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.