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## Preface

WHEN I BEGAN to study Chinese popular religious culture in Penang, I did not intend to make spirit mediums a particular focus, nor was I drawn to them. I could not, however, avoid them. My friends took me to see spirit mediums who performed in an abandoned garden, to family séances in their homes, to out-of-the-way temples in remote villages, and to urban temples that celebrated enormous festivals. In the afternoon or evening, a short walk from my house would bring me to small temples where I could visit with the Monkey God, the Third Prince, the Vagabond Buddha, the Crippled Immortal, and the Wealth God as they possessed their spirit mediums, and again to roadside shrines that invoked local spirits residing in trees and rocks.

Spirit mediums in trance perform impressive self-mortifying feats during temple festivals, and use language poetically in their day-to-day healing consultations – lures for an anthropologist trained in symbolic and interpretive traditions. Claude Lévi-Strauss explained the shaman-healer’s performance as a form of folk psychoanalysis, but as a novice researcher I questioned how tissue paper charms, talismans, and luck-changing rituals could possibly ameliorate a client’s hardships. And when I sought explanations for their practices, spirit mediums often answered my questions evasively, further dampening my interest. Asked, for example, about a ritual in which seven burning oil lamps stood in front of a temple, a spirit medium responded offhandedly: “Oh, that’s just something that I learned in Taiwan.” Asked about the deities, more than one person answered with a faint smile: “That’s something that you should ask someone old, really old, like two hundred years old!” But Chinese often said, “If you ask [the gods], there will be a reply,” and one day a committee member for a major downtown temple took me to meet a spirit medium whom he claimed could help me in my work.

As usual, I stood to the side and listened while the possessed medium counseled a client. This time, however, the committee member urged me to ask the god-in-his-medium a question. I moved to the side of the altar and asked, “Right now I am doing research on Chinese religion. Will I be able to write a book?” He not only predicted success, but to my surprise began to lecture me on self-cultivation and the Dao. I realized that I had been mistaken in seeking to interview the spirit mediums when it was their gods who were the experts in spiritual matters. With the temple as backdrop, in the personality of a Chinese god, and with the authority and dignity conferred by that status, the spirit medium could lecture effectively on these arcane matters. So enlightened, I transformed my approach to my research, and became the student to several spirit mediums/gods.

I have formally interviewed twenty-two practicing spirit mediums at eighteen Penang temples – three women and nineteen men. Most of these spirit mediums were Hokkien speakers, but that number includes two Cantonese, three Hakka (a father and his two sons), and one Teochiu. I interviewed most of these people in the front room of private homes, asking about how they came to become spirit mediums, about the experience of trance, and about their patron deity’s story. I also have interviewed six possessed spirit mediums – of course from their perspective, I interviewed the gods themselves.

But I also have talked to many other people in both Penang and more recently Singapore – temple committee members, spirit mediums’ clients, research assistants, the families whose homes I shared, friends and neighbors – and listened to their stories and interpretations. In my study of Christianity in Singapore and Malaysia, I have gained valuable insight into popular religious culture from Christian converts who maintain critical but also analytical perspectives on those practices.

Most of these individuals discussed popular religious culture with me in response to my questions and evident curiosity, often in the context of quasiformal interviews that I both taped and recorded in a notebook. Bourdieu has critiqued the anthropologist’s use of “instruments of objectification” such as genealogies, maps, diagrams, and even mere transcription into writing as constructs that destroy the logic of practice in the process of seeking to understand it (Bourdieu 1990 [1980]: 11). Too often (he further concludes) the anthropologist confuses the interviewees’ overly coherent synoptic accounts – which after all they produced to teach the struggling anthropologist – with a rule book local people use to guide their everyday practices.

Undoubtedly many of the stories, symbolic exegeses, and moral teachings that I discuss in this monograph were the product of the dialog of fieldwork. But the stories that I elicited in interviews were very like those that my landlady

and her friends exchanged in the kitchen on an almost daily basis. Although my questioning about the meaning of ritual symbols undoubtedly prompted some people to greater self-consciousness, often I simply entered into an ongoing conversation. Spirit mediums in particular often spoke fluently and at length on occult matters, clearly enjoying the opportunity to share stories that had been retold many times, and they deflected the topic away from subjects that did not interest them, including the histories of the gods that I sought with such enthusiasm.

I had studied Mandarin Chinese with Professor George Chao at the University of Chicago prior to beginning research in Penang, and decided on my arrival to study Hokkien, which is the *lingua franca* spoken by most Chinese. With the help of Ch'ng Oon Hooi and my second landlady, Tan Gaik Suan, I developed a good passive understanding of Hokkien, and a basic speaking ability. I also developed a file-card lexicon of Penang Hokkien vocabulary with around 2,800 entries, a time-consuming but useful undertaking. Whenever possible I conducted interviews in Hokkien, and I usually transcribed those interviews with the assistance of research assistants. I translated many of the written texts that I collected in Penang (invocations, scriptures, divination charms, and poems) with the assistance of Dr. Wu Xu. The final responsibility for any errors of transcription or translation is mine.

In 1991, I embarked on archival research with the intention of returning to my ethnographic research materials—including much that I did not incorporate in my doctoral thesis—with greater depth of insight. That research resulted in a very long monograph that I finally divided in two. *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community* (2004) examines Chinese popular religious culture under colonial rule and in the contemporary period, focusing on the role of religion in reinforcing power, claiming social honor, and strengthening ethnic solidarity. This monograph continues that project with an in-depth study of the everyday practices of popular religious culture and spirit mediums.

I published an earlier version of Chapter Five in 1996 as “Teachings of a Spirit Medium” in *Religions of China in Practice* (Lopez 1996), and it was reprinted in *Religions of Asia in Practice: An Anthology* (Lopez 2002). The description of my experience while meditating in Master Lim’s temple has been published as a poem in *Reflections: The Anthropological Muse* (DeBernardi 1985). I thank Penguin Press for permission to use excerpts from several chapters from D. C. Lau’s translation of the *Tao Tê Ching*, published by Penguin Classics (Lao Tzu 1963).

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The Social Science Faculty at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang (1979–1981), the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore (1995, 1997, 1999), the Centre for Advanced Studies at the National University of Singapore (1999), and the Asia Research Institute (2004) extended the favor of institutional support during periods of research in Malaysia and Singapore. I would also like to thank the staffs at the National University of Singapore, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), the Singapore National Archive, the Singapore High Court, and the Brethren missionary agency Echoes of Service in Bath, England, for allowing me access to their library and archival collections.

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Although all those who participated in this study were fully informed of my intentions to publish my research findings in the form of a book, nonetheless I have followed the convention of changing the names of almost all of the individuals I interviewed. I also have altered or omitted the names and obscured the locations of most temples.