

Chee-Beng Tan, *Chinese Religion in Malaysia: Temples and Communities*

Leiden: Brill, 2018. Hardcover, €121.00; paperback, €44.00; eBook, €121.00. ISBN 9789004357860 (hardcover), 9789004429864 (paperback), 9789004357877 (eBook).

Professor Chee-Beng Tan is a cultural anthropologist whose research contributions include major ethnographic studies of Malaysian Chinese society and culture, as well as edited volumes on the anthropology of Asian food. He studied as an undergraduate at what is now called Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, graduating in 1974. At that time, anthropologists trained in Canada, Britain, and the United States staffed the university's social science program. His undergraduate teachers involved him in their ethnographic research projects and encouraged him to undertake graduate work at Cornell University. For his doctoral research, in 1977–78 he studied the Malay-speaking Baba of Melaka, graduating in 1979. After teaching in Singapore for a year, he joined the faculty at the University of Malaya in 1980 and made Malaysia the focus for his research for the next sixteen years.

During those years, Tan conducted research in many locations in Malaysia. However, in 1996, discouraged by the “hegemony of Malay nationalism” (Tan, Ngeow, and Ling 2017, 106), he resigned from the University of Malaya and joined the anthropology department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. During his sixteen years at CUHK, he shifted the main focus of his research to Fujian Province and also made major contributions to the emerging field of the anthropology of food. During that time, he also helped develop the field of overseas Chinese studies. Following his retirement from CUHK in 2012, he joined the anthropology department at Sun Yat-sen University. Due to the demands of shifting jobs, countries, and research interests mid-career, Tan did not have time to fully analyze the research materials he collected in Malaysia during the 1980s and 1990s (Tan, Ngeow, and Ling 2017, 100–1). These materials, supplemented by more recent observations, form the foundation of *Chinese Religion in Malaysia: Temples and Communities*.

Tan's book is comprised of seven chapters, an organization that demonstrates his approach to analyzing the complicated topic that is Chinese popular religion. These chapters discuss temples and local communities (chapter 1); deities, speech groups, and temples (chapter 2); temple services, mediums, and temple promotion (chapter 3); localization and Chinese religion (chapter 4); “Pudu: The Hungry Ghosts Festival” (chapter 5); religious organizations and philanthropy (chapter 6); and Taoist religion in Malaysia (chapter 7). In these chapters, Tan illustrates his analytical arguments using examples from many local communities and speech groups, drawing on interviews and observations made over a time period that spans decades. As well, he often seeks to tie temples and temple traditions back to Chinese roots.

Much effort and research went into the writing of this book. But in the period between Tan's commencing his research on Chinese temples and completing this book, much has been published on these topics. In my view, greater attention to the insights and contributions of other scholars would have deepened and enriched this study. To give but one example, the chapter on Dejiiao organizations is empirically based on Tan's research on this topic (Tan 1985) but does not engage with Bernard Formoso's (2010) book *De Jiao: A Religious Movement in Contemporary China and Overseas*, which is referenced in a footnote and listed in the bibliography but not discussed. The same point could be made about many studies cited in this book.

As he described it in a recent interview, Tan's training as an anthropologist was in the Malinowskian tradition of functionalist ethnographic research (Tan, Ngeow, and Ling 2017, 97, 104). Although his approach has developed and changed throughout his career, his account of Chinese religion in Malaysia is functionalist, and he cites both Émile Durkheim and E. E. Evans-Pritchard favorably. For this book, however, Tan did not do functionalist-style in-depth research in a single community but rather multisited research. The result is that the reader is sometimes left with a series of ethnographic snapshots of temples and local communities at the moment in time when Tan visited them.

Multisited research can highlight network relationships and other social patterns, and Tan demonstrates that religious organizations and practices like community temples, spirit mediums, and public philanthropy are found throughout Malaysia. He also shows that overseas Chinese in Singapore and Thailand share these patterns, some of which he further links back to mainland China. The book's only map shows Malaysia's political boundaries. A map showing the regions of China from which overseas Chinese migrated would have been useful for many readers.

Tan's discussion of the modern history of popular Taoism and the Taoist priesthood is this book's most interesting chapter (chapter 7). Seeking unity and influence, Taoists have sought to create centralized forms of organization in both Malaysia and Singapore that promote wide networking with practitioners of Chinese popular religion in "greater China." The outcome of their efforts remains to be seen, but this subject could have been the topic of an entire monograph.

Many have described Chinese popular religion as syncretic and unsystematic; in mainland China, the government views many of its practices as little more than superstitions. In this short book, Tan succeeds in integrating diverse examples of popular religious practice, from temple festivals to spirit mediums, within a coherent framework that makes sense of its diversity. Although the book is scholarly, this study could be seen as a contribution to a modern movement to raise the status of Taoism.

Because I have done ethnographic research on Chinese temples, festivals, and spirit mediums in Penang and Singapore, I read the rich ethnographic data Tan was sharing with interest, but I wondered whether a reader who had less knowledge of Chinese popular religion and its practices would comprehend the significance of this information. This book will be most appreciated by academic experts in the field of Chinese religions and by readers seeking to learn more about Chinese popular religious traditions in Malaysia.

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