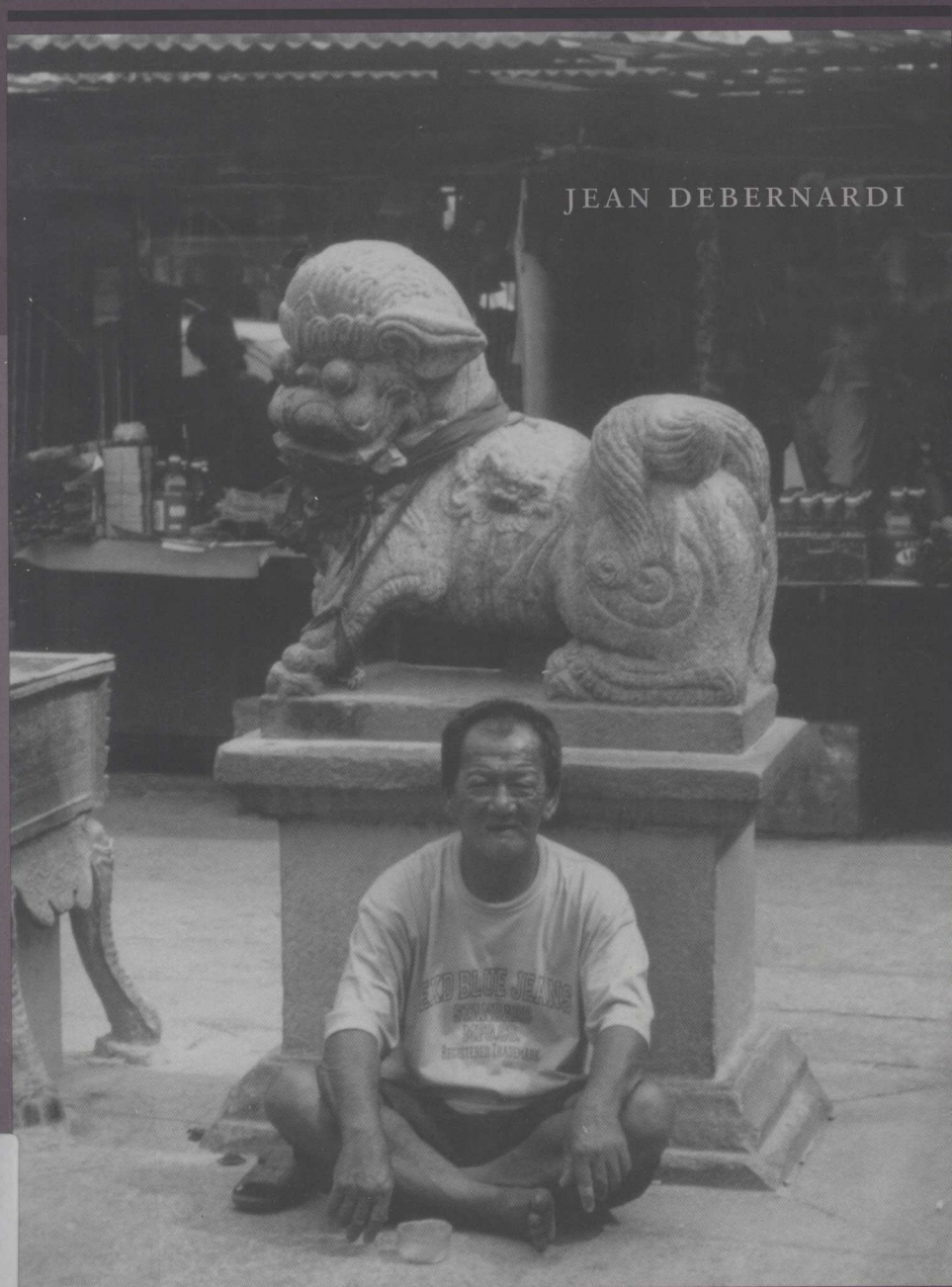


rites of belonging

Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community

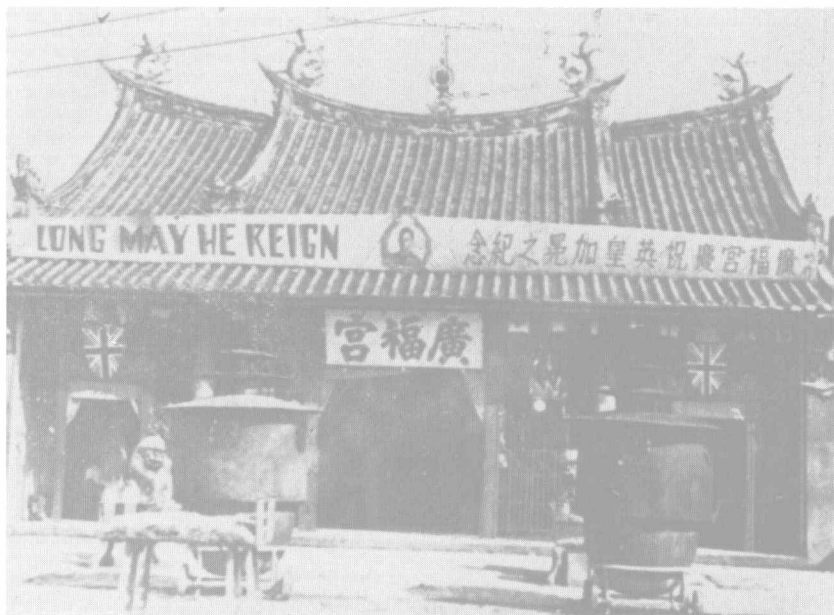
JEAN DEBERNARDI



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Rites of Belonging

*Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a
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Photograph on page iii: The Kong Hok Palace, George Town,
decorated to celebrate the coronation of a British king, possibly
that of George V in 1911. (Photo: Kong Hock Keong archive)

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Preface

When I began ethnographic research on Penang Chinese popular religion in 1979, I had little idea how challenging the project would be. I knew that the Chinese in Penang celebrated the festival events of the traditional lunar calendar on an unparalleled scale and chose urban George Town as my research site. In my first months in Malaysia I realized, however, that I would never be able to write a social and cultural analysis of the Penang Chinese in the style of Bronislaw Malinowski's memorable monographs on the Trobriand Islands or E. E. Evans-Pritchard's classic studies of the Nuer. Indeed, Penang was extraordinarily complex. I had few guidelines or models for doing ethnographic research in a heterogeneous urban community or for writing about the politics of culture in a modern nation-state.

In the two years that followed, I drove to every part of Penang Island—from downtown urban neighborhoods to spirit-medium temples in remote plantations—to study the periodic events of the festival cycle and the regular trance performances of spirit mediums. Some whose help I sought tolerated my presence but declined to interact with me, whereas others debated with me as if I were a critical observer who had attacked their “superstitious” beliefs. More than a few Penangites, however, concluded that I was correct to come to Asia to study spiritual things, since Western society was chaotic and lacking in spirituality. People also noted that I “ate Chinese” (Hokkien: *chiah Tiongkok*), meaning that I lived with a Chinese family on a back lane where no European had ever lived before and that I spoke Chinese languages.

I had studied Mandarin to prepare for my research, but the Chinese in Penang speak not only their languages of education (English, Mandarin, and/or Malay) but also dialects of three different Chinese languages, using Hokkien as their lingua franca. My Mandarin remained standard, but for many months I

worked daily with a private tutor to learn how to speak the Penang variety of Hokkien, a form of Southern Min creolized with Malay and English. Once I had gained a modest level of proficiency in this local variety of Hokkien, which unmistakably identifies the speaker as a Penangite to Hokkien speakers elsewhere, the rumor flew that I was not European at all but a Eurasian with an unidentifiable accent.

Trained as a symbolic anthropologist, I persistently sought narratives and exegetical meanings from a wide range of Penangites—from diviners, spirit mediums, and Daoist priests to temple committee members and politicians. Until I conducted a summer of research in Taiwan and Fujian province (People's Republic of China) in 1987, however, I was not fully aware of how diversely history and politics had shaped Penang society or how greatly the Penang Chinese had transformed their traditional culture. The fifty-year Japanese occupation of Taiwan and the traumatic events that followed the Guomindong occupation after Chiang Kaishek lost the mainland have shaped the political attitudes and aspirations of the Hokkien Chinese of Taiwan, just as Communist rule and, more recently, fast-paced development have dramatically altered life for Hokkien Chinese in Fujian province. Similarly, more than a hundred and fifty years of British rule and the creation of the new nation-state of Malaysia have shaped Penang Chinese social memories, ritual practices, and sociopolitical strategies. Consequently, I decided to conduct archival research to learn more about the organizations and events of popular religious culture in the colonial period.

Although they like to describe themselves as a traditional, conservative people, the Penang Chinese are quite modern in the way that they have refashioned themselves and their traditional culture in this cosmopolitan urban community. They did so first as participants in the global ecumene established under British colonial rule, then as citizens of the nationalistic, postcolonial Malaysian state. I write with some nostalgia, however, since new movements have replaced the revitalization of Penang's local religious culture that was so conspicuous a feature of the 1970s and 1980s, and new tides of modernization threaten to replace two-story shophouses, temples, and the mansions of millionaire's row with high-rise towers and shopping malls.

A Note on Romanization

Hokkien, which linguists call Southern Min, is not a national language in any of the places where it is spoken—Fujian province in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and the many countries of Southeast Asia in which the diaspora Hokkien have settled. Those Hokkien speakers who are literate in Chinese usually have studied Mandarin, and Hokkien largely remains a language of oral communication, although most Hokkien words can be written using characters and several systems of romanization exist. (See DeBernardi 1991.)

Linguists at Xiamen University (P.R.C.) have developed a new romanization of Hokkien using pinyin, the details of which I provide for comparison in the table on the following page (*Xiamen Daxue* 1982). Since this system has not been adopted in Southeast Asia, I use a more widely known standardized missionary romanization system in my transcriptions of Hokkien terms (Embree 1973, Chiang n.d.). Penangites have conventional but sometimes unsystematic ways of writing the Hokkien names of deities, events, and societies, and I note common alternative forms. In my citation of Hokkien terms and names, I provide both a romanized transcription and a standard Chinese (*putonghua*) equivalent in pinyin. In the reference matter appearing at the end of this book, I also append a list of Chinese festivals celebrated in Penang with names of temples, associations, and deities in Hokkien and pinyin, and a glossary of Chinese characters arranged according to their pronunciation in standard Chinese.



Hokkien romanization (missionary and pinyin) and International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) equivalents

Consonants			Vowels		
Missionary romanization	Pinyin	International Phonetic Alphabet	Missionary romanization	Pinyin	International Phonetic Alphabet
p	b	p	i	i	i
ph	p	p ^h	i ⁿ	ni	i
b	bb	b	e	e	e
m	bb	m	e ⁿ	ne	ẽ
t	d	t	a	a	a
th	t	t ^h	a ⁿ	na	ā
l	l	l	o	oo	ɔ
n	l	norl	o ^a	noo	ō
k	g	k	o	o	o
kh	k	k ^h	u	u	u
g	gg	g			
ng	gg	ŋ			
h	h	h (initial)			
h	h	ʔ (final)			
s	s	s			
ch	z	ts(ɕ)			
chh	c	ts ^h (ç)			
j		dz			

Rites of Belonging

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Introduction

WHEN MALAYSIA achieved independence in 1957, the multiethnic, plural society that the British had built under imperial rule became a modern nation-state. The Chinese community that developed in colonial Malaya was almost equal in numbers to the indigenous Malays but controlled much of the country's commercial wealth. In response to the fear that the indigenous majority would be overwhelmed by this powerful immigrant minority, the country's leaders resolved to use the political process to protect and promote Malay interests. Consequently, the new nation's constitution based Malaysia's national identity on Malay language and culture, including the practice of Islam, and protected the special rights of Malaysia's "children of the soil" (*bumiputeras*). Although many Chinese became citizens of the new nation, the stereotype persisted that they were unassimilated outsiders whose deepest loyalties were to China rather than Malaysia.

In Malaysia—as in many postcolonial nations—ethnic identity became the master principle on which the new nation's political system was founded. Malaysians formed ethnically based political parties—the United Malays National Organization, the Malayan Chinese Association, the Malayan Indian Congress—to govern the newly independent nation. Then in 1965, the Federation of Malaysia separated from predominantly Chinese Singapore, ensuring that the Malays formed the majority, albeit by a slim margin.

But when Chinese bragged of their victory in a 1969 election, roving gangs retaliated by torching Chinese shops in the streets of Malaysia's cities, and an unknown number of Malay and Chinese youths fought to their deaths. After this tragic event, the leaders of this new state further rewrote its social contract to promote the economic and educational interests of the Malay majority to the disadvantage of minority groups. Malaysian Chinese began to fear cultural loss

and assimilation. When Vietnamese Chinese fled communist Vietnam in the 1970s, they watched and wondered if someday they and their children would be driven out of their adopted homeland.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Malaysian Chinese leaders sought strategies by which to unify their community and rallied to influence the government to adopt more inclusive, multicultural policies. In this period, many Penang Chinese also turned to the organizational strategies and ideologies of popular religious culture as a source of strength and cohesion. Malaysian political scientist and activist Chandra Muzaffar observed with some alarm that religious polarization had become “the new channel, the new conduit for transmitting ethnic fears and insecurity” (Chandra Muzaffar 1984: 124). Noting the visible heightening of non-Malay religious consciousness, A. B. Shamsul observed that “the significance of the religious factor in Malaysian politics has reached a level of intensity never before witnessed” (Shamsul 1994: 113).

Although we may regard this revitalization of Chinese popular religious culture as a reflex of ethnic politics in the postcolonial period, a form of reactive nationalism, perhaps, the use of religion to construct identity, value, and a sense of belonging in the idiom of the sacred is deeply rooted in the historical experiences of the Penang Chinese. When Chinese emigrated from southeastern China to this colonial port city, they joined a heterogenous, cosmopolitan community whose population included British and Malays, but also Burmese, Javanese, Arabs, Sikhs, Tamils, and Parsees. Chinese freely borrowed from these ethnic others, transforming their own style of life, but many remained loyal to the practices of their religious culture, which blended ancestor worship with cosmological and ethical frameworks derived from Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

In the colonial period, many British found it incomprehensible that English-educated Chinese would continue to participate in traditional practices. Colonial officer and Sinologist Victor Purcell, for example, marveled at “the adherence of most Chinese to the religion of their forefathers,” noting that even Penang Chinese educated in English universities remained Buddhist (Purcell 1967 [1948]: 128–29). His comments echo those of Superintendent of Police Jonas D. Vaughan, who noted of nineteenth-century Penang that “[t]he Chinese are so attached to the habits of their forefathers, that notwithstanding an intercourse in the Straits for many generations with natives of all countries they have zealously adhered to their ancient manners and customs” (Vaughan 1971 [1879]: 2). Authors like Vaughan and Purcell assumed the antiquity of Chinese popular religious culture, failing to realize that Chinese traditional culture had taken new forms and meanings within the historical contexts of colonialism, globalization, modernization, and nationalism.

As in many parts of the British Empire, ethnic consciousness developed in