Vincent Goossaert, "The Destruction of Immoral Temples in Qing China," *Institute of Chinese Studies Visiting Professor Lectures Series (II)*, *Journal of Chinese Studies* Special Issue (Hong Kong: Institute of Chinese Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), pp. 131–53; Wang Jian 王健, *Lihai xiangguan: Ming Qing yilai Jiangnan Su Song diqu minjian xinyang yanjiu* 利害相關：明清以來江南蘇松地區民間信仰研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2010), pp. 187–208; idem, "Shiwu shiji mo Jiangnan hui yinci yundong yu difang shehui" 十五世紀末江南毀淫祠運動與地方社會, *Shehui kexue* 社會科學, 2015, no. 6, pp. 155–64.

[25] Jiang Zhushan, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen," pp. 85–90.

[26] Yuqian 裕謙, *Mianyizhai xu cungao* 勉益齋續存稿, 1876 woodblock edition, reprinted in *Qingdai shiwenji huibian* 清代詩文集彙編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 579, *juan* 7, pp. 46a–50a (435–37); *juan* 15, pp. 49a–52a (677–78).

[27] "Suzhou" 蘇州, *Shenbao* 申報 (daily, 1872–1949; all *Shenbao* articles are given with the Gregorian calendar date: dd-mm-yyyy) 12-10-1928.

太媽). The name of the Grand Dowager in connection with Shangfangshan first appears in historical sources during the sixteenth century.[28] Several late imperial records suggest that she had demonic origins; the *baojuan* say that she once was a child-eater.[29] This identity can explain her exorcistic powers: in Chinese popular religion many exorcistic deities (usually tamed by the Daoists) themselves have demonic origins.[30] This demonic quality makes Taimu an apt agent of exorcistic and healing practices.

One may also interpret the development of the Taimu beliefs as a part of the general tendency for powerful female deities to take an increasingly important role in local religion in late imperial China (a phenomenon identified but still poorly understood).[31] The Grand Dowager soon rose to prominence, and nowadays she is the primary object of devotion for female believers, especially female spirit-mediums. An explanation for the fact that Wutong were overshadowed by their mother is that officials paid less attention to her during early persecutions, and thus her cult could re-emerge more easily.[32] However, other equally plausible interpretations foreground the role played by the female spirit-mediums. In any case, since the eighteenth century both the temples and shrines, and narrative and ritual texts related to the Wutong usually carry the name of Taimu rather than of her sons.

Fieldwork shows that local spirit-mediums still play a crucial role in managing transactions with the Wutong; while some worshippers come to Shangfangshan on their own, many are brought there by their spirit-medium. Since early times,

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[28] Huang Wei, *Pengchuang leiji*, *juan* 5, p. 617; Lu Can, *Gengsi bian*, *juan* 5, p. 51; Lu Rong 陸容, *Shuyuan zaji* 菽園雜記, in *Yuan Ming shiliao biji congkan* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), *juan* 8, p. 84. The hypothesis of the origins of Taimu as one form of the indigenous female cults, suggested by some scholars (Yang Derui, "Xie'e de muqin: Suzhou Shangfangshan Taimu chongbai yanjiu," pp. 196–97), seems insufficiently substantiated.

[29] The image of Taimu can also be related to Hariti (Guizimu 鬼子母), a deity of demonic origin, appropriated in the Buddhist tradition and very popular in China and Japan, see e.g., Emmanuelle Lesbre, "La conversion de Hārītī au Buddha: origine du thème iconographique et interprétations picturales chinoises," *Arts Asiatiques* 55 (2000), pp. 98–119.

[30] See, e.g., Paul R. Katz, *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats: The Cult of Marshal Wen in Late Imperial Chekiang* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, eds., *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996); Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

[31] E.g., Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 417–19, 491–92.

[32] Jiang Zhushan, "Tang Bin jinhui Wutong shen," p. 81, n. 43; von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 242–43.

Shangfang temple was associated with the activities of local spirit-mediums (most of them female) possessed by the Wutong. These spirit-mediums made prognostications, diagnosed the illnesses of the local women as inflicted by the Wutong deities and conducted rituals for their cure. Female spirit-mediums, who claimed to be able to cure people with the help of the Wutong were mentioned already in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century.[33] According to Lu Can, these mediums established connection with the deities by claiming to be engaged in sexual relations with them.[34] Female spirit-mediums, known as *shiniang* 師娘 (which is still their most common appellation in the Suzhou and Shanghai areas, along with *kanxiangtou* 看香頭),[35] also appear in the bans promulgated by Tang Bin and Yuqian.[36] The latter in his "Prohibition of the Illicit Cult of Wutong and Heretical Sayings of the Spirit-Mediums" (*Jin Wutong yinci bing shiwu xieshuo shi* 禁五通淫祠並師巫邪說示) wrote that "on the occasions of marriage or illness the female spirit-mediums ordered [believers] to travel to Shangfangshan and sacrifice to the Wutong with meat offerings and music of drums. The monks of the Buddhist monastery there arrange these sacrifices for a high price." He also mentioned the custom of "contracting a loan from the other world," which was popular at his time as well.[37]

In modern times, female spirit-mediums possessed by deities from Shangfangshan were quite common in the Suzhou area: one can find numerous records of them in the Shanghai newspaper *Shenbao* 申報.[38] While some of them were village-based, others were living in large cities including Shanghai.[39] While many of these spirit-mediums must have moved to the city from the rural areas around Suzhou together with their clients, they also attracted to the cult and to Shangfangshan city folks who

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[33] Chen Yongchao, "Suzhou Shangfangshan Taimu xinyang ji yishi wenyi de diaocha baogao," pp. 205–6.

[34] Lu Can, *Gengsi bian*, *juan* 5, p. 51.

[35] In Jiangnan, the *shiniang* or *kanxiangtou* channel the gods, while the *guanwang* 關亡 channel the dead; yet the distinction is often less than clear-cut since we have met many *shiniang* habitually possessed by Shangfangshan gods also channelling dead people.

[36] Tang Bin 湯斌, *Tangzi yishu* 湯子遺書, in *Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu*, vol. 1312, p. 26a.

[37] Yuqian, *Mianyizhai xu cungao*, *juan* 7, pp. 47b–48a (436).

[38] "Wuhui congtan" 吳會叢談, *Shenbao* 29-09-1883; "Mitai chuntiao" 麋臺春眺, *Shenbao* 24-02-1903.

[39] E.g., "Nüwu pianqian zhi panhuan" 女巫騙錢之判還, *Shenbao* 11-06-1924, where a Daoist collaborates with the medium, both in attracting patrons and in performing rituals; "Zhang xunguan he tui Santaitai" 張巡官喝退三太太, *Shenbao* 24-12-1933. The active collaborations of mediums and Daoists (the former bringing patrons to the latter) were commonplace in Jiangnan.

may have otherwise never been there. Clearly, spirit-mediums took advantage of the rapid urbanization to spread their cults; this phenomenon is still observable, as a good number of present-day worshippers at Shangfangshan come from greater Shanghai.

Wutong spirit-mediums in Republican-period Shanghai had a rather high profile; while many may have started with a modest domestic altar, some soon were able to develop full-fledged temples, with names such as Shangfangshan xianlaoye tang 上方山仙老爺堂.[40] Such temples were most often housed in rented shops or street-level apartments, and were colloquially known as "Buddha shops" (*fodian* 佛店).[41] Such largely unlicensed entrepreneurial temples were found all over the city, sometimes run by migrant Daoists or Buddhists, but most often by spirit-mediums. They were constantly criticized by some members of the elite and banned by authorities (the concessions' authorities being very lenient, utterly uninterested in the issue), but, nonetheless, remained a key feature of the Jiangnan urban landscape from the late Qing to 1949.

Newspaper reports discussing the Shangfangshan spirit-mediums and their temples in Shanghai mostly mention their healing services,[42] even though this is no proof that it was the only defining feature of the cult; in any case, it shows that we may need to consider the possibility that the cult's focus evolved from being primarily gods of wealth in the late imperial period, as proposed by Richard von Glahn, to more focus on healing (even though that function was certainly always present) in the twentieth century. One Wutong temple in Kunshan (a county between Shanghai and Suzhou), run by female spirit-mediums, was known for its cures during epidemics.[43] One man who was healed by the Shangfangshan second brother (each of the five brothers have their own spirit-mediums) in 1927 paid for publishing a note of thanks to the god in the *Shenbao* daily.[44] It is also noteworthy that in some cases, such Shanghai temples associated the Shangfangshan gods with more "respectable" ones,

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[40] "Cuhai yubo—tu ou cuoheren" 醋海餘波 —— 途毆撮合人, *Shenbao* 04-07-1935; "Li Suzhen suqing yu fu lihun" 李素貞訴請與夫離婚, *Shenbao* 24-12-1934.

[41] *Fodian* are described and criticized in numerous *Shenbao* reports; see also Vincent Goossaert, "A Question of Control: Licensing Local Religious Specialists in Jiangnan, 1850–1950," in Paul R. Katz and Shu-fen Liu, eds., *Belief, Practice and Cultural Adaptation: Papers from the Religion Section of the Fourth International Conference on Sinology* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 2013), pp. 569–604.

[42] "Xiaohai huanbing xianghui zhiliao" 小孩患病香灰治療, *Shenbao* 07-09-1936.

[43] "Kunshan: Chengqu nüwu ji ying qudi" 崑山：城區女巫亟應取締, *Shenbao* 24-08-1929, discussing the Taimumiao 太母廟 just outside the city's western gate.

[44] "Zhuyi shenyi" 注意神醫, *Shenbao* 16-02-1927.

such as this one home temple combining them with Guanyin, Lüzu 呂祖, and Jigong 濟公.[45]

Another important event that took place in the modern development of Shangfangshan was the setting of the date of the temple festival on 8/18, said to be the Grand Dowager's birthday (this may reflect Taimu's centrality in the cult in modern times). For example, in an article published in the *Shenbao* newspaper on 13 October 1876, we can find a description of the temple festival at Stone Lake, where courtesans with their clients were riding boats and enjoyed watching the full moon, a revival of an old sightseeing practice that declined after the Taiping war (1850–1864) had laid ruin to Suzhou. While the audience was watching all kinds of performances, they "all at once saw a big boat approaching, from which the strips of burning paper were flying, and in which various sacrificial objects were loaded. There were more than a dozen old women, who did not cry nor laugh, but murmured something for themselves." Upon making inquiries, the author of the report learned that these crones were "female spirit-mediums returning from Shangfangshan, where they had returned a loan from the other world and sacrificed to ghosts." On the shore, surrounded by the crowd, there was a male medium, "stripped to the waist, who swallowed knives and fire, and cut his chest and arms, in order to demonstrate his magic abilities—one of those, who are called leaping [spirit-mediums] from Maoshan [*tiao Maoshan* 跳茅山] in Shanghai".[46] Indeed, the 8/18 festival was said to attract all local spirit-mediums, both male and female, and some of them engaged in self-mutilation and other physical feats.[47] Such types of spirit-possession are rarely seen on Shangfangshan nowadays; spirit-mediums now mostly remain quiet, talk with the voice of the god, and draw talismans for healing or protection.[48]

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[45] "Shen Fo mu'ou luolie yi tang" 神佛木偶羅列一堂, *Shenbao* 26-12-1935; this home temple was on Robinson Road 勞勃生路. The two latter were the dominant deities in the Jiangnan modern spirit-writing cults; on them, see Vincent Goossaert, "The Jin'gaishan Network," in Vincent Goossaert and Liu Xun, eds., *Modern Urban Daoism* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

[46] "Chuanyue jisheng" 串月紀盛, *Shenbao* 13-10-1876. On the Maoshan spirit-mediums, see Rostislav Berezkin and Vincent Goossaert, "The Three Mao Lords in modern Jiangnan. Cult and Pilgrimage between Daoism and *baojuan* recitation," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 99 (2012–2013), pp. 295–326.

[47] "Huahua xuxu shuo Lengqie" 花花絮絮說楞伽, *Shenbao* 18-09-1927; "Bayue shibari zhi Shihu" 八月十八日之石湖, *Shenbao* 14-09-1935. This last report explains that some of the spirit-mediums dress up as gods.

[48] See also Chen Yongchao, "Suzhou Shangfangshan Taimu xinyang ji yishi wenyi de diaocha baogao," pp. 237–40.

The 8/18 festival remained popular through the 1930s but inevitably declined during the Japanese invasion and especially after the anti-religious campaigns in the 1950s. This vitality is remarkable in a context of anti-religious campaigns and destructions. Shangfangshan was vandalized at least twice during the first half of the twentieth century: newspaper reports tell us of a local member of the gentry, a *juren* 舉人, who on his own initiative went there on 4/18 in 1905, found the local constable (*dibao* 地保) and worshippers in a dispute over petty profits from the site, and (maybe taking advantage of the confusion) destroyed the statues and hectored the worshippers to stop worshipping immoral gods. However, the report ends on the sobering note that when the *juren* returned two days later, a new statue was already in place.[49] Furthermore, the gentry head of the township (*zhendong* 鎮董) was furious and had the *juren*'s porters beaten, showing that the cult enjoyed the active support of large parts of the local elites (as opposed to officials and cadres from outside).[50] More seriously, the 1927 Northern campaign and its immediate aftermath was an occasion for widespread vandalism in religious sites wherever the Kuomintang (KMT) armies went, and Shangfangshan was no exception.[51] In late 1928, the magistrate of Wuxian ordered to throw the statues in the lake, in a campaign that also targeted another possession cult near Suzhou, that of Muhuajing 木化精.[52] Still, descriptions of the 8/18 pilgrimage in subsequent years clearly show that the destruction was shortly followed by reconstruction.

Given the intensity of the anti-superstition campaigns in the Suzhou area from the 1900s onwards and especially during the KMT period (1927–1937), it would seem surprising that a site such as Shangfangshan, notorious, highly visible, and easily reached from downtown Suzhou on tramways as early as the 1920s, and with such an iconic value as a site of state fight against a local immoral religion, should continue to thrive through the period. Yet it did: *Shenbao* reports tell us about the crowds of worshippers more or less regularly from the 1870s through 1948. Even at the height of the KMT anti-superstition campaigns, police patrolled the pilgrimage, but did not prevent it. It was banned in 1927, but took place all the same.[53] One explanation is that the anti-superstition campaigns focused on territorial festivals rather than

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[49] "Yu xiaolian bing Su fu qing hui yinci gao" 余孝廉稟蘇撫請毀淫祠稿, *Shenbao* 04-06-1905.

[50] "Daohui yinci shouru" 搗毀淫祠受辱, *Shenbao* 29-05-1905.

[51] On the fate of temple cults in Jiangnan during that period, see Paul R. Katz and Vincent Goossaert, eds., *The Fifty Years That Changed Chinese Religion, 1898–1948* (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, forthcoming).

[52] "Suzhou" 蘇州, *Shenbao* 12-10-1928; on the anti-Muhuajing campaign, see "Suzhou" 蘇州, *Shenbao* 05-03-1929, and "Xiangshan dangbu fenhui guiyao Muhuajing jixiang" 香山黨部焚燬鬼妖木化精記詳, *Shenbao* 08-03-1929.

[53] "Xingchunqiao benyue ji" 行春橋奔月記, *Shenbao* 20-09-1927.

voluntary pilgrimages. Whereas village processions (*saihui* 賽會) were heavily targeted by activists,[54] pilgrimages were, to a greater extent, left to themselves; a phenomenon we also see in other Jiangnan cities, such as Hangzhou 杭州.[55] The reason for this was that village processions engaged the whole community in an ascriptive way (all members of a given territory, and its registered families having to be represented[56]) and commanded economic resources (endowments) and political allegiances, while pilgrimages were by and large organized by voluntary groups funded by ad hoc donations and were thus less of a priority for social reform.

Another reason is that the key actors in the Shangfangshan cult, the spirit-mediums, were also able to continue practising throughout the period. Xiao Tian 小田, who has studied the fate of the Jiangnan female spirit-mediums during the modern period, found a large amount of prohibitions of all kinds, but less than impressive effects on actual social practice.[57] Indeed, these spirit-mediums were, during the late Qing, under a sort of local licensing and control system that disappeared with the Republican regime and mostly left them under the radar of state intervention;[58] not being entirely dependent on temples (most worked from home) and endowments, they were very hard to suppress. We hear of specific bans on spirit-mediums at Shangfangshan, but with very limited effects.[59] One aspect of the Republican policies

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[54] On anti-superstition campaigns and their effect on festivals and *saihui* in the Suzhou area, see Xiao Tian 小田, "Shequ chuantong de jindai mingyun: Yi Suzhou 'Qionglong laohui' wei duixiang de li'an yanjiu" 社區傳統的近代命運：以蘇州「穹窿老會」為對象的例案研究, *Jiangsu shehui kexue* 江蘇社會科學, 2002, no. 6, pp. 141–47; and Gao Wansang 高萬桑 (Vincent Goossaert), "Wan Qing ji minguo shiqi Jiangnan diqu de yingshen saihui" 晚清及民國時期江南地區的迎神賽會, in Kang Bao 康豹 and Gao Wansang, eds., *Gaibian Zhongguo zongjiao de wushinian, 1898–1948* 改變中國宗教的五十年，1898–1948 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2015), pp. 75–99. On KMT religious policies in Jiangnan, see Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

[55] Vincent Goossaert, "The Local Politics of Festivals in Hangzhou, 1850–1950," *Daoism: Religion, History and Society* 5 (2013), pp. 57–80; on the city people going to suburban temple festivals in great numbers during that period, see Shuk-wah Poon, "Thriving under an Anti-superstition Regime: The Dragon Mother Cult in Yuecheng, Guangdong, during the 1930s," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 43, no. 1 (June 2015), pp. 34–58.

[56] On the ascriptive vs. voluntary dimensions of Chinese religion, see Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), chap. 1.

[57] Xiao Tian 小田, "Lun Jiangnan xiangcun nüwu de jindai jingyu" 論江南鄉村女巫的近代境遇, *Jindaishi yanjiu* 近代史研究, 2014, no. 5, pp. 39–55, 160.

[58] Goossaert, "A Question of Control: Licensing Local Religious Specialists in Jiangnan, 1850–1950."

[59] "Maoyuan xinliang" 茂苑新涼, *Shenbao* 06-08-1890.

that affected spirit-mediums is the increased focus on health policy, through campaigns to outlaw faith healing and divine consultations. For instance, in 1947, the Shanghai police raided a number of visible spirit-medium temples offering cures and arrested five spirit-mediums, one of whom was channelling the Shangfangshan gods.[60]

Not only did the Shangfangshan avoid lasting destruction during the first half of the twentieth century, but it actively played a role in the development of spirit-medium traditions. One of the ways it fulfilled this mission was through enshrining dead spirit-mediums, as well as other women and men. Jiangnan religious culture, although certainly not unique in this regard, favours the divinization of spirit-mediums as local deities and their enshrinement in local temples. Long Feijun 龍飛俊, who has worked on a temple in the Pudong 浦東 rural part of Shanghai, has documented how local temples' side shrines have the statues or tablets of numerous deceased spirit-mediums, now beseeched as intermediaries with higher gods.[61] In this area, another related practice was the enshrinement of dead young women as spouses or concubines of local gods. This practice was long decried and fought against by local elites, and also became, during the Republican period, a target of anti-superstition campaigns.[62] But, it is also possible to take a more anthropological view on such reports and consider that such an enshrinement gave a positive, even desirable, posthumous destiny to young women (and sometimes men) who had otherwise no prospect but to be forgotten. Rather than seeing the gods as killing and abducting young people (as late imperial literati did), we can alternatively see them as offering a solution to the issue of premature death. One must also note that a substantial part of the Shangfangshan pilgrims come from the communities of fishermen/boat people of the Taihu 太湖 region, a distinct community that was only settled on land after 1949, and who collectively worship their dead in communal temples with spirit-mediums having the highest status.[63]

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[60] "Wuyi jie: Huodong wuwei zhongzhi daxian" 巫醫劫：活動五位終止大仙, *Shenbao* 12-12-1947.

[61] Long Feijun 龍飛俊, "Shanghai Longwangmiao de taitaimen" 上海龍王廟的太太們, in Wang Gang 王崗 and Li Tiangang 李天綱, eds., *Zhongguo jinshi difang shehui zhong de zongjiao yu guojia* 中國近世地方社會中的宗教與國家 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2014), pp. 119–38.

[62] Xiao Tian, "Lun Jiangnan xiangcun nüwu de jindai jingyu," discusses two cases (dated 1919 and 1937) of dead women enshrined as wives of Pudong City Gods 浦東城隍, and the elite reactions to such practices.

[63] See Ko Enko 胡艷紅, *Konan no suijō kyomin: Taiko gyomin no shinkō seikatsu to sono hen'yō* 江南の水上居民：太湖漁民の信仰生活とその変容 (Tokyo: Fukyosha, 2017); Zhu Mingchuan 朱明川, "Chuan yu an: Dong Taihu liuyu minjian xinyang zhong de liang zhong chuantong" 船與岸：東太湖流域民間信仰中的兩種傳統, *Minsu quyi* 204 (June 2019), pp. 147–95.

Fig. 2: Bridal chamber of the Fourth Spouse at Lengqie temple, Shangfangshan, 2011

Two fascinating reports published in the *Shenbao* relate such cases. One, dated 1909, tells of a young man from a village near Suzhou who died just after marriage. A local female medium revealed he had been hired in the service of one of the Shangfangshan gods; his family built a statue of him, placed it in a new shrine at Shangfangshan, where the female medium settled and started a successful healing cult, until the local magistrate arrested her and burnt the statue.[64] A later one, from 1946, discusses a rich merchant from Shanghai whose beloved young daughter had just died. He went to Shangfangshan to have salvation rites performed for her, and a medium told him the daughter had married one of the five brothers. The merchant then not only set up a statue, but a whole nuptial chamber for her (complete with a bed, toilet stands, etc.) within the Shangfangshan temple.[65] Such a nuptial chamber can be seen today at Shangfangshan, and locals explain it was set for a young woman from Shanghai (see fig. 2). Whether this is the same woman as reported in the *Shenbao* is moot, but the point is that the practice of enshrining young people and spirit-mediums at Shangfangshan is continuing and represents a structural, living aspect of the cult.

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[64] "Shehui du" 社會蠹, *Shenbao* 08-06-1909.

[65] "Wangnü jia Wutong" 亡女嫁五通, *Shenbao* 24-10-1946.

2. Shangfangshan Today

At present the site of Shangfangshan is flourishing anew, for reasons that are partly similar to those that allowed it to thrive during the Republican period. In 1986, the site was assigned to the Suzhou Department of Parks; and in 1987 the "pagoda court" (*tayuan* 塔院) of the former Lengqie monastery was rebuilt. As in so many places throughout China, the outer area is a park managed by the Forest Department, charging its own entrance fees, while the religious site inside can only be reached through entering the park. According to the reports of Chinese scholars, already at the end of the 1980s the site was leased to local entrepreneurs, who organized the pilgrimage activities there. These activities were a good investment: in 1987 the price of candles sold there through the year amounted to some 80,000 RMB, and entrance tickets to 140,000 RMB.[66] This situation of temple leasing was continuing during our last visit. However, in this article we do not discuss the question of management of Shangfangshan.

The outlook of "the pagoda court" on Shangfangshan is quite different from a typical Buddhist monastery. Two large halls in the first yard of the temple facing each other are taken by the images of the Wutong, their mother, and their wives (see figs. 3–4 and map).[67] Two rooms in the hall on the left are decorated as the bedrooms of Grand Dowager and the wife of the Third Lord, with the real traditional-style beds and toilet stands exhibited there. Most cultic objects and decorations were donated by ordinary believers, who did this in return for the deities' blessings. The Mother and the five wives are as important in the cult as the five brothers; both fieldwork observation and written sources show that some spirit-mediums are possessed solely by the Mother, or by one of the wives, even though it remains common to say that the most powerful member of the whole family is the third brother—a feature also found in other spirit-possession cults where the powerful possessing spirit is called third-born.[68]

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[66] Cai Limin, *Suzhou minsu caifenglu*, pp. 110, 260–61.

[67] The arrangement of deities' statues is interpreted differently by the various temple keepers and visitors, see Chen Yongchao, "Suzhou Shangfangshan Taimu xinyang ji yishi wenyi de diaocha baogao," pp. 217–21.

[68] See the case of Nezha 哪吒, the third prince (San taizi 三太子), discussed by Meir Shahar, *Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and His Indian Origins* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015) and Guanyin's demonic avatar as the third princess, discussed in Mark Meulenbeld, "Death and Demonization of a Bodhisattva: Guanyin's Reformulation within Chinese Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3 (September 2016), pp. 690–726.

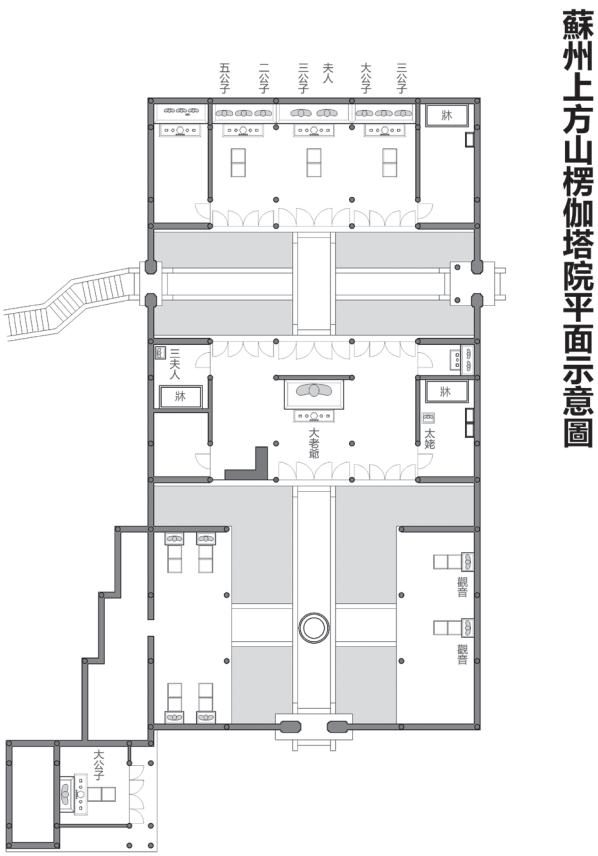

Fig. 3: A map of Lengqie temple, Shangfangshan (c) Tao Jin

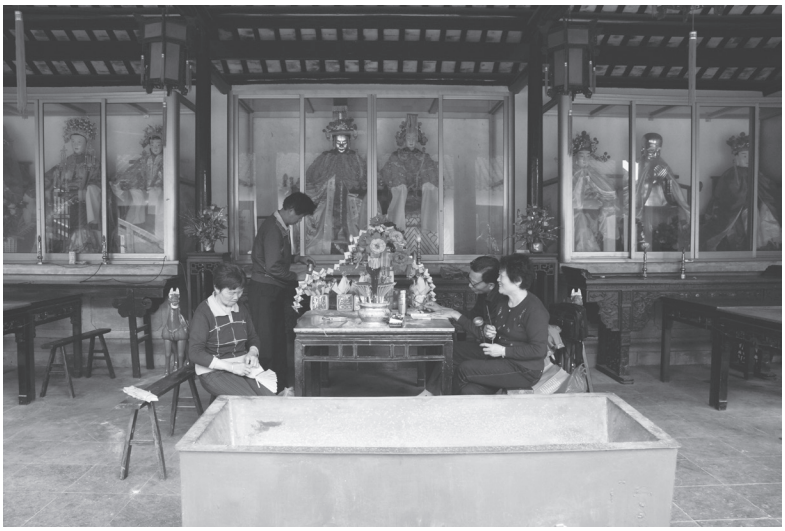

Fig. 4: Baojuan recitation at Lengqie temple, 2011

Nowadays, there are also two additional buildings in the second yard of the temple (on the left), where the Buddhist images of Bodhisattva Guanyin and Dizang 地藏 are placed. A sign near the Guanyin statue says that one cannot bring meat offerings to her, as she is a Buddhist deity. The other gods know no such stricture. As has been the case for centuries, devotees and spirit-mediums have ignored calls for a vegetarian reform of the Wutong cult; pigs' head (the favourite offering for spirit-possessing deities in Jiangnan) are very prominently on show at the site.[69] The two "Buddhist" halls must have been added later, as Cai Limin 蔡利民 did not see them in 1989.[70] However, as we have already seen, the connection between Guanyin and Wutong is very old. Guanyin of Shangfangshan could be regarded as very special: the famous collection of strange stories by Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797) contains a piece saying that once the role of Guanyin at that site was taken over by a transformed fox.[71] In our view this story is very symptomatic of the connections between Guanyin, the deities of Shangfangshan, and fox spirits. Foxes as ambivalent spirits, often regarded as illicit, but usually tolerated even by traditional literati, are often considered as the northern counterparts of the Wutong.[72]

Visitors do not find Buddhist monks in the Shangfangshan temple and the Baojisi at the foot of the hill, the latter being completely museified. We did not see any monks during the 8/18 festival that we observed on 25 September 2016. This is likely a new development, as monks were apparently involved in the site when the Baojisi was active; for example, we read a mention of a monk during the 8/18 celebrations in 1927.[73] Pilgrims going to Shangfangshan are usually organized in groups that are presided by the medium and/or a master of telling scriptures. During our successive visits we always saw several groups simultaneously performing in the various halls of the temple complex, but there may be seasonal patterns, with periods of more or less intense activity. These are both local communities and small family-based groups; we thus find both ascriptive (family- or territory-based) and voluntary logic at work in the

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[69] For another case of such tensions, in contemporary Taiwan, see Chün-fang Yü, *Passing the Light: The Incense Light Community and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).

[70] Apparently, the post-1978 shrines of "the pagoda court" were constructed with the help of believers' donations: some of their names are listed on special plaques on the walls.

[71] Yuan Mei 袁枚, *Zi bu yu* 子不語, in Wang Yingzhi 王英志, ed., *Yuan Mei quanji xinbian* 袁枚全集新編 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2015), *juan* 11, p. 153.

[72] See Xiaofei Kang, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 45–46.

[73] "Huahua xuxu shuo Lengqie." The monk is described as raising funds for rebuilding the temple. In the 1980s, temple managers were still reported to invite religious specialists taking the role of Buddhist monks for the most important celebrations there. See Cai Limin, *Suzhou minsu caifenglu*, pp. 260–61.

recruitment of the cult. The most crowded day is of course 8/18, the traditional date of temple festival, the "pilgrimage period" starting two days earlier (see figs. 5–6). Different types of performances, such as the singing of "sacred songs" and dances by female mediums, take place on these days.[74]

According to the temple keeper, who acts as the official worker of the Shangfangshan site (interviewed on 29 May 2011), pilgrims come from various places around Suzhou, as well as the city itself, all year round. Many of them are descendants of people who had contracted a loan from the other world and worship Wutong in their homes; others have been instructed to do so by spirit-mediums with the purpose of eliminating disasters or illnesses or praying for blessings. Most believers are from Changshu, Zhangjiagang 張家港, Taicang, Kunshan, Wujiang 吳江, and Wuxi 無錫. People from Shanghai and several places in Zhejiang province (especially the Jiaxing 嘉興-Hangzhou-Huzhou 湖州 region) also frequently visit. Among four groups we met there on 29 May 2011 and 12 December 2012, one was from Changshu, one from Taicang, one from Wuxi, and one from Shanghai. Besides, the leaders of the groups (spirit-mediums) often bring believers from locations other than their own home towns/villages, which demonstrates the large catchment areas of their religious services, as well as the cooperation between ritual specialists. For example, a family from Shanghai was brought by a female medium who lives in Fengxian 奉賢, Shanghai, and was accompanied by a female *baojuan* performer from Zhoushi 周市, Kunshan. The family of Wuxi natives used the service of two masters of scroll recitation from Luzhi 甪直 town, a suburb of Suzhou. During the temple festival on 25 September 2016, more than twenty scroll recitation teams brought by pilgrims from different places around Suzhou performed on the spot simultaneously.

While the many groups visiting Shangfangshan perform similar rites, there are different styles of scroll recitations performances that reflect local variations in the site's extensive catchment area: the performers from the Changshu and Zhangjiagang areas usually use the style of performances with the "wooden fish accompaniment," while the performers from the suburbs of Suzhou use the accompaniment of string instruments, which corresponds to the general difference of styles in the two areas.[75] The text usually recited on Shangfangshan is the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager*, though other texts may be also included (see fig. 4). These additional texts are related to the specific purpose of the believers' pilgrimage to the mountain, such as praying for health, blessings, descendants, and so on.

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[74] Chen Yongchao, "Suzhou Shangfangshan Taimu xinyang ji yishi wenyi de diaocha baogao," pp. 227–35.

[75] Rostislav Berezkin, "Scripture-telling (*jiangjing*) in the Zhangjiagang Area and the History of Chinese Storytelling," *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 24, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1–42, esp. pp. 27–28.

Fig. 5: Pilgrims at Shangfangshan on 25 September 2016

Fig. 6: Female medium presenting offerings at the foot of pagoda at Shangfangshan, 25 September 2016

The performance can also include special rituals aimed at securing family welfare. For example, the masters of scroll recitation from Luzhi on 12 December 2012 also performed the ritual of "untying knots" (*jiejie* 解結) that is quite common for *baojuan* performances in southern Jiangsu.[76] It has the meaning of "dissolving disasters" (or karmic obstacles) and is quite common in both Buddhist and Daoist traditions of South-East China.[77] Masters of scroll recitation in Jiangsu might have borrowed it from the Daoist tradition. The sacrifices for the deities, including pork, fish, and chicken, as well as vegetarian offerings (fruits and pastry) are performed, the incense is burnt, and the memorials, recording the believers' requests for the deities, are submitted as a part of the pilgrimage programme.

The religious assembly held by a couple from Shanghai on 12 December 2012 had the purpose of "returning the life debt" (*huan shousheng* 還受生), which has its origin in Daoist scriptures and rituals dating back to the Tang and Song dynasties.[78] These assemblies are usually held at believers' homes, and are still quite frequent in the Suzhou area, especially the areas around Changshu and Kunshan, also marking the sixtieth anniversary of a family head.[79] According to the medium who organized the pilgrimage, this family has visited Shangfangshan three times in the course of three years, and invited the master of scroll recitation from Kunshan to recite texts. Apparently, in this case there was a conflation of two popular practices of "returning the life debt" and "returning the loan from the other world," which are not very different in the eyes of modern believers. Usually, however, scroll recitation on Shangfangshan is just the final part of the religious assembly initially to be held at the believers' home.

3. Contracting a Loan from the Other World

Since the late Ming period, "contracting a loan from the other world" has become intimately associated with Shangfangshan, and it remains today one of the most frequently performed rituals there. According to the record of Qian Xiyan 錢希言 in the early seventeenth century, this practice took the following form:

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[76] Berezkin, "On the Survival of the Traditional Ritualized Performance Art in Modern China," p. 191.

[77] For the Daoist form of this ritual, see Isabelle Robinet, *Méditation taoïste* (Paris: Dervy-livres, 1979), p. 213ff; John Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 187–88.

[78] Hou Ching-Lang, *Monnaies d'offrande et la notion de trésorerie dans la religion chinoise* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises, 1975), pp. 35–39, 40–49.

[79] Yu Dingjun, "Jiangsu Changshu de jiangjing xuanjuan," pp. 90–99; Rostislav Berezkin, "Paying for Salvation: The Ritual of 'Repaying the Loan for Life' and Telling Scriptures in Changshu, China," *Asian Ethnology* 77, nos 1/2 (2018), pp. 307–29.

> At the beginning of each year shopkeepers and merchants in Suzhou draw up a contract to seek a loan from Wutong. First they purchase a large quantity of spirit money, which they present to the god at this temple. Then they bring the spirit money back to their home and suspend it over their domestic altar. Throughout the year they are exceedingly circumspect in making offerings. At the end of the year they take the spirit money—adding some "interest" to the original amount—to Mount Lengqie, where it is burned to "redeem the debt" *[nazhai]*.[80]

This custom persisted in later periods. According to the description given by Cai Limin, based on observations during the 1980s, the traditional form of this transaction that existed before 1949 included a visit to the temple on the part of the supplicant for such a loan, who presented an offering of incense and candles, "taxes" (*qianliang* 錢糧),[81] that is, spirit money, bound together with straw. The medium, who had entered a trance and was possessed by the god, presented conditions for this transaction. The supplicant agreed with them and then took spirit money in the form of paper ingots from the altar. Upon returning home, he (or she) placed them on the domestic altar. If after several days, the paper money retained its original form, the loan was considered to be approved by the deity; if the paper had shrivelled, the request was denied.[82] If the loan was accepted, the debtor should worship the Wutong at home each full and new moon. After a year had passed, the debtor made a pilgrimage to Shangfangshan, where he (or she) "settled accounts" by remitting taxes (*jie qianliang* 解錢糧), which included an interest on the loan (*fuxi* 付息).[83] According to a 1935 article in *Shenbao*, most people who contracted a loan with the deities were merchants and madams of the courtesans' quarters (*laobao* 老鴇)[84]—the Stone Lake had become a popular amusement area for courtesans and their clients. Such recruitment is known from other immoral cults, but whether the journalist was accurate or just casting aspersions is impossible to determine. According to our field observations (2011–2018), spirit-mediums who perform the *jie yinzhai* nowadays either manage the paperwork (including a written contract and memorial sent to the gods through burning) themselves—something rather unusual for spirit-mediums in general—, or work with *baojuan* performers who routinely do Daoist-style documents for the gods.

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[80] English translation by von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, p. 232.

[81] On spirit-money "taxes" in Jiangnan, see Vincent Goossaert, "Bureaucratie, taxation et justice. Taoïsme et construction de l'état au Jiangnan (Chine), xviie–xixe siècles," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2010, no. 4, pp. 999–1027.

[82] The method of divination with the use of bamboo slips (*qiuqian* 求籤) was also used.

[83] Cai Limin, *Suzhou minsu caifenglu*, p. 253.

[84] "Bayue shibari zhi Shihu" 八月十八日之石湖, *Shenbao* 14-09-1935.

To return the loan was not an easy task that could be completed during a single pilgrimage. Usually debtors of the deities travelled on pilgrimage to Shangfangshan every year. Besides, descendants of a debtor often continued to worship the Wutong and go on pilgrimage to Shangfangshan, as the "loan from the other world" could not be settled once and for all (*qingchang* 清償) in one generation, hence the popular *xiehouyu* 歇後語 (riddle proverb) in the Suzhou area: "A loan from the other world contracted at Shangfangshan—you can never return it completely" 上方山陰債——還不清.[85] This practice of borrowing from deities was quite popular in the Republican period; till now stories about people who suddenly became rich after "taking a loan from the other world" from Shangfangshan in the 1930s–40s continue to circulate in the vicinity of Suzhou, for example the story of doctor Xia Zhizhong 夏志仲 from the town of Tianzhuang 恬莊 (Changshu, modern Zhangjiagang).[86]

4. Wutong Domestic Worship in the Changshu Area

As we have seen, people often travel to Shangfangshan to conclude a ritual started at their domestic altar, while people who take a loan from the gods at Shangfangshan must establish a domestic altar and return regularly. The Wutong cult must, thus, be understood in the circulation between these two settings, the private altars and the effervescent pilgrimage centre. Yet, the image of the cult and its gods appear different on the hot-and-noisy hilltop and in the village shrines.[87] While Shangfangshan remains loaded with ambivalence for Buddhist and Daoist clerics, who rarely, if ever, go there, the Wutong cult has largely remained acceptable in Jiangnan village society throughout the modern and contemporary period. Richard Von Glahn has argued that a new, "tamed" form of the cult as the gods of wealth from the five directions, Wulu caishen 五路財神, took over during the mid-Qing period, at least in urban middle-class contexts.[88] While this development is part of the larger story of the cult, the Wutong and their mother appear unambiguously as such in numerous temples; in some cases they are even listed as local territorial gods (*sheshen* 社神). For instance, when a large number of villages were destroyed during the building of the Suzhou

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[85] *Shenbao* 14-09-1935.

[86] Zhangjiagang shi feiwuzhi wenhua yichan 張家港市非物質文化遺產 site, s.v. "Tianzhuang jie yinzhai" 恬莊借陰債, accessed 19 June 2019, http://www.zjgst.cn:8080/ 张家港非物质文化遗产 /dispaper.asp?id=112.

[87] In this article we use the word shrine to refer to a cubicle devoted to the worship of the gods, much smaller than a temple, but permanent and independent from other buildings (unlike an altar).

[88] Gu Lu 顧祿, *Qing jia lu* 清嘉錄, in *Qingdai shiliao biji congkan* 清代史料筆記叢刊 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), *juan* 1, pp. 50–51; see also von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 245–46.

high-tech industrial zone 蘇州工業園區, the village territorial gods were gathered in a new temple managed by the Daoist Association, Yuhuanggong 玉皇宮 (Jade Emperor Temple), inaugurated in 2008. There, the statues of these gods are arrayed along the walls, and among the well-known territorial deities, one finds Taimu (fig. 7).[89]

As concerns the Changshu area specifically, the spread of the Wutong beliefs there can be traced back to the middle of the Ming dynasty. For example, the *Gazetteer of Changshu County* (*Changshu xianzhi* 常熟縣志), compiled by Yang Ziqi 楊子器 (1458–1513) and Sang Yu 桑瑜, mentions the temple to the Divine Officials of Five Manifestations (Wuxian lingguan 五顯靈官)—i.e., the officially recognized form of the Wutong.[90] The official recognition was then repealed, and the temple was abolished in 1496 as part of prefect Yang Ziqi's campaign against "illicit cults."[91] Still, the Wutong cult continued to develop, though information about it in local historical sources is extremely scarce, apparently due to its illegal nature. Relevant information comes mainly from oral history—recollections of old people, especially religious specialists, which can testify that the custom of feasting Wutong and their mother existed among locals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Nowadays, Wutong worship is quite widespread in the areas to the south and east of the old county city of Changshu, such as the districts of Shanghu 尚湖, Yushan 虞山, and Baimao 白茆. According to the memory of the locals and our own observations, it declined in the Gangkou 港口 area of modern Zhangjiagang city (originally north-western part of Changshu, which became a part of separate Shazhou 沙洲 county in 1962) since 1949, though it once was quite widespread there as well. At the same time, the ritual assemblies with recitation of the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* still often take place in the Yangshe 楊舍 area of Zhangjiagang on the southern bank of the Yangtze,[92] originally located in Jiangyin 江陰 county on the

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89 Vincent Goossaert, "Territorial Cults and the Urbanization of the Chinese World: A Case Study of Suzhou," in Peter van der Veer, ed., *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2015), pp. 52–68.

90 Yang Ziqi 楊子器 and Sang Yu 桑瑜, eds., *Changshu xianzhi* 常熟縣志, 1499 woodblock edition in the possession of the Tōyō Bunko (microfilm at the Fu Ssu-nien Library of Academia Sinica, Taiwan, roll 3314), *juan* 2, p. 82a; see also Changshu shi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui bangongshi 常熟市地方志編纂委員會辦公室, ed., *Chongxiu Chang-Zhao he zhi* 重修常昭合志 (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1, p. 344.

91 On this campaign, see Hamashima, *Ming Qing Jiangnan nongcun shehui yu minjian xinyang*, p. 17.

92 Zhou Kaiyan 周凱燕, "*Taijun baojuan* he Wutong shen xinyang de bianqian"《太郡寶卷》和五通神信仰的變遷, *Changshu ligong xueyuan xuebao* (*Zhexue shehui kexue*) 常熟理工學院學報（哲學社會科學）, 2009, no. 3, pp. 120–22.

Fig. 7: The statue of Taimu in the Jade Emperor Temple in modern high-tech industrial zone of Suzhou, 2012

Fig. 8: "Toilet stand" (*zhuangtai*) in a rural house of Changshu (picture courtesy of Yu Dingjun)

border with Changshu (in 1962 it also became a part of Shazhou and then in 1986 the city of Zhangjiagang).

In Changshu rural areas many locals have a permanent altar at home, where the Wutong and their mother are worshipped, called *zhuangtai* 妝臺 / 粧臺 (toilet stand), which has a form of a table, placed in an auxiliary room (bedroom) of the house, with candle stands and an incense burner, also decorated with an amulet in the form of a picture of Shangfangshan pagoda (see fig. 8). The usual explanation of this practice is "contracting a loan from the other world" by the ancestors of the family, which requires the worship of Wutong by the descendants. These altars for Wutong in bedrooms can be traced to the beginning of the nineteenth century, as they were already mentioned by Yuqian, who used the same term, *zhuang* 粧, for them. He also noted that many well-to-do families entrusted the worship of Wutong to spirit-mediums, who constructed altars in their houses on behalf of the believers. This was called "entrusting the altar" (*jizhuang* 寄粧).[93] Nowadays the rural spirit-mediums, who are numerous in Changshu, also have Wutong shrines adjacent to their houses.

The worship of the Wutong in Changshu often takes the form of religious assemblies. Nowadays, there are three main types of assemblies during which the Shangfangshan deities are presented with offerings and the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* is recited: "returning the vow of Xiangshan" (*Xiangshan wanyuan* 香山完願),

[93] Yuqian, *Mianyizhai xu cungao*, *juan* 7, p. 47b (436).

"worshipping the toilet stand" (*daizhuang* 待粧, or "knocking at the counter" *chuo/chu guitai* 擉櫃檯), and "musical [feast] for Grand Dowager" (*xiang Taimu* 響太姆, literally "making noise for the Grand Dowager"). This typology is emic and used by the ritual specialists and patrons alike; it is based on the purpose of the ritual, relating also to its scale. In the first type, offerings to the Wutong constitute the concluding part of a large assembly that can be performed on various occasions—such as the consecration of a new house, praying for progeny or success, or healing—and requires the performance of many *baojuan* texts (notably the *Baojuan of Xiangshan* [*Xiangshan baojuan* 香山寶卷], devoted to the story of the female reincarnation of Bodhisattva Guanyin as Princess Miaoshan 妙善).[94] The second type is focused specifically on the worship of Taimu (and the Wutong). It usually includes the recitation of the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* together with several other short *baojuan* texts. The *Baojuan of Guanyin in White Clothes* (*Baiyi baojuan* 白衣寶卷; alternative name *Baojuan of Miaoying* [*Miaoying baojuan* 妙英寶卷]), devoted to another reincarnation of Guanyin as a pious girl, Xu Miaoying 徐妙英, may also be added. This type of assembly primarily has an exorcistic function (see below); it is also the rite performed by groups visiting Shangfangshan.

The third type of religious meetings, the "musical feast for Grand Dowager," is extremely rare nowadays. It can be performed on two occasions: when a medium is first possessed by one of the Shangfangshan deities (either one of the Wutong or the Grand Dowager), or when a person is struck by a grave disease. A medium who has established a connection with her deity (in the cases that we have observed, it was the oath of apprenticeship) is supposed to hold a banquet of celebration once a year. On this day the deity descends, and plentiful offerings are presented. The spirit-mediums may invite masters of telling scriptures or local Daoist priests, who provide "sacred entertainment," that is the musical performance of the *Liturgy for the Tea Banquet* (*Chayan ke* 茶筵科). Unlike usual scripture recitation in the Changshu area, the performance of this ritual text should be accompanied by string musical instruments, hence the popular name for this type of ritual meetings.[95] The masters of telling scriptures sing special popular tunes, which may be included in the performances of the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager*. The female medium also dances for the deities, "the dance with the flower baskets" 挑花擔 being commonly performed (see fig. 9).[96] These create an especially joyous and festive atmosphere.

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[94] Berezkin, "On the Survival of the Traditional Ritualized Performance Art in Modern China."

[95] For the music of Changshu telling scriptures, see Berezkin, "On the Survival of the Traditional Ritualized Performance Art in Modern China," pp. 198–99.

[96] This dance also is often used during temple festivals and ritual assemblies with telling scriptures in the same area.

Fig. 9: "Dancing with the flower baskets" by a female medium, 2016

According to masters of telling scriptures whom one of us has interviewed, few such specialists can perform the ritual for the "Tea Banquet" any more at present; Daoist priests are usually asked to perform it instead. Sometimes both the Daoists and masters of telling scriptures perform their rituals on the same occasion. It was the case during the sacrifice to the Grand Dowager organized by a local community in the temple of Deity Liu (Liu shen 劉神) near Yu Mountain 虞山 in Changshu in spring 2014. The teams of the Daoists and masters of telling scriptures performed simultaneously, but in different venues. While masters of telling scriptures tend to be less educated than Daoists and need fewer skills (Daoists must master instrumental music and body techniques), both types of specialists are called "masters" (*xiansheng* 先生), transmit their knowledge and texts either from father to son or from master to disciple, and are well respected in local society.

Some masters of telling scriptures use the Daoist recension of the *Liturgy for the Tea Banquet*. For example, in the family tradition of Yu Dingjun 余鼎君 (b. 1942, a master of telling scriptures working on a modernization of the tradition[97]), this text was lost in the 1960s, so he and his elder brother, Yu Baojun 余寶君, have used the script of the Daoists, when they were asked to perform the "banquet" for the

[97] On him, see Berezkin, "On the Survival of the Traditional Ritualized Performance Art in Modern China."

Grand Dowager.[98] The published version of the *Liturgy for the Tea Banquet* collected from Xu Guigen 徐桂根, a master of telling scriptures from Luyuan 鹿苑 town in Zhangjiagang, cannot be very old, as one of its verses mentions the railroad between Suzhou and Shanghai.[99] Thus, we may date the modern form of this ritual text to the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The *Liturgy for the Tea Banquet*, collected in the Gangkou area, is also noteworthy for the high place it ascribes to Taimu, who is placed on the second story of the seven-storeyed pagoda symbolizing the pantheon of the ritual practices devoted to the Shangfang deities).[100] Thus, she even appears prior to Wutong and their father (Lord Xiao [Xiao gong 蕭公]) and is second only to Guanyin.[101] This order apparently represents the primacy of female deities over their male counterparts, which is asserted by the female spirit-mediums.

The name of the "tea banquets" 茶筵 can be traced back to sources of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[102] For example, in circa 1520 Lu Can described them as night-long ritual performances, during which female spirit-mediums used esoteric language and songs to conjure up the Wutong spirits and convey the wishes of their clients.[103] These practices are also mentioned in the early Qing gazetteer of Wu county.[104] Yuqian in his prohibition edict called them "arranging banquet" (*daiyan* 待筵) and linked them with the sacrifices on Shangfangshan.[105] This name also appears in *baojuan* texts from the Changshu area. An 1885 illustrated report in the famous pictorial *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 tells of sacrifices to the Wutong in Jiangyin and explains they are called "candle banquets" (*layan* 蠟筵) or "happy banquets" (*xiyan* 喜筵) (fig. 10).[106] A related practice is a wedding ritual, apparently unique to the Suzhou area, called "Flower banquet" (*huayan* 花筵). The Daoist liturgical

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98 On the variants of the *Liturgy for the Tea Banquet*, see Chen Yongchao 陳泳超 , "Cha yan de lishi ji qi zai Changshu diqu de xianzhuang kaocha" 茶筵的歷史及其在常熟地區的現狀考察 (unpublished manuscript, courtesy of Chen Yongchao).

99 *Zhongguo, Heyang baojuan ji* 中國・河陽寶卷集 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 2007; hereafter ZHBJ), vol. 2, p. 1381.

100 Ibid., p. 1384.

101 See also the text of "Invitation and Sending-Off the Grand Dowager" (*Taimu qing song* 太姥請送), collected from master Yu Guanbao in the Gangkou area, printed in ZHBJ, vol. 2, p. 1435.

102 Chen Yongchao, "Suzhou Shangfangshan Taimu xinyang ji yishi wenyi de diaocha baogao," pp. 205–6; idem, "Cha yan de lishi ji qi zai Changshu diqu de xianzhuang kaocha."

103 Lu Can, *Gengsi bian*, *juan* 5, p. 51.

104 Tang Bin 湯斌 et al. eds., *(Kangxi) Wuxian zhi* (康熙) 吳縣志 , reprint of 1691 edition (Yangzhou: Jiangsu Guangling guji keyinshe, 1989), *juan* 29, pp. 9a–b.

105 Yuqian, *Mianyizhai xu cungao*, *juan* 7, p. 47b (436).

106 "Yinsi wufu" 淫私無福, *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 (Shanghai: Shenbaoguan, 1884–1898; reprint, Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1983), *wu ji* 戊集 , p. 67.

Fig. 10: Offerings to Wutong in Jiangyin county, picture of *Dianshizhai huabao*, 1885

manual (entitled *Huayan yaosheng jiejia* 花筵邀聖接駕, comprised mostly of hymns and invocations), which one of us obtained from a Daoist living in Chefang 車坊, just southeast of Suzhou, invokes the Wutong among other protective deities called to bless the new couple. It uses their title as Lords of Shangfangshan.

Assemblies held for Shangfangshan deities in Changshu can also include special rituals of propitiations of demonic spirits, which emphasize their curative function. In the local tradition of telling scriptures, there is a ritual of "sending-off [deities] to the mountain" (*songshan* 送山), which can be performed in connection with the Wutong worship, in several different ritual contexts. It is staged when bad luck or illness in a family is attributed to the interference of a malicious spirit, which can include the Wutong—indeed, the ambiguity of the Wutong as gods that are found on

both ends of the exorcistic work is amply documented in late imperial sources.[107] In this case, after the sacrifice at home is performed, the paper icons (*zhima* 紙馬) of the Shangfangshan deities and offerings for them are taken to Shangfangshan. A medium with a master of telling scriptures and several members of the chorus travel to the mountain to finish the recitation of *baojuan* and ritual there, while the sponsors stay at home, which is considered to be now cleansed of harmful interference.[108] The exorcist function of telling scriptures is also mentioned in the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager*; for example, introductory verses in one of its versions say: "The Grand Lady[109] bestows happiness, Five Sages (Wutong) send auspicious signs, Their (Five) Spouses will eliminate disasters, and the sponsors' [of assembly] fortune and longevity will grow" 太郡來賜福，五聖降禎祥。夫人免災殃，齋主福壽長.[110]

The ritual of "sending-off deities" can be traced to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, the book on Changshu customs, called *Haiyu fengsu ji* 海虞風俗記 (A record of the customs in Haiyu) by the local literatus Wu Shuangre 吳雙熱 (*c.* 1889–1934), describes "sending-off the monkey immortal" (*song houxian* 送猴仙), which also included sacrifices and feasting for the malicious spirits.[111] This ritual is also performed in Changshu nowadays, sometimes in connection with the Wutong (however, different texts are used for worshipping the Monkey King).[112] Interestingly, many spirit-mediums and telling scriptures performers in Changshu also identify the Wutong with the monkey spirits.[113] This apparently has to do with the fact that the words "monkey" (*hou* 猴) and "marquis" (*hou* 侯) are homonyms. The title of marquis has been associated with the Wutong since the Song period and appears in modern *baojuan* and liturgical texts in Changshu.[114]

Wu Shuangre did not mention telling scriptures in connection with "sending-off the monkey spirit," which does not necessarily mean it did not exist. Telling

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[107] Goossaert, "Daoism and Local Cults in Modern Suzhou."

[108] For the participation of a chorus in telling scriptures, see Berezkin, "On the Survival of the Traditional Ritualized Performance Art in Modern China," pp. 181–82.

[109] Grand Lady (Taijun 太郡, an honorific title for the mother of a high official) is occasionally used as a synonym of Taimu.

[110] ZHBJ, vol. 1, p. 68.

[111] Wu Shuangre 吳雙熱, *Haiyu fengsu ji* 海虞風俗記, 1916 lithographic edition, reprinted in *Zhongguo fengtu zhi congkan* 中國風土志叢刊 (Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2003), vol. 32, *juan* 2, p. 1.

[112] Yu Dingjun, "Jiangsu Changshu de jiangjing xuanjuan," pp. 69–70.

[113] The editors of ZHBJ accepted this identification, see ZHBJ, vol. 2, p. 1377.

[114] E.g., ZHBJ, vol. 1, p. 75; vol. 2, pp. 1377, 1380. There is certainly more to the connection, however, for the parallels between the *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記) and vernacular narratives about Wuxian/Wutong, see Section 5 below.

Fig. 11: "Meat altar" during ritual assembly of Xiangshan in Yushan, Changshu, 2015

scriptures had a clearly pronounced exorcistic function at his time, and Wu Shuangre mentioned "chanting scriptures" (*songjing* 誦經) as a way to avert calamities used by the locals.[115] "Chanting scriptures" in this passage must refer to *baojuan* performances that already were widespread in Changshu at that time. The alternative use of telling scriptures or Daoist services described here is strikingly similar with the modern situation of sacrificing to Wutong in Changshu.

The two assemblies that one of us witnessed in Shanghu and Yushan in 2012 and 2015 respectively belonged to the first type of worship of Wutong and Grand Dowager ("returning the vow of Xiangshan"). In these cases, while Guanyin was worshipped at a vegetarian altar, a separate "meat altar" (*huntai* 葷臺, or "the toilet stand") for the Wutong and their mother was constructed in one of the rooms of the patrons' house (see fig. 11). It consisted of two adjoined tables placed near the wall where a paper icon in the form of the Lengqie pagoda on Shangfangshan was pasted. On both occasions this image, painted with coloured ink and decorated with colourful paper cuts, was specially prepared by the masters of telling scriptures. It substituted for a traditional permanent altar. The picture of the Lengqie pagoda remained in the room after the end of the ritual: it was not burnt, like other paraphernalia, but had the role of a protective amulet.

115 Wu Shuangre, *Haiyu fengsu ji*, *juan* 4, p. 9.

An incense burner, candles, and offerings were placed on the meat altar. These offerings include three types of sacrificial meat: pork, chicken, and fish (*sansheng* 三牲). There are also toilet implements that are intended for the Wutong, their wives and parents: towels, toothbrushes, soap, small mirrors, etc. Offerings of this type apparently gave the popular name to the Wutong's altar in the Changshu area—the toilet stand. Other deities, mainly those of the local tutelary nature, are worshipped on this altar. They are represented by small icons, locally called "the Buddhist horses" (*foma* 佛馬), also put against the wall on the same altar.[116] The set of icons, used in the tradition of telling scriptures represented by Yu Dingjun, includes those of the Earth God (Tudi 土地), Deity Liu, Chief Supervisors (Zongguan 總管), the Fierce General [Liu] (Liu Mengjiang 劉猛將), Five Spouses [of Wutong] (Wu furen 五夫人), Jade Earring (Yuhuan 玉環), Grand Dowager, her husband Lord Xiao, Bodhisattva Guanyin, Five Miraculous-Ones (Wulinggong, or Wutong), King Yan (Yan wang 炎王), King Li (Li wang 李王, or Deity Li [Li shen 李神]), Zhou the Pious Son (Zhou xiaozi 周孝子 or Deity Zhou [Zhou shen 周神]), and the Talisman Official (Fuguan 符官). Thus, it consists of the main figures featured in the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* and most popular local deities, the stories of which are also narrated in *baojuan* texts, performed at this altar. Among them, Fierce General Liu, Li, Chief Supervisors, and Zhou are known as the "four great deities" of former Changshu county.[117] These deities are grouped together with the Wutong because they also require blood sacrifices.

Worship of the Wutong during the assemblies of "returning the vow of Xiangshan" takes the form of the recitation of related *baojuan* and singing of the special melodies inserted in this text. Traditionally these can include "Building the Pagoda" (*Zaota* 造塔), "Ten Sisters Combing Hair" (*Shijie shutou* 十姐疏頭), "Ten Fans" (*Shi ba shanzi* 十把扇子), "Awarding Golden Flowers" (*Shang jinhua* 賞金花), "Green Poplar and Willows" (*Yangliu qing* 楊柳青), "Suzhou Scenery" (*Suzhou jing* 蘇州景), etc., some of which are also included in the *Liturgy for the Tea Banquet*.[118] Several of these melodies are "popular tunes" that are quite often used in Changshu

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[116] The more standard name of these disposable icons (they are burnt at the end of the assembly) is *zhima*.

[117] For details of their modern worship in Changshu, see Rostislav Berezkin, "The Connection between the Cults of Local Deities and *Baojuan* (Precious Scrolls) Texts in Changshu County of Jiangsu: With *Baojuan* Performed in the Gangkou Area of Zhangjiagang City as Examples," *Monumenta Serica* 61 (2013), pp. 73–106; for their historical origins, see Hamashima, *Ming Qing Jiangnan nongcun shehui yu minjian xinyang*, pp. 14–61.

[118] For the published versions, see ZHBJ, vol. 1, pp. 74–75; vol. 2, pp. 1377–84, 1453, 1454, 1464–66.

telling scriptures. "Green Poplar and Willows" and "Suzhou Scenery" are also shared between this art and local drama, originally called *tanhuang* 灘簧 and now (in its reformed guise) known as the Wuxi drama [*xiju* 錫劇]. It is hard to assert in which genre these melodies were first used, but they certainly testify to the connection between *baojuan* performances and local drama, and also greatly contribute to the entertaining aspect of modern telling scriptures.[119] Some of these tunes have been lost in the recent period, and few modern performers know how to sing them. The reason for the rejection of a once rich music repertoire by the performers is also a desire to save time during the performances, which is a common trend in the development of telling scriptures.[120] For example, in Yu Dingjun's tradition, mainly four tunes are sung at the meat altar, namely "Gāthā of the Dowry" (*Jiazhuang ji* 嫁妝偈), "Spouses Combing Hair" (*Furen shutou* 夫人梳頭), "Spouses Changing Clothes" (*Furen gengyi* 夫人更衣), and "Five Fans" (*Wu ba shanzi* 五把扇子), collectively known as "Small Arias of Lengqie [Mountain]" (*Lengqie xiaoqu* 楞伽小曲).[121] They were modified from traditional melodies with lyrics composed by Yu Dingjun. Modification of words in these tunes, characteristic of folk literature on the whole, is quite common among the performers of telling scriptures.

The spirit possession of the medium, called "an audience" (*kaichao* 開朝), may also take part at the end of the performance of the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager*, when one of the Wutong makes a pronouncement for the sponsors of assembly (*xunshi* 訓示). The *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* is followed by the performance of several other "meat" *baojuan* texts (devoted to other local meat-eating deities). After this the deities of both vegetarian and meat altars are sent-off together and the assembly ends.[122]

All the ethnographic data presented above show that, even though contemporary ritual practice is changing fast, with Wutong rituals disappearing in some areas and being simplified in others, the tradition is still very much alive and clearly similar in its basic structure to what it was in the late imperial times. The Wutong and their

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[119] For the discussion of this connection, see Bai Ruosi 白若思 (Rostislav Berezkin), "Fojiao shuofa yu xiqu biaoyan zhijian: Tantao Jiangsu nanbu xuanjuan yu tanhuang zhi guanxi" 佛教說法與戲曲表演之間：探討江蘇南部宣卷與灘簧之關係, in Fudan daxue wenshi yanjiuyuan 復旦大學文史研究院, ed., *Jiaocuo de wenhuashi lunji* 交錯的文化史論集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), pp. 340–58.

[120] Berezkin, "On the Survival of the Traditional Ritualized Performance Art in Modern China," pp. 209–10.

[121] Yu Dingjun, "Jiangsu Changshu de jiangjing xuanjuan," p. 77.

[122] In the past, deities worshipped at the vegetarian and meat altars were sent-off separately. At present, the rituals of seeing-off the two types of deities are merged into one, see Berezkin, "On the Survival of the Traditional Ritualized Performance Art in Modern China."

mother are present in many homes; they are part and parcel of local pantheons of familiar tutelary gods and are placed under Guanyin, the omnipresent saviour. Rituals for them are linked to family life and reproduction, notably to marriage and illness. The grander Wutong rituals are celebrated for the consecration of spirit-mediums; as the latter are the most important ritual specialists at the village level, such a consecration is a major community affair. In short then, the Wutong are central in domestic and communal village life and cannot be described as marginal, evil forces as they have been by elite critical discourses. This is not to say that villagers ignore the dangers surrounding the Wutong; they know they can be threatening but consider that rituals at their disposal can control them. To understand their representations of the gods, we must now turn to the *baojuan* that discuss who they are.

5. The *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager*

The *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* appears in the form of manuscripts in the possession of folk performers in the areas around Suzhou; as almost all *baojuan*, they are anonymous and handed down or copied by a master of scroll recitation from his master or father. We have collected five texts from the performers from Changshu, Kunshan, and Taicang (see Appendix 2) and compared them with texts collected and published recently by Chinese scholars.[123] All of them are broadly similar in terms of contents and storyline, though their titles may be different: *Baojuan of the Great Mother* (*Taimu baojuan* 太姆寶卷), *Baojuan of Miraculous Response* (*Ganying baojuan* 感應寶卷), *Precious Scripture of the Great Mother of Shangfangshan* (*Shangfangshan Taimu baojing* 上方山太姆寶經), *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager Saving the World* (*Taimu jiushi baojuan* 太姥救世寶卷), *Baojuan of Miraculous Lords* (*Linggong baojuan* 靈公寶卷), etc. One can suppose that many of them share a same source.

It is difficult to determine when the earliest version of the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* was composed. Yuqian already mentioned *baojuan* performances, called *xuanjuan* 宣卷, in his notes on spirit-medium activities; but his list of texts does not include any title mentioning the Wutong and their mother.[124] The earliest extant *baojuan* manuscript dealing with the Wutong is the *Baojuan of the Family Hall of Five Sages* (*Wusheng jiatang baojuan* 五聖家堂寶卷), dated 1908.[125] A manuscript dated

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[123] Chen Yongchao 陳泳超, "*Taimu baojuan* de wenben goucheng ji qi yishi zhishe: Jian tan Wudi shenling baojuan de lishi yuanyuan"《太姥寶卷》的文本構成及其儀式指涉 —— 兼談吳地神靈寶卷的歷史淵源, *Minzu wenxue yanjiu* 民族文學研究, 2017, no. 2, pp. 5–17.

[124] Yuqian, *Mianyizhai xu cungao*, *juan* 7, p. 48a (436).

[125] Che Xilun 車錫倫, *Zhongguo baojuan zongmu* 中國寶卷總目 (Beijing: Beijing Yanshan chubanshe, 2000), p. 281.

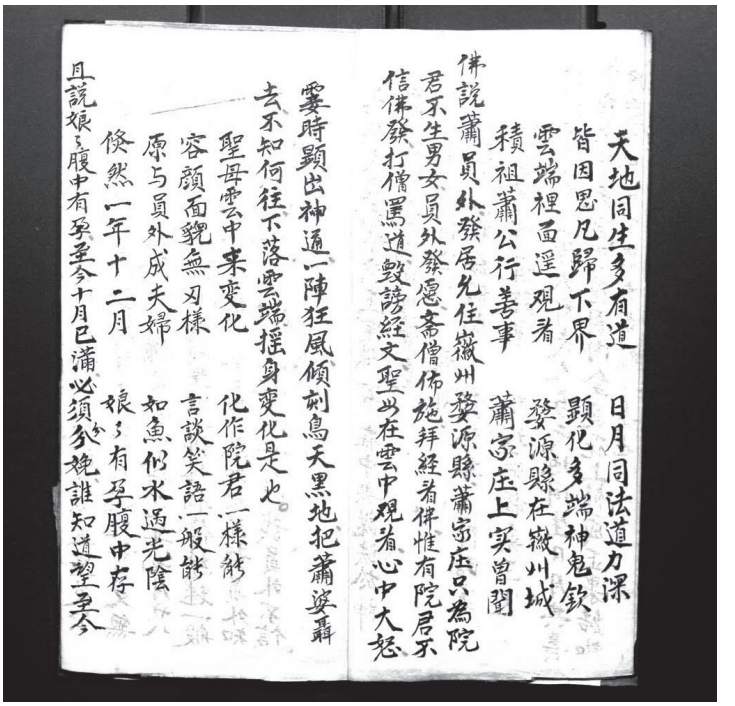

Fig. 12: Manuscript of the *Baojuan of the Five Sages Granting Peace*, dated 1913 (picture courtesy of Nanjing Library)

1947 with the alternative title of *Baojuan of Miraculous Response* was discovered during modern surveys of telling scriptures in the Changshu area.[126] We have found an early manuscript in the old books collection of Nanjing Library with the title of the *Baojuan of the Five Sages Granting Peace* (*Wusheng bao'an baojuan* 五聖保安寶卷, abbreviated as *Baojuan of the Five Sages* below), copied by a certain Mr. Jin 金 from the Shengzhentang 聲振堂 and dated to the *guichou* 癸丑 year, which may correspond to 1853 or more probably 1913 (see fig. 12). This text is written in a combination of simple classical and northern vernacular (*baihua* 白話) language, with several dialectal words and terms.[127]

The comparison with other manuscripts of the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* from the Changshu area (see Appendix 2) demonstrates close proximity; many passages are identical. However, the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* is shorter than modern

[126] Changshu shi wenhua guangdian xinwen chubanju 常熟市文化廣電新聞出版局, ed., *Zhongguo Changshu baojuan* 中國常熟寶卷 (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2015; hereafter ZCBJ), vol. 3, p. 2504.

[127] For example, the word for "float" 汆 (Mandarin: *tun*).

texts: it has roughly 8,000 characters versus 20,300 characters in the modern Changshu recension. It lacks many poetic passages, such as "Suzhou scenery," which have become integral parts of the modern recensions.[128] Therefore, it is likely that the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* was an antecedent of the modern *baojuan* texts, and those from Changshu particularly. As far as we know, nobody has used this manuscript from the Nanjing Library for research purposes. Here we treat it as a rare early primary source on the Wutong lore of the Changshu area.

The *Baojuan of the Five Sages* starts with the hymn (eulogy, *zan* 讚) for the Grand Dowager and her sons, which imitates similar poetic pieces in the Daoist tradition:

> Primordial King of the Law of Limitless Great Path (*Dao*), precious pearl [shines] in the centre. He preaches to the deities and unrolls the dark net, myriad sages worship the divine Lord.
>
> 無極大道元始法王，寶珠一粒在中央。說法於神光，流演玄網，萬聖禮靈皇。[129]

Similar verses appear in the modern variants of this text from Changshu and Zhangjiagang.[130] This proximity also points to the connection between telling scriptures and Daoist rituals in the Changshu area, which we already have noted above. However, the two first prosaic passages open with the words "as the Buddha pronounced" (*Foshuo* 佛說). A note at the end indicates that recitation of this text is followed by chanting of the *Heart Sūtra*. These Buddhist elements, common in the *baojuan* texts since the early period of their development, attest to the Buddhist connotations of their performances, usually called "Buddhist services" (*Foshi* 佛事) by the believers and performers in Changshu.[131] Combination of Daoist and Buddhist terms with the vernacular hagiography of folk deities in the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* reveals the complex religious background of this text. The *baojuan* texts thus appear to be essential scriptures of Jiangnan popular religion.

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[128] An important difference between the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* and the later texts consists in the inclusion in the latter of mentions of modern technology, such as trains, see e.g. ZCBJ, vol. 1, p. 607. This suggests that the currently performed recensions of the *baojuan* were edited in the twentieth century.

[129] *Wusheng bao'an baojuan*, p. 1a.

[130] Cai Limin, *Suzhou minsu caifenglu*, p. 111; ZCBJ, vol. 1, p. 585.

[131] The 1947 manuscript from Changshu contains a Buddhist invocation to the Wutong, running: "Namo Five Sages Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva" 南無五聖王菩薩摩訶薩, see ZCBJ, vol. 1, p. 585.

The story of the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* centres on the adventures of the "Five Saints," who, in fact, are reincarnations of Bodhisattva Huaguang 華光.[132] They were born in the family of the pious landlord Xiao 蕭員外, who lived in Wuyuan county of Huizhou 徽州 prefecture. While their father was an earthly person, their mother was in fact the transformed Sage Mother of Jiezhidu 蛣蜘度聖母, who descended on earth to take the place of the landlord's wife, a lady who did not worship the Buddha and other deities.[133] Her name is reminiscent of the word "spider" and hints at her demonic origins. The Sage Mother took the appearance of Lady Xiao, so that nobody realized she was in fact an incarnated immortal. The birth of the Five Saints was itself a miracle: the Sage Mother bore them for twenty-four lunar months and gave birth to a ball of flesh, which the landlord considered to be a demonic apparition and threw into a ditch.[134] The five brothers in the ball were rescued by the Bodhisattva Fire-King (Huoyanwang 火炎王), who helped them return to the Xiao family. They were given names with the meaning of the "Golden, Silver, Copper, Iron, and Precious Wheel Stores."[135] Since early childhood they developed extraordinary skills in martial arts, which they perfected after learning from the celestial immortal.

Trouble came when their mother suddenly disappeared, imprisoned in hell because she had engaged in cannibalism and thus caused the anger of celestial deities. The Five Saints rescued her with the help of Bodhisattva Guanyin. Later on, celestial deities ordered the Five Saints and their mother to live in the Fusang 扶桑 mythical land. The story reaches its apotheosis when Guanyin subjects water demons with the help of the Five Saints and their mother. She borrows a gigantic tree from them to build a pagoda on Lengqie Mountain in Suzhou, where the demons were imprisoned.[136] In return they were settled on that mountain (then renamed Shangfangshan), where they are worshipped as tutelary deities by the local people. Guanyin says:

> Grand Lady, if you give me this precious tree, I will bring you mother and sons to the happy land of Suzhou, where you will become deities. I will also

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132 *Wusheng bao'an baojuan*, p. 4a.

133 Her personal name differs in the various versions of the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager*.

134 On this frequent theme, see Shahar, *Oedipal God*.

135 金輪藏主、銀輪藏主、銅輪藏主、鐵輪藏主、寶輪藏主. In the 1947 version from Changshu, they have the same names, except for the fifth brother, who has the word "tin" 錫 in his name: ZCBJ, vol. 1, p. 586; also compare with the modern version: ZCBJ, vol. 1, p. 596.

136 This story of Guanyin saving Suzhou from demons bent on flooding it may originate in the drama, *City of Sizhou* (*Sizhou cheng* 泗洲城), which is quite popular in traditional Chinese theatre: Qi Senhua 齊森華, Chen Duo 陳多, and Ye Changhai 葉長海, eds., *Zhongguo quxue da cidian* 中國曲學大辭典 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997), p. 600.

recompense you with the seas of wine and mountains of meat, and so you will prosper for ten thousand years.
太郡，你若捨寶樹，我今帶你母子到蘇州福地為神，還你酒海肉山，萬載興隆。[137]

Throughout the history of texts devoted to the Wutong and their mother, the question of blood sacrifices and meat-eating is at the core of debates. Daoists asserted to have converted them to vegetarianism by the early Qing, but they have claimed victory too early.[138] The Changshu version of the *baojuan* (1947) tells that Taimu changed to vegetarianism, while her sons remained meat-eating deities.[139] The *baojuan* (and importantly the early version we have found) actually condone their meat-eating habits.

Several episodes in the *baojuan* narratives describe and justify actual practices of the Wutong cult in the Changshu area. For example, the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* tells about the establishment of small shrines for them, which in the past were very common in the areas around Suzhou (see figs. 13–14).[140] According to this text, such a shrine was first established in the garden of the Wang 王 family, after the Wutong had saved their daughter, Wang Suzhen 王素貞, from captivity at the hands of a mountain immortal. According to the Wutong's wishes, this altar should be only 3 *chi* 尺 high (around 1 metre) and have the depth of only one arrow. The text also explains that the Wutong will punish by fire those who disobey them; they threatened landlord Wang that they would burn his property if he did not fulfil his original vow of building a shrine and worshipping them. Therefore, the building of small shrines for Wutong was related to the fear of fire.[141] The verses in the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* say:

Five Saints went to Sichuan to look for their Mother,
Since that time [building] of small temples continues till now.
Venerating them with the "banquet" also started at that time.
Till present people praise the powers of the Five deities!
五聖四川尋母去，當傳小廟到如今。
款待花筵從此起，至今稱讚五神靈。[142]

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137 *Wusheng bao'an baojuan*, p. 26b.

138 Goossaert, "Daoism and Local Cults in Modern Suzhou."

139 ZCBJ, vol. 1, pp. 589–90; see also ZHBJ, vol. 1, pp. 68–75.

140 Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, p. 254, discusses the omnipresence of tiny Wutong shrines in pre-1949 rural Jiangnan, especially in sericulture areas.

141 For the association of Wuxian with fire in the earlier vernacular literature, see Cedzich, "The Cult of the Wu-t'ung/Wu-hsien in History and Fiction," p. 148.

142 *Wusheng bao'an baojuan*, p. 12b.

Fig. 13: A small temple of Wutong in Jinze 金澤 town, Qingpu 青浦 district of Shanghai, outside view (picture courtesy of Zhu Mingchuan 朱明川)

Fig. 14: A small temple of Wutong in Jinze town, Qingpu district of Shanghai, inside view (picture courtesy of Zhu Mingchuan)

The episode recounting the struggle and then the marriage of the Five Sages with the Five Princesses of the Iron Fans (Tieshan wu gongzhu 鐵扇五公主) of the Phoenix Mountain (Fenghuangshan 鳳凰山), daughters of the Sage Mother of the Jade Earring (Yuhuan Shengmu 玉環聖母), also features prominently in the *baojuan* text.[143] It explains the origins of the spouses of the Wutong, who are also worshipped together with their husbands. Besides, the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* tells that Jin Yuanzu 金元祖, the Seventh Minister (Qixiang 七相), also should be worshipped together with the Grand Dowager and her sons.[144] This text also mentions other local deities that are worshipped together on Shangfangshan:

> They also commemorated all the sage officials facing South,
> They protected the state[145] and governed the commoners.
> The temples facing south were built for them on the Southern Mountain,
> And all [sage] officials became proper deities there.
> Deities Liu, Li, Zhou, and Jin are all sacred,
> The temples of this mountain are all filled with the noise [of pilgrims].
> 又薦南朝眾聖職，匡扶社稷治黎民。
> 南山建造南朝廟，眾職坐位為正神。
> 劉李周金為神聖，滿山立廟鬧音音。[146]

This provides a textual justification for venerating local deities on the same altar as the Wutong and their mother.[147] The *baojuan* also justify the presence of two altars (meat offerings vs vegetarian) in the rituals and clarify the Wutong's relations with Guanyin. Indeed, *baojuan* like other Chinese religious narratives, often serve to explain the ritual.[148]

The main storyline of the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* has an early source, namely the novel *Journey to the South* (*Nanyouji* 南遊記) by Yu Xiangdou 余象斗 (late sixteenth century) that also tries to legitimize the Wuxian beliefs through a Buddhist

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143 Ibid., pp. 20a–21b.

144 See also ZHBJ, vol. 1, p. 74.

145 Literally "altars of earth and grain."

146 *Wusheng bao'an baojuan*, p. 30a.

147 After the persecution in the seventeenth century, the Wutong temple on Shangfangshan was turned into a temple for Jin the Chief Supervisor, see von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, p. 241.

148 Mark R. E. Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

appropriation of their myth and identity.[149] This novel is also noteworthy as it establishes the ritual foundations for the worship of Wutong's mother, Sage Mother Jizhituo 吉芝陀, who may have served as a prototype of Taimu. There are many similar episodes in this novel and the *baojuan*, and the textual filiation with this as well as other novels would deserve a separate study. There are also major differences between the *baojuan* and *Journey to the South*, which does not mention Shangfangshan at all. Thus, in the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* we have a combination of several narrative lines and motifs that can be traced to both written and oral sources. Connections with traditional novels are quite common in *baojuan* performed in Changshu: several texts, narrating the stories of deities, obviously use the episodes of such famous novels as the *Enfeoffment of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義) and *Journey to the West* dating back to the late sixteenth century (not to mention *baojuan* of entertaining "secular" contents that also circulated in Changshu).[150]

What is crucial to our argument is that the *baojuan* performed in Changshu do not hide the demonic origins and violent proclivities of the gods, but claim they have been redeemed by their filial piety. Besides other testimonies, the dubious nature of Wuxian/Wusheng is revealed in the connections between the stories of Wuxian and those of other rebellious deities. Nezha 哪吒, Sun Wukong 孫悟空, and Erlang 二郎 belong to the category of "the unruly gods," which usually break the strict hierarchy of Chinese popular pantheon; in terms of the Western religious theories they also may be defined as the tricksters.[151] The parallel with the Sun Wukong is especially important in the ritual context of telling scriptures performances in Changshu, as the Monkey Spirit propitiated there is often identified as Sun Wukong. Furthermore, like

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[149] Alternative title: *Huaguang tianwang Nanyou zhi zhuan* 華光天王南遊志傳. For the reprint of the Ming edition (printed in 1571 or 1631; British Museum, London), titled *Ke quanxiang Wuxian lingguan dadi Huaguang tianwang zhuan* 刻全像五顯靈官大帝華光天王傳, see *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小説集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), vol. 54, pp. 1–228; we are using the modern edited version: *Si youji* 四遊記 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), pp. 54–99. For the analysis of this novel, see Cedzich, "The Cult of the Wu-t'ung/Wu-hsien in History and Fiction," pp. 137–67; von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 217–20; Hou Hui 侯會, "Huaguang bianshen Huoshen kao: Mingdai xiaoshuo *Nanyouji* yuanliu chutan" 華光變身火神考 ——明代小説《南遊記》源流初探, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小説研究, 2008, no. 2, pp. 234–46. Chen Yongchao's "*Taimu baojuan* de wenben goucheng ji qi yishi zhishe" argues that this novel and the modern *baojuan* about Taimu have a common source in ritual songs of the early modern period, which have not survived.

[150] Rostislav Berezkin, "New Texts in the 'Scripture Telling' of Shanghu, Changshu City, Jiangsu Province: With the Texts Composed by Yu Dingjun as an Example," *Xiqu xuebao* 戲曲學報 (*Journal of Traditional Chinese Theater*) 12 (March 2015), pp. 101–40.

[151] Shahar and Weller, *Unruly Gods*.

the five pilgrims in the *Journey to the West*, the five brothers in the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* are guided and saved by Guanyin.

Besides, like the sixteenth-century novel, the *Baojuan of the Five Sages* attempts to differentiate the benevolent form of Wuxian from the originally illicit cult of the Wutong. This point of view influenced Yu Dingjun, who insists on distinguishing between Wuxian/Wusheng on the one hand and Wutong with their mediumistic séances on the other. Interestingly, he bases his argument that Wuxian is a benevolent deity on the authority of the novel *Journey to the South*.[152] However, as in other similar attempts at the "standardization" of Wutong on the part of literate ritual specialists, this identification does not seem to be very persuasive. The demonic nature of Wuxian/Wusheng is still obvious in the written texts of novels and *baojuan*, as well as in the folk rituals of Changshu. In *baojuan* texts their ferocious nature remains visible, as is their craving for "the mountains of meat and the seas of wine."

In short, the *baojuan* present the Wutong as powerful, potentially violent (like many if not most local gods in Jiangnan and elsewhere in the Chinese world), but kept in check by their mother and by Guanyin. The mechanism for this control of the gods is found at Shangfangshan, where the five brothers and their mother have been given a proper temple under the direct supervision of the Buddhist saviour symbolized by the pagoda. The *baojuan* justifies the pilgrimage by this relationship of subordination; this is also expressed by the Wutong exorcisms that end with the gods being sent back to Shangfangshan. The pilgrimage practices described in sections 1 and 3, and the domestic rituals discussed in section 4, which constantly refer to each other, do not express transgression and revolt from demons—as elite foes of the Wutong cult imagine—but integration in a higher order, based in the city of Suzhou, symbol of literate refinement, where moral values prevail.

Conclusions

Shangfangshan has been for centuries and remains today the vibrant centre of the Wutong cult that thrives in the whole Jiangnan area. Based on the stories, beliefs, and practices we could observe in rural and suburban areas of Suzhou, we have demonstrated that the cult today is grounded in the domestic worship of the Wutong as protective deities in charge of wealth, health, and marriage: this is its most common forms. Its rituals include exorcisms and pilgrimages to Shangfangshan, mediumistic practices of possession and prognostication, *baojuan* recitation of the gods' lives, and related vocal and string music. In the modern Changshu context, the pilgrimage to Shangfangshan is usually an extension of the private worship of the

[152] Yu Dingjun, "Jiangsu Changshu de jiangjing xuanjuan," p. 78.

Wutong and their mother, the Grand Dowager. It is likely that this pattern has deep historical roots, and that Shangfangshan developed after and on the basis of the domestic cults in the early modern period, although this must remain a hypothesis at this stage of our research. The pilgrimage is particularly important to the key actors of the cult, the spirit-mediums, who are sometimes enshrined there. It connects the various local Wutong shrines and specialists and has without a doubt contributed to the relatively homogenous liturgy and narratives of the Wutong throughout the region and its stability over time.

While the many temples devoted to the Shangfangshan gods that used to be common in urban contexts (notably Shanghai) have disappeared after 1949, the cult is still very active and links rural Jiangnan with its urban centre, Shangfangshan, close to downtown Suzhou. Our story is thus largely one of historical continuity, even though there were major changes, including the now disappeared Buddhist clerical involvement with Shangfangshan, or the attempts at modernizing the *baojuan* tradition. Indeed, most of the narrative (the lives and identities of the Wutong family members), visual, and ritual elements of the cult can be traced back to the late Qing and early Republican period sources, and many of them to earlier periods, around the Ming dynasty (or even earlier), when Shangfangshan rose to the centre of Wutong worship in the whole Jiangnan region. Indeed, many special terms in ritual practices of Changshu can be found in the sources of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Thus, the resilience of popular beliefs in the Suzhou area in spite of the state persecutions is remarkable.

Our approach and the wealth of data found in the course of fieldwork allow us to move beyond the established terms of the debate about these infamous deities, which consist of questioning whether the Wutong are essentially immoral, and to what extent the state/Confucian (as well as the less-often discussed Buddhist and Daoist[153]) attempts at taming and standardizing them have succeeded. As is clearly visible in modern sources, contemporary practices, ritual and narrative texts, the Wutong can be dangerous and kind at the same time; the ritual actions and the narratives recited fully acknowledge this ambiguity, which underpins the gods' power, and explain how the ritual means deployed allow people to successfully deal with it. In this regard, they are not fundamentally different from many other morally complex Chinese gods that are not usually discussed as "immoral."

Some of the members of the Wutong divine family are considered primarily beneficial (notably the Grand Dowager), and some potentially harmful (the five sons). Therefore, the Wutong can be invited and exorcised by the locals on different occasions.

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[153] Goossaert, "Daoism and Local Cults in Modern Suzhou," discusses the Daoist remaking of the Wutong during the early Qing.

Stories of the Wutong raping, or forcibly taking as wives young women, of the kind that abound in late imperial literary sources (and underline the literati's hate of the cult), can still be heard, but the moral understanding by locals is often quite different from that from literary sources, as it always was. This understanding is that the Wutong can heal them and help them succeed because their brutal life stories have made them powerful; their cravings (riches, sex) and qualities (filial piety) are those of normal human beings, but intensified. One needs the ritual tools of the mediums and *baojuan* performers, who activate the controlling forces of Taimu and Guanyin, to harness these very human impulses. We see no compelling reason to think this contemporary moral understanding has radically changed since the imperial times. The moral values of the Wutong are laid out in their vernacular scriptures and embodied by the mediums; they allow for the divinization of these women—and in some cases, men as well. Indeed, the gender dimension of the cult deserves much more attention than we have paid here.

Appendix 1: Texts Recited by a Performer from Kunshan on Shangfangshan on 9 December 2012 (6.00—12.00 a.m.)

Taimu baojuan 太姆寶卷
Yuhuang baojuan 玉皇寶卷
Dizang baojuan 地藏寶卷
Mulian baojuan 目蓮寶卷
Xuehu zhenjing 血湖真經
Shousheng baojuan 受生寶卷
Shousheng jing 受生經
Caishen baojuan 財神寶卷

Same performer and place, in December 2011:

Taimu baojuan
Yuhuang baojuan
Dizang baojuan
Xiaohai baojuan 小孩寶卷
Xingxiu baojuan 星宿寶卷
Yaoshi baojuan 藥師寶卷
Tudi baojuan 土地寶卷
Zhuangyuan baojuan 狀元寶卷

Appendix 2: List of *Baojuan* Texts Consulted for This Study

1. *Baojuan of the Family Hall of Five Sages* (*Wusheng jiatang baojuan* 五聖家堂寶卷), manuscript by Shen Yinlan 沈蔭蘭 dated 1908; Beijing Normal University Library
2. *Baojuan of the Five Sages Granting Peace* (*Wusheng bao'an baojuan* 五聖保安寶卷), dated 1913; Nanjing Library Rare Books Department, no. 09154
3. *Baojuan of Miraculous Response* (*Ganying baojuan* 感應寶卷 ; alternative titles: *Baojuan of the Family Hall of Five Sages* [*Wusheng jiatang baojuan*五聖家堂寶卷], *Baojuan of the Great Peace* [*Taiping juan* 太平卷]), dated 1947, manuscript in possession of Xiang Kunyuan 項坤元. Printed in ZCBJ, vol. 1, pp. 585–94
4. *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* (*Taimu baojuan* 太姥寶卷), manuscript by Hu Zhengxin 胡正興 of Zhuangjin 莊涇 village in Gangkou 港口 township, Zhangjiagang, undated, printed in ZHBJ, vol. 1, pp. 68–75
5. *Precious Scripture of the Great Mother of Shangfangshan* (*Shangfangshan Taimu baojing* 上方山太姆寶經), modern manuscript (undated?) of a medium from the Changshu area, published by Cai Limin in his *Suzhou minsu caifenglu*, pp. 111–23
6. *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* (*Taimu baojuan* 太姥寶卷), modern manuscript (undated) by a performer from the city of Changshu
7. *Baojuan of the Great Mother* (*Taimu baojuan* 太姆寶卷), modern manuscript (undated) by a performer from Zhoushi, Kunshan
8. *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager Saving the World* (*Taimu jiushi baojuan* 太姥救世寶卷), manuscript by a performer from the Chengxiang 城廂 town area of Taicang (dated to 1993)

The Wutong Cult in Modern and Contemporary Suzhou Area

(Abstract)

Rostislav Berezkin Vincent Goossaert

This article explores the living Wutong cult in the Suzhou area. In continuation with its long history, this spirit-possession cult still has fortune-bringing and exorcistic dimensions. The authors combine historical and ethnographic approaches to the Wutong beliefs with a focus on the pilgrimage to cult's centre at Shangfangshan (a sacred site in Suzhou) and the domestic worship of the Wutong in the Changshu area. This provides us with a perspective on this cult as built by ritual specialists and common believers. In both forms of worship, the *baojuan* storytelling is actively employed, and the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager* (transmitted as manuscripts) thus appears as a key scripture of local beliefs. With the analysis of textual and ethnographic evidence, we move beyond the established argument about these infamous deities, which consists of questioning whether the Wutong are essentially immoral, and to what extent the attempts at taming and standardizing them have succeeded. We uncover the ambiguity of the Wutong, who are presented as dangerous and kind at the same time in the local sources. The scriptures of the cult, notably the *Baojuan of the Grand Dowager*, acknowledge this ambiguity, which underpins the gods' power, and develop ritual means to deal with it.

Keywords: Wutong Suzhou baojuan (precious scrolls) illicit cults folklore folk beliefs

現當代蘇州地區五通信仰

（提要）

白若思　　高萬桑

本文分析近現代蘇州地區五通神信仰。這種古老的巫術活動在當地至今具有祈財與驅邪的功能。兩位作者結合歷史與民俗學角度來研究五通神信仰，以蘇州上方山朝聖，即古代五通神信仰中心，以及常熟地區私宅崇拜為主。這樣我們能結合研究神祇和普通信眾的看法。這兩種崇拜場合都出現寶卷講唱儀式，因此《太姆寶卷》抄本成為了當地民間信仰的經書。我們不沿襲傳統有關五通神研究的論點，即不討論五通是否邪神以及五通是否已被人馴服或標準化。我們致力解釋五通神信仰的歧義：他們在當地材料經常被刻畫為既危險卻又善良的地方神。在民間的五通經書特別是《太姆寶卷》，這種歧義並不罕見，它一方面強調神靈的法力，另一方面提供對付該神的儀式方法。

關鍵詞：　五通神　蘇州　寶卷　淫祀　民俗　民間信仰