

The Changing Tastes of the Gods: Chinese Temple Fairs in Malaysia

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About 40% of the population of Malaysia is Chinese, and Singapore—now an independent nation but formerly part of Malaysia—is three-quarters Chinese. The Chinese community dates back more than five hundred years, but most of the present-day Chinese inhabitants of these countries are descended from individuals who emigrated from China in the period 1870–1930 (Purcell, 1965). These emigrants came from southern China, almost all of them deriving from two provinces, Fukien and Kuangtung. They spoke several languages—all part of the Chinese language family. Most of them were poor, and almost all of them derived from small villages or isolated areas. Thus, when they brought their culture with them, it was not the Chinese “Great Tradition” but a series of local peasant traditions. As they grew more secure economically, they imported teachers from China, and these did not succeed in disseminating the tradition widely. One of the main reasons was that the Chinese of the southeast Asian region—the Nanyang, “South Seas,” as it is called in Mandarin Chinese (there are cognate words in the other languages)—were acculturating both to the local communities around them and to the European culture that came with colonialism and trade. In Malaysia and Singapore, the colonial power was Great Britain. (For the history of the region, see Hall, 1968.) The British came in large numbers, quickly became dominant in the economy (they still are, in spite of decolonialization), and established one of the most thoroughgoing and systematic colonial regimes in the world. The British imported great numbers of poverty-stricken Chinese and south Indians to work in the tin mines, rubber plantations and railroads. Part of the British policy was to keep separate the “races”—ethnic groups—and to allocate each to an economic role. The Malays, who are the largest indigenous community in Malaysia

and form about half the population, were farmers and ruling classes; the old distinction between Malay aristocrats and commoners was sharpened and made much more rigid than of old. The Chinese were the traders, small entrepreneurs and miners. Indians were menial laborers; there were also some educated Indians brought in to serve as clerks. Part of this separation was a development of mutual hostility between these groups, in particular between Malays and Chinese. Previous to British occupancy, the Malay and Chinese communities had gotten along well—indeed, the situation was almost a model of tolerance, with much intermarriage. The Malay royal families took great pride in any Chinese “princesses” they could trace in their lineage, while the Chinese married Malay women and developed a large community that is Malay in speech and modified-Chinese in most other realms of culture. At present, however, decades of colonial rule and other related problems have caused legacy of tension between Chinese and Malays. In this paper I will not consider the Indians, and the ethnic setting thus reduces to a triangular one: Chinese, English and Malays. The cultural relations between these groups are complex. Here I will discuss the effect of the modern situation on Chinese arts in Malaysia. I focus on the temple fair because it is of critical importance in the aesthetic life of the cultural groups found in south China. In modern Malaysia, the temple fair continues to be of central importance, but is changing rapidly in all possible ways.

The material on which this paper is based was collected in Malaysia and Singapore in 1970–71 by my wife and myself. Most of our material refers to Penang state, in northern Malaysia, and my reference here will be almost entirely to Penang. Our base line is a knowledge of traditional Cantonese temple fairs derived from our research in Hong Kong in 1965–66 (Anderson, 1970). The present paper is interpretive not descriptive, the actual beliefs and ceremonies are described in detail elsewhere (Anderson, ms.).

The Chinese temple fair has not been well described in the literature. Chinese writing—literary and scientific—have taken it for granted, since the reader is expected to know about the fairs from long experience. Western writings have often been inadequate or else produced by biased observers, usually missionaries whose main purpose in life is to stamp out such manifestations of traditional religion. I am not aware of any study by a social scientist that is devoted to analysis of temple fairs. One is much better off with the Chinese literature, especially such works as Tun's *Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking* (translated by D. Bodde, 1965), but here attention focuses on distinctive features of the fairs, the

reader (1 repeat) being always expected to know the basic form and the significance of these events.

“Temple fair” is the word usually used in Western writings to label an event that Chinese speaking English usually call “a god’s birthday.” There are various Chinese terms for the event, but none is so specific or intentionally exact as this latter term. The phrase “god’s birthday” is, however, somewhat inaccurate. The presiding spirit of a temple is normally a *shen*, and *shen* can be translated ‘god’ but includes revered human beings who have been, as it were, canonized, as well as various other classes of beings. It is more fully translatable as “powerful and at least potentially helpful resident of the spirit world.” Every *shen* has his day. It is not a birthday. Many *shen* have always existed, or at least have existed since the dawn of history; most of the rest were born at unknown dates; and in any case Chinese reckoning usually counts everyone’s age from the lunar New Year, while birthdays in the Western sense are rather minor events. But the *shen*’s day is the day on which is worshippers celebrate him and reverence him; and it is an annual event, recurring on the same day of the Chinese lunar year. In Western religious, similar events are claimed (often mistakenly) to be “birthdays” of the saints and divinities, and it is in this sense that the word “birthday” is used in the above phrase. Incidentally, it is interesting that the pattern of celebration of such days is so widespread in organized religion. Christmas, Muhammad’s birthday, Wesak saints’ days, Hindu deities’ days and Chinese temple fairs are all rather similar in important respects. This fact attracted attention from early folklorists, but has not done so of late, unfortunately.

Every traditional Chinese community has one or more temples whose presiding *shen* is (or are) charged with protecting and caring for that community. The Jade Emperor, ruler of the spirit world, specifically details the *shen* in question to be the tutelary deity of the community. This becomes known to the people of the area through a supernatural or omen-like manifestation. Often the people will call on a particular *shen* to become their resident guardian, and build a temple to this *shen*. In any case, a contract exists: the *shen* guards over the community, but the community must reciprocate by worshipping the *shen*. This involves burning incense morning and night at the temple and caring for the structure; someone will be detailed to do this, and all large temples have a regular caretaker who fulfills priestly functions. But such service is only part of the worship. The other part is the temple fair. On the day of the *shen*, the community must do everything in its power to stage

a day of transcendent delight. The *shen* must be made happy, contented and pleased, both by the most spectacular and superb festivities possible and by the happiness and pleasure of the worshippers as they celebrate. (See fuller discussion in Anderson, 1970, 1972.)

This is done by means of a wide range of festive behaviors, whose special characteristic is to raise every sensory experience to the highest possible level of pleasurable intensity. This sensory manipulation in the interests of religion is a widespread and critically important theme in Chinese culture, and is nowhere more vividly shown than in the temple fairs. The eyes are dazzled with the most brilliant colors available, made into the largest and most intricate and multicolored constructions. The best performing companies appear to put on Chinese operas, or at least puppet-show versions of them if a live opera company is too expensive. The ears ring from the loudest possible music, played on bands or orchestras that include drums, gongs, oboes and other loud instruments. In the meantime, firecrackers are constantly exploding in vast numbers. The nose is brought near choking by clouds of incense or even of smoke from whole sandalwood logs and other scentmakers. The mouth is filled by every possible sort of snack, climaxing in the huge feasts at which all the finest and most powerfully flavored foods are served. The sense of touch and temperature responds to the vast shoving crowds, the intolerable heat in the temple where fires and incense burn, the stinging of the smoke. In traditional China, a temple fair that failed to raise everyone's sensory experience to a climactic pitch would not be considered pleasing to the *shen*.

This pattern was carried to Malaysia, and temple fairs continue to flourish there. In spite of all assaults by the forces of change, the fairs are always held at the major temples and continue to be important events. They continue to bring together the art, music and other arts of the community. The temples and ancestral halls retain their functions as community centers. But changes both in the temples themselves and in their fairs have occurred. Perhaps equally significant are the changes which have *not* occurred. Continuity is interesting in itself, and, even more important, continuity in one thing coupled with change in another make a pattern quite different from anything before—a fact almost always overlooked in studies of this kind.

The typical temple fair in Penang state, Malaysia, involves a day of celebration—some fairs last three days. Incense, feasting, sacrifices of food, sacrifices of paper goods (paper imitations of earthly valuables, which become real valuables in the spirit world), and other offerings are

the continuing order of the day. Vast numbers of people cast lots to find out their future or to receive answers to questions. In the afternoon and/or the evening, there is a show. Traditionally, the show is Chinese opera if the temple community can afford it, and otherwise a puppet show; rod, hand and string puppets all flourish abundantly in the Malaysia-Singapore region. The shows of today, however, are increasingly non-traditional. Most common among the new shows is a local-talent variety show. A band playing popular music, a succession of female singers, and similar acts will appear, in a pattern taken from Western (specifically British and American) models, but rather indirectly; much of the pattern is partly derived from Western models seen on TV, radio, etc., but most of it is taken from the Western-style acts of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia (which themselves are influenced by Japanese equivalents). The music in particular shows this. It is a style known as "Mandarin music"—a quite distinctive style, in which Western harmonies, musical instruments and some singing styles, as well as many Western tunes, are combined with Oriental themes, tunes and stylistic features to produce a new synthesis. (I use the word "Oriental" instead of Chinese because there is a Japanese and Korean input.) Mandarin music seems to have started in Hong Kong and Taiwan, but is more popular in the southeast Asian Chinese communities. Here it is listened to by everyone, but most commonly by those who are neither wholly traditional in life-style nor highly Westernized. The former wholly traditional listen to some traditional music and to Mandarin music also; the Westernized listen to Western music.

Temple art, too, has changed. Recently built temples differ from traditional temples in the following features: ornamentation very much less; colors pastel rather than prime or pure; interior tiled with hard porcelain tile, rather than walled with wood or brick plaster; much emphasis on solid, bright-colored surfaces rather than on highly decorated ones; ornaments and *shen* images very much less intricately made. Thus the setting for the fair, if a new-built temple is involved, is much less overpowering to the eye. Of course, even the old temples are now no longer the largest and most spectacular buildings in the community. Even in traditional China most temples were small, dull and poor, but the village houses were more so. The situation in the village where we stayed, in which the house of the richest man was very considerably more ornate and intricately decorated than the new temple, would once have been rare, especially since they said rich man was contributing most of the cost.

Last of all, the temple fairs draw small, quiet crowds except in a very few huge temples. Most of the onlookers are children, particularly if the show is a traditional one rather than a modern variety-show.

Thus even the fair of the Goddess of Mercy temple, one of the largest, oldest and most revered temples in Malaysia, was quieter than it had been in past years; and modernized floats and processions were part of the worship. The temple itself, once perhaps the most elaborate and well-built structure in Penang, is now dwarfed by the modern business buildings around it in the city of Georgetown.

Let me now analyze these changes, with some comparative notes on changes in recent years in Hong Kong.

First, it is obvious that the temple fair is no longer a calculated sensory climax, Increasing affluence and experience with the wider world has given the Chinese community many other sources of excitement; at the same time, relative decline in temple revenues and rising costs of putting on fairs have prevented the temples from mounting such spectacles as they once did. This has shifted the whole emphasis of the ritual. Making the god content is now a matter of following the specific required rites: sacrifice and the show (which the *shen* demand to see). There is more stress on pleasing the *shen* by doing the requisite acts, and no special stress on pleasing him by staging the most spectacular possible festivity.

Thus the solidest continuity is in the most essential aspects of the *paai* or worshipping rite. Incense is as abundant as ever. The specific foods most central to a worship offering—fruits, roast pork, buns and like—are still as important as ever. Paper representations of money, gold and silver bars, and clothing are still burned for the *shen*'s use. Moreover, the basic act of having a show persists; if the *shen* could not see one, bad luck would follow. There are sweet snacks at the fair, and some feasting after it. This essential core must go on as long as Chinese folk religion exists in recognizable form. But in its new context—as one rather small part of a complex modern world, rather than as one of the two great events of the year (the other, in traditional China, was the New Year)—it is of very different psychological import for the worshippers. Even the feast is apt to be less good or less of an occasion for gorging than is a political or business dinner. One gets the feeling that the relationship with the *shen* is different. Now, one has a special but businesslike relation with him; he is there and the rites suffice. He is not all-important and is no longer the personification of the community. The community is diffuse, and anyway it has other excuses for a good time.

The show itself is very rarely opera today. Chinese opera is reserved for public events of a more secular order. In Singapore the opera still is abundant at temple fairs, but in Penang the decreasing revenues and the changing tastes of the viewers have changed the opera's social role. This is the main reason for the continuing survival of the puppet theater. In Hong Kong, the puppet theater is almost dead, according to Alan Kagan who has studied it thoroughly. (Kagan, personal communication) In Taiwan, too, it is fading out. In Mainland China it is said to flourish, but, of course, with changed themes. The last refuge of the traditional puppet theater in all its variety and abundance may well be the Malaysia-Singapore region and perhaps other southeast Asian centers. The puppet theater is considered to be a cheap substitute for the opera. The plays are opera plays, scaled down. The puppets are dressed as opera characters. The several opera traditions—Cantonese, Teochiu, Hokkien, etc.—are matched by puppet traditions (though, I believe, with considerable differences in detail). The price for a performance is a fraction of an opera's cost, and, in this day of grudging donations to the temple committee that organizes the fair and other occasions, the cost is critical. The variety show with its Mandarin music and other modern acts is replacing both opera and puppet theater. Most temple fairs still put on the old acts, but every year the popularity of the new ones increases, and occasionally both are done.

Now, the critical point here is the tastes of the *shen*. *Shen* live in a world far more traditional than ours—it still has an Emperor and the full imperial structure. Therefore, they are believed to like the traditional art forms. In this they differ strongly from their present-day Malaysian worshippers. The interest of traditional opera and puppet theater is now confined to children, and to those Chinese who are so Westernized that they come at the old events with a fresh, appraising eye—a combination of outsider's interest and insider's nostalgic enthusiasm. The few bearers of traditional "high culture" in Malaysia look down on puppet theater, always a folk form and regarded as lowly by the elite of the old days. Even the opera, being invariably one of the southwestern regional operas rather than the Peking, is not highly regarded. Calligraphy, painting and classical music are the main items preserved by the China-born teachers. As for the vast majority of Malaysian Chinese, their interests lie elsewhere. In the village where we spent most of our time, there were a few television sets. On these—and they were watched by everyone in the village sometime or other—the Chinese theater was sedulously avoided. Virtually all watching was of

British and American programs. Even Malay and Indian programs were watched. But viewing Chinese-language items was virtually confined to the news, and very occasionally to a variety show of the sort seen at some temples. Radio listening was primarily to music and the news, and the music chosen was almost exclusively Mandarin music, as were the records bought by those who could afford record players. Older people listened to traditional or semi-traditional opera music, but even they usually heard Mandarin music. (Western music was not listened to.) In short, in so far as the *shen* prefer the traditional shows, they are that much more conservative than their worshippers.

However, their tastes are changing. The variety shows certainly please the modern worshippers more, and involve them, since the talent is local (the opera companies and puppet companies travel widely). The temple design and art is also notable in this connection. The change from wood, brick, elaborate ornament and prime colors to tile, cement, simple decor and pastel colors is partly dictated by finances, but is primarily a Westernization. In each case the change is away from Chinese traditional ideals of religious architecture and toward the British secular architecture of Malaysia (where, e.g., interiors are tiled because of the wet climate). The *shen* has changed his taste to approximate that of the worshippers. In this connection it is worth remarking that when recently-deceased relatives are contacted, e.g. in a wedding of two spirits, the goods supplied for them are entirely modern and Western: chauffeur-Mercedes-Benz cars, business suits, and the like are constructed of paper and burned for the use in the spirit world. The *shen* prefer a basically Chinese temple structure with many Chinese details and a specifically traditional floor plan, but their taste, too, is altering. It is noteworthy that their taste is showing itself strikingly similar in kind and in rate of change to that of the oldest China-born residents, especially those with a traditional Chinese education. Obviously the latter serve as models: the *shen* are perceived as like them.

I now turn to the relation of this to the historical and present situation of the Chinese in Malaysia. In the first place, the conservation of basic structures is important. The Chinese folk cult has obviously persisted as a living, viable, important tradition in the Nanyang. The structures believed essential to the correct performance of a rite go on as they always have. This being so, the falling-off in numbers and interest at the temple fairs must indicate a shift in emphasis within the folk religion. This, in fact, is what has occurred. The religion has not weakened; but instead of being centered around celebrations, festivals

and joyous occasions, and around providing maximal sensory stimulation and emotional release, it now centers around death and sickness. In Malaysia, the great Chinese festivals of today are the funerals, Curing rites and contacting the dead are also relatively more important than in the religion found in China in older times. Invulnerability cults still flourish. While these are all continuations of past traditions, indeed of foci of the folk religion, there is absolutely no question but that the religion has changed its emphasis from celebration of life to involvement with death. Here the problem of continuity and context confronts us. In the traditional religion of China, death rites were important; but in association with the celebration rites, the death rites were (and are) seen as integrating death and the dead with the great basic stream of things, and making them live in a vitally important way. In modern Malaysia, the same rites, practiced *without* the balance of the great ceremonies, both indicate and stimulate a bitter dedication to a dying past and a melancholy world-view. Funerals become ever more elaborate while temple fairs become ever less so; the change in the attitudes of the worshippers appears not only from this but also from their explicit comments.

In the second place, note that the changes in the temple fairs are *invariably* in the direction of Westernization. There is neither true creative innovation nor any imitation whatsoever of Malay rites. Virtually no Chinese have switched to the usual Malay religion, Islam. Chinese often visit Malay homes on the major Islamic holidays, and enjoy themselves, but this is a secular thing for them. This lack of Malayanization was not always the case. The Malay local spirits known as Datok Keramat ('holy chiefs') in Malay are worshipped by Chinese living in their areas. A whole range of Malay spirits and ghosts are feared or placated in longer-established Chinese communities. But these borrowings took place in the past. Now, when changes are made, they are invariably in one direction: away from Chinese and toward Western traditions, with the English-language-speaking world being the main provider of the latter.

Most interesting of all is the fast-growing importance—in temple fairs and in secular life—of the particular, stable fusion of Chinese and Western culture that is represented and symbolized by Mandarin music. This combination is a distinct musical style now, with its own stars and record companies, and is popular from Taiwan and Hong Kong to and throughout the emigrant Chinese world. It is nowhere more popular than in Malaysia, where radio stations often play it virtually without a

break for eighteen hours a day, and where a good percentage of the Chinese population listens to it most of their waking hours and to the virtual exclusion of other music. The temple art described above is another example of this Sino-Western fusion culture. There are other examples from all walks of life. Here, the point is that even the gods, the *shen*, are becoming members of this new cultural phenomenon. More conservative than any but the most thoroughly enculturated in the old ways, the *shen* nevertheless are rapidly changing.

Now, it is obvious from the first point above mentioned that the new fusion culture has created—or rather has arisen from—great psychological problems among its members. They have turned away from temples in general, devoting their money instead to private ends; the sense of community, centering about the temple, is gone, or rather going.

The Chinese of Malaysia were never bearers of a "Great Tradition." The peasant traditions they brought with them have dissolved and faded with time, as the homeland is forgotten and as totally new economic and social facts force themselves upon the modern Chinese. Under these circumstances, one would expect a fusion with the Malay culture stream, such as occurred in the days before the British. But British policy, and later the mutual distrust and dislike which resulted from that policy, cut the Chinese and Malays off from each other, and also introduced a new tradition—that of the colonial British themselves. This British stream was itself modified by distance from the homeland and by the nonrandom selection of Britishers for the colonial service. This aberrant and rather simplified British lifeway was of course the way of the elite in colonial Malaysia, and anyone native to Malaysia had to accommodate himself to it or remain forever among the faceless masses. It was under such circumstances that the fusion began to take place. Since independence, the gap between Chinese and Malays has grown wider or at least no narrower; in addition, the great wave of Westernization that has rolled over so much of the world has struck Malaysia too, where it was able to wash over a land already flooded by prestigious British ways and populated by ethnic groups that were already fast losing certain aspects of their traditional cultures. Among the Chinese, the wave was particularly effective. It bore along with it a great variety of forms already worked out in Hon gKong and Taiwan, forms that blended China and the West. It was these which had special appeal to the vast majority of the ordinary Chinese of Malaysia. Still intensely proud of their Chinese heritage but finding it incomplete, they could not throw it over and become Western or Malay; they would not even borrow from the

Malays. The new fused forms filled their needs for new, distinctively Chinese, yet prestigiously Westernized ways. However, it is clear from many developments that the present situation is unstable. First, as the Chinese become educated and well off, they become more Westernized. Even the language is going; there are Chinese in Singapore whose native language is English and who know no Chinese. This is admittedly extreme, but evidently the Western influence can be expected to grow stronger everywhere. Second as mentioned above, the sad emotional state of much of the poorer and less educated Chinese community implies that enough problems exist to force change. Mandarin music is probably bound to follow traditional folk music into oblivion in a generation or two. Perhaps a new, distinctively Chinese culture will arise, or perhaps the Malaysian Chinese community is due to disappear into a new international community.

In summary, the continuation of the Chinese temple fair shows that Chinese traditional culture is still a powerful factor in the lives of the Malaysian Chinese. Its changes show that the traditional culture is growing less and less adequate to the felt needs of the community. Its specific form is a product of the tension between Chinese and Malays, which has driven the Chinese back into themselves, and of the tension between the Malaysian Chinese and the West, which has led to tentative and transitory yet highly interesting new forms. The tastes of the gods have changed; the whole nature of the gods is different.

In summary, the felt needs and problems of a community caught between different ethnic groups will be expressed in the religious and artistic life.

A community so caught, if subjected to much stress, will tend to turn in on itself and to select certain features of the old tradition to remember while forgetting others. The new pattern thus created is a specific adaptation to conditions, not to be understood by reference to "survivals."

I believe that the pattern seen in Penang Chinese temple fairs reveals that the ordinary Chinese feel themselves especially hard hit by prejudice. In particular, the fall of intense sensory experience, of communal ritual and of innovation and the rise of a backward-looking death-connected cult may be singled out; as also the lack of recent borrowings from the Malays and the extreme borrowings from the British and other Westerners. Faced with a world in which British interests were long dominant, and Malaysia have adapted by changing the form and substance of traditional ritual, though the belief-system that sustained the ritual continues to survive. In the new ritual forms, we can see clearly

expressed the tensions and fears of the community.

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