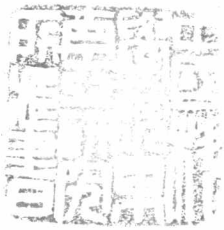
CHINESE SPIRIT-MEDIUM CULTS IN SINGAPORE



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CHINESE SPIRIT-MEDIUM CULTS IN SINGAPORE

by

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PREFACE

The concentration of this monograph on Chinese spirit mediumship in Singapore is chiefly a device for focussing attention upon the most typical, although rather extreme, manifestation of the major religious orientation of the overseas Chinese. Only by such a device is it at all possible to cope with the immense range of religious beliefs and practices found in Singapore. The accounts given here may chiefly be of value as a detailed record of religious rites, but it is hoped that the rites, shown in their institutional context, can also throw some light upon the wider ramifications of culture and society among the Chinese.

The field work on which the book is based extended from February, 1950, to November, 1951, and a preliminary report of the work was submitted to the Colonial Social Science Research Council. In its present form, the account is less intended for the sociological theorist than for those who take a general, or even a professional, interest in the affairs of the overseas Chinese and of Southeast Asia.

During the twenty-one months of field research, Singapore enjoyed a period of relative calm and considerable prosperity. The Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 still held bitter memories, but many of its immediate effects had been overcome. The Colony had already begun to advance on the path to self-government although the full impetus of the movement had not yet been felt by the majority of the population. Disturbing influences were due more to external than to internal events. The one exception was rioting by Muslims in December, 1950, over the case of Maria Hertogh. The two days of disturbances had a serious but not lasting effect upon public confidence. Although they suffered some casualties, the Chinese generally kept aloof from any trouble-making, and were notable for the philosophic manner in which they accepted the curfews that were imposed.

By the beginning of 1950, the Communist régime was established throughout China, and the attitude of most overseas Chinese had become that of awaiting the turn of events without showing much overt enthusiasm for either side.

The state of emergency due to Communist terrorism had continued since June, 1948, but its effect in Singapore was slight compared with that in the Federation of Malaya. In Singapore occurred isolated incidents involving arson, murder, grenade-throwing and the theft of identity cards, but security measures were sufficient to prevent any serious dislocation of life. Nevertheless, there was a persistent atmosphere of tension under the threat of Communist attack. The most important indirect influence of the emergency upon Chinese religious customs arose from the measures that had to be taken to restrict and control crowds and processions. The police had always had to keep a

watchful eye on these at Chinese festivals, but the prevailing situation made restrictions additionally necessary. A more important factor, from the viewpoint of the detailed description of rites, was the banning of fire crackers, except during limited periods in the Chinese New Year, thereby prohibiting one of the customary adjuncts to many religious ceremonies.[1]

In June, 1950, the Korean war broke out. At first there was no apparent effect in Singapore but eventually the scarcity of certain commodities and the phenomenal increase in the price of tin and rubber led to steep rises in the cost of living. By the middle of 1951, many families which did not stand to profit directly from the conditions of prosperity were in severely straitened financial circumstances.

One spirit-medium cult was studied with as much thoroughness as possible. This cult was selected for detailed attention largely because it offered the best opportunities for consistent investigation over a long period. In addition, a relatively thorough study was undertaken of about a dozen other cults, selected chiefly for variations they displayed in relation to the first cult. As a further check upon the problems of variation, attention was paid to about forty additional cults. In all, then, the information given in this report is based upon a knowledge of some seventy spirit-medium cults, nearly sixty of which I visited and investigated personally. In most cases, observations were of occasions which included actual performances by possessed mediums.

The investigation of spirit-medium cults represented my main interest, but the scope of my studies was not restricted to this alone. In the course of this book, references are made to many other types of religious practice, and to the more general features of Chinese life in Singapore. These were given as detailed investigation as circumstances would permit, but in the present context they serve as background material to the central theme.

Throughout the book the term 'South Seas', which has now become well-established in studies of the overseas Chinese, is a direct translation of the phrase the Chinese themselves use when referring to the approximate area which Europeans know as Southeast Asia. The term 'Malaya' is used to cover both the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore.

Where monetary values are given they are quoted in Straits dollars, each of which is worth 2*s*. 4*d*. at the official rate of exchange. Without going into a detailed examination of its actual purchasing power, it can be taken as being worth about 2*s*. In other words, there are approximately $10 to the £ sterling, and three Straits dollars are about equivalent to the United States dollar.

[1] Here, as elsewhere, references to the British colonial administration are restricted to the immediate relevance of governmental action to matters under discussion. No attempt is made to assess the part played by British administration in the creation and maintenance of law and order which has made Chinese enterprise possible, or of the contributions of the European community as a whole to commercial development in Southeast Asia.

A few remarks must be added on the perennial problem of the romanised spelling of Chinese words. In cases where a place or a street with a Chinese name has an accepted romanised spelling this form has been used without any attempt to give Chinese characters or alternative romanisations. Where a Chinese has selected a romanised name for himself or his business it would be discourteous not to follow a similar course, however incorrect phonetically his choice may have been. In all other cases, where it has been impossible to avoid the use of a Chinese phrase, and where it is desirable that characters should be given for the benefit of Chinese scholars, a romanised form has been given in the text. Although the National Language is very far from being a *lingua franca* among the overseas Chinese, I have found it convenient to give most of these Chinese phrases in the Wade romanisation of Mandarin. In a few cases, however, where this was not justified, owing to the use of a phrase which is peculiar to a southern dialect, I have used a widely accepted form of Cantonese or Hokkien romanisation with (C.) or (H.) after the word to indicate its origin.

In this connection, it should be pointed out that the terms 'Hokkien' and 'Cantonese' are used throughout as they are commonly understood in Malaya. That is, 'Hokkien' refers chiefly to the Amoy dialect and to the inhabitants of certain districts in southern Fukien, while 'Cantonese' refers to the dialect spoken in Canton, and to most, but by no means all, the inhabitants of Kwangtung province.

In two important cases, I have followed an entirely independent line in romanisation. So frequently do the words appear that in using the designation '*shen*' for god or spirit and '*dang-ki*' for medium, it is unlikely that any strain will be put on the reader's powers of recognition. The former is derived from the Mandarin word *shên*, but deprived of its diacritical mark, and the latter represents the pronunciation of a colloquial Hokkien word. Any resemblance to the phonetically correct form (*tâng-ki*) is incidental. It would be going too far to use the plural forms of *shens* and *dang-kis*, so the reader must be left to infer from the context whether the singular or plural is intended.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge my great debt to the Colonial Social Science Research Council for a year's post-graduate study in the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and at the School of Oriental and African Studies, followed by the period in Singapore and six months in England for the preparation of the report. The financial provision made for my accommodation by the Government of Singapore while I was living in Singapore is also acknowledged with deep appreciation.

Before his departure on a visit to Australia in 1951, Professor Raymond Firth was responsible for much of my training in the theory and techniques of social anthropology. He also advised me during my first year in Singapore. And I am also deeply indebted to Dr. E. R. Leach, for valuable criticism and for many helpful suggestions. It is a further pleasure to record my thanks to Maurice Freedman, who

preceded me by a year as research worker among the Chinese in Singapore, and who gave unstinting help in both practical and theoretical matters, at first, while I was in Singapore, and, subsequently, in his capacity as Lecturer in Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Valuable and expert criticisms of my work in its various stages were made by Professor Derkbodde, Professor Schuyler Cammann and Dr. E. C. S. Adkins.

Other persons who made suggestions which have now been incorporated in the finished product were Mr. G. G. Thomson, Public Relations Secretary, Singapore; Mr. D. Duncanson, Assistant Secretary for Chinese Affairs; Dr. F. Gasser and Mr. John Padfield.

The publication of this book in its present form is entirely due to the Committee of Monographs on Social Anthropology of the London School of Economics and Political Science and particularly to the editorial work of Dr. Marian W. Smith. Mrs. E. M. Chilver, Secretary to the Colonial Social Science Research Council in London dealt most efficiently with the numerous administrative and financial points which arose concerning my work. I am also extremely grateful to the Colonial Secretary, Singapore, his Secretariat staff, and the heads of government departments for giving me all the help I required and for making the necessary arrangements for my stay in the Colony. My thanks are particularly due to three successive Secretaries for Social Welfare, Mr. T. Eames Hughes, M.C.S., Mr. G. Webb, M.C.S., and Mr. R. W. I. Band, M.C.S., for providing me with office accommodation and with many of the facilities of their department. I should mention especially the Assistant Secretaries (Finance), Mr. E. M. F. Middleditch and Mr. C. S. Dant, who were burdened with many additional administrative tasks on account of my presence.

I must record my appreciation of the facilities accorded me in the use of the Library of the University of Malaya, although I was in no way connected with the university, and of the interest shown and advice given by individual members of the staff. I am similarly indebted to the staff of Raffles Museum, particularly Dr. C. A. Gibson-Hill, for a time Acting Director, and Mrs. M. Topley, Acting Curator of Anthropology.

Among my Chinese friends in Singapore, I remember particularly the late Mr. Cheng Hui Ming, M.B.E., Assistant Secretary for Chinese Affairs, whose breadth of scholarship and knowledge of local affairs provided an invaluable fund of information. Also, Mr. Law Hung Ki, who, in addition to trying to teach me Cantonese, provided me with much of my background material concerning Chinese religious customs. Mr. Ly Singko performed a similar function in relation to Mandarin, and was, in addition, responsible for the growth of many stimulating ideas which I hope to be able to elaborate upon with his help at a later opportunity. Assistance of a somewhat different nature was given by Miss Margaret Lee, a graduate of the University of Malaya, who was sufficiently interested in research work to undertake a short study of a Teochiu Christian village in the northern parts of the island. Although

no explicit acknowledgments have been made, her findings have influenced some of my conclusions. Mr. Choy Chan Wah proved an invaluable guide to many aspects of Chinese life, while Miss Pitt Chin Hui, Secretary to the Singapore Buddhist Federation, did much to encourage me to study some of the purer expressions of Chinese Buddhism. My eventual concentration upon types of religious practice very far removed from what she and her fellow-Buddhists would advocate is not intended in any way as disrespect for the help I was given.

My chief thanks, however, are due to persons who cannot be mentioned by name; the many participants in the activities of spirit-medium cults who gave their willing co-operation. I am particularly indebted to the promoters, mediums and worshippers of the cult of the 'Great Saint' who endured my presence at their ceremonies on frequent occasions for over eighteen months. In spite of my efforts at preserving their anonymity, I am afraid that several of the cults I have described, and particularly this one, will be easily identifiable by inhabitants of Singapore. I must state as emphatically as possible that none of my criticisms of Chinese spirit mediumship should be taken to apply particularly to any one of the cults I have described. The more disreputable ones, from which certain generalisations have been drawn, have, in fact, been omitted from detailed reference.

To this it must be added that I realise that much of what occurs in spirit-medium cults is distasteful to Europeans and Asians alike. It is no secret that the Chinese, in general, are not particularly well-liked by the other communities among whom they live in Southeast Asia. They are, of course, well capable of looking after themselves whether they are liked or not. But in common with most other peoples, they are highly sensitive to slights and discourtesies, particularly those provoked by an animosity based on unjustifiable grounds. The whole argument of this book, therefore, would be misused if the material concerning spirit mediumship were offered as evidence that the Chinese are a people with undesirable qualities. No opportunity is provided here for dwelling upon the many excellent qualities of the overseas Chinese, which have gained them at least the respect of other communities. It is hoped that the reader will take full cognisance of these good qualities as he proceeds in the pages which follow.

August, 1954 A. J. A. E.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

365

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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I

INTRODUCTION

The basic principles of Chinese spirit mediumship are relatively simple. The underlying assumption is that a spiritual being of vast and undefined powers possesses the body of a human medium and enables him to inflict injury upon himself without feeling pain, and to speak with divine wisdom, giving advice to worshippers and curing their illnesses. It will be immediately apparent that this is an example of a phenomenon known as shamanism, which is found on a world-wide scale.[1] To many, however, it is not a phenomenon which is usually associated with contemporary Chinese religious practices. Indeed, very few Europeans, even among sinologues and persons who have spent their whole careers in contact with the Chinese, realise that there are spirit-medium cults among the Chinese in Malaya.[2]

If Chinese spirit-medium cults have received little attention by either western or Chinese scholars, it is partly due to the fact that the religions of China have received far more extensive treatment as systems of thought than as practical expressions of popular belief. Nevertheless, various aspects of spirit mediumship have been recorded by several western authors, particularly by J. J. M. de Groot.[3] References to spirit mediumship, and in some cases lengthy accounts of its practices, can be found in many of de Groot's works. Their special value is that de Groot's researches were undertaken towards the end of the last century, chiefly in the districts of south Fukien from which many of the Chinese now living in Singapore originated. Much of what de Groot described can be found in present-day Singapore, but in spite of this there is a general ignorance of spirit mediumship among most non-Chinese. There is even reason to believe that the Chinese themselves do much to foster this ignorance because they would prefer foreigners to remain unacquainted with some of the practices involved.

Seen in one light, Chinese spirit mediumship in Singapore represents only a small part of the life of a busy commercial port, but seen in the light of European ignorance and Chinese secretiveness it is possible that spirit-medium cults may serve as a partial guide to the nature of overseas Chinese society. Although the sophisticated Chinese may not be particularly proud of what spirit mediumship stands for, it would

[1] See, among many others, MacCulloch, 1920 and Shirokogoroff, 1935.

[2] There have been important exceptions, for instance Freeman, 1924; Middlebrook, 1939; and Stirling, 1924.

[3] Especially, de Groot, 1886; 1892–1910 and 1912. Further reference may be made to de Groot, 1903; Doolittle, 1876, who deals with Foochow in North Fukien; Doré, 1918; Harvey, 1933, leans heavily upon de Groot but adds personal observations; Meade, 1928, is based upon secondary sources; and Reichelt, 1952.

be difficult to deny that it contains much that is meaningful in the culture of the great mass of immigrants.

The Singapore Background. Only a brief survey can be given here of the varied background against which the events described take place.[1] Since 1819, when Raffles founded his fortress and trading post on an island just north of the equator, until the present day when Singapore is a flourishing British Colony with a population of over a million, the Chinese have played a major part in its development. But although eighty per cent of the Colony's population is now Chinese, it would be wrong to give the impression that other communities have not played an important part in its history. The social life of the Malay, Indian, Eurasian and other inhabitants of Singapore remains outside the scope of this account, if only for the reason that they lead existences of their own which are almost entirely remote from the Chinese community. Singapore is, in fact, a place which, after 130 years of growth, has still to develop a culture it can call its own. There is no *lingua franca*, except a crude form of Malay, and English which serves the better educated persons of all communities. The apparent amity in which so many ethnic groups live side by side in Singapore is based more upon ignorance than upon any active virtue of tolerance. The 1947 Census[2] showed that over sixty per cent of the population had been born in Malaya. Although it is now possible to discern the emergence of a 'Singaporean', to use the term which the local Press likes to popularise, as yet this amounts to little in terms of an independent culture. Singapore is a city to which many people have come, chiefly for the sake of economic advantages, but it is still a place to which few consider themselves genuinely to belong.

In addition, Singapore suffers from many of the difficulties of great cities anywhere in the world. Above all, there is severe overcrowding in nearly all types of homes. Since 1939 the population has almost doubled,[3] while the suspension of building during the war has rendered the task of housing the still-increasing population an almost impossible one. By most standards, however, Singapore is a clean and orderly city.[4] It has one of the best health records in Asia and a mortality rate that compares well with European cities. The health services have performed an excellent job of post-war rehabilitation, but their resources, chiefly of personnel, are too scanty to make very deep inroads into the numerous diseases that can be found among a crowded Asian population. Similar problems exist in the field of education. An energetic Ten Year Programme is designed to cope with a situation in which the deficiencies of the war years have yet to be made good while at the same time about 30,000 additional children are reaching

[1] See especially Purcell, 1948 and 1951. [2] del Tufo, 1949.

[3] For a demographic study see Smith, 1952.

[4] Detailed information can be obtained from the Annual Reports of the Colony of Singapore (Government Publications Bureau) and from the annual reports of government departments. See also *A Social Survey of Singapore*, Department of Social Welfare, 1947.

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