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

colonial Malaya as the consequence of "encounters between peoples who signif[ied] their differences and inequalities—in power, economic position, political ambitions, and historical imaginings—by cultural means" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 388). As I discuss in Part I of this study, Chinese temples and festivals assumed exceptional importance in Penang precisely because they were a means to establish a social presence for the Chinese immigrants, to organize their social life, and to display their economic prowess. Far from being an inert tradition that was unself-consciously transmitted, the Confucian cult of memory also took on new meanings as a form of racial pride. The descendants of these early immigrants continue to defend Chinese language and culture in the modern state, in which they now are a large ethnic minority.

Identity and the Invention of Tradition

Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini have argued that scholars who study overseas Chinese communities tend to reify "Chinese identity," focusing on "intrinsic and timeless features of Chinese culture, which persist even in the midst of non-Chinese society" (Ong and Nonini 1997: 8). They correctly conclude that because Chinese social strategies often take traditional guises, scholars have failed to notice the newness of their social arrangements. Consequently, they propose that we view concepts like "Chinese culture, Chinese family values, *guanxi* [social relations], 'Confucian capitalism,'" and so on, as "discursive tropes" that "constitute Chinese identities and transnational practices." They conclude that these discourses and their connections to power are themselves in need of study (Ong and Nonini 1997: 9).[1]

Many scholars now emphasize the strategies by which leaders use culture, history, and language to construct the experience of a shared heritage.[2] Eric Hobsbawn coined the term "invented tradition" to name this phenomenon, defining it as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawn 1983: 1). Although the term "invented tradition" may overstate the novelty of the practice, which is not confined to the modern world, nonetheless it captures the seemingly paradoxical fact that people often refashion and may even wholly invent traditions to suit their needs. We may ask, however, how communities or governments decide which elements of tradition or the past are to be transmitted. The ideologies of nationalism, modernism, multiculturalism, and religious fundamentalism suggest different conclusions about how the past should be preserved in the present—or, indeed, if it merits any place there at all.

Although the modernist may decry or trivialize the nationalist's invocation of history, for many the past provides materials for the construction of modern identities that draw on tradition for legitimation. For example, Chinese immigrants to port cities like Penang formed secret sworn brotherhoods like the Heaven and Earth Society for their protection, and new members submitted to an elaborate ritual of initiation. (See Chapters 3 and 4.) The men who scripted these deeply traditional rituals took an ancient Asian symbolism of political authority—that of the exemplary royal city imagined as the pivot of the universe—to validate new social and political arrangements. In so doing, they captured some of the magical power of Chinese cosmology and ritual process.

In the recent revitalization of religious culture, Chinese community leaders also have turned to the symbols and social organization of religious culture. Whereas some Penang politicians made use of the territorial organization of the Hungry Ghosts Festival to promote Chinese unity in the pursuit of shared community goals—including education, health care, and the rebuilding of the Penang Chinese Town Hall—the organizers of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival mobilized a ritually defined sense of unity, distinguishing insiders from outsiders in a logic of sacrality and purity. Penang Chinese religious culture reproduces traditional structures of thought and practice, but it also enters into social process, including the identity projects of modernity.

The Ritualization of Change

Although both have roots in traditional forms of social organization, I propose that we consider both the formation of popular religious institutions like the Heaven and Earth Society in colonial Penang and the contemporary revitalization of popular religious culture as social movements designed to create and sustain unity. Most theorists of social movements focus on contemporary political movements that demonstrate people's ability to self-reflexively seek social change. Ideology, rather than culture, is a key tool for understanding these movements, and important elements in that ideology include a definition of the actor herself or himself (the insider), the identification of the group's adversary (the opponent), and an indication of the goals and objectives for which people struggle (the hoped-for outcomes). Often people seek to regenerate the present through a mythic reaffirmation of the past, and Alberto Melucci concludes that "[a] movement joins past and future, the defense of a social group with a demand for transformation" (Melucci 1996: 351). At the same time, however, social-movement theorists tend to dismiss religious revivalism as an escapist form of resistance that offers participants regressive utopias or reinvented rituals in place of effective mobilization to create a new political order (Melucci 1996: 171–72).

Perhaps because of the Western tendency to equate modernity with secularism, few scholars have regarded ritual as a form of modernity. By contrast, the historical and anthropological scholarship on millennial movements demonstrates that these movements often were the product of the conjuncture between colonial powers and local communities that were divided by linguistic and cultural differences or even mutual hostilities. In his study of Melanesian cargo cults, for example, Peter Worsley concluded that millenarian cults tend to occur among peoples—aboriginal communities or peasants, for example—who experience oppression at the hands of another class or nationality (Worsley 1968: 227–28). Faced with a common opponent who threatens to absorb or defeat them, their leaders seek strategies to overcome their lack of unity through new forms of social integration. Consequently, the millenarian movement brings people together in a united relationship of antagonism to a shared opponent.

Precisely because they are so deeply divided, these groups require an ideology to provide them with a basis for unity, and in millenarian movements this ideology takes religious form. Leaders project common values onto the supernatural, seeking to remove these values from the realm of discussion and debate. Concurrently, they develop common symbols that transcend local divisions to serve as a basis for unity. Chinese sectarian movements, for example, often expressed a wished-for unity in the symbolism of the Dao, the unitary source of all things, sometimes anthropomorphized as the Bushel Mother. In this quest for symbolic sources of unity, the deities protective of local territories and communities became absorbed into spiritual hierarchies, imagined as local administrators or assistants subservient to more powerful, universal gods.[3]

At the same time, the ideologies of groups like the nineteenth-century Heaven and Earth Society projected the image of the group's enemies onto this supernatural screen as archetypal demonic opponents. The Heaven and Earth Society's legendary history and ritual of initiation fused political goals with millennial aspirations, identifying as their opponents and demonizing China's "barbarian" Manchu rulers. Indeed, the group's slogan "Overthrow the Qing [dynasty] and restore the Ming" (*Fanqing fuming*) simultaneously meant "Overthrow darkness and restore light." Members joined with the group's ancestors and gods to form five divine armies, allied against their imagined enemies. (See ter Haar 1998.)

For universal savior gods and demonic opponents to serve as sources of ideological unity, however, their promoters must teach their often allegorical meanings through narratives, visual representations, and the ritual process. Indeed, whereas many authors view ritual as a formalized, inflexible form of social action that transmits tradition and confirms traditional forms of authority,

ritual also provides the organizers of new social movements with a vehicle for change and the promulgation of new symbols and values.

During the French Revolution, for example, radicals developed a revolutionary cult in which "a new calendar, new images, and new kinds of processions worked to create a new man by laying a new social foundation for his existence" (Hunt 1988: 30). In order to lay this new social foundation, the revolutionaries created a calendar of significant dates, abolishing Catholic feast days, and emphasized horizontal space and egalitarianism in their gatherings. They also sacralized their revolutionary oath, since the oath made the act of creating a social bond visible, and therefore was fundamental to the formation of a new social contract (Hunt 1988: 29; see also Ozouf 1976). Like the French revolutionaries, members of the Heaven and Earth Society also sacralized their social contract with an oath. Instead of creating a new calendar, however, they represented their opposition to China's Qing dynasty by using the calendar of the Ming dynasty that they sought to restore (Stanton 1900: 42).

Lynn Hunt's study of the French Revolution suggests that political leaders use ritual process and the sacred to (re)construct communities since these require "a new cognitive basis, new categories of definition" (Hunt 1988: 30). Ritual is an appropriate medium through which to promote these new categories of definition and to ensure that individuals experience them as objective and compelling. As Emile Durkheim pointed out, in the collective effervescence of ritual practice concepts take on an emotional charge, and people experience them as transcendent and binding:

> [S]ociety cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and realizes its position; it is before all else an active co-operation. The collective ideas and sentiments are even possible only owing to these exterior movements which symbolize them. (Durkheim 1965 [1915]: 465–66)

Because people learn collective ideas through movement and common action, the religious cult and its ritual practices are essential: "The cult is not simply a system of signs by which the faith is outwardly translated; it is a collection of the means by which this is created and recreated periodically" (Durkheim 1965 [1915]: 464). The collective celebration of invented rituals is designed, then, to ensure that the new cognitive order forming the basis for the group's shared collective representations achieves "an extended and prolonged empire over intellect" (Durkheim 1965 [1915]: 486).

The "empire" of ritual practice is ruled not only by Durkheimian collective representations but also by leaders who seek to use ritual practice to generate emotional solidarity and identification with a larger group (Collins 1988: 117).

The Heaven and Earth Society's ritual of initiation, for example, was strategically crafted to instill sentiments of respect toward leaders, of in-group solidarity and a sense of belonging, and of shared antipathy toward opponents.

In contemporary Penang, traditional forms of ritual and social practice confirm local authority structures and community boundaries, but these coexist with modern forms of authority and belonging—the political party, the workplace, and the nongovernmental organization. At the same time, Penang's history is interwoven with the history of the growth of global capitalism, and this multicultural settlement was an early participant in "the modern culture movement." According to Sahlins, this movement is one aspect of a larger process of structural transformation in which we find globalization leading to the syncretism of traditional and modern elements. As a consequence, local communities select and elaborate traditional cultural practices—like the potlatch, or the Straits Chinese religious processions known as *chingay*—to show to others their difference and uniqueness. The process of interaction and syncretization has resulted in "the formation of a world *system* of cultures, a 'culture of cultures' with all the characteristics of a structure of differences" (Sahlins 1994: 389).

For example, when Penang community leaders made use of the grassroots territorial organization of the Hungry Ghosts Festival in the 1970s and 1980s to raise funds for community projects like the support of Chinese independent schools, they took traditional forms of community identity—collective worship and feasting—and used them to mobilize support for their modernist projects and the goal of greater Chinese unity. As social reformers, these leaders openly criticized as superstitious and unprogressive the Hungry Ghosts Festival's costly, grand-scale rituals, which several generations of educated Penangites have denounced as a pointless, wasteful extravagance. They preferred instead to sponsor cultural shows of music and martial arts during the Moon and Lantern festivals, displaying performance genres that today represent the essence of Chinese culture at multicultural festivals worldwide.

But there is still space in Penang society for more traditional cultural practices—ritual, myth, and symbol—that also mobilize a sense of identity. Penangites transmit social memory through these practices, and rituals that recall the past—including the memory of collective grievances—provide them with a "theatre of memory" (Feuchtwang 1992: 20). Indeed, Paul Connerton has argued that if social memory exists, we will find it in commemorative ceremonies whose ritual performances convey and sustain knowledge of the past at the same time that they inculcate habits in participants (Connerton 1989: 4–5).

Rituals of commemoration are not of course always religious in design: the student protesters at Tiananmen Square drew strength from their commemo-

ration of the seventieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement (Schwarcz 1991), and in 1987 many Taiwanese remembered the forty-year anniversary of a demonstration that the Nationalist government had dispelled with bullets, killing many young Taiwanese students. Such events not only are recalled by those who experienced them but are constructed as collective memories and passed on to a new generation. (See also Jing 1996, Halbwachs 1992.)

Diverse means exist to promote social memory, from oral narratives to historical texts, from museum displays to miniseries. Ritual action is a powerful means by which to shape social memory, however, since it draws on poetic and dramaturgical forms to create vivid images of the past and to formulate attitudes toward historical actors and events. As Victor Turner noted, following Monica Wilson, people often cast their most enduring ideas in performance, and thus ritual may reveal deeply held values (Turner 1969: 6).

The Localization of Chinese Popular Religious Culture in Time and Space

Unquestionably, the identity projects of modernity involve the elaboration of discursive tropes, including politically motivated attempts to construct social unity in the tropes of Chinese civilization. But Penang religious culture also encompasses an imaginative and poetically compelling cosmology, mythology, and theodicy, some elements of which we may trace back for millennia in Chinese history.[4] These enduring structures of classification and action connect Penang Chinese traditionalists to a social, cultural, and economic way of life, and their acceptance and reproduction constitute one form of identity maintenance.

Anthony D. Smith (1981, 1986, 1999) convincingly demonstrates that many ethnic groups derive a sense of identity and shared destiny from deep cultural, historical, and territorial roots. Consequently, the culturally conservative practices of traditional culture do far more than mark out social boundaries in contemporary identity politics:

> It is this wider tradition and life-style that provides an image and language of "our community" and whose profile is sharpened by contact with "other communities." *All* the elements of that tradition and culture—the myths, symbols, values and memories encoded in laws and customs, institutions, religions, art, music, dance, architecture, family practices and language—help to bind families together in a community of ancestry; a totality of expressions and representations (and not just the linguistic codes that for some scholars form the symbolic "border guards" of the group against the stranger), a totality that gains with every generation and evokes a veneration and a respect of ancestors and the past. (Smith 1986: 49)

In contemporary Penang, many Sino-Malaysians localize, perform, interpret, and transmit an understanding of Chinese history, philosophy, and cosmology through the diverse media of local religious culture, including temples, festivals, sacred texts, and ritual performances.

In this study, I investigate Penang Chinese religious culture as a structured field of representations, but also as a localized ritual practice, and as a historically situated social process. Symbolic action is, after all, "a duplex compound made up of an inescapable past and an irreducible present" (Sahlins 1985: 151–52). In Penang, that "inescapable past" includes systems of symbolic classification deeply etched in linguistic structures and the habits of everyday life, but also the more formalized systems of classification that inform ritual practice. The past also includes, however, this diaspora community's memories of their experiences of conflicts in China and Southeast Asia that put their community at risk—conflicts that Penangites now recall in narratives of spiritual warfare and acts of ritual commemoration.

At the same time as I explore the processes by which the Malaysian Chinese have localized their religious culture in the time and space of Penang, I also seek to develop more satisfactory ways of discussing the relationship between China's elite and popular religious traditions. In the literature on Chinese religion, scholars commonly polarize the contrast between the two. Many use the term "folk religion" to describe local religious practices, often assuming them to be nothing more than a chaotic jumble of superstitious practices and improvised ritual remedies. But rather than polarizing elite and popular religious forms, we should explore how people at all levels of society and in all ethnic groups interact with and conceive of one another in light of religious institutions, practices, and ideologies.[5] (See Davis 1982.)

Even though it may be performance-oriented, Penang religious culture draws deeply on the cyclical cosmology that forms the basis for the *Book of Changes* (or *Yijing*) and the concept of the Dao or moral path taught in Laozi's *Daodejing*. Temples also commonly distribute sacred texts like the Heart Sutra and classical morality books like *Taishang's Treatise on Action and Retribution* (*Taishang Ganying Pian*). Vernacular literature deeply informs the religious imagination, and novels that use allegory to convey their religious messages continue to inspire the imagination of those who practice Chinese religious culture (Dudbridge 1978; Elliot 1955; Esherick 1987; Shahar 1996, 1998).[6]

Whereas the authors of popular novels translated their cosmologies into allegorical didactic stories, the inventors of ritual forms expressed it in visual symbols and magical operations that sought to restore harmony and balance in a disordered world. In their everyday ritual practice, for example, mediums

"dance the gods" (*thiausin*, *tiaoshen*), including the spirits of the heroes of vernacular fiction: the Emperor of the Dark Heavens, the Third Prince, the God of War, the Vagabond Buddha, and the Great Saint (popularly known as the Monkey God). Possessed by the spirits of divine kings, princes, generals, and Buddhist saviors, spirit mediums wage spiritual warfare against the chaotic forces of illness and misfortune, imagined in an idiom of the demonic.

Textual sources may provide the most reliable vehicle for the transmission of Chinese cosmology, but ritual officiants—Daoist priests, Buddhist monks, or the gods possessing their spirit mediums—translate the basic elements of that cosmology into ritualized practices and performances. These practices embody abstract structures of action and feeling in the individual's experiences, including the experience of place and time. The events of the contemporary lunar festival cycle, for example, define a sacred geography and a sacred calendar that coordinates festivals, rituals, banquets, and reunions, thereby contributing to the "spatiotemporal production of locality" (Appadurai 1996: 180–81).

Overview

Under British rule, Chinese immigrants to Penang localized their diverse community by developing institutions for self-government, including the Kong Hok Palace—a temple that served as a community tribunal and council—and their secret sworn brotherhoods. These institutions interwove the political and the religious, the sacred and the profane, in order to achieve models of universal order.[7] Community leaders used the ritual process to organize society—sometimes claiming the charisma of divine election for themselves—mapping space to reproduce a sacred geography, and synchronizing time to the rhythms of their lunar calendar. The Chinese immigrants reproduced their way of life, however, in the space of the Straits Settlements, and during the time of British colonial rule.

Penang's European elite, many of them Freemasons, affirmed the Enlightenment values of cosmopolitan brotherhood, truth, and religious tolerance. Their commitment to religious tolerance, however, sometimes conflicted with their reformist spirit. Many found Chinese local religious practices superstitious and disruptive of public order, and some argued that rationality and the greater public good should take precedence over tolerance. At the same time, the British recognized that the Chinese community used their religious culture to reproduce a competing authority structure that the colonials regarded as an *imperium in imperio*—an empire within the empire.

In Part I of this study, I examine the development of the heterogeneous Penang Chinese community, along with the conjuncture between the British

and Chinese communities whose leaders competed for control of this urban settlement. I investigate the dialogue between these two communities—both seeking to localize their own notions of propriety, authority, and sacrality—through the analysis of two conflicts: the 1857 Penang Riots and the 1890 suppression of the Chinese secret sworn brotherhoods.[8] As Sally Falk Moore notes, "events of articulation" like these are "the crossroads where many different interests and visions of things intersect," and may infuse cultural categories with new meanings (Moore 1994: 364–65).

In seeking greater measures of control over the Chinese performance of periodic festivals and the sworn brotherhoods' form of the Asian theater state, the British colonial government sought to superimpose European notions of public civility, virtue, rationality, and authority on the heterogeneous urban community that they had created. Although they may have suppressed the sworn brotherhoods and their elaborate ritual performances, they did not succeed, however, in preventing the symbols and practices of Penang Chinese religious culture from having continued empire over imagination.

After independence, the Penang Chinese community exchanged an identity as British subjects for citizenship in the new Federation of Malaya. The new social contract of nationhood developed in 1957 lent constitutional support to a division between the privileged core nation of indigenous Malays and immigrant outsiders, and maintained ethnic divisions set during the colonial period. Where nineteenth-century British fears that the Chinese had formed an empire within the empire sparked a literature investigating the Chinese secret societies, the postcolonial literature now regarded Chinese populations outside the political boundaries of China as "Overseas Chinese"—sometimes hinting that these immigrant communities were a potential fifth column for Asian communism—and examined the paradoxes of their position as an economically powerful but often politically marginalized minority in the new nations of Southeast Asia.[9]

In the postcolonial period, a policy of religious pluralism and tolerance has continued, but Islam is central to the definition of Malay ethnicity and Malaysian national identity. Consequently, many non-Malay minorities, including the Chinese, strongly feel that current political policies marginalize their cultural expressions. In this period of political uncertainty, many Chinese have turned to fortifying their cultural, linguistic, and religious institutions. In Part II, I explore the revitalization of Penang Chinese religious culture but also investigate the continuities and enduring structures that make religious culture an important vehicle for identity maintenance. I focus on events of the festival cycle that draw the community together—or at least those who follow the practices of local religious culture—in the first, seventh, and ninth lunar months,

and I consider Penang Chinese religious culture as a structured cosmology, a form of social memory, and a social process. Let me turn now to Part I of this study, in which I explore the development of this ethnically diverse community and the role that religious culture has played in interethnic conflicts and competitions.