

# Chinese Religion and the Challenge of Modernity in Malaysia and Singapore: Syncretism, Hybridisation and Transfiguration<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The past fifty years have seen continuing anthropological interest in the changes in religious beliefs and practices among the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore under conditions of rapid modernisation. Anthropologists have used the syncretic model to explain these changes, arguing that practitioners of Chinese “folk” religion have adapted to urbanisation, capitalist growth, nation-state formation, and literacy to preserve their spiritualist worldview, but the religion has also experienced “rationalisation” in response to the challenge of modernity. This article proposes an alternative approach that questions the dichotomous imagination of spiritualist Chinese religion and rationalist modernity assumed by the syncretic model. Using ethnographic, archival and secondary materials, I discuss two processes of change — the transfiguration of forms brought about by mediation in new cultural flows, and the hybridisation of meanings brought about by contact between different cultural systems — in the cases of the Confucianist reform movement, spirit mediumship, Dejiao associations, state-sponsored Chingay parades, reform Taoism, and Charismatic Christianity. These represent both changes internal to Chinese religion and those that extend beyond to reanimate modernity in Malaysia and Singapore. I argue that existential anxiety connects both processes as the consequence of hybridisation and the driving force for transfiguration.

## Keywords

hybridity, modernity, syncretism, Chinese religion, Singapore, Malaysia

## The Question of Syncretic Chinese Religion

Syncretic popular religion in Oriental societies has long intrigued Western scholars because of its striking difference with the theological religions of sacred books. The frequent innovations throwing up new doctrines, practices and deities, or incorporating borrowed ones, exist with an improbable stability

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of worldview over the *longue durée* of centuries despite the highly decentralised and dispersed character of religious organisation. Even as Sinic, Indic and Southeast Asian civilisations were brought into the capitalist world-system and traditional communities brought under the pressures of modern cultural institutions, syncretic popular religion has survived and defied the prediction of decline. In Malaysia and Singapore, Chinese religion has attracted anthropological attention because rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, and then extant economic and cultural globalisation, accentuate the paradox. However, scholars remain wedded to the dichotomous imagination of tradition versus modernity, bringing into opposition the rationalism of modernisation and the spiritualism of syncretism, and the textual authority of theological “world” religions and the oral traditions of performative “folk” religions. My objection does not stem from the postcolonial criticism of Orientalism (Alatas, 1977; Said, 1978), but rather that the whole range of phenomena that scholars have described under the rubric of Chinese religion far exceed the dichotomous imagination of “modernisation.”

The dominant scholarly view treats Chinese religion not as “a theological entity,” but a “cultural complex” that celebrates the life-course of individuals in the Chinese community, a participatory religion of ethnic rites of passage that defines the spatio-temporality of the Chinese life-world (Saso, 1985:344). Anthropologists have used Clifford Geertz’s (1966:4) famous definition of religion as a cultural system to define Chinese religion as a “system of symbols” providing for “conceptions of a general order of existence” in “an aura of factuality” which render certain “moods and motivations” as “uniquely realistic” (Wee, 1976:156; Tan, 1983:243). As such, the symbolisms and practices pervade many areas of the Chinese life-world and provide cultural resources for the community to tackle the social and existential problems of the day. Thus, scholars have introduced a wide range of practices into their analysis of Chinese religion and criticised the flawed Eurocentric definition of Chinese religion as consisting of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism and the residual category of popular religion (Barratt, 2005), and affirmed the radical syncretism of Chinese religion that fuses all four categories and more.

But as the list of phenomena increases, the theoretical burden of the syncretic model becomes too heavy for the model to bear. This is, first and foremost, a definitional issue. In her pioneering studies on Chinese religion in Singapore, Marjorie Topley (1956, 1961) included vegetarian houses; clan associations; secret societies; funereal, festival and shrine associations; and modernist reform movements, thus extending the Chinese religion field into quasi-religious and functionally secular associations. Topley (1961:313) concluded that Chinese religion was experiencing secularisation and its

“traditional ritual elements” would not survive. On the other hand, studying the same field in the same period, Elliot (1955:28,22) saw the deepening of syncretic spiritualism in the resurgence of spirit mediumship compared to their muted significance in South China, which he argued was due to the erosion of ancestral cults by the secular materialism of an immigrant community facing rapid urbanisation and commercialisation (see also Comber, 1958). These are opposite conclusions, which highlight the vicissitudes of interpretation in relation to one’s analytical focus within a field of heterogeneous beliefs and practices defined as symbolically unified.

Observing general religious revival among the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore, succeeding anthropologists largely shifted their lens from the secularisation thesis to a “rationalisation” thesis built on comparative studies of the diverse phenomena included in the Chinese religion field. Implicit in the thesis was the interpretation of the Chinese religious change from the vantage point of modernity, with monotheistic Christianity and then canonical oriental religions as intermediate “rational” religions, that is laden with evaluations of syncretic “pollution” of canonical “purity.” In her comparative study of Buddhism and Chinese spirit-mediumship, Vivienne Wee (1976:177) concluded, “The majority of Singapore’s ‘Buddhists’ are ignorant of much of the Buddhist philosophy.” Similarly, Tan Chee-Beng (1983:240) argued that the rise of Taoism and Buddhism were “absorbed into the folk religion,” which “in turn threatened the purity of both Buddhism and Taoist religion.” In another study, Tan (1985:72) outlined the evolution of the syncretic Dejiao (德教), or Doctrine of Morals Association, “from traditional Chinese folk religion to form a more rational and distinct sect” that remained within “the dynamic influence of the traditional beliefs” and explained that it was due to “more educated” Chinese Malaysians becoming “interested in religions which are less ‘magical’” and “offer coherent spiritual and ethical systems of teachings.”

In fact, by the 1990s, the definition of Chinese religion expanded to cover Chinese religiosity in general, including the turn-of-the-century Confucian reform movement and the growth of Christianity (Tan, 1985:229,224; Cheu, 1993). John Clammer (1990) compared the demonology, spiritualist practices and pragmatic materialist orientation of Chinese religion with the Charismatic movement popular among Chinese converts to Christianity in Singapore. He concluded that, in highly individualistic Singapore society, Charismatic Christianity offered “a level of community” and “reintroduced the realm of the spiritual in a form that [is thought of as] ‘modern’” (1990:65,54). Furthermore, Clammer duplicated the Weberian pathos of disenchantment in arguing that even though Charismatic Christianity shared affinity with Chinese religion, it was “sadly lacking in breadth and depth,”

leaving no “real cultural unity with the lifestyles and worldviews of their adherents” (1990:122). Similarly, Tong Chee Kiong (1992) argued that urbanisation and English-medium education caused the “rationalisation and intellectualisation of religion” among the Chinese, marked by accelerating conversion to Christianity, revival of canonical Buddhism and rationalisation of Taoism in the formation of the Taoist Federation (see also Tham, 1985; Tong, 2007).

The chief flaw with the rationalisation thesis is the teleological privileging of supposedly “modern” Western religion and its canonical Eastern equivalents over “folk” Chinese religiosity, which forces the interpretation that any action on the part of Chinese religionists is seen as the attempt to play catch-up. This runs against the theoretical grain of syncretism, since incorporation of anything other than ostensibly modern religions, such as Christianity, is read as syncretic, while the appropriation of Christian practices is read as rationalisation, thus paradoxically rendering the syncretic model static despite its theorised dynamism. The dichotomous imagination sets up a rigid opposition between modernity and Chinese religion, which begs the question of why the radical syncretism of the latter fails in its encounter with modern practices when it has succeeded for more than a millennia in assimilating practices of varying “rational” shades. Furthermore, the causality of the relationship between Chinese religion and modernity is invariably posited as a unidirectional causality, with modernity effecting changes on Chinese religion but seldom vice versa. While ostensibly anchored in Weberian comparative religion, the rationalisation thesis fails to take note of Weber’s own qualifications that there were many rationalities (he was interested in instrumental rationality and its origins in the monotheist religions) and when he spoke of the rationalisation of religion, Weber referred to the internal systemisation by a religion’s specialists according to the religion’s founding premises (Tambiah, 1990:153).

I argue that to understand Chinese religious change in Malaysia and Singapore, and perhaps syncretic popular religion in general, we need to conceptualise the relationship between syncretism and the two processes of change captured by the *transfiguration* of forms brought about by mediation in new or accelerating cultural-economic flows and the *hybridisation* of meanings brought about by contact between different cultural systems. In my approach, modernity is not taken as a superior cultural system that forces Chinese religion to change in form and meaning to its dictates. Rather, modernity is a powerful cultural system that intrudes into syncretic cultures by way of material processes, such as scientific education, urbanisation, industrialisation and nation-state citizenship formation, which, historically, were initially

transmitted by Western Christian missionaries, then by metropolitan-educated political elites, and now through pervasive global mass media technologies. As the Geertzian definition implies, people caught up between these two systems face existential crises as the realism of their “conceptions of a general order of existence” collapses. In turn, hybrid meanings and transfigured forms are produced, as people negotiate the intrusions, resulting thus in the transformation of both Chinese religion and modernity.

Indeed, scholarship today has shifted its analytical lens from rationalisation to the negotiation of modernity, and recent works suggest the two concepts of transfiguration and hybridisation that I propose here to reorient the study of Chinese religious change.<sup>2</sup> Tong and Kong (2000:41) discuss how Chinese religionists negotiate state-imposed urbanisation and correspondingly transfigure their sacred space and rituals, but at the same time preserving Chinese religion, as “the form of rituals may change but the essence and meanings remain.” In Jean DeBernardi’s (2004:178–179) study of the transformation of Penang’s Hungry Ghosts Festival by a “revitalisation movement,” hybridisation can be seen in the preservation of the festival and ritual forms, in which perceived “superstitious” practices and “passive” performances are transformed into philanthropy and community activism to politically and culturally express a modern Chinese identity in the context of Malay-dominated nation-state formation in Malaysia.

## Redefining Chinese Religion

The demands of the theoretical rethink are twofold. First, the field of Chinese religion should be properly defined. The Geertzian definition is too general to capture the syncretic specificity of Chinese religion and may apply to both modernity and Chinese religion. Thus, we need a two-tiered definition. On the cognitive level, to describe both modernity and Chinese religion as cultural systems, the Geertzian definition is useful in highlighting the existential character of both worldviews and the realist construction of sentiments in both. On this general level, we can distinguish the spatio-temporalities of modernity and Chinese religion as operating with different logics without specifying one as more rational than the other. On the level of practice, both differ on the symbolic performance that defines the identity of the adherent. Elliot’s (1955) discussion of the performance of *baishen* (拜神) is especially useful in this respect. But while Elliot separates out the two words, and

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar theoretical argument in the case of Thailand, see Kitiarsa (2005).

describes *bai* as the embodied worshipping of an image involving the movement of clasped hands in front of the body and *shen* as the amorphous reference to anything spiritual, and uses “shenism” thus to define Chinese spirit medium cults, I use the whole phrase to define Chinese religion.

Contrary to Elliot’s view, to *baishen* does not mean to “worship the gods” (1955:27), for this immediately contrasts Chinese religion as a polytheistic religion from the point of view of monotheistic religion and does not differentiate Chinese religion from other ostensibly polytheistic religions. To *baishen* is to engage one *shen*, and only one *shen*, using specific embodied practices (the moving clasped hands) at any moment in time in a communicative event, which may be an interlocution that involves the exchange of favours and offerings, that speaks thoughts and inspires ideas, that expresses sentiments and evokes feelings, or that articulates reverence and reaffirms sociality. The key significance here is that in Chinese religion *shen* is an almost-empty sign, a signifier referring to nothing else except the meaning of “the spiritual other.” Practitioners can, therefore, fill the sign with selected concrete meanings, the possibilities of which are bounded by the historical discursive conditions of Chinese religion in a specific social context. It is therefore syncretic, in the sense that an alien deity or personage and the associated meanings may be imputed by practitioners into the sign when they *baishen* with the embodied performance.

Two dimensions of contrast may thus be drawn between Chinese religion and any other religion. The specific embodied performance of *baishen* distinguishes it from other syncretic religions such as Hinduism — Hindus and Chinese religionists may “pray” to the same image, but they do it differently and the difference defines their separate identities. The syncretic effect of the almost-empty sign *shen* in the performance of *baishen* distinguishes Chinese religion from non-syncretic religions, such as Christianity, in which the sign “God” in the performance of worshipping God is an almost-full sign laden with symbolic meanings established by theological acts. The Christian practitioner does not fill the sign with discursively possible meanings in his own volition, but must tackle a sign already filled with meanings — a symbol. The performance of Christian praying is, thus, one fraught with a much greater amount of tension and anxiety than the performance of *baishen*. It is the theologian who deals with the discursively possible and fills the sign with meanings.

Second, the static dichotomy of modernity versus Chinese religion should be reconceptualised as a dynamic interaction between two that takes place through the two processes of transfiguration and hybridisation. Transfiguration is brought about by the political, economic and cultural flows that drive

the expansion and deepening of modernity. The spread of nation-state, commodity, and urban and industrial technological forms have not only opened up social spaces of “disjuncture and difference” (Appadurai, 1996:27–47), but they have also radically shaped the materiality of everyday life and existential order that lies at the basis of Chinese religious beliefs and practices. Hybridisation is brought about by contact with the powerful transcribing and inscriptive force of modernity that attempts to locate local cultures and their meanings from a universal, scientific point of view and represent them through mass media technologies. The result is not cultural imperialism or rationalisation, but the inducement of “creative interplay” at the contact zone of the two systems (Hannerz, 1992:265), for example, when individuals brought up with Chinese religious beliefs and practices attend missionary schools or state-sponsored higher education, or face the deluge of global and regional mass media products circulating in the highly literate societies of Malaysia and Singapore.

Comparatively, transfiguration refers to the changing of forms of practices without the shift in essential meanings, while hybridisation refers to the change in meaning with little change to forms of religious practice. The two processes may overlap, with radical change induced by the simultaneous changing of forms and meanings; I refer to this third mode of change as transfiguring hybridisation. The power asymmetry is expressed in the fact that modernity is forcing the two processes of change in the Chinese religion field, but transfigured, hybrid or “new” practices will emerge in the contact zone, extend into the field of modernity and shape the very forms and meanings of modernity. In the following sections, I focus on two cases in each of the three modes of change, with a case that would be defined as Chinese religion and the other as a “modern” example with semblances of Chinese religion. My aims are to explicate the two processes as well as to theoretically situate the diverse and complex phenomena that the scholarship has increasingly placed together.

### **Hybridisation: The Disfiguration of Existential Meaning**

In the chapter entitled “Signs Taken for Wonders” in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (1994) focuses on an example of the spread of Christianity among Indians in early 19th Century. An Indian catechist meets a group of native men praying with a translated Bible which the men believe is God’s gift given to them by an angel from heaven at the fair. He attempts to assert the divine-colonial authority of the European sahibs which he claims to represent and seeks to bring who he thought are misguided simple folks to Christian

orthodoxy. But the men resist, holding on to their hybrid religious beliefs. From this, Bhabha (1994:115) offers an important insight into “the hybrid object,” which “retains the actual semblance of the authoritative symbol but revalues its presence by resisting it as the signifier of disfiguration after the intervention of difference.” Hybridisation is, thus, not simply the cross-breeding of two distinct cultures. Rather, following Bhabha’s theorisation, hybridisation is the displacement of the authority of modern symbolic meanings by partial native knowledge, which exists for the modernist as a signifier of disfiguration. Thus, we can begin to understand why Clammer sees the Charismatic Christianity practiced by Singaporean Chinese as superficial despite its close affinity with spiritualist Chinese religion. From the vantage point of modernity, the spiritualist practices of Chinese Charismatics displace authoritative Christian symbolisms, since one begins to suspect whether the practitioners are actually syncretically performing Chinese religion rather than Christianity. The spiritualist practices, then, become signifiers of disfiguration in the discourse of modernity, constantly disrupting its coherence.

In the interaction between two cultures, the “Third Space of enunciation” that emerges in the contact zone renders “the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process” and destroys the dichotomous “mirror of representation” of self and other, modernity and tradition (Bhabha, 1994:37). In this “Third Space,” a “something else besides” that “contests the terms and territories of both” modernity and tradition transpires as “the transformational value of change” (1994:28). In the case of Chinese religion meeting the challenge of modernity, hybridisation refers to the ambivalent and unequal melding of meanings of the two cultural systems that create an existential condition, because both cultural systems begin to break down, which causes people to innovate hybrid practices with the meanings stabilised in a coherent combination. A hybrid practice is partially familiar, in different partial proportions, in both cultural systems, and this partial character threatens the “normal” practitioners in both cultural systems, as it appears as the disfiguration of the cultural system.

### *Dejiao Associations*

Dejiao is an example of hybrid practices that remain in the field of Chinese religion because they invoke its worldview of spirits and involve the performance of *baishen*. The organised sect came to post-War Malaysia and Singapore already comprised of hybrid practices evolving from the acute crisis of modernity faced by the Chinese at the height of the Sino-Japanese War in the turbulent 1930s. For example, one of the seven items in its basic creed is “Do not take alcoholic drinks, do not commit licentious act, do not gamble, and do



not smoke.” Its central “Prayer Text” is the very materialisation of hybridity. The Text outlines the doctrines of Dejjiao but is “rhymed in Teochiu” and recited as a prayer in “all congregations” and receives its legitimacy for having been revealed by “the deities of Dejjiao” through planchette “automatic writing,” or spirit-board divination, in 1942 (Tan, 1985:8–9). While promoting moral virtue, codified in its basic creed and “ten virtues and eight rules” derived from Confucianism, Taoism and exigent reactions to the crisis of modernity in 1930s China, Dejjiao also promotes the doing of good deeds in the Buddhist sense. At the heart of Dejjiao rituals is the Chinese religious performance of *baishen* in congregational settings oriented towards the worship of *Guan Diye* (关帝爷) as the supreme deity surrounded by a hierarchy of venerated saintly sages called “Honourable Teachers” performing various roles, complete with Chinese-language hymns sung in the Western musical key that combined encouragement of fraternal love, world peace and righteous citizenship with Chinese symbolisms and sayings.<sup>3</sup>

The worship of *Guan Diye* is also a significant hybridising development. In itself, the worship of Guan Yu, a legendary warrior of the Three Kingdoms Period, is not remarkable since he is popularly worshipped in South China and by South Chinese immigrants in Malaya as *Guan Gong* (关公), a deity of righteousness, honour and protection against evil. However, in Dejjiao, he is believed to have succeeded the throne of heaven when the Jade Emperor abdicated in 1924. Dejjiao followers worship him as the new Emperor God of Heaven, as *Guan Diye* and not as *Guan Gong*. The replacement of a wholly mythical supreme deity with a deified historical figure imbued with legendary significance in popular Chinese history and religious significance in Taoist and Buddhist eschatological narrative of afterlife salvation put Dejjiao doctrines in affinity with monotheist Christianity.

In Malaysia and Singapore, further hybridisation is evident in addition of the worship of Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammed to the trinity of honourable teachers Lao Tzu, the Buddha and Confucius immediately under *Guan Diye*. Christian and Muslim doctrinal elements have been incorporated into the Dejjiao belief system, for example, in an important prologue to *The Holy Scripture of Dejjiao*, published in 1966, by a non-mainstream Dejjiao group in Penang. The *Scripture* adopts a monotheist view that the deities are manifestations of the one true God and the trinitarian belief to define the five founders as salvationist manifestations of the Son of God and *Guandiye* as the Holy Spirit. For Tan (1985:65), this reflects “a further process of syncretism

<sup>3</sup> Che Sen Khor Moral Uplifting Society (2002) 星州德教会紫新阁金禧纪念特刊 (Singapore Moral Uplifting Society Che Sen Khor Fiftieth Anniversary Golden Jubilee Memorial Publication). Singapore: The Society, Pp. 69–73.

and rationalisation,” which is a contradiction in theoretical terms since the monotheist and trinity beliefs are being incorporated into the Dejiao cultural system but the outcome is judged in terms of the logic of monotheist rationality seen as more “modern.” The *Scripture* has obviously borrowed the terms of the monotheist trinity from Christianity, but it has hybridised them with Dejiao beliefs and thus disfigured the meaning of the Christian trinity for Christians, who would surely, for example, find the worship of the Holy Spirit in a legendary Chinese figure a serious “corruption” of trinitarian beliefs. At the same time, the fact that the *Scripture* has not been widely received by the mainstream Dejiao groups suggest that the trinitarian beliefs may go too far in disfiguring the religious significance of the richly textured individual character of the deities for Dejiao followers, thus depriving them of the everyday relevance of their patron saints in favour of an abstract and distant God.

It is also crucial to locate the Dejiao hybridisation in the postcolonial context of Malay-dominated nation-state formation in Malaysia, especially after the separation of Singapore in 1965. The publication of the *Scripture* was followed, not coincidentally, by the ironic 1967 revelation via spirit-board divination that the practice be abolished and the sects focus on neglected ethical development. In itself, Tan already sees planchette divination as a rationalisation of the “more shamanistic spirit-medium cult” of Chinese religion (1985:27), but this event illustrates, for Tan, the further rationalisation of Dejiao. But the abolishment was a hybrid practice, since the calling for ethical development was predicated on the very acceptance of the reality of spirit-board divination that was now prohibited — a prohibition that affirmed the legitimacy and validity of the practice prohibited. It was controversial among many Dejiao followers, as it disfigured their meaningful cosmos, cutting them off resolutely from the spirit world of Chinese religion.

Significantly, the controversy was distributed, according to Tan (1985:29), between north and south, with half of the eighteen mainstream associations in Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Malacca, Johor and Singapore continuing planchette sessions, though the conflict continued to plague the practicing Malaysian associations through the 1980s but, apparently, not the Singaporean associations. Religious practices in Penang, as noted by DeBernardi (2004), have been one cultural site through which the Chinese community negotiate their political position vis-à-vis the Malay-dominated centre in Kuala Lumpur, in Selangor state. Today, the Malaysian Dejiao associations not only provide public welfare services, but they are also sites where Chinese political life is enacted. Chinese-dominated political parties of the ruling coalition, Gerakan and the Malaysian Chinese Association, often organise events in Dejiao halls

or patronise Dejiao social events.<sup>4</sup> In 1999, the Dejiao association that produced the trinitarian *Scripture*, Chang Hua Kor in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, found itself at the centre of a political controversy because a prominent Malay opposition politician was charged with sedition for making a speech at the association accusing the ruling United Malays National Organisation for causing the May 13th racial riots in 1969 to the applause of the Chinese audience.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, the Singaporean associations are not prominent in the public life of the Chinese community and appear to be disconnected from state-led Chinese cultural developments, especially modern Chinese education in vernacular Mandarin. Thus, Che Sen Khor's — the first Malayan Dejiao association established in 1952 in Singapore — recent diamond jubilee memorial tome was issued in the inaccessible traditional Chinese script with sections written in literary Chinese rather than the simplified script and vernacular syntax the younger generations of Chinese Singaporeans grow up learning in state-organised education. Furthermore, the eight-page brief history of Association overwhelmingly focuses on its early development from 1952 to the 1960s, suggesting the lack of institutional growth after 1965. The tome's planchette divination script anthology (乩文选纪) also spans only the pre-1965 period. Importantly, the eight-page history ends with the 1967 "final" planchette revelation and claims that Che Sen Khor has since ceased all divination practices and occupied itself only with moral works, contrary to Tan's (1985:28,35) field observations of continuing divinations in 1981 and his reference to 1982 scripts defending divinations.<sup>6</sup> The Association's amnesia points to a belated hybridisation in line with the Malaysian associations. Importantly, the planchette divination anthology published in the memorial, comprising almost half of the 600-page tome and codifying the pre-1967 sessions, accentuates the ambivalence of the 1967 revelation. By making the scripts available to the laity in print and thus making the memorial tome analogous to a vernacular bible for the Association members, it lends legitimacy to the 1967 disfiguration but, at the same time, moderates the impact by granting canonical significance to past divinations.

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<sup>4</sup> "Call for more organ donors," *New Straits Times*, 12 November 2001; "Chua furious over cancer hospital delay," *New Straits Times*, 1 December 2003.

<sup>5</sup> "Marina found guilty of sedition, fined RM5,000," *New Straits Times*, 10 February 2001.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105. I would like to thank Tham See Weng, Yee Yeong Chong and Daniel Tham for assisting me in the translation of parts of the text.

### *Reform Confucianism*

The Straits Chinese Confucian reform movement at the turn of the 20th Century, which DeBernardi mentions as the predecessor of the Hungry Ghosts Festival revitalisation movement in contemporary Penang, exemplifies hybridisation that substantially excavates the Chinese religion worldview by removing spirit “superstitions” but retains formal symbolic and *baishen* performative aspects. In Penang, a 1907 conference of Straits Chinese leaders sought to abolish the Chingay procession in honour of Guanyin because it did not “conform to scientific reality” (DeBernardi, 2004:31). Months earlier in 1906, in Singapore, the Confucian reform movement pressed the Thiam Hock Kheng, the main temple of the majority Hokkien community to abolish both the Chingay and the Hungry Ghost Festival. The reformers argued that the Chingay was the further perversion of the *baishen* practice “by introducing prancing lions and paper dragons” to “please the gods,” and that the *baishen* practice had been corrupted from the original Confucian “object of the temple... to commemorate the deeds of the departed great ones, to exalt their virtues, and to record appreciation of their services.” The reformers referred to the Festival as *sembayang hantu* (*baishen* in Malay), implying that the syncretic incorporation of Malay animism into Chinese religion had perverted Buddhist and Taoist beliefs to feed neglected spirits on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month and turned them into a month-long exuberance of ignorance and superstition.<sup>7</sup>

The reform movement was especially active in Penang and Singapore and two of their leaders, legislative councilmen Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, propagated reformist views through their *Straits Chinese Magazine*, which ran from 1897 to 1907. The purity of Chinese religion and its *baishen* performance was at the heart of the discussions in the *Magazine*. As Lim summarised, “Remove from your religious life all superstitions, all senseless fear of the Unseen... the best religion for the Chinese is pure Confucianism.” Articles delved into *feng shui* geomancy only to show it was a “delusion” that would “pass away with the approach of scientific knowledge,” into ancestral worship to show that it was “the root of almost all the social evils now existing in China,” into divination practices, fortune-telling and spirit-mediumship to show that they lead down the slippery slope of superstition to the extent that Chinese women would “see Malay magicians and Indian fortune-tellers with most perfect freedom,” and into the creolised Wangkang procession in Malacca involving Malays and Chinese propitiating “insatiable *hantus*” as a “superstitious rite which may be excusable among barbaric and savage tribes”.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Anon. (1906) “Revival of Confucianism”. *Straits Chinese Magazine* (SCM) 10(4):203–205.

<sup>8</sup> Lim Boon Keng (1897) “Our Enemies”. *SCM* 1(2): 58; Lin Meng Ching (1898) “The

As Philip Holden (2000:118–134) has shown, the reformers were not Confucianists cut from the traditional Mandarin robe but rather negotiated the meanings of modernity garnered from their English education to construct a hybrid Chinese identity, in which the figure of the Victorian gentleman loomed large. The hybrid identity achieved its modern distinction by exorcising the spirits of Chinese religion in the call to return to the original religious-ethical spirit of Confucianism. However, the movement went much further than hybridising Protestant reformation ideology with neo-Confucianism. Lim argued that “the Chinese had ages ago solved the problem of man’s religiosity,” that “until the introduction of... Christianity and Mohamedanism [sic], religion concerned itself entirely in the cultivation of a pure and righteous life... leaving alone abstruse theological and philosophical questions” and even proposed a minimalist Protestant-style congregational service, but one that would be purely “a service of thanksgiving for the Divine mercy and goodness.” Lim also argued against “the delusion... of the existence of the soul,” calling the Christian belief of the body as the temple of the soul “the metaphor of Paul the apostle.” Lim contrasted Confucianism and Christianity, argued that the “deity in the Confucian sense is Nature herself,” whose laws the human mind would worship by way of “reason and intelligence” and concluded that Christianity, plagued by “the dogma of atonement” and “the Pauline interpretation,” must “undergo a reformation” that would make it “more nearly resemble Buddhism or Confucianism.” For Lim, thus, belief in “the Soul” represented the key problem, the solving of which would remove the “superstitious” spiritualisms of Chinese religion, transform *baishen* performance into pure thanksgiving and show the oriental religions to be superior in their true and original essence to occidental monotheisms.<sup>9</sup>

However, this view represented such a radical disfiguration of the Chinese worldview that it even provoked resistance among the Straits Chinese reformers, especially those who viewed Christianity as a progressive force for advancing and modernising Chinese civilisation.<sup>10</sup> This partly explains the very limited impact of the reform movement on Chinese religious syncretism in Malaya and the Straits Chinese continue to play an important role as intermediaries in the traffic between Malay and Chinese religious syncretism, as we

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Doctrine of Feng-Shui”. *SCM* 2(6): 69; Lee Teng Hwee (1901) “The Effects of Ancestral Worship on Society in China”. *SCM* 5(20): 134; Moy Fa Chang (1900) “On Some Chinese Superstitions”. *SCM* 4(15): 99; Pun Lun (1905) “The ‘Wangkang’ Procession in Malacca”. *SCM* 9(3): 119,123.

<sup>9</sup> Lim Boon Keng (1899) “Straits Chinese Reform: IV. Religion”. *SCM* 3(12): 164,166; Lim Boon Keng (1900) “Straits Chinese Reform. V. Filial Piety”. *SCM* 4(13): 29; Lim Boon Keng (1904) “Confucian Cosmogony and Theism”. *SCM* 8(2): 83,85; Lim Boon Keng (under the pen name of Wen Ching) (1900) “The Soul”. *SCM* 4(16): 134.

<sup>10</sup> Evangelicus, “Biblical Teaching and Christian Practice”, *SCM*, 1901:5:20:141–7.

shall see. Conversely, the Straits Chinese leaders were never fully accepted by the British colonialists as fully modern subjects. Nevertheless, reform Confucianism has been influential in the postcolonial construction of Penang's contemporary revitalisation movement and Singapore's national modernity, notably with the Confucianist turn of the Singaporean ruling elite in the 1980s in producing an "Asian values" citizen morality.

### **Transfiguration: Anxiety, Religiosity and Fetishisms**

Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003:388) differentiate between an analytical focus on the vectors of mediated public forms and their transfiguration in global cultural flows and the study of the translatability of public forms as cultural texts in the production of local modernities. Hybridisation is a process studied in the latter, but transfiguration is the process tackled in the former, with the emphasis on "the importance of circulation as the enabling matrix within which social forms, both textual and topical, emerge and are recognisable when they emerge." The key circulatory matrices in Malaysia and Singapore crucial in causing Chinese religious change are globalising capitalist circuits and the political circuits of the nation-state as a modern cultural form, and the key attribute of transfiguration in terms of its effect on everyday practice is the intensification of religious fetishism. As McClintock (1995:184) argues, combining psychoanalytic theories of anxiety projection and Marxist theories of commodity fetishism, the fetish is an object of desire that social contradictions are displaced unto and with which the individual can compulsively manipulate to gain symbolic control over the "terrifying ambiguities" of race, gender and class that modern capitalism, colonialism and nation-state formation engender.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Spirit Mediumship*

It was first noted by Clammer (1983:1) that local spirit mediumship was "assuming new forms as changes are forced on it with modernisation and the changing physical environment." In the first place, the exalted position of local spirit-mediumship compared to South China is in itself a transfigured form of Chinese religious practice. Thus, we find the reversal of the position of importance from Taoist priests (*saikong*; 师公) to spirit-mediums (*dangki*; 童乩) in local Hokkien religious ceremonies, despite the fact that the Chinese

<sup>11</sup> For the relationships between religious fetishisms and the commodity, and state fetishisms of capitalism, see Apter and Pietz (1993).

names encode the hierarchy of the Taoist priest as “elder” (公) and the medium as “youth” (童). Furthermore, in China, only minor *shen* would possess a *dangki*, but local spirit mediumship involves “some of the mightiest figures in the Chinese pantheon.” This, Elliot (1955:164–167) explains, is due to the fact that the commercial flux of urbanised life transforms Chinese religion from being a temple-centred ritualism grounding the stable order of agrarian villages to a Chinese religious marketplace serving the religious needs of an urban population facing the anxieties of the capitalist market.

In Sino-Malay cults involving Chinese worshippers who adopt the *Keramat* shrines of Malay Muslim holy men, new practices such as prohibitions against eating pork before a religious session and the wearing of leather shoes at the shrine are added. Elliot (1955:113) argues that these are “superficial concessions to local conditions” and that the practitioners “remain staunchly Chinese in their religion.” But the changes are neither superficial, nor concessionary. There is no doubt that the defining traits of Chinese religion have been retained: the spiritualist worldview and the *baishen* performance, with the almost-empty sign *shen* here filled with the Malay *datuk*. But these are retained within a transfigured form that expresses the anxieties of the interaction between Chinese immigrants, indigenous Malay “hosts” and British colonialists as agents of modernity and, concomitantly, the ambivalent sense of identity and rootedness of a diasporic community. Not coincidentally thus, the spirit mediums of these cults are often English-educated Straits Chinese of Malay-speaking Peranakan heritage.

Elliot describes a spirit-medium session involving a Malay *shen* called Datuk Machap and a Straits Chinese *dangki* who speaks fluent Malay, English and Hokkien, as quiet and sedate compared with other types of Chinese spirit mediumship. On the walls of the shrine, two framed testimonials hung, one written in Chinese and the other in English, almost like a doctor’s qualifications in a clinic. The English testimonial began with “FAITH HEALING in the Twentieth Century world of ours today is a belief not commonly shared by many people, but to me and to those who are religiously inclined this sanctimonious medium of healing has been responsible in saving the lives of a great number of people who have suffered all kinds of illness” (Elliot, 1955:115). The testimonial went on to narrate the illness suffered by the writer’s eldest son and testify to Datuk Machap’s healing powers, which were magnified by the fact that the doctors of modern medicine had given up the case as hopeless. Elliot also quotes a Straits Chinese informant who explained the English-educated Straits Chinese’s respect for Malay spiritualism as a product of the pioneer migrants having to face “the terrors of the jungle” and “the hostility of the Malays” (1955:116). If we read the two expressions together, the

transfigured *baishen* practice of the Datuk Machap cult expresses, firstly, the remembrance of pioneer anxieties, giving thus a primordial sensibility to the migrant Chinese heritage, and secondly, the domestication of Malay dangers, the powers of which are now benevolently transferred to resolve the anxieties of modernity, which in this case, refer to the failure of modern medicine.

Collectively, the Datuk Gong spirit medium cults express the ambivalent identification with Malaya, and Malaysia, as their new-found home by the *Peranakan* Chinese religionists. A comparison with the transfiguration of the Tudi Gong (土地公) in Taiwan is instructive. Dell’Orto (2002:237,241) shows that the revival of Tudi Gong worship, ceremonies and processions among the Taiwanese is intricately linked to “the potential ambiguities and contradictions” that the notions of place, community and identity may raise in the practice of everyday life, which involves the “displacements caused by urbanisation, migration and cosmopolitanism” and the ambivalent national identity of Taiwan vis-à-vis China. Significantly, Nadu Gong or Datuk Gong (*datuk* is an honorific Malay title for chiefs) and Tuapeh Gong (大伯公; the first phrase refers to the father’s eldest brother) — both terms anonymously deifying legendary communal leaders — have replaced Tudi Gong as the tutelary and territorial deity of the local district in Malaysia and Singapore and spirit mediumship takes pride of place in religious practice, while it is visibly absent in Dell’Orto’s account. The ambiguities and contradictions of place, community and identity are far more attenuated for the diasporic Chinese communities in Malaysia and Singapore since cultural and ethnic links with China have largely been severed. Furthermore, the longstanding colonial and postcolonial discourse, especially in Malaysia, is that the Chinese are guest citizens living on *bumiputra* (sons of the soil, in Malay) soil, a point that was materially experienced in the resettlement of Chinese villages into guarded population centres during the post-War communist insurgency.

In Malaysia, thus, the risk of disrespectful “collision” with Datuk Gong spirits that may reside in all objects is believed to be acute (DeBernardi, 2006:178–184). The belief is far weaker in Singapore, where the environment is heavily urbanised and managed by the self-identified neo-Confucianist state. Furthermore, Datuk Gong worship has itself transfigured to the logic of Singapore’s statist multiracialism, in which formal equality between the constituent Chinese, Malay and Indian groups, undergirded by the anxiety of communal tensions and race riots, are implemented in housing and residential zoning policies, particularly in newer suburban towns where one would find the clustering of Chinese and Indian temples, Christian churches and Islamic mosques. In 2004, a major spirit-medium ceremony and religious procession spanning the large north-eastern residential district in Singapore were held to



mark the opening of a 77-year old Datuk Gong temple that was displaced by urban development from an older suburban town to a newer one. Tan Wee Cheng, a highly-educated professional who describes himself as an English-speaking and middle-class “Folk Taoism” heritage enthusiast, documented that the temple now worshipped three deities, Tuapeh Gong, Datuk Gong and the Hindu god, Ganesha, representing the Chinese, Malay and Indian components of statist multiracialism harmoniously presiding over the temple.<sup>12</sup> While the religious cosmology and *baishen* performance have remained unchanged, the form of Datuk Gong worship has shifted differently in Malaysia and Singapore according to the political significance of Malay ethnicity to the Chinese religionists and the ensuing anxieties.<sup>13</sup>

### *Chingay*

In some cases, the circuits of capital and state formation drive the transfiguration of a particular religious practice into the “secular” domain of modernity, leaving the transfigured practice hollowed out of Chinese religious cosmology and *baishen* performance. This does not mean that the transfigured practice is empty and inauthentic. Rather, the transfigured form exudes the sensibilities of authenticity that are linked to different kinds of fetishism, namely the sensuous commodity fetishism of capitalism and fetishisms of the nation in modern state formation, which Robert Bellah (1992) has called “civil religion.”<sup>14</sup> These sensibilities, while emerging *sui generis* in the transfigured practice, draw on Chinese religious cosmology and *baishen* performance continuously to underpin their meaningfulness to the masses who consume and participate in the practices as audience.

A good example is the Chingay procession. DeBernardi (2004:178) notes that Penang’s contemporary Chingay “appears to be entirely secular in its intent,” with the usual floats dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy and “god images touring their neighbourhood in red sedan chairs” replaced by acrobatic flagpole-balancing, Chinese music and martial arts acts that showcase “modern images of Chinese identity” to the nation and the world. In Singapore, over sixty years after the banishment of Chingay by the Confucian reform

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<sup>12</sup> Tan Wee Cheng (2004) “The Inauguration Ceremony of Jiutiaoqiao Xinba Nadugong Temple, Tampines”. *Tangki*. URL: <http://weecheng.com/singapore/tanki/> [Accessed 12 September 2007].

<sup>13</sup> For similar nation-state inflections on spirit mediumship in Thailand, see Morris (1998).

<sup>14</sup> The link between religion and nationalism is beyond the scope of this paper, but I note that many scholars from Emile Durkheim, in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, to Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities*, have made the theoretical connection.

movement in the 1900s, the state revived Chingay as a nation-building float procession encouraging collective effervescence among the majority Chinese population. The transfiguration appears as secularisation at first glance. Moved from its position in the Hungry Ghosts Festival celebrations to the Chinese New Year, Chingay appears to be cleansed of its creole religious content to express a secular Chinese identity. Furthermore, the religious heading of Chingay, whether of a wooden boat, religious artefact or spirit-medium in trance leading the floats, is removed in favour of the Chinese Lion Dance, deemed as purely traditional and symbolically ethnic without religious significance. The translation of Chingay, a creolised transliteration of *qian* (祈安) is also changed to *zhuangyi* (妆亿), the former meaning “praying for peace” and the latter “dressed up for a masquerade.”<sup>15</sup> Chingay also expresses the state’s official multiracialism. Non-Chinese floats made its first appearance in 1976. The 1979 Chingay floats included the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations’ portrayal of the legend of Sang Nila Utama founding pre-modern Singapore, “Indian maidens” from the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society expressing “their joy at the end of the harvest season,” Malay theatre troupe Sriwana performing a Malay opera and a Punjabi group performing Bhangara, all “folk” cultural practices with religious significance or connotations secularised as ethnic traditions that when combined with the Chinese floats expressed the state’s multiracialism.<sup>16</sup>

But its secular canopy is really anchored in sacred soil. The People’s Association, a government grassroots body that organises the parades, asserts that the 1973 parade was the first Chingay held in Singapore, when it is evident that there are religious precedents and equivalents that live in popular memory. The self-acclaimed neo-Confucianist Lee Kuan Yew, when he was Prime Minister, was credited with founding the “first” Chingay parade, “with all its noise and gaiety,” to compensate for the ban on firecrackers, “a customary New Year practice to drive away evil spirits,” as there was “good reason” for the ban because firecrackers “had caused damage to property and injury.”<sup>17</sup> Significantly, firecrackers are allowed to be set off during the parade under the aegis of state management. The benevolence of the paternal state is, therefore, coded in the parade itself. Protecting the people from the danger of the very instruments they believed would protect them from evil spirits, the regime draws its legitimacy from the people’s vernacular religious beliefs.

<sup>15</sup> Chen Mong Hock (1967) *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore, 1881–1912*. Singapore: University of Malaya Press, Pp. 133; People’s Association (2007) *Chingay: Singapore on Parade*. Singapore: The Association, Pp. 22.

<sup>16</sup> People’s Association (c. 1979) “Chingay ’79”. Pamphlet.

<sup>17</sup> People’s Association (2007:22).

In the 2000s, Chingay became an integral part of the state's tourism promotion program and policy to transform Singapore into a vibrant post-industrial global city, turning the solemn nation-building procession into a carnival-esque celebration of colourful multiculturalism packaged for tourist consumption as Asia's "Mardi Gras." Ironically, as the circuits of capitalism penetrate more deeply into society encouraged by the state's pro-globalisation policies, religious images have made a comeback in the recent parades. In the 2007 parade, among the 25 items, there were three reminiscent of Chinese religion. "Dragon, Fly" featured a traditional Chingay performance of fire breathers and young athletes carrying a "unique fire-spewing majestic dragon made of windmills," which will "give everyone a spinning good time and good luck." "New Year Blossoms in Chinatown" featured a miniature of the Chinatown building of the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum, a Chinese-Theravada Buddhist organisation supported by the Tourism Board. "God of Fortune and the Eight Immortals," organised by the tourism industry, re-enacted a classic Chinese mythology involving personages that are otherwise worshipped as *shen*. The latter two (the first was not a float) were among the top five favourite floats voted by spectators on the Singapore Chingay website.<sup>18</sup>

The Chingay procession and its Chinese religion-themed floats show that Chinese religious forms can easily be transfigured into the fantastical spectacle of flowing commodity forms, the Chinese religious meanings and sentiments of which are exploited to form the cultural space of the nation. In turn, the parade expresses and momentarily resolves the extant anxieties of globalisation, namely the decline of state sovereignty and imminent collapse of national community and multiracial society as capital and migratory labour flows accelerate. Cultural heritage preservation and state patronage of the arts have risen dramatically in recent years with the massive influx of skilled migrant labour to a city increasingly drawn into the webs of the global economy. The 2008 Chingay thus saw a fitting finale titled *The Celestial Web* by acclaimed artist Tan Swie Hian. Originally a poem filled with Buddhist symbolisms celebrating life, Tan transformed his poem into a Chingay float "sculpture in the shape of a bamboo shoot" holding dancing love goddess Vasumitra of Buddhist vintage. She is watched by Earth goddess Gaia in a sensuous meeting of East and West and both goddesses are surrounded by dancers "representing the Brown people, Black people, White people, Yellow people as well as the Purple gods, Red gods, Green gods and Blue gods," who together with "other sculptural elements like horses, fishes, snakes... olive leaves hanging on the

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<sup>18</sup> This is based on observations and materials collected in my ethnography of the main Chingay procession in downtown Singapore, 23–24 February 2007 and 15–16 February 2008. The official Singapore Chingay website was accessed at <http://www.chingay.org.sg>.

shimmering Celestial Web, all merging into a state of trance whereby all universal beings are joined as one.” The float procession was capped by an orchestra and dance number with Tan performing a spontaneous “aerial painting” of “a tree unfolding the harmony of diversity, which is uniquely Singapore.” Chinese religious elements such as spirit-medium trance, planchette automatic writing and images of goddesses carried in processions are thus transfigured into a modern-day aesthetic display. Tan’s publisher believes the performance would reach out “to a wide multi-racial audience” and “transcend all religions.” Then, in an interesting turn of the phrase, the publisher reflects on the ability of the aesthetically transfigured form to resolve everyday anxieties, “Beauty has to possess a formal sensibility in itself... Because the experiences of our everyday lives are so painfully limited, transient, incomplete, and entrapped within the constraint of time and space, it drives sensitive beings to seek the solace and fulfilment of fantasy in the realm of art.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Transfiguring Hybridity: New ‘Asianisms’**

#### *Reform Taoism*

In the space where hybridisation and transfiguration overlap, forms and meanings shift simultaneously under the forces of interactive semiosis and cultural flows to drive radical change in Chinese religion and shape new Asian modernisms. Examples of the former would be Taoist and Buddhist revival movements, where the practitioners have appropriated from Christianity organisational and worship practices, while shifting the focus from rituals to doctrinal teachings and development (Tan, 1983:238–239; DeBernardi, 2004:224). However, the conceptualisation of these changes as modernisation of Chinese religion does not capture the complex agency that is involved in the creative construction of new meanings and enactment of new practices or explain the motivations that drive the agency. Instead, it assumes that Chinese religion is backward and playing catch-up by way of mimicry. These practices are still strongly grounded in Chinese religious cosmology and the *baishen* performance and it is too early to ascertain whether the changes are

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<sup>19</sup> Phoon Kwee Hian (2008) “A Multi-media Performance of Tan Swie Hian’s *The Celestial Web*”, in Phoon (ed.) *The Celestial Web by Tan Swie Hian: Finale of the Chingay Parade 2008*. Singapore: People’s Association and Candid Creation Publishing, Pp. 19; Tan Swie Hian (2008) “The Skylight Belongs to All Beings”, in Phoon (ed.) *The Celestial Web by Tan Swie Hian: Finale of the Chingay Parade 2008*. Singapore: People’s Association and Candid Creation Publishing, Pp. 45; Phoon, “A Multi-media Performance”, pp. 19, 21.

sustainable or representative of the periodic revivals that rise and return into the syncretic march of the Chinese religious *longue durée* (Overmyer, 2002).

But one can be certain to divide the recent changes into two components corresponding to hybridisation and transfiguration. DeBernardi's documentation of "a modern master" in Penang is exemplary. Master Lim Peng Eok, an English-educated spirit-medium, hybridised his *Daodejing* (道德经) teachings with Christian, Theosophical and Theravada Buddhist elements to provide spiritual teaching for his disciples to achieve the self-cultivation and self-realisation, which he claimed was something Chinese temples failed to do in the face of Christian and Buddhist missionary activity. His provision of regular text-based catechism was already a transfigured practice in itself, but he went further by transforming the common dramaturgical form of spirit mediumship for his healing sessions into a "consultation" style of advising clients at a small desk in the temple's main shrine room while wearing plain clothes, claiming that the simpler the possession is "the greater the spiritual power" (DeBernardi, 2006:234,236). But while "traces of his influence persist" in his disciple's publications "promoting modernised forms of Daoism," more interestingly, the same students commissioned a golden statue of him after his passing away and "now venerate" this image that sits at the right hand of Guanying on the temple altar (2006:254). Hybridisation and transfiguration in this "modern" reform Taoism have produced changes that fold back into Chinese religious cosmology and *baishen* performance, making them relevant to educated English-speaking practitioners and reconnecting them to their vernacular-speaking contemporaries.

In December 2006, I was invited to participate in a panel discussion on inter-faith dialogues and multiculturalism at the Singapore Inter-faith Youth Forum camp for youth leaders of various religions organised by the Inter-Religious Organisation. I was pleasantly surprised to meet youth leaders who identified themselves as Taoists and spoke of their aspiration to create greater awareness among young Chinese of the relevance of Taoism to "modern" life. After the camp, the youth leaders went on to officially found the Taoist Federation Youth Group. The Federation was founded in 1990 to represent Chinese religion temples under the banner of Taoism. However, due to the organisationally decentralised and ideologically diverse character of Chinese religion, the Federation has been confined mainly to organising celebrations of the birthday of Lao Tzu, to bring together the myriad temples and associations every year in the form of the Taoist Cultural Festival to make the celebrations accessible to Chinese religionists. Plans to create a resource centre and library and establish a theological school have remained dormant for years. Though belated, the Youth Group was, however, a significant development,

since the Federation was formed in response to the trend of increasing conversions among young Chinese to highly-organised Christian churches during the 1980s. The Youth Group has adopted the “modern” organisational and activity forms of Christian youth groups, which reform Buddhism has done well in the 1990s to meet the challenge of the latter to attract adherents,<sup>20</sup> thus transfiguring the practice of Chinese religious education, which usually happens within the family or around a master acclaimed to be spiritually powerful.

Within the transfigured practice, hybridisation specific to Singapore’s Chinese religious context takes place. For example, the Youth Group’s first official event was an educational tour of four temples, the first of which was doctrinally Taoist, while the next three worshipped Master City God (城皇) originating in Anxi county in Fujian (福建) region during the 10th Century and honoured by the Sung emperors, the Nine Emperor Gods (九皇爷) popular with South Chinese spirit mediumship and the local Tuapeh Gong together with Datuk Gong and Ganesha at the multiracial Loyang Tua Pek Kong Temple. The order of the temples visited proceeded from the ancient Chinese to the diasporic and multiracial recent, from canonical Taoism to folk spiritualism, suggesting the Group was operating with a cognitive framework that privileged “modernised” canonical Taoism as the unifying centre of Chinese religion without excluding the popular aspects. This is decidedly different from reform Confucianism, which sought to exorcise popular practices and beliefs to create a “pure” Chinese religion. The Group also organised the 2007 Taoist Cultural Festival and, for the first time, turned it into a public outreach event complete with an educational exhibition, a seminar, the obligatory ritual ceremony (but this time involving Taoist priests representing the various vernacular language groups), and an inter-faith dinner with government ministers in attendance and multiracial entertainment program.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> According to Census figures, the percentage of Singaporeans professing to be Christians rose from 9.9 percent in 1980 to 12.7 percent in 1990 and 14.6 percent in 2000, while the percentage of Buddhists rose from 26.7 percent to 31.1 percent and 42.5 percent respectively, and the percentage of Chinese religionists and Taoists declined as the religion claiming the most believers, 30 percent in 1980, to 22.4 percent in 1990 and a mere 8.5 percent in 2000. Proportionally thus, Buddhism gained more converts than Christianity during the 1990s (Singapore Department of Statistics [1994 and 2001]: *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Statistical Release 6 — Religion, Childcare and Leisure Activities* and *Singapore Census of Population 2000: Statistical Release 2 — Education, Language and Religion*).

<sup>21</sup> Taoist Federation Youth Group Website (Singapore), “Temple Tour cum BBQ”, “Dialogue with Taoist Master Huang Xin Cheng”, “Taoist Cultural Festival 2007”, URL: <http://taoist-youth.sg/> [Accessed 5 November 2007]. The Taoism-Singapore network can be accessed at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/taoism-singapore/>.

Interestingly, the seminar involved two Taoist masters and Victor Yue, a well-known local heritage conservationist who started the lively Taoism-Singapore electronic-mail network for practitioners, enthusiasts and scholars to exchange information and views. Yue has also inspired amateur ethnographers, such as Tan Wee Cheng mentioned above. For the amateur ethnographers, to quote Tan, their aim is: “To promote awareness of Folk Taoism as a critical piece of the kaleidoscope that is Singapore’s cultural heritage.” Tan, himself, has been critical of reformist “Chinese-educated intellectuals” who see Chinese religion as “backward superstitions.”<sup>22</sup> The association of the Group with non-Taoist amateur ethnographers of Taoism shows that the youth leaders welcome the anthropological perspective as an accepted route to greater understanding of their own religion, signifying the inward reflection that characterises reform movements. At the same time, the contemporary anthropological perspective celebrating cultural diversity matches reform Taoism’s inclusive approach to “folk” Chinese religious practices and beliefs. Through such associations, and through the strong involvement of the Group in the inter-faith movement, the youth leaders are not only staking a position for Taoism to represent Chinese religion to other religions that are considered more “modern,” but also to exude a form of confident ‘Asianism’ that resolves the anxieties of being a Western-educated, diasporic Chinese distantly connected to a rising China engaging the West in the capitalist globalisation of civilisations.

### *Charismatic Christianity*

Charismatic Christianity accounts for the growth of Christianity among the Chinese in Singapore. More significantly, the growth is concentrated in the independent churches founded by marginalised leaders who left mainstream denominational churches. Free from institutional links to established Christian congregations, the pastors take on the role of prophetic sectarian founders and develop new forms, meanings and practices melding together Chinese religion and Charismatic Christian elements and extending them into new cultural territories to shape and reshape Singaporean modernity. Independent Charismatic Christianity seems to have gained a level of cultural traction with the younger and better-educated English-speaking Chinese, but at the same time growth is increasingly directed at developing Chinese-speaking congregations and expanding social welfare services that complement the state’s “Asian

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<sup>22</sup> See Tan Wee Cheng (2004) “Why This Site: Statement of Objectives” and “Awareness of folk Taoism among Singaporeans” online at: <http://twcnomad.blogspot.com/2004/07/awareness-of-folk-tourism-among.html> [Accessed 12 September 2007].

values” ideology and communalism. A strong sense of Asian distinction inflects the way the local leaders adapt practices and beliefs borrowed from American Pentecostalism. Claims that Jesus Christ was an Asian and not a Westerner as often portrayed are asserted, while one informant told me that the conservative nature of Chinese made them better Christians who could hold onto their faith and religiosity well.<sup>23</sup>

Despite their autonomous individuality, several similarities arising from the transfiguring hybridisation with Chinese religion and modernity define the independent Charismatic churches. The worship session combines pop music concert-style performances complete with modern technologies, conventional church choirs and the active participation of the members (see Tong, 2008). The climax of each session is the breaking out of the congregation into tongue speaking, where possession by the Holy Spirit is believed and experienced. Key Charismatic practices fit with Chinese converts as transfigured extensions of *baishen* performance where the palms are believed to transmit or receive spiritual powers. Worship involves the raising of hands with palms facing out and up, where the clasped hands of reverence in Chinese religion are opened out in the act of surrender to the Holy Spirit. In healing sessions, the healer extends his or her hands over the believer being prayed over, with the palms facing the latter, and the latter opens up his or hands with palms facing up to receive the healing power. The palms play an important role again in the “spiritual warfare” practices in everyday life or in organised events, such as “prayer-walking,” which mobilises the church members as “prayer-warriors” in a transfiguration of the spatio-territoriality of Chinese religious spiritualism exemplified by processions such as the original Chingay.

These events specifically put Chinese religion and the nation-state in the crosshairs of spiritual warfare. In one “prayer-walking” event organised by Bethesda Cathedral, a church located in the midst of a public housing estate which I visited for fieldwork in late 1997, the event began at the church where a prayer session climaxed in tongue speaking. Thus filled with the Holy Spirit, the members spread out to prayer-walk the neighbourhood to claim the spiritual territory against Chinese religionists of neighbouring temples, who had planted flags for their religious processions. When members encountered a Chinese door or tree shrine, they would extend their hands, palms facing the shrine, to pray over the shrine. Pastor Tay, who founded Bethesda after leaving the Brethren church in the 1980s, explained his decision to mobilise his congregation and concentrate evangelical and prayer-walking efforts in the imme-

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<sup>23</sup> These observations are based on fieldwork I conducted in 1997–1998 in three local churches of varying sizes. See Goh (1999).



diate neighbourhood of the church, “The sight of the two [Chinese] temples at the junction of Chai Chee Drive and Chai Chee Street, as I drove past everyday, seemed to tell me that Chai Chee was, so to say, their domain. . . . I had a sense of fear each time the temples decorated the encircling area with their prayer flags, staking their spiritual claim on the land.”

Pastor Tay also took part in several national prayer events that brought together the independent Charismatic churches each year to “claim Singapore for Jesus.” In 1997, a national prayer event was organised on Singapore’s National Day, with prayer-walkers “treading the civic and financial districts . . . as one united prayer-force” and every home prayer group launching into “fervent prayer” for one hour “at the strike of the anthem during the National Day Parade,” the paramount civil religious ceremony of the nation-state.

In the subsequent decade, the national prayer event evolved into a movement the organisers call *LoveSingapore*. At the core of the movement today is the “40-Day” programme filled with prayer events leading up to National Day. It commemorates and performs the Biblical account of Christ’s forty days of prayer and fasting in the desert that ended with his temptation by the Devil, who offered him the whole city of Jerusalem, but in a specifically Singaporean cultural context that transfigures the Chinese religious spatio-temporality and hybridises its strong spiritualism with Christian Pentecostalism and the meanings thrown up by urbanisation, strong nation-state formation and economic globalisation in Singapore. One of the events in 2008 is the “City@Prayer” convening of prayer-warriors on weekdays leading up to National Day, up on the 30th floor auditorium of a downtown building “in the heart of the historic civic district” and facing the culture ministry (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts) building and Parliament House. With what the organisers call a “stunning prayer view of the city,” the auditorium is supposedly an “awesome place to be found in the gap on behalf of the land” and the power of prayer is enhanced by the “feel of open horizons with a Jacob ‘stairway’ to an open heaven.”<sup>24</sup>

The “Come Home to Love” event infuses the state-managed public housing landscape with new meanings:

Did you know that as many as 90% of Singapore’s 4 million live in high rise dwellings? To the pragmatic city planner, this is an efficient housing solution in a land-scarce city-state. But to those blessed with godly imagination, this is an ingenious plan inspired from above. God organised our housing in such a manner so that it is super

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<sup>24</sup> The 2008 *LoveSingapore* information was obtained from various internal pages of the movement’s website, available online at: <http://www.lovesingapore.org.sg/> [Accessed 30 June 2008].

easy for each one of us to love our neighbours and serve our communities. Each housing block is a mega-zone of humanity with all kinds of needs. Huddled under one roof are families made up of precious individuals who struggle through life feeling small and empty inside.

Participating prayer-warriors are encouraged to “take ownership of their blocks and begin to personally care for the welfare and shalom of their neighbours,” so that “a fresh revival” would sweep through the “nation in no time.”

These and other events would culminate in the “Day of His Power!” prayer event in a massive exposition hall and timed to coincide with the National Day Parade. This is seen as commemorating the eve of “that unique day in the year when young and old, male and female, rich and poor, strong and weak, local-born and foreign-born, conservative and charismatic come with one heart to pray for matters that truly matter: a life changed, a church revived, a nation transformed, a world evangelised.” National unity is reconceptualised in the terms of Pentecostal spiritualism, but with a strong ‘Asianist’ twist responding to the transformation of Singapore into a global city. The “40-Day Prayer Guide” names the theme for National Day eve as “the Antioch attraction,” referring to the ancient city where Paul began his apostolic mission to spread Christianity in the Hellenic world and the vision of *LoveSingapore* to transform Singapore into the “Antioch of Asia,” and National Day as “city of our dreams.” Referring to the state’s embrace of neoliberal globalisation and the policy to let in foreign skilled workers from Asia, participants are encouraged to “embrace” and “positively influence the dynamics of the change.” *LoveSingapore* has thus moved with the times to engage the globalisation of Asia that Singapore finds itself caught up in, utilising its transfigured and hybridised practices that hark back to and engage the spiritualist cosmology and *baishen* performance of Chinese religion to define a new Christian ‘Asianism.’<sup>25</sup>

The ‘Asianist’ disfiguration of Protestant Christianity has not escaped the attention of the mainstream denominational churches in Singapore, which are largely Evangelical but non-Pentecostal. The mainstream churches grew out of early British missionary activity oriented towards China, which cultivated Christian middlemen among the Chinese population in the colonial outposts of Singapore and Hong Kong (see Smith, 1985). Colonial patronage brought English education, economic opportunities, and Western lifestyles and worldviews, and the conservative Chinese Christians make up the political, bureaucratic and business elites of postcolonial Singapore. In contrast,

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<sup>25</sup> For similar engagements with animist spiritualism and modernity in African Pentecostalism, see Meyer (1999).

members of the independent Charismatic churches are largely from the emergent lower-middle classes, where they still have a foot in the Chinese religion spirit-world of their parents and siblings. The Charismatic explosion has elicited the critical responses that often tie Charismatics to Chinese religion. The two incidents that inspired an Anglican Dean to write a book on “worshipping God acceptably” were when a friend asked him whether it was right “to worship the Lord . . . with the same joss sticks that we had used to worship the idols in our pagan days” and when he “heard a pastor declaring that God loved to hear His name being praised with vibrant singing all day long” during “the Charismatic renewal.” In his best-selling guidebook on dealing with Chinese traditions and beliefs in true Biblical fashion, the Anglican pastor not only provides detailed instructions of practices that may be adopted by the faithful, but also criticises “the belief that there are demonic spirits residing in or physically attached to the pantheon of inanimate idolatrous images, like the *long* [Chinese dragon; 龙]” for “glorify[ing] the devil” by allowing “the animistic beliefs of our culture to corrupt and cause our faith to degenerate into a form of Christian superstition.” The pastor also rejected an attempt by a spiritual warfare group to Christianise the Mid-Autumn Festival by interpreting the full moon and moon-cakes eaten during the celebrations as symbolising Creation and the completeness of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

But what is at stake in the dispute between “conservative and charismatic,” as the *LoveSingapore* organisers put it, is not just the definition of true Christianity. During an interview with a member of Faith Community Baptist Church, which has been one of the main churches driving *LoveSingapore*, he asked me for a Singapore fifty-dollar note. He took the note, laid it on the table and repeated a teaching he learned in church. Pointing to the image of the Chinese dragon at the top right hand corner at the back of the note, which portrayed the city skyline and highway bridge, he said it showed how the Devil dominated the nation and that it was the duty of all Christians to fight the spiritual war that went on daily in modern Singapore. The Charismatics’ close engagement with Chinese religion and the nation-state, both materially omnipresent in the everyday lives of Chinese Singaporeans, emphasises a form of social empowerment and collectivism with ‘Asianised’ meanings that appeal to the English-speaking Chinese non-elites, but which disfigure the individualistic, exegetical and Westernised worldview of elite Christians. Thus, a local theologian from the evangelical Theological Centre of Asia College, who studied *LoveSingapore* for her Cambridge Divinity School doctoral thesis,

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<sup>26</sup> Kuan Kim Seng (2008) *Our Duty and Our Joy: A Call to Worship God Acceptably*. Singapore: Genesis Books, Pp. xv,xvi; Daniel Tong (2003) *A Biblical Approach to Chinese Traditions and Beliefs*. Singapore: Genesis Books, Pp. 35,139,140.

criticises Charismatics for succumbing to “cultural seduction” by mimicking the communitarian state’s “beneficent political paternalism” and “technique of control” when they reach out into the larger community “presuming to have the ‘power’ and ‘solution’ to its needs” (Tan-Chow, 2007:93,94). Spiritual warfare, she argues, “turns prayer into an ideology of control rather than a profoundly theological activity” and its presumption of “access to special knowledge” reflects “Gnostic and esoteric tendencies” (2007:87,89). While she finds that Pentecostalism has the promise of offering an “ethic of negotiation” between faith and life, she warns of “cultural assimilation,” of becoming “captive to one’s culture” (2007:97). Culture is indeed at the crux of the disfigurations and anxieties brought out by the new Christian ‘Asianism.’

## **Conclusion**

I began this essay with a review of the intertwined problems of defining Chinese religious syncretism while explaining Chinese religious change as modernisation. My key objection has been that the assumption of a superior and colonising modernity contradicts the very definition of syncretism as a resilient cultural system that absorbs alien belief and practices. I have advocated a view that “provincialises” modernity (Chakrabarty, 2000), treating it as just another cultural system, but without ignoring its symbolic and material prowess in our age. The changes wrought by the interaction of modernity and Chinese religion in the contact zones of Malaysia and Singapore, which I have conceptualised as hybridisation and transfiguration, are found in both cultural systems, so that we have both the “modernisation” of Chinese religion and the spiritualist reanimation of the nation-state and the postcolonial church.

I have deliberately focused on the processes rather than the outcome or product: hybridisation instead of the hybrid, transfiguration instead of the fetish. My reason for doing this is to retain the significance of the driving force in each concept, that is, disfiguration and anxiety resulting from the meeting of Chinese religion and modernity. The process engages and resolves the force but does not eradicate it. While hybridisation is a response to the disjuncture of meanings when two different cultures collide, when each culture disfigures the other’s existential worldview, the hybrid created by prophetic innovations contains and combines the very disfigurements. Likewise, the fetish contains and exudes the very anxieties thrown up by the encounter of disparate symbolic forms. In this sense, the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore have innovatively displaced existential disfiguration and anxiety into the hybrid and fetish, using these to deal with their everyday lives.

It is in these staid conclusions that an interesting theoretical possibility opens up, suggesting the primacy of symbolic form over meaning that allows for Chinese religionists and modernists to communicate, interact, collide and reanimate each other. The constant disfiguration of the culture the hybrid finds itself in creates ensuing everyday anxieties that call for pastoral intervention, which tends to fetishise certain transfigured forms and signs to guide the faithful in fulfilling the high dictates of the prophetic hybrid teachings or revelations. In other words, hybridisation tends towards transfiguration. This describes Max Weber's (1930) argument that prophetic Protestant teachings led to existential anxieties that necessitated pastoral ethical work, which in turn led to the fetishisation of profit and laid the foundation for capitalist rationality. We find the same logic at work in the transfiguring hybridities I have discussed. Nation-oriented prayer-walking is to the Charismatic seeking to find his or her purpose in a cosmos wrecked by spiritual warfare what profit-oriented asceticism was to the Calvinist seeking to find his salvation in a predestined cosmos of a distant God. The reform Taoist strives for forms of religiosity fetishised as modern as he or she seeks to recover the denigrated status of Chinese religion in a multicultural cosmos of spiritual hierarchies. We also find the same tendencies in the hybridisations I have discussed. Colonial-era reform Confucianism tended towards the fetishisation of the figure of the *junzi* (君子) as the Chinese equivalent of the Victorian gentleman and this was realised when the political elites in Singapore did just that in the 1980s to legitimise their rule (Goh, in press). In the codification of pre-1967 planchette divinations by the first Dejiào association in Malaysia and Singapore, we find the fetishisation of the Word to resolve the anxieties thrown up by the schismatic conflict over a popular practice.

On the other hand, the transfigurations I have discussed are settled in their practices, keeping their worldview and its multiple meanings intact while changing and adding forms of practice to resolve extant anxieties. Their practitioners do not seem to need to make multiple meanings contained within their universe of forms cohere through hybridising innovations. The implication ties in with Webb Keane's (2007:288) conclusions in the case of Sumbanese Christians, "The persistence of forms across changing representational economies is part of what makes the past seem to impinge on the present . . . is what makes it possible for Dutch and Sumbanese eventually to speak to one another." "Modern" meanings are absorbed into transfigured *baishen* performances and the spiritualist meanings of Chinese religion are assimilated into modern institutions, especially the nation-state and religious movements engaging it, in a way that would seem strangely Asian and familiar to the Westerner who sees modernity as his contribution to human civilisation. Thus,

Chinese religion and modernity not only coexist but also animate each other. The challenge of modernity is only an apparent one.

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