

### SOUTHEAST ASIA

DEBERNARDI, JEAN. *The Way that Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2006. xx + 372 pages. Maps, figures, table. Cloth US\$65.00; ISBN 0-8047-5292-3.

This is another book by anthropologist Jean DeBernardi on Chinese popular religion in Penang, Malaysia, with a focus on spirit mediums. Unlike other studies which concentrate on spirit-mediums as folk healers, DeBernardi also studies them as teachers, masters, moral guides, and charismatic leaders. After a long and informative introduction, the book is divided into two parts comprising seven chapters, followed by a conclusion. Part 1, entitled “Heaven on Earth,” describes spirit-mediumship in the wider context of the practice of Chinese popular religion in Malaysia. Chapter 1 on “Mending Luck” provides the introduction on this important theme, focusing on “the practical meaning of luck, fate, and wealth” (78). Spirit-mediumship is an important form of divination to mend luck, through which worshippers receive authoritative responses from a particular god that gives them specific diagnoses and concrete remedies (100). People consult spirit-mediums for all kinds of help, including getting lottery numbers. A common cause of bad luck or ill health is attributed to spiritual collusion with a spirit, described as *hoandiah* or *chhiongdiuh* in Hokkien (Minnan language). This is discussed with examples in Chapter 2. Also described in this chapter is seeking the help of spirit-mediums to get rid of black magic.

The process of spirit-medium trance possession is described in Chapter 3. This is an informative chapter which describes trance performance, symbolic power of objects (such as the black flag that protects the medium from “demonic influences”), language used, connectedness with imperial China, popular literature and Chinese religious culture, and, of course, the embodiment of the gods. Imageries of deities are derived from Chinese classic literature works, and “in the trance performance these characters come alive as individuals with well-defined personalities” (150). The author describes three deities—Nezha, the Great Saint (Monkey God), and the Vagabond Buddha—who are common in possessing

mediums in Penang, and, indeed, throughout Malaysia. Neza is also called The Third Prince or the Baby God, and the book has a beautiful photo (Fig. 28) of the medium possessed by the god-sucking pacifiers (rubber teats) and holding a bottle of milk. Possession by the Great Saint (the Monkey God) is often shown by the medium acting like a monkey. The character of Jigong as a vagrant who always help the poor and the weak is well known to most Chinese worshippers. Figure 29 in the book shows a medium possessed by Jigong drinking Guinness Stout.

Part 2 of the book is on "Spirit Mediums." Chapter 4 is devoted to describing the veneration of Datuk Kong, that is, *keramat*, who are spirits associated with sacred sites or tombs of Muslim saints. As the Datuk spirits are generally associated with Malays and Islam, the mediums in trance speak Malay, and the food offered has to be *halal*. Pork, for example, cannot be offered, and food associated with the Malays, such as *nasi kunyit* and betel nut, are common offerings. Datu Kong spirits need to be placated, especially if one has collided with them. Through the narration of a woman medium called Datuk Aunt, the author not only gives us a picture of the Chinese *keramat* belief in Penang, but also the wider Chinese beliefs and practices.

In Chapter 5, DeBernardi describes the China-born spirit medium called Master Poh, who worked as a medium in a small house temple. In terms of teaching, this medium has a universalistic outlook, emphasizing that all religions and in fact all "races" are fundamentally the same, and his moral teaching is derived from Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. In fact DeBernardi provides detailed example of Master Poh's teaching on self-cultivation and the Dao, as well as filial piety. Chapter 6 describes another kind of spirit medium. In this case Master Lim caters to the English-educated middle-class Chinese. His ability to use the Daoist text *Daodejing* to impart his teaching and even juxtapose this with lines from English poems and the Bible no doubt helped to impress his disciples. He provided spiritual healing and gave advice to business people. Like Master Poh, Master Lim also emphasized self-realization to escape from the cycle of death and rebirth. In Chapter 7, the spirit medium described, Master Ooi, was possessed by the Vagabond Buddha. Unlike Master Poh and Master Lim, Master Ooi showed his ability to perform self-mortifying acts. The chapter has an interesting section on Vagabond Buddha talking to the ethnographer—that is, through the medium.

The description on the mediums gives readers a sense of their diversity. It shows that their ability to teach in addition to performing mediumship is influenced by their intellectual background, especially knowledge of Chinese popular fiction, philosophy, and religion, even though few of them had received much education. In the case of Master Lim, he was also exposed to theosophy and "also was deeply influenced by the modernist form of Theravada Buddhism" (225). This, combined with his knowledge of Chinese traditions, help him to teach morality, self-reliance, and spirituality. However, to what extent do spiritual-mediums actually teach morality and spirituality in the temples, and how large is their audience? This is hardly discussed, and most of the teachings described are based on the author's interview with the mediums, although in their roles as mediums, they also convey moral advice from the gods. The author provides a very good conclusion to her study when she points out that the spirit medium is "both a vehicle for shared structures of meaning and an agent in the construction and renewal of those structures in performance" (302). Overall this is an excellent study on Chinese spirit medium and on Chinese popular religion in Malaysia, Penang in particular.

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