

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Religion in the Folded City: Origami and the Boundaries of the Chronotope

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Abstract

In this article we rethink the chronotope approach by examining what happened to religious space-times in a Chinese urban development project that completely transformed what had once been five relatively rural townships. What happens to chronotopes when a place is so completely transformed? We focus on multiple chronotopic dimensions in the religious experience of those villagers whose families had long occupied this land, but who now live separated from their old neighbors, without their old livelihoods, having lost their old temples, and surrounded by new migrants who are generally wealthier and better educated. Building on recent anthropological work on chronotopes, coupled with insights taken from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, this article explores the complex interrelationships and workings of chronotopes through the idea of the fold. This approach reconsiders what the boundaries between chronotopes might look like—not necessarily straight lines that are difficult to cross, but more like the infinite inflections of curves as those curves intersect and interact with each other. Rather than thinking of chronotopes as structured wholes separated by clear boundaries—much as we also tend to think about “states,” “cultures,” or “ontologies”—folding allows us to reconceptualize the kinds of interactions that take place when one space-time touches another. We examine in particular three ways in which folding elucidates how chronotopic boundaries can work: they can make the distant near, separate inside from outside, and complicate the boundary by interdigitating.

Keywords: China; chronotope; urbanization; religion; spirit mediums; temples; folding; space-time

In her influential review article on the anthropology of time, Nancy Munn argued that time and space should not be treated as antithetical: “In a lived world, spatial and temporal dimensions cannot be disentangled, and the two commingle in various ways” (1992: 94). That is, time happens only in spaces, and spaces happen only over time. This idea was eventually popularized in anthropology as the study of “chronotopes,” especially after Keith Basso’s influential *Wisdom Sits in Places*

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(1996), which took the term from Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) work on the relationship between literary genres and chronotopes.

Taking these ideas as a starting point, our goal is to rethink some aspects of the chronotope approach through the idea of the fold. We will do this by examining what happens to religious space-times in Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP, 苏州工业园区), an urban development project that completely transformed what had once been five relatively rural townships on the eastern side of the city. The transformation of space was as drastic as possible: almost everything was bulldozed under the ground, including every farm, village, temple, and grave.¹ The urban engineers even forced most of the water underground, in this extremely wet extension of the Yangzi River delta where all transport through most of the twentieth century was by boat; it now flows through huge pipes. What remains on the surface runs in perpendicular grids as much as the newly created roads do. The earlier space is now invisible, and the city planners have designed a new urban region from scratch, following their vision of what a modern and global city should look like. It is now home to about a million people, including most of the roughly hundred thousand original rural residents, whom the local government resettled into large housing estates. Outside of those estates, it is largely a place of shining skyscrapers, high-end malls, university campuses, and high-tech businesses, all studded with expensive American and European coffeehouse chains.

What happens to time when space is so completely transformed? Or better, what happens to the chronotopes, to space-times? Munn presses us to keep our attention on the actual experiences of space-time as they are "continually being produced in everyday practices. People are 'in' a sociocultural time of multiple dimensions" (1992: 116). Our goal in this article is to focus exactly on those multiple chronotopic dimensions as they fold over each other in the religious experience of those villagers whose families had long occupied this land, but who now live in four-story walk-up apartments, separated from their old neighbors, without their old livelihoods, having lost their old temples, and surrounded by new migrants who are generally wealthier and better educated. This is a somewhat different usage than we see in most of the work discussing multiple chronotopes, and is intended to deal especially with the problems of how to conceptualize the dynamics of their interactions and the mechanisms of generating new chronotopes.

Public relations statements for the SIP government tend to favor the blank-slate modernity version of a chronotope. That is, they imagine an old landscape that was mired in the peasant past, with its inefficient transport, sloth-like economy, and unsophisticated people. The new one is instead at the forefront of world culture and the cutting edge of economic growth. Even after the bulldozers have had their way, however, that is far from the only chronotope in play. As soon as we begin to consider the lived experience of the residents—and here we focus primarily on those people who lived in the pre-SIP landscape—the relevant play of multiple chronotopes becomes far more vibrant.²

¹Of the hundreds of original temples, only one was spared, because bits of it ostensibly date back to the Southern Song Dynasty.

²Fieldwork took place between 2014, when we first learned of the temple we focus on here, and 2019, after which COVID-19 brought it to an end. Nearly all the work was conducted over summers, and involved both authors working jointly, usually conducting interviews and taking part in rituals together. Our primary interlocutors were the villagers who had been displaced by the urbanization process. We focused especially

Chronotopes and Folds

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope was a starting point for us because of the way it treats space and time together. For Bakhtin, every important literary genre could be characterized by its unique chronotope, as if each defined a separate ontological vision. As he defined it, the chronotope "expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space) ... spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (1981: 84). The idea became important in anthropological considerations of time especially after Keith Basso adapted it to Western Apache understandings of their geography in time: "The Apache landscape is full of named locations where time and space have fused... It is also apparent that such locations, charged as they are with personal and social significance, work in important ways to shape the images that Apaches have—or should have—of themselves" (1996: 62).

As in most of the anthropological work that followed, Basso pointed us, at least implicitly, toward two chronotopes: the Western Apache one that lay in the landscape and the stories it told for people, and a competing "Anglo-American" one told mostly through what counts as "history." We end up with an image of two space-times bouncing uncomfortably off each other, with little interaction. This turned out to be a common approach in the work that followed. For Michael Lambek, for example, there was a Sakalava (Madagascar) chronotope, which he describes sometimes as continuing its "half-life" in the present, in tension with a meta-narrative of "modernity" or simply "historicism" (2002: 244, 273; 2016). Safet HadžiMuhamedović also shows us primarily two chronotopes. One is a local, hybrid (Serb/Muslim/Guberti [Roma]) "sacroscape" based on traditional calendrical rites, and the other is an ethnically divisive and nationalist "ethnoscape" (2018). Each case juxtaposes a local/traditional chronotope against a modernist/nationalist/historicist alternative.

As scholars began to address the problem of multiple chronotopes more directly, they realized that such reductions to separate spheres could be too simple, even if analysis required some sort of simplification. In particular, they began to be interested in how the different chronotopes could co-exist and interact. This began with Bakhtin himself, who added a short section of "Concluding Remarks" to his essay, written thirty-five years after the bulk of it had originally been finished in 1937–1938 (1981: 243–58). In that section, the idea of the chronotope suddenly opens out far more broadly beyond the chronotope of each genre into a discussion of all kinds of cross-cutting chronotopes, from themes (for instance, roads, castles, thresholds) to positionalities (the author, the listener, or reader).

Some recent anthropological work has shown this empirically. For example, although Kristina Wirtz makes a heuristic simplification into just three chronotopes, her fine-grained analysis of dialogues shows how people are

(but not at all exclusively) on the local religious leaders, making contact with about sixty of them and interacting with some of them on numerous occasions. We also visited all the temples in the area, with frequent visits to the Gaodian Temple that we discuss here. We held additional interviews on numerous occasions with the Daoists at that temple, with the leadership of the SIP Daoist Association, with the Religious Affairs Bureau, and more occasionally with local government officials not involved with religion.

constantly shifting chronotopic perspectives, even from sentence to sentence. As she writes, “This kind of chronotopic juxtapositioning is what I want to highlight, not as an exceptional moment ... but as the very moment of mutually constituting those chronotopes in and through the poesis of their juxtapositions” (2016: 365). Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov asks the crucial question of how multiple chronotopes are structured in relation to each other, and suggests two primary mechanisms: change (meaning the attempt to replace one chronotope with another, or to falsify one with the other) and exchange (where each chronotope provides a kind of resource for the other) (2017: 9–10).

In line with this more recent work, it is thus not our intention to add yet another non-modern chronotope to the pile. Instead, we will explore the complex interrelationships and workings of chronotopes through the idea of the fold. We bring the idea of folding into the discussion to reimagine chronotopes as constantly interacting, interweaving, and reshaping one another. As we will suggest at the end, the broader significance of this approach is to dismantle and suggest alternatives to clearly bounded entities of all sorts, not just chronotopes but cultures, states, and ontologies as well.

In addition to the images of folding that our fieldwork suggests, we have drawn inspiration from two philosophical traditions: Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) phenomenology and Gilles Deleuze’s (1993) work on folding in Leibniz and the Baroque.³ When Merleau-Ponty invoked images of folding and layering, he was especially interested in how to understand perception without assuming a subject/object dichotomy as a starting point. He began from touch rather than sight, and especially from the idea of palpation (of one hand pressing on the other, for instance, or of two different people’s hands). The process, he said, creates a kind of “flesh,” experienced as a “coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body” (1968: 146). He goes on to write, “This pact between them and me according to which I lend them my body in order that they inscribe upon it and give me their resemblance, this fold, this central cavity of the visible which is my vision, these two mirror arrangements of the seeing and the visible, the touching and the touched, form a closebound system that I count on, define a vision in general and a constant style of visibility from which I cannot detach myself” (ibid.: 146). It is this process of coiling/layering/folding that creates us as subjects and objects, he claims, so that our “body is a thing of two leaves” (ibid.: 137), itself folded with the two leaves of the world.

Deleuze offered a somewhat different take on the fold, explained initially as an aspect of Leibniz’s understanding of the infinite (which led to his “invention” of calculus). Instead of beginning from the idea of a point (a minimal unit fixed in space and time) he highlights nodes of inflection, where every spot suggests an infinite number of tangents, and the focus is thus on the constant change of curves (that is, folds), rather than the stasis of lines. Thus, “A fold is always folded within a fold, like a cavern in a cavern” (1993: 6). And he concludes the book by telling us that even today, “We are discovering new ways of folding, akin to new envelopments, but we all remain Leibnizian because what always matters is folding, unfolding, refolding” (ibid.: 137). These considerations push us to reconsider what the boundaries between chronotopes might look like—not necessarily straight lines that are

³See Chamarette (2007), who also connects these authors.

difficult to cross, but more like the infinite inflections of curves as those curves intersect and interact.

Folding the New City

Let us begin with some quick ethnographic examples that led us to the idea of folding time/space. One day in July 2018 we were interviewing Uncle Yin, who was the “incense head” (香头) for one of the village temples that had been destroyed.⁴ Incense heads in this region are leaders of local religious communities, who do some combination of arranging important rituals, leading people on pilgrimages, and managing village temple affairs. Many (but not Uncle Yin) also serve their deities as spirit mediums. Yin’s temple had honored Suiliang Wang (随粮王), a deity well-known locally but not influential beyond the immediate region.⁵

On this day he mentioned that Suiliang Wang’s grave still existed, just over the line into the next township to the north (although by that time both former townships had already been dissolved and merged into a single urban administrative unit [社区]). We offered transportation, and he happily agreed to show us. When he finally identified the spot, however, there was nothing but an unmarked empty lot surrounded by the new buildings of the SIP. The grave—already a burial of a dead man, which folded his body into the earth—had been buried even more thoroughly, folded yet again into the urban infrastructure, so that no visible trace remained above the ground.

Downcast and angry, Yin then offered to take us to Chefang town, which had been the center of his now-destroyed township, in order to show us a temple to Suiliang Wang that he assured us still stood. Chefang town was right at the edge of the expansion of the SIP. The town’s buildings stood mostly in ruins, with crumbling facades and salvageable materials like windows ripped out. Some still had people living in them, and nothing new had yet been constructed. The older space had been largely destroyed, and the promise of a new one was never quite realized; it remained like this for the entire duration of our fieldwork. It was a chronotope of limbo, ruins seemingly outside time, with only the hope of a future salvation, ever postponed. Yin led us on foot through the devastation for about fifteen minutes until we finally stopped at the site of the temple. Again, we found nothing but rubble and Yin’s conviction that this sacred site, like the grave, had been folded into the ground, lost in the screeching sounds from surrounding factories.

In 2016, Auntie Lin—the spirit medium for a different and larger destroyed temple dedicated to Suiliang Wang—told us what had happened to the statue-bodies from her temple. In the years after the villages were destroyed (beginning around 2005 in this part of SIP), people built a set of small temporary buildings to house all their deities. They knew that the SIP planners had agreed (unusually for China) to include some new religious infrastructure, including two large new Daoist temples charged with housing all the local deities (土地神), whose village temples had been crushed under the ground. Our primary research site was one of these

⁴All names are pseudonyms. We use “uncle” and “auntie” here as terms of address for incense heads because that is typical in Chinese, and those are the terms we usually used in practice.

⁵Suiliang Wang appears to be a local variant of the regionally more widespread Jin Zongguan (Huang 2017).

temples, called the Gaodian Temple (高垫庙), named after a destroyed village that had stood nearby. That village had an important temple to Suiliang Wang, the one that Auntie Lin served, and for that reason the Daoist in charge of the new temple chose Suiliang Wang as their primary deity.

The temporary altars crowded together near where the new temple was being built. It was less convenient for people than walking a few minutes to their village temple, but this shanty town of the gods also had some advantages, like the pleasure of the much larger crowds that gathered on important worship days, and the possibility of burning incense to other deities.⁶ The new temple finally opened with a great ceremony in 2014, and it did indeed have statues for most local gods they had identified, carefully carved and lined up neatly along all the sides of the large temple. From the Daoists' point of view, the small, dirty, and crudely shaped statues from the village temples (now in the temporary altars) no longer had a purpose, and late one night they buried them all—around 1,500 statues according to Auntie Lin—at an unmarked site near the temple, and they bulldozed the old shanty town of temporary temples.

Auntie Lin's images were destroyed as well, and all she had left afterwards were photographs of the originals, which she kept on her altars. She had doubts about whether the Daoists performed the proper rituals when they buried the gods, in part because she knew intimately how those gods felt. She was a spirit medium, so Suiliang Wang could cause her to experience what he experiences. At first, she refused to talk about it. "If I tell you," she said, "you'll have to dig them up." Finally, however, she relented, and gave us a claustrophobic description of how it felt to be buried alive, with the dirt clogging your nostrils and mouth, the clammy rain making you shiver through the winter, and the summer sun cracking your skin. Suiliang Wang (and his wife and sons) may have been buried, but they could still make themselves present from under the ground. This is a crucial feature of foldings: the possibility of unfolding again, even if the unfolded thing is sometimes altered, like an uncrumpled sheet of paper where the creases remain visible.

The idea of the fold also appealed to us because of the ways that local people will often fold the tin-dusted paper money (锡箔) that they burn for the spirits (Hou 1975; Wagner 2014). While we never heard anyone use a folding metaphor for what was happening to the land around us, origami was everywhere. Paper spirit money is usually sold in flat stacks, and, after being offered to the spirits, is burned in designated incinerators at temples (or in the open for spirits outside of temples, like ancestors). Worshippers fold them into various shapes of golden or silver ingots, cubes, or intricate flowers and pagodas before burning them (see [image 1](#)). The effect is even stronger if they have been folded by a spirit medium, or while reciting sutras. Who does the folding and how it is done plays a role in their efficacy.

The discussions of folding in Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze are highly abstract, with neither suggesting in any concrete way how to apply their ideas to empirical cases like buried statues/gods. Our analysis will try to show how their suggestions about folding can usefully illuminate the multiple chronotopes at play in the SIP. We propose three kinds of mechanisms where the idea of folding reveals important processes.

⁶We do not have space to explore the reasons why these forms of religion remain important to people, in spite of decades of repression, which has sometimes been severe. We will note only that this region is not unusual in manifesting the importance of local religions in China. See, for example, Cao 2011; Chau 2005; Fan and Chen 2016; Ng 2020; and Weller and Sun 2010.



Image 1. Folding paper ingots while reciting sutras into microphones, Chengong Ci. Photo by authors, 2018.

First, folding can make distant things (in space-time) come near to each other, the way folding a piece of paper can cause two distant points to touch; our primary example of this is spirit mediumship. Second, folding creates an inside and an outside where none had existed before, as the brief discussion of Merleau-Ponty implied; for this, our main case will be one of the spirit medium altars that was folded into the new Daoist temple. Third, folding—as suggested by Deleuze’s imagery of folds within folds—allows us to explore the fractal complexities that can occur at the boundaries, in this case the boundaries between alternate chronotopes; we will discuss this through another altar at the Daoist temple, which shows the complex relationships between the altar’s adherents’ understandings of space and time, and those of officially sanctioned Buddhism, of the Daoist priests in the temple, and of government officials and urban planners.

Making the Distant Near

The first way in which folding clarifies the relations among chronotopes is in making the distant near, bringing together chronotopic worlds that would otherwise be separated. The shortest path between two points on a plane is a straight line, but

we can create a far shorter path by folding the plane. We can even bring the two points together until they touch. Most Chinese deities were once living humans. People say, for instance, that Suiliang Wang was a Ming (or sometimes Song) Dynasty official managing transport on the Grand Canal. In one sense, his death and burial (ostensibly in the erased tomb that Uncle Yin took us to see) made him increasingly chronotopically distant as the years passed.

Nevertheless, in our research area, spirit mediums often allow a temporary closing of the chronotopic gap.⁷ Michael Lambek has already invoked precisely the idea of folding to describe this in Madagascar: “Sakalava historicity is neither strictly cyclical and reversible nor strictly linear and irreversible, but folded (like an accordion, the favored instrument to draw the ancestors who lived during the colonial period). The present remains beholden to and in conversation with a steadily accumulating past” (2016: 320).⁸

The SIP created a distance between the village past and the high-rise present. Its residents, however, keep the conversation with the past alive through folding. In this section we will highlight the role of spirit mediums in temporarily closing chronotopic gaps.⁹ Spirit mediums subvert boundaries by nature (the past and the present, the buried and the living), quite obviously including their ability to cross between chronotopes. It would be even more accurate to say that they rework boundaries in a way very much like what happens when two points come together on a folded sheet of paper. The medium herself occupies that spot where the two sides touch, allowing us to hear directly from the spirits.

We worked mostly in the southernmost part of the SIP, in what had been a single township with a population of about twenty thousand. During the research years, we made contact with sixty-six incense heads, the majority of whom also serve as spirit mediums. Even this number is far from complete, because on major festival days we were always able to see new mediums we had not yet met. That is, spirit mediums are commonplace. Although there is no way to gather concrete evidence about past numbers of mediums, many people told us that the numbers had been increasing ever since the village temples were destroyed. “When the gods have no homes,” several people told us, “they have to take our bodies.”

One of the more dramatic episodes we saw took place on a hot summer day in 2016, in the basement of the Gaodian Temple. The basement housed a set of five large Buddhist statues, with a reclining Sakyamuni as the centerpiece. Those images were there because they had been lodged in a large Buddhist temple that was torn down. The Religious Affairs Bureau expected the new temple to make space for them as part of the promise to take in all the local deities, but the Daoists could not bring themselves to put these Buddhist images in the main temple spaces, thus relegating them to the basement.

It was a major festival day, and so the temple was full of worshippers. Followers of incense heads affiliated with these Buddhist deities had hired a sutra-chanting group to read scriptures (宣卷) in the basement. While that group was taking a break, we heard a sudden commotion as one of the primary incense heads for Sakyamuni—a

⁷One could understand these mechanisms as examples of memory, mimesis, and metaphor in making things count as the same (see Seligman and Weller 2019).

⁸For recent examples of spirit mediumship in Taiwan and China, see Lin (2015) and Ng (2020).

⁹Note that the continuations and revivals of ritual performance are similar examples of folding, which we lack the space to discuss here.

middle-aged woman who worked as a cleaning lady—suddenly began singing in a loud, expansive, and dominating voice, taking a broad stance with dramatic gestures reminiscent of local opera performance. It was Sakyamuni, and he was angry. He demanded that people in the large crowd that was gathering immediately go upstairs and outside to the main incense pot in the temple complex and make offerings to him there. Most of them complied. Meanwhile, the sutra-singing group was ready to return, but could not interrupt the god and just waited respectfully by the side.

When the crowd returned from offering incense, Sakyamuni increased his ire, demanding that his followers find an appropriate space for him. “I am Sakyamuni! I am the Buddha! What is one such as I doing in this dark basement? Why is my statue-body not above ground? I am far greater than any of those little locality gods (土地神). How dare you treat them with more respect than me?” And so he continued for many minutes, until a follower was finally able to convince him to leave the medium, and she came out of her trance. Sakyamuni had been gone for well over two millennia, his local temple had been obliterated for over a decade, and its village and surrounding township were no longer even names on a map. Nevertheless, the medium’s body allowed him to be urgently present and to voice one of the many tensions folded into the Gaodian Temple through the process of urban construction.

Two years later we watched a different medium in another part of the basement. A group of four women was reciting scriptures at a table in front of a statue of Guanyin, the bodhisattva who is one of the most widespread and important deities in the Chinese pantheon. This time, one of the women suddenly stood up and began to sing. In daily conversation she spoke with a kind of confident authority, but this was Guanyin’s voice, not hers; she sounded somber and sad. “Thank you all for coming! Thank you for preparing this for me on my birthday!” One of the followers quietly asked Guanyin about the health of a friend, who was in the hospital, and Guanyin promised to try to help. Then, as Guanyin continued to sing, she became increasingly emotional, her voice broken by sobs. She scolded her followers, demanding to know why they have done so little for her, and why they have not found a suitable temple for her. The most senior of the followers quietly tried to explain how hard they had been trying, but Guanyin would not be mollified.

And then, in a flash, weeping, tearful Guanyin was gone, and the medium’s voice was brash and confident. It soon became clear that her body had become another locally important and powerful goddess, Taimu (太姥), mother of the infamous Wutong (五通) gods and thus matriarch of a group of deities that had been repressed for centuries as illicit and immoral (Chen 2018; Guo 2003; von Glahn 2004). Taimu’s body language was different too—swaggering and larger than life. Even her accent changed to something reminiscent of a Shanghai gangster. “Don’t you worry! I’ll have a little talk with Guanyin and fix everything up. It’ll be fine!”

Each of these deities folded together multiple chronotopes in addition to that of the dark, loud and smoke-filled temple basement on a festival day. Each had his or her own quite different history and set of connotations as an important deity. Nevertheless, those associations were probably less salient for people than the memories of more recent chronotopes: the village temples in which the specific materializations of these deities had lived before urbanization. It is worth remembering that a statue of a Chinese god/goddess is not a symbol or a representation of the deity. It *is* the deity, materialized in a particular body through the techniques of the carver, animated by rituals to “open the eyes,” and fed through the offerings of followers. Nearly every village temple had at least one

affiliated spirit medium who was a vessel for one or several deities. At least three chronotopes thus folded together at these moments of possession: the broad understandings of these gods as generalized deities with their own histories, the specific understandings of them and their mediums as part of village social lives, and the post-urbanization moment in the basement of the Gaodian Temple. For at least two of the deities, there was also an imagined future time and space where they would be worshipped in places more appropriate to their status.

By instantly switching from one deity to another across their different timespaces, the spirit medium's body is also an inflection point for different chronotopes. By bringing all of these chronotopes together at once, by allowing the contradictions between these chronotopic worlds to become directly apparent, the deities were able to comment indirectly on the entire complicated process of urbanization, which had brought both new benefits for people (including the temple itself) and a series of injustices. Note the etymology of "complicated," which comes from the Latin for "folded together" (*com- plicare*). Here, the complication takes the form of condensations of multiple chronotopes, pleats and replications (both also from the same Latin "folding" root) that bring together more than one time-space.

Creating Insides and Outsides

Following the same Latin root, a second way in which folds reveal how multiple chronotopes relate to each other might be called "implication" (folding in), along with its unfolded partner, "explication." Folds not only can make the distant near; they also create insides and outsides. The embryonic fold, for example, is a crucial early stage where the flat disc of the early embryo folds and ultimately creates the beginnings of our bodily differentiations, separating our physical inside from our outside. Every pocket is another kind of fold in which all kinds of things can be hidden or stored and sometimes retrieved.

Merleau-Ponty wrote about how we develop a sense of subject and object, and how we might begin to see past that distinction by understanding perception as a kind of mutual enfolding in an experienced world, in which we are both inside and outside at the same time. Thus he wrote that "the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside" (1968: 144). That is, by abstracting away from the direct visual or tactile experience of another person, we fold off a subject from an object. We create an illusory pocket of an "inside" self and an "outside" other. We have just seen this, for example, in the cases of spirit mediums, whose subjectivity is formed in the process of othering themselves. Their ability to speak through the other time-space of gods is what creates them as subjects, rather than reflecting a pre-existing subjectivity.

Most of the village temples that have now been lost were also pockets of a sort, and their hidden lives have continued in surprising ways. Given the history of campaigns against "illicit" cults in this region, which go back to the late Ming Dynasty (Wang 2007), temple destruction and rebuilding was a constant. People often built new temples cheaply and in ways that did not make them obviously identifiable from the outside. The pace of this cycle of political destruction and rebuilding increased in the twentieth century and peaked with the mass destructions of the Socialist Education Movement (1963–1966) and the early Cultural Revolution years (1966–1970).

Even after things began to open up again in the 1970s, various moments of local and national political pressure meant that local officials tore down many temples multiple times, only to have people reconstruct them again. With urbanization, however, the cycle could not continue, because the villages themselves no longer existed, and because there was no more rural open space on which to build.

People initially responded by returning to burn incense at the sites where their old temples had been folded into the ground, even if those were now factories or office buildings. Sometimes, before all the land was filled, they rebuilt their temples. When we interviewed a leading official from the Religious Affairs Bureau, who had helped craft the policies of temple destruction, he told us that their original plans for the SIP had no space at all for religion, because they wanted to build what they viewed as a modern city. Nevertheless, all that chaotic incense burning everywhere, plus the fact that after a few years he had torn down far more temples than originally existed (because people kept rebuilding), forced him to reconsider. Building the Gaodian temple was part of his solution to provide a path forward to people while staying within a politically acceptable vision of what religion should be.

When building new village temples became completely untenable, some incense heads responded with creative use of other spaces that avoid the authority of the Daoist and political hierarchies. Altars are now folded into storage areas in the new apartment complexes, sometimes into disused boats (of which there are many left over from the days when all transport was by water), and even into parts of the new Gaodian Temple itself.

Those informal spaces in the Gaodian Temple are what first attracted our attention. The temple itself has a typical layout for a large temple: there are three large halls aligned on the central axis: an entrance hall with a guardian deity, a middle hall for the main deity (Suiliang Wang), and a rear hall for the Jade Emperor (as is usual for Daoist temples today). Four narrow buildings line the edges of the rectangular temple complex, with two on each side. Those narrow buildings contain new statues of all the old village gods. While those buildings define the official space, the temple is nevertheless riddled with what we might see as small folds in space-time, pockets of alternatives to the official temple, where incense heads have managed to take some space for themselves. There were two such altars in a room to the left of the main entrance hall, and another one in the room to its right. Another sat in the space underneath a staircase that leads from behind the Jade Emperor Hall in the back to a basement area. Still more were in the basement itself. Yet another occupied half of a small building just outside the main temple compound; that building's other half is a Buddhist Sutra Recital Hall, which we will discuss further below. More minor ones exist as paintings, some concealed in basement broom closets, and others hidden among the more official images.

As an example, let us look more closely at the altar in the storage area under the staircase. It housed a large crowd of deities, jostling against each other in the cramped and dark space. Its original temple served three neighboring small villages in the northeastern part of what used to be Chefang Township. Of all the informal altars hidden in pockets of the Gaodian Temple, this was one of only two that had managed to preserve the original statues from their old village temple (see [image 2](#)).

One day in 2018, sitting on benches just outside their altar, we asked Auntie Feng—the primary incense head and spirit medium for the altar—and a group of about a dozen followers how they had managed to preserve their original deities when so many hundreds of others had been buried. Auntie Feng herself was just coming out of



Image 2. Altar in the storage area under the staircase in Gaodian Temple. Photo by authors, 2019.

a trance (where Guanyin had again berated people for not finding a better space to honor her, much like what we described in the previous section), so several others led the conversation at first.

They said they knew in advance that the Daoists planned to destroy all the old statues. “So many of the ‘daughters’ were getting possessed at that time,” one told us, “how could we not know?” Many people with a special relationship to deities are understood to be their sons or daughters, and all spirit mediums consider themselves as such. We looked around the group of women and asked how many of them are daughters. Five of them raised their hands in addition to Auntie Feng. Forewarned by their gods, Auntie Feng used a connection through one of her followers to find space for their images in a Buddhist temple, for which they paid the temple a fee of RMB 66,000 (roughly US\$10,000, a significant sum for them). That temple was very far from where they lived, however, so when the Gaodian Temple was being built in 2011 they paid another fee—RMB 100,000 (roughly US\$15,000) this time—to the Daoist managing the temple for rights to the space under the staircase.¹⁰ While the other “pocket” altars folded into the temple generally were not able to preserve their original statues, they all used similar mechanisms to gain control of temple space. And all of them regularly unfolded themselves on festival days, from the first and fifteenth of every lunar month to the birthdays of their primary deities.

It is worth remembering as well that income for a temple like this comes especially from local people sponsoring rituals. Thus, compromising with the more influential incense heads also served the broader interests of the Gaodian Temple and others like

¹⁰That Daoist was no longer affiliated with the temple by the time of our fieldwork, and no longer living in Suzhou. Rumor was that he was fired for accepting fees like this, but we cannot confirm it and he was not willing to be interviewed.

it by ensuring a steady stream of revenue. Or so it seemed, at least, until 2019, when those altars that had been folded into small pockets became folded still further, so that people lost access. Without warning, the Daoists moved all of them into the basement, which they then permanently padlocked.

The altar under the staircase was no exception. As we got to that part of the temple early in the morning in 2019, we saw Auntie Feng and a couple of her followers pushing and yanking hard on the basement doors, trying to see if they would give way so they could offer incense. When that failed, we all walked systematically around the building jiggling and tugging on each of the windows in the hopes that one had been left unlocked. And one had! The five of us clambered down the drop to the floor. Auntie Feng and her two followers set about cleaning and then worshipping at the altar where their statues had been moved. The two anthropologists, feeling like truant school children, kept an eye out for Daoists who might discover us. Meanwhile, another incense head and his wife could be seen peering in a window on the other side. His hidden altar had also been exiled to the basement, so we unlocked the window for them, and they made offerings to their own statues. We snuck out again, undiscovered, but rarely found the windows open again.

Later that summer, we ran into the group again on Guanyin's birthday, one of the major events of the year. People packed into the temple courtyards, and the Daoists were preparing a large ritual to be held at the side altar dedicated to Cihang Daoren (慈航道人), widely understood to be a Daoist version of Guanyin. We were standing off to the side of the courtyard, talking to the head of the SIP Daoist Association. One of the youngest Daoists came toward us at the run, and the director asked what was wrong. Puffing from the exertion, the young man explained that the group from the altar that had been under the staircase was demanding that their statue of Guanyin be released from the basement. "They wouldn't take no for an answer, so I finally had to run away! I don't know what to do! They're going to chase me again!" The director scowled and sent him off to deal with it somehow.

In fact, a few of the Guanyin statues from the basement prison had been temporarily released to enjoy the official ritual, but only those belonging to incense heads that the temple managers found relatively tractable. Auntie Feng and her followers were certainly not in that group. We ran into them again a few minutes later, as we walked down the rear staircase that used to house their informal altar. Once again, they were pounding on the basement door, hoping for a way in, but this time the defenses were too strong. Soon, the young Daoist appeared again and was immediately buttonholed by one of the followers. Her strategy alternated between angry demands ("How dare you leave Guanyin locked in the basement?") and abject supplication ("I'm begging you, please, please let her out!"). He tried to take the stern line that his superiors had commanded but was again unable to take the pressure and galloped off to hide from them once more. Guanyin remained locked away.

The events of 2019 created a fold within a fold. The first set of folds dated back to 2011, when the temple was being constructed and the incense heads with the most capacity occupied less visible corners of the temple space. None of their informal altars were visible to a casual visitor. Folded into these hidden pockets, the altars nevertheless periodically unfolded on ritual days when people came to burn incense and often to consult with the mediums who would stand by their altars. In 2019, however, the Daoist managers of the temple had folded these altars even deeper into the temple by imprisoning them in the basement and not allowing any of the followers to have access—like pockets that have been sewn shut, and like the gods they had buried earlier.

The Daoists also began trying to stop the accordion folds of spirit mediums by physically removing anyone in trance. A few days earlier we heard of a fistfight in the hall dedicated to Cihang Daoren/Guanyin as we were approaching the temple. The fight was over by the time we got there, but four “daughters” of Guanyin we found there explained to us that there were two issues. First, while this group had not managed to enfold their own altar into the temple, they had hidden a set of Guanyin’s clothes from their old temple behind the Daoists’ new statue. The priests had just removed them, after having ignored them for many years. Second, the eldest of the group (a woman in her late seventies) had become possessed, with Guanyin again complaining about ill treatment by the Daoists. This time, the priests tried to remove her physically, but her equally aged husband tried to intervene and protect her, thus causing the fight.

On Guanyin’s birthday that year, the Daoists were actively patrolling to try to abort any spirit possessions. Nevertheless, we saw Suiliang Wang possessing a medium, crying out “Save me, save me!” That is, save his statue-body from its exile in the basement. Finally, someone suggested to each of us separately that no one would get possessed near the official Cihang Daoren/Guanyin altar, because all the Daoists were there for the ritual. Instead, she told us to go to the official Taimu altar, which was on the opposite side of the courtyard. There we saw a large group of women chanting scriptures just outside the window, since the hall was too narrow to hold everyone. Before long Taimu appeared through a medium, as the singers fell silent to watch. Taimu began in a good mood, showering blessings on people and bringing Keping up to bow at the altar. Within a few minutes, however, her mood changed, and Guanyin took over the possession. She began to lament the situation in the temple, entreating Taimu for help and saying how much she was suffering. Her words were interrupted by her weeping, until she was so wracked with sobs that she could no longer speak. She collapsed onto a chair by the wall and the medium slowly came out of the trance, her cheeks still wet from tears.

The newly constructed temple is easily represented in two dimensions, as on a blueprint. Such a representation, however, would completely miss its folded pockets, which are often invisible, opening up only on ritual occasions. Similarly, simply adding another dimension of time also misses the folds of past and future time that can suddenly impinge on the present through spirit mediums. We have multiple chronotopes that shift and interact with each other. Even after the hidden altars became still more invisible and inaccessible by being locked in the basement, the bulldozed villages, buried deities, and crushed temples continued to unfold periodically. Those things that were folded inside retain their potential for release, even as the forms and implications of the hidden changed over time.¹¹ As Merleau-Ponty suggested, we see how these folds shape both spirit mediums and gods as subjects, even as they shape the temple or the city itself as objects.

Interfolding

The third form of folding is multiple (Latin: *multi-* -*plus*, many folds; also, the less Latinate “manifold”) and interdigitated. In this form, various chronotopes are not completely walled off from each other, as if they required a kind of epoché to move

¹¹One could also compare this with the concept of sideshadowing, as developed in Shohet (2021).

from one to the other. Instead, each penetrates the other in ways that maximize contact. This kind of effect is especially common in biological systems where it is useful to have as much interaction as possible in a relatively small space, and yet to maintain separation. For example, this is the way leaves and roots ramify to maximize contact with sunlight and needed resources, alveoli in the lungs create an enormous surface area for the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, or the tiny folds of microvilli within the larger folds of villi within the still larger folds of the intestines maximize the body's intake of nutrients. In a way, the folding is mutual, with folds of sunlight, soil, air, and food interdigitating with the leaves, roots, alveoli, and villi.

Another informal altar in the Gaodian Temple demonstrates multiplying interactions in a complex field of various chronotopes of Daoist temple managers, Buddhists pursuing paths of officially approved orthodoxy, Communist religious planning officials, and followers of a spirit medium. This particular altar puzzled us at first, because it was in a separate building that featured large black Chinese characters on red backgrounds proudly invoking Amitabha Buddha (阿弥陀佛), and it housed a Buddhist sutra chanting group. This building stands just outside the main temple complex; the grounds include many structures beyond the temple proper, like the offices of the SIP Daoist Association and the residences of some of the Daoists. What was such a strictly Buddhist-looking space doing under the noses of the Daoist temple managers, who are normally concerned to keep the religions as far apart as possible?

The answer goes back to the Stone Guanyin temple in Upper Clear River, one of the now-destroyed villages.¹² Knowing that the bulldozers would be coming, Guanyin spoke through her powerful local medium, a woman named Auntie Huang. The goddess declared that a local man named Uncle Qi needed to serve the goddess and the temple as an incense head. Uncle Qi had never been particularly devout, although he would burn incense in the old village temple if he had time. This was one of several cases we know of when a deity actively chose a man to represent a village temple as the relocation crisis loomed. These men were older, literate, and relatively well-connected; they also generally had strong personalities. The deities recognized that such a leader would be necessary if the temple or its gods/statues were to be saved.

Uncle Qi took his job seriously. Like the handful of other men in this position, he did not dare challenge a request the deity made directly to his face. His first step, similar to some other villages that faced temple demolition, was to protect the temple's statues by housing them in a large Buddhist monastery. This monastery was too far away, though, and people were unhappy with the solution. Uncle Qi also pursued a bolder path: he went directly to the leadership of the local Religious Affairs Bureau. As he tells it, he and a younger man from the village paid about thirty visits to government offices to try to negotiate a solution.

One top official there, who was crucial in shaping the religious arrangements in the SIP, including the construction of the Gaodian Temple, offered to help, but only if they pursued what he considered a more properly orthodox Buddhist path. If they would create a Buddhist sutra recitation group (念佛堂), he promised, he would find them a space to meet; they could also place the statues from their village temple there.

¹²The name of the temple stems from what was once a stone statue of the deity. It was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution and eventually replaced by a clay statue, which was also destroyed. The current statue was carved from camphor wood in the late 1990s.



Image 3. Village men learning to recite sutras, Stone Guanyin Transitional Temple, ca. 2010. Photo courtesy of Master Han at Gaodian Temple.

Uncle Qi, Auntie Huang, and many others from the village agreed to this arrangement. They brought in a young man from a monastery to teach them how to do this, since none of them had any experience and quite a few were illiterate (see [image 3](#)).

In 2012, a few months after the Gaodian temple opened, the Religious Affairs official kept his promise by compelling the Daoists at the Gaodian Temple to give up a large room with an attached courtyard they had originally intended to use as their office. This official had power over the entire religious infrastructure of the SIP, and the Daoists had little choice but to accede. Because the villagers had this official's blessing, this is the only one of the informal altars that did not have to pay a large fee to use space in the temple. The room is arranged as a typical sutra recitation hall, with a very simple altar at one end, and rows of kneelers set up behind. The villagers raised funds to roof up the courtyard to house the statues from the original Stone Guanyin temple.

The Religious Affairs official takes credit for the construction of the one Buddhist temple, two Buddhist sutra recitation groups, and two Daoist temples in the SIP. He was the one who worked with the original urban plan that called for no religious structures, but later became convinced that they had to provide some kind of outlet for people's spiritual needs. He claimed not to care if this took a Buddhist or a Daoist form (although he uses a notably Buddhist name in some social media), and thus promoted both Buddhist sutra recitation groups and the construction of Daoist temples. He opposed the "chaotic" nature of the old village worship and spirit mediumship and saw either institutional Buddhism or Daoism as a path toward his goals of rationalization, standardization, and accountability to the state. For him,

the deal with the followers of the Stone Guanyin temple was a chance to push people toward what he considered a better path.¹³

Note how much interfolding there already is among chronotopes in this story. The Religious Affairs official, championing a kind of Weberian-modern chronotope of progress and rationality, reports that he had to adapt his thinking, and ultimately the entire urban plan for the SIP, due to pressure from the relocated villagers. At the same time, he managed to push some of the villagers onto a far different Buddhist path than they would have considered before. Thus, the very different chronotopes of villagers and Communist urban and religious planners remain separate, but thoroughly fold into each other. Furthermore, this process folded a Buddhist space into a Daoist temple, and this space remained open and active even after the Daoists decided to ban anything Buddhist from the temple itself. The entire place, together with a patriotic site that commemorates a war hero, is also folded inside a community park, packing it neatly into the urban planners' modernizing chronotope.

The process of interfolding soon got more complicated still. The initial village sutra recitation group attracted dozens of people. They may have begun initially purely from pragmatic considerations, paying the price that the state demanded for them to rehouse the statues from their village temple. For many, however, sutra recitation soon became a worthy end in itself, at least as important as caring for their village deities. The group gradually gained in skill, many took the first level of Buddhist vows ("taking refuge," 皈依), some went on to take more demanding vows, and many paid for the expensive black robes (海青) that devotees typically wear while they chant. It also began to attract nonlocal residents in the relocation housing complexes. According to Uncle Qi, membership grew to about two hundred within a few years (although only forty to fifty would show up for a typical weekly session).

Nevertheless, by the time we met the main players on Guanyin's birthday in 2018, a major cleavage had opened up. While Uncle Qi focused on cultivation with the Buddhist group, Auntie Huang's spirit mediumship grew with the Stone Guanyin altar as the base. On that day Uncle Qi was sponsoring a ritual for the goddess in a room in the main temple, which he had rented for the day from the Daoists. He told us not to go to the altar in the sutra recitation building because they were conducting an inappropriate ritual, one that was not strictly Buddhist and thus should not take place in that building. We went anyway, of course, to find Auntie Huang running her own ritual in front of the Stone Guanyin altar. Various followers of each group also took the opportunity to speak ill of the other group.

The sutra recitation group under Uncle Qi's leadership grew increasingly literate and increasingly male, and people like Auntie Huang felt marginalized. After all, Auntie Huang was respected and well-known as a spirit medium. As with all spirit mediums in this region, she served because the deity demanded it and would destroy her health if she did not accede. She ignored Uncle Qi's wishes, and the original united front that the Stone Guanyin deity had created—choosing Auntie Huang as the

¹³The official describes his role in the process very much as a rational actor. We had little access to him beyond formal interviews but note that such a presentation of self is completely consistent with the modernist and rationalizing point of view he championed in religious policy.

medium and Uncle Qi as the incense head—broke apart. By 2019 this had deteriorated to the point where Uncle Qi was writing angry letters to the Religious Affairs Bureau denouncing Auntie Huang, although he never got a response. For her part, Auntie Huang called the Fire Department on Uncle Qi when the Daoists would no longer let him conduct his ritual in the main temple (because by 2019 they considered it too “Buddhist”), and he tried conducting it, with incense burning, in his residential compound.

The interfolding of chronotopes is thus particularly complex here and shows how each chronotope can define and shape the others, even as it is changed itself. We have a Communist official who makes space for religion in his vision of the modern city, Daoists who make space for Buddhists, and followers of a village temple who fold into a spirit medium branch (whose chronotopic emphasis is on the spirits of the past as they affect concrete needs in the present) and a sutra recitation branch (oriented instead toward future rebirth in the Pure Land)—something that began as a tactical move but later threatened to tear apart any sense of village solidarity. Each of these implies very different orientations toward time and space, with each trying to maximize its surface in the enfolding.

Even this multiplicity fails to capture the entire situation, though, since we have not taken space to discuss things like the earlier interfolded relations between village temples and local, non-temple-based Daoists (Tao and Goossaert 2015) or the ways people themselves will switch among alternate chronotopes. For our purposes here, we have tried to emphasize what Wirtz (2016) called the dialogue among chronotopes, the way each one shapes the others through their folded interactions. The complexity of this particular case may be what has protected the Stone Guanyin altar so far. It was the only one to have been left intact by the Daoists when they suppressed and further enfolded the others in 2019, exactly because it folded together with so many other chronotopic visions.

Yet another fold was added when political pressures increased on all institutions to perform loyalty to the Communist Party, especially in 2018–2019. For the Gaodian Temple, this consisted in part in flying the national flag in front of the temple, hanging slogans about the leadership of the Party in prominent parts of the temple, and posting on social media photographs of the Daoists studying the works of Xi Jinping. For the combined Stone Guanyin/Buddhist sutra recitation hall, this meant covering over the large characters invoking Amitabha Buddha on its outer wall. Yet another chronotope was invoked instead when they glued new characters on top, written more elegantly on a white background, and invoking traditional Confucian values that the state had been promoting. Before long, however, the glue began to fail and (as [image 4](#) shows) the layers that had been folded in began to show through again.

The chronotopes here do not just crosscut one another but each fold makes an inside and outside, thus creating more contact space and more possibilities of new folds along the way. Thus, for example, when the official ordered the Daoist temple to fold in a Buddhist sutra chanting group, it created the space for the Buddhist group to make legitimate contact with other Buddhist monasteries and monastics. In one case, the daughter of a famous spirit medium became so deeply involved with official Buddhism that she stopped coming to any rituals that her mother sponsored. This third way of folding thus creates manifold possibilities, allowing different chronotopes to multiply, flow, and interact.



Image 4. Buddhist sutra recitation hall, with old slogans revealed beneath the new. Photo by authors, 2019.

Conclusion

Seeing folding as a major element of chronotopes adds to the dynamic ways we envision time/space interactions. It also sheds light on how anthropology incorporates and contributes to historical analysis by making time as important as space. Chronotopes in various forms of folding connect individual bodies/subjects to larger temporal forces that are understood in terms of shifting time/space. Thus, folding allows anthropology to break free from the trap of the immediate time/space in which the ethnographer carries out the research. In a way, the ethnographer is witnessing the making of history through the folding of time/space. This way of thinking about the foldings of space and time provides an alternative view of what “history” can be: not chains of events or a road through a tunnel, but times/spaces tapping into one another at any given moment.

We have avoided inscribing a simple list of chronotopes, because we want to emphasize instead how invocations of multiple chronotopes fold and unfold with each other in ways far more plastic and organic than Bakhtin’s original identification of a chronotope with a genre, or than the typical anthropological contrast of a “traditional” with a “modern” chronotope. Note that even those things we have referred to as chronotopes each can point to multiple understandings of space and time. For example, the urban planners typically imagine an erasure of a backward past, leaving a blank slate on which to write a future of wealthy, cultured, and patriotic citizens. Yet, when it suits them, they will also claim deep roots in Suzhou’s past glories or recreate a block of traditional village architecture as a kind of commercial center.

Buddhists instead describe a world of cycles, from the wheel of repeated incarnations to the enormous eras between one Buddha and the next. Yet, they also speak of completely alternative space-times ruled by other Buddhas; most

importantly for the people we discussed here, those include the Pure Land in which they hope to achieve rebirth. There is also the eschatological hope for complete escape from this world of suffering by achieving enlightenment, and thus removal from any space-time.

The Daoists, as they modeled their new temple, instead constructed a hierarchy of deities and territories stretching into the historical past and a continuous future. At the same time, however, they maintained a Daoist concern with the body as a microcosm of the universe, and they adjusted as well to the state demands for the performance of patriotism (with its vision of a future-oriented, Communist-led modernity) and for the construction of religion in a roughly Weberian model as something rationalizing, individualized, and voluntary. Finally, for the spirit mediums, space-time had never been either singularly continuous or eschatological, instead switching as divine presence folded into and back out of their bodies.

It is not surprising, given what we can find in the anthropological literature, that multiple chronotopes are at play here. The significance of the material we have presented lies instead in its suggestions of new ways to think about exactly how those chronotopes may interact. We have tended to think of chronotopes as structured wholes separated by clear boundaries—much as we also tend to think about “states,” “cultures,” or “ontologies.” Such an image, however, makes it difficult to conceptualize the kinds of interactions that take place when one space-time touches another.¹⁴ We can see, then, that the classic approaches to chronotopes like those in Basso or most of Bakhtin focused our vision only on an enclosed image of a singular chronotope. Even when someone like Basso suggested a second “modern” or “historicist” alternative, both chronotopes existed as bounded wholes. Folding instead offers an alternate view of how chronotopes can multiply, transcend, and transform. That is why we have experimented here with various ways of thinking about folding in all its Latinate richness—complications, complicities, implications, explications, replications, supplications, replies, pleats, and plaits—but with a particular focus on how folds can make the distant near, separate inside from outside, and complicate the boundary by interdigitating.¹⁵

By looking at kinds of folds instead of at boundaries as solid lines, we can see how the various kinds of folding continue to give life to people’s practices even as they are altered in fundamental ways. The distant continues to be made near by spirit mediums even in the absence of temple spaces; pockets of alternate chronotopes continue to distinguish insides from outsides even as they may be locked away in basements; and complex interfoldings allow various traditions and institutions to maximize their interactions, shaping each other while remaining discrete.

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¹⁴For related attempts to rethink the nature of boundaries, see Weller and Wu (2017) and Seligman and Weller (2012).

¹⁵As can be seen from all these Latinate words in English, the “fold” metaphor has long lurked inside the English language.

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