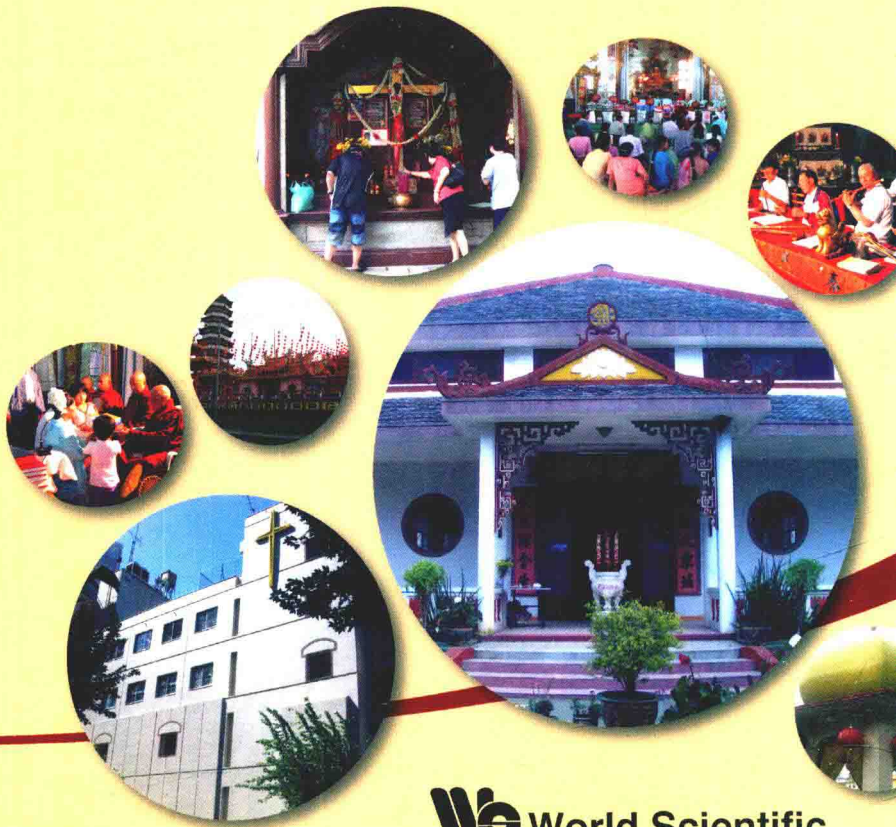


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Religions, Chinese Identities and
Transnational Networks

Edited by Tan Chee-Beng



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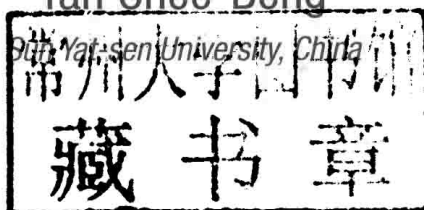
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INTRODUCTION: AFTER MIGRATION AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Tan Chee-Beng

Introduction

Identification with some forms of religious beliefs and practices is quite universal in human societies all over the world, although there are also many individuals who do not follow any particular religion. When humans migrate, religions follow. As various works like Kolot *et al.* (2004), Kumar (2006) and Pulis (1999) have shown, religious affiliation is significant to the formation of diasporic identities. When migrants rebuild their life in the diaspora, they also rely on their familiar religion for psychological support and to have a sense of belonging. Where possible migrants may re-territorialize their religious organizations in the new land, building mosques, churches or temples. Religious affiliation after migration goes hand in hand with rebuilding social life and connecting with the homeland. But migration involves

changes as well as adapting to changes brought about by new encounters not only with the new physical environments but also with other peoples and their religions. Thus, the religion brought by migrants may be transformed with local characteristics or the migrants may even adopt the religion of the majority people, even new faiths may be created. In adopting new religious affiliation, migrants also transform the new faiths as a result of new interpretation and their habitus, to use Pierre Bourdieu's term; here I use it to refer to the cultural tendency to influence religious behavior according to what one has learnt and is familiar with.

The migration of Europeans, western colonialism and missionary activities had led to the global spread of Christianity. Military conquests and migration had also led to the global spread of Islam, and the migration of Muslim merchants was an important factor that led to the spread of Islam in different parts of the world including island Southeast Asia. Today Muslims continue to migrate and they are transforming the religious landscape of many countries, as in the United States. Infact, USA has become a meeting point of diverse faiths because this powerful affluent country continues to attract migrants of all faiths from all over the world. Indeed, all traditions of Buddhism can be found in USA.

Chinese migrants are special in that they have migrated to almost everywhere in the world. While they are not major carriers of such universal religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, their global spread allows us to study religious affiliation in different cultural contexts, and topics that can be studied include affiliation with their traditional religion after migration, the role of religion in social organization, the localization of Chinese religious practices outside the Chinese land, their conversion to new faiths especially Christianity, the spread of Chinese forms of Buddhism and Christianity, and transnational religious networks among the Chinese of different nationalities and between the Chinese overseas and China. This book is a small effort towards understanding all these via analyzing Chinese overseas and their religious affiliation.

It is difficult to define religion although most people understand what is referred to without any academic definition. Nevertheless, Thomas A. Tweed, who studies the Cubans in Miami and their practice of Catholic rituals, provides us with a convenient and thoughtful definition: "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and supernatural forces to make homes and cross boundaries" (Tweed, 2006: 54). This definition is particularly useful for the study of migrants and their descendants with regards to religious affiliation. Religious affiliations, whether traditional Chinese or new affiliations, no doubt helped Chinese migrants to feel secure and confront sufferings and cope with new situations. They found home in religion which plays important roles in crossing boundary not only spiritually but also in inter-ethnic interaction and encountering different religions.

Chinese Religious Traditions and Living in the Diaspora

The religious traditions carried by Chinese migrants include the so-called Chinese popular religion, Chinese Buddhism as well as ideas and beliefs derived from the teachings of Confucianism and Taoism. Added to these are the beliefs and knowledge about *feng-shui* (Chinese geomancy) and the spiritual cultivation of *qi* (breath) which is considered as essential for good health and longevity. The early Chinese migrants were merchants, peasants and workers and their religious tradition was largely the Chinese popular religion. New migrants today of course include more educated people and professionals who do not necessarily attach strongly to any religious tradition, but there are also Christians and people of various faiths, and of course many are still followers of the Chinese popular religion. The so-called Chinese popular religion refers to the complex of beliefs and rites related to the worship of deities called *shen*, ancestors and ghosts. This was and is the religion of the Chinese

masses who observe the related religious practices as part of their cultural life and do not have a label to cover an exclusive religious identification.

In the context of mainland China and Taiwan, scholars have used “Chinese popular religion” as a convenient label of reference.¹ In the study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia I have proposed to use the term Chinese Religion and I propose to use this as a convenient term to refer to the complex of Chinese religious beliefs and practices. The use of the singular is not meant to treat it as one homogenous type but to include a complex of diverse indigenous Chinese religious practices. We can include in this the organized religious “sects” which are organized out of the popular beliefs and rites as well as the *sanjiao* or the “three teachings” of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Of course when we talk of the religions of the Chinese, these will include not only Chinese Religion, but also Christianity, Islam and others. Of these Chinese Religion and Chinese Buddhism are major Chinese religious traditions in that they developed in China even though Buddhism was originally introduced from India. There is so much overlaps between the two traditions that Chinese devotees do not pay much attention to separating the two, and they can go to both *shenmiao* (temples of Chinese deities) and *fosi* (Buddhist temples) to pray, and either or both monks and Taoist priests can be asked to perform funerals. However, distinct Buddhist identity and organization can be found in Buddhist temples that devote fully to the worship of Buddhist deities and the conduct of Buddhist rites.

It is not the purpose here to describe Chinese Religion in details. In this book Myra Sidharta writes about the worship of Mazu in Java, Indonesia. Mazu, also called Tianhou, was an important deity that early migrants brought overseas and there are many Mazu temples in Southeast Asia and in Taiwan. Mazu was the imperial court

¹For some works on the Chinese popular religion, see for instance, Feuchtwang (1991), Jordan (1972), Overmyer (2003), Shahar and Weller (1996), and Yang (1961).

approved sea deity (*haishen*) and so it is not surprising that her statue was carried by migrants overseas. In fact it was common for migrants and junk owners to bring along an altar for safe voyage, and many temples outside China were originally small shrines which installed the statues brought by migrants. Myra Sidharta refers to J.S. Stavorinus' account of his voyages to the East Indies in the 18th century. While he did not specifically mention Mazu, he confirmed our present knowledge of Chinese bringing statues of deities onboard. It is enlightening that he mentioned:

"... they bring every year a new one with them from China, which is then placed in their temple, and the old one of the former year is taken away, and carried back to China; and they never begin to land any part of the cargo, until the image of this idol, which is made of gold, and is about four inches high, has been sent on shore out of the junk; both on board, and on shore, they continually burn lights and incense, and in the evening some silver paper, before the idol." (Stavorinus, 1789/1969: 288)

From this report it is obvious that the Chinese junk operator carried a statue on both journey. Of course they could be more than one statues brought to the diaspora. The Chinese of different regions in China brought along their regional deities. Thus, we find in Southeast Asia many Chinese deities and temples. The Chinese migrants had re-territorialized Chinese Religion in Southeast Asia. They have drawn upon Chinese deities and other supernatural beings to make home via the Chinese Religion. Observing religious festivities and participation in Chinese rites provides a sense of belonging to a cultural tradition. Even the Chinese temples, which are usually constructed in traditional Chinese architectural style, symbolize Chinese cultural identity. While there are now many studies on the Chinese overseas, their religious life remain under studied.

In countries like Malaysia and Singapore, the Chinese have been able to practice their traditional religion. There has been much cultural continuation in things religious although there are also local

development. For example, many Chinese temples donate to charity and to Chinese education, which is a reflection of Chinese self-determination in preserving Chinese education in Malaysia. In Indonesia there was much pressure to give up Chinese culture to assimilate fully into the Indonesian society under the Suharto regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, and the Chinese needed to adjust in order to maintain their cultural heritage. The government did not recognize Chinese Religion although Buddhism was recognized. This encouraged Chinese temples to “become” Buddhist in name. Confucianism was at first recognized as a religion, and the Indonesianized Confucianism became an institutional religion and organized like a “church”, as described by Leo Suryadinata. Even the *sanjiao* or “three teachings”, referring to Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, became an organized Chinese religion in Indonesia under the Indonesianized name of Tridharma. Leo Suryadinata’s chapter describes both the development of Indonesian Confucianism and Tridharma in response to state policy and Chinese religious adjustments, and explains the nature and division of Tridharma more clearly than any previous publication.

The Chinese religious affiliation reflects their adjustment to their respective national society. In Myanmar, as described by Duan Ying, the Chinese participate strategically in Theravada Buddhism which is the dominant religion in the country. While they maintain their Chinese Religion and Chinese Buddhism, which is Mahayana in tradition, the Chinese in Myanmar cross boundaries easily to participate in the religious life of the Burmese. The Chinese understand the moral authority of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar, and for those who could not get full citizenship, as pointed out by Duan Ying, “the practice of Buddhism has become a crucial way to express their cultural belonging to Burma and obtain social recognition”. Thus, Buddhism is very relevant to the Chinese cultural politics in Myanmar.

Some Chinese worldview and practices can be religious not in the way of worshipping deities. The knowledge and rhetoric about *feng-shui* with regards to human interaction with nature and the cosmos

is one such phenomenon. In this book we have a chapter by Emily Wu about the use of *qi* or “breath” in the practice of traditional Chinese medicine in America. Emily Wu writes, “While recognizing science as fundamental in medicine of the modern world, a truly outstanding TCM practitioner should master *qi* to the level of *shen*, or a penetrating connection with the divine/natural orders of the universe.

Localization and Chinese Religious Traditions

In Chinese Religion there are many deities known generally as *shen*, and Chinese worshippers’ attitude to deities is that as long as they are *ling* (efficacious), they are good to pray to. This makes it easy for the Chinese to incorporate non-Chinese divinities into their religion or to worship them like Chinese deities. Among Chinese overseas, this is evident where the Chinese encounter other faiths in their social life, especially in societies where the dominant non-Chinese religion is not so exclusive. Thus, it is fascinating to study Chinese religious affiliation in the Philippines which is a predominantly Catholic country, where the Filipino Catholics are also quite open in their religious attitudes.

In this book, Aristotle C. Dy and Teresita Ang See give us a fascinating account of Chinese religious affiliation in the Philippines and the significance of this religious syncretism to the local Chinese identity. As they describe, “In the Philippines, as we have observed earlier, statues of Guanyin and the Virgin Mary can share the same altar, and Chinese devotees tend to identify them with one another. To call Guanyin the “Chinese Mary” or the “Buddhist Madonna” is in fact an act of linking a local icon to a properly Chinese devotion.” Furthermore even the Chinese goddess Mazu has been recognized as Virgin Mary. The inter-religious encounters have also affected Chinese observation of Chinese religious festival for, as Ari and Ang See report, the Catholic tradition of praying for the dead has become more important than the Chinese tradition observed

during the seventh lunar month, which is a major religious festival in Chinese religion. Also the visit to the graves on the Catholic All Souls' Day on 2 November has become more important. In my visit to Trinidad in May 2012, I find this is so too among the Chinese there.

The cross-boundary interaction between Chinese religion and Catholicism is facilitated by the belief in saints in the latter. The fascinating Filipina situation can also be seen among the Chinese and the Catholics in Cuba, as described by Benton (2012). In Cuba, the popular Chinese deity Guangong (also called Guandi) is known as San Fancón, cón being the Spanish transcription of the Chinese word *gong*, while Fan is *guan* pronounced in the Taishan dialect, and San is derived from *santo* for "saint". The name itself is a very interesting feature of localization arising from cross-linguistic interaction. Guangong is accepted by the Africans in Cuba into their localized Yoruba religion that incorporates elements of Catholicism, regarding him as Changó. Furthermore, Guangong is associated with Santa Barbara, while the Chinese in Cuba pray to both Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and Guangong as guardian saints. Benton (2012) also describes the association of the Goddess of Mercy with Virgin Mary in Catholicism.

In Malaysia, the majority people are Malays who are Muslims. While Islam is exclusive in its religious ideology, the Chinese, who are polytheistic in religious worldview, have no problem adding the worship of Malay saints and guardian spirit into Chinese religion, as described by Lee Yok Fee and Chin Yee Mun in this book. These guardian deities of Malaysian origin are perceived as mainly Malay but can also be Thai or Orang Asli (aborigines in Malaysia). The Datuk Kongs, as these local guardian deities are called, are worshipped by the Chinese as part of their Chinese Religion although both the non-Chinese ethnicity and the food habits are observed. They are prayed to for healing and for spiritual protection. While Islam as practiced by the Malays and Chinese Religion are uncompromising, this does not prevent the Chinese from installing and worshipping territorial deities which they perceive as non-Chinese locals.