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Margaret CHAN

Singapore Management University, [margarechan@smu.edu.sg](mailto:margarechan@smu.edu.sg)

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## Chinese New Year in West Kalimantan: Ritual Theatre and Political Circus

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**Abstract:** Since 2002, when Chinese New Year became a national holiday in Indonesia, spirit-medium parades on the fifteen day of the New Year (called *Cap Go Meh*) have been growing in size in certain West Kalimantan towns, especially Singkawang. This parade in particular has become a major tourist draw-card. Referring to local history, Chinese popular religion and Hakka culture, this article applies a performance analysis methodology to dissect this contemporary phenomenon from religious, historical and inter-ethnic perspectives. It shows how the parades have become enmeshed in current inter-ethnic politics in West Kalimantan, as well as revealing the way that adaptations by the spirit-mediums involved demonstrate their spiritual commitment to their Indonesian homeland.

### Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Chinese communities the world over celebrate the advent of the lunar new year over fifteen days during which family reunions, and visits among family and friends, renew communal bonds. The final day is called *Cap Go Meh*.<sup>3</sup> Its night was traditionally marked by the firing of crackers and by ritual processions to scare the demons of bad luck away from the coming year. From this tradition there has arisen in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and other centres of diasporic Chinese life, larger-scale festivities that have become tourist draw-cards<sup>4</sup>. This article discusses one such processional conclusion to Chinese New Year that occurs in the West Kalimantan town of Singkawang, where spirit-mediums parade down the main streets, performing fearsome self-mortifications on sedan chairs set with knives and nails. The Singkawang spirit-medium parade has gained such national attention that, in 2008 and 2009, it featured in the official "Visit Indonesia" tourist calendar. Yet while this parade grew in national stature, the public celebration of *Cap Go Meh* 2008 was seriously restricted in Pontianak, the provincial capital.

This article describes and analyses the contrasting experience of *Cap Go Meh* 2008 in these two West Kalimantan towns. The existence of such processions is still relatively new in Indonesia. Public celebrations of Chinese New Year, or *Imlek*, were banned during Suharto's New Order regime, from 1967. It was only in 2000, under President Abdurrahman Wahid, that they were allowed once more, a move that was re-affirmed in

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Chan is a trained ethnographer and practice assistant professor of theatre and performance studies, School of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University. Her email is: [margarechan@smu.edu.sg](mailto:margarechan@smu.edu.sg).

<sup>2</sup> This work was supported by the Office of Research, Singapore Management University. I also thank: Mayor Hasan Karman in Singkawang; my Indonesian friends Ardian Cangianto, Rudi Dustika Teja, Hendy Lie, Nusantara Setiadi, Jack Mulyana Husodho, Hidayat Boesran, Chin Miao Fuk, Eugenia Wu and Louis William; my friends from Taoism-Singapore Forum, Victor Yue, Timothy Pwee, Raymond Goh, Ronni Pinsler, Jave Wu and Lee Su-Yin. I have also been privileged to receive valuable advice and references from Nola Cooke, Mary Somers Heidhues, Jean DeBernardi, Hui Yew-Foong, Jamie Seth Davidson and Hoon Chang Yau.

<sup>3</sup> The fifteenth day of *Imlek* is known throughout Indonesia by the Hokkien [福建 Fujian] term *Cap Go Meh* [十五暝 *shi wu ming*]. In China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, this day is named *Yuan Xiao Jie* [元宵节], the Feast of the First Full moon, a day marked in ancient China by a lantern festival. Marie-Luise Latsch, *Chinese Traditional Festivals* (Beijing: New World Press, 1984), pp. 37-45.

<sup>4</sup> A spirit-medium parade used to be held on the fourteenth and fifteenth of the first moon in Cambodia right up to 1968. See W. E. Willmott, "Spirit-Medium Possession among the Chinese in Kampuchea, 1963," *Asian Culture*, 14 April 1990: 88-99; and W. E. Willmott, "Yuanxiao" in the Cambodia section of *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan (Singapore: Archipelago Press and Landmark Books, 1998), p. 146. In Penang and Johore, *Cap Go Meh* is celebrated with a parade of temple contingents, pugilistic displays and floats as *Chingay* [真艺 *zhenyi* "true art"]. In Singapore, *Chingay* is entirely secular.

2002 by President Megawati's declaration of Imlek as a national holiday.<sup>5</sup> Because of this recent history of suppression, Chinese New Year festivities have taken on a political significance in the *reformasi* era, and Indonesian presidents since Abdurrahman Wahid have made a point of attending celebrations in Jakarta. Chinese communities in major cities including Jakarta, Semarang, Surabaya, Bandung, Bogor and Yogyakarta hold overt street parades featuring *barong sai* [Chinese lion dance] and *liong* [also *naga*, dragon dance], but nothing in Indonesia is comparable to the Cap Go Meh celebrations in the otherwise quiet town of Singkawang, with its parade of spirit-mediums.

Singkawang town is filled with tourists over the Cap Go Meh.<sup>6</sup> The general public flock to see the grisly spectacle; but a more interesting show for observers of the Indonesian-Chinese diaspora involves reading how this ritual theatre, with its excessive display of Chineseness, is played out against the palimpsest of historical inter-ethnic communal politics. Certainly the Pontianak no-show of 2008 has been attributed to Malay discomfort with the excessive Chineseness of Cap Go Meh celebrations, an unease arising from a deeper worry that Dayak-Chinese unity might marginalise Malays.<sup>7</sup> Historically, Chinese and Dayaks have been viewed as collaborators: although Dayaks have clashed with Chinese in the past, such conflicts were often instigated by external parties trying to use the Dayaks to control the Chinese.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, however, the closeness of Dayaks and Chinese was given new political significance by the pairing of a Dayak governor and an ethnic Chinese vice-governor in West Kalimantan. As the spirit-medium parades of Cap Go Meh in West Kalimantan provide another stage on which to display Dayak and Chinese unity, this ritual show became another arena of political tension after the 2007 provincial election.

Cap Go Meh celebrations originated in age-old traditional Chinese folk religiosity, and even in this era of tourist-oriented commodification of such events, its ritual elements, like exorcisms, can still be understood as expressions of popular religious impulses.<sup>9</sup> This essay therefore explores contemporary Cap Go Meh in West Kalimantan from two intersecting approaches, one as a form of ritual theatre and the other as a socio-political event with significant inter-ethnic ramifications. In both cases, I apply the methodological tools of performance studies to unravel the events of 2007 and 2008 there. From this perspective, the spirit-medium parade in Singkawang appears, on the larger stage of West Kalimantan communal politics, as a political circus of absence and presence.

A performance analysis of spirit-medium worship in Singkawang, and its corresponding absence (where absence as much as presence performs socio-cultural meanings) in Pontianak in 2008 and 2009 first needs to be set within the context of

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of Chinese New Year in contemporary Indonesia, see Chang-Yau Hoon, "More than a Cultural Celebration: The Politics of Chinese New Year in Post-Suharto Indonesia" in this issue of *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*.

<sup>6</sup> See the mayoral address opening the Cap Go Meh 2008. Hasan Karman, "Sambutan Walikota Singkawang pada Acara Perayaan Festival Chap Go Meh 2008" (speech presented at the opening of Chap Go Meh 2008, 21 February 2008, or "Singkawang Dihiasi Kemeriahan Cap Go Meh" ("Singkawang ready for Cap Go Meh celebrations"), available in *Republika Online*, Saturday 24 Jan 2009:

[http://www.republika.co.id/berita/27877/Singkawang\\_Dihiasi\\_Kemeriahan\\_Cap\\_Go\\_Meh](http://www.republika.co.id/berita/27877/Singkawang_Dihiasi_Kemeriahan_Cap_Go_Meh).

When I tried to book for 2009, all rooms had been taken one month in advance, and when I inquired in July 2009 for 2010, I was told that all rooms were already booked.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Hui Yew-Foong, "Chinese Indonesians Living on the Edge", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), Review, 6 March 2008: 34.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Mary Somers Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders in the "Chinese Districts" of West Kalimantan, Indonesia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2003), pp. 110-11, for Dutch using Dayaks to control Chinese. Jamie S. Davidson and Douglas Kammen, "Indonesia's Unknown War and the Lineages of Violence in West Kalimantan," *Indonesia*, Vol. 73 (Apr 2002), is a chilling account of how the Indonesian military instigated the 1967 *demonstrasi* [demonstration] killings of local Chinese.

<sup>9</sup> I am currently engaged in research focused on the religious aspects of Cap Go Meh in West Kalimantan which I intend to publish elsewhere.

Chinese history in West Kalimantan, since local history illuminates both the religious rituals and communal inter-ethnic politics. Consequently, before introducing Cap Goh Meh in Kalimantan, this article begins with a brief historical glance at the Chinese there, emphasising only matters relevant to my later discussion. It then focuses on the parade I witnessed in Singkawang in 2008 and the subsequent one in 2009, with performance readings to elucidate the ritual and social meanings of the religious procession. The examination of the Singkawang parade will not only shed light on the cultural practices of the Indonesian-Chinese community here, but also bring into focus inter-ethnic relationships between the Chinese, Dayaks and Malays in this region. But first, a short note on my methodology may not go amiss.

A performance reading is an eminently insightful heuristic device for the understanding of socio-cultural dynamics of this sort. Its basic position is that all of human living is performed. In the 1950s, the sociologist Erving Goffman pioneered this dramaturgical perspective on social behaviour, proposing that, in their interactions, people put on a "front" which identified their social roles.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1970s, the noted anthropologist Victor Turner, who worked on ritual, began to describe the symbolic action in human society as dramas. Turner argued that "daily living is a kind of theatre" and should be examined as such.<sup>11</sup> Around the same time Richard Schechner investigated the "infinity loop" between social dramas (the lived experience) and staged dramas, where initiatives would feed from one to the other and back again.<sup>12</sup> Performance studies as an academic discipline emerged from New York University when Turner and Schechner collaborated to bring theatre and anthropology together to study human performances. This article will apply aspects of this general methodology, as well as Geertz's semiotic approach to ethnography,<sup>13</sup> to its analysis of the Cap Go Meh spirit-medium parades as both ritual theatre and political circus.

### **Hakka History in West Kalimantan**

Chinese sources dating back to the Tang dynasty [唐 618-907] mention Borneo,<sup>14</sup> but significant Chinese migration there only began from 1740.<sup>15</sup> The majority were Hakka [客家 Kejia] who came from Fujian [福建] and Guangdong [广东] to work the gold mines in West Borneo. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were over 40,000 Chinese,<sup>16</sup> who outnumbered the Malay population. The Chinese had originally toiled and paid taxes to the Malay sultans, but in the later eighteenth century they took their survival into their own hands by forming confederations: in 1776 the Montrado-based Heshun Zongting [和顺总厅 Harmonious Submission] was founded, and in 1777 the Lanfang Kongsì Zongting [兰芳公司总厅 Virtuous Orchid] was formed at Mandor. Later a splinter group, Santiaogou [三条沟 Three Gullies] left Heshun Zongting around 1819.<sup>17</sup>

For almost a hundred years, the zongting alliances administered their constituencies as "mini-republics", with elected ruling general assemblies and executive councils. So successful were they economically, socially and politically that the surprised Dutch, who thought of Chinese emigrants as the uneducated dregs of their society, sent the

<sup>10</sup> See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), pp. 22-30.

<sup>11</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), pp. 72-85.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994, originally 1977), pp. 143-90.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> Yuan Bingling, *Chinese Democracies: A Study of the Kongsis of West Borneo (1776-1884)* (Leiden: Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies CNWS, Universiteit Leiden, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 55; Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, pp. 19-48. The Santiaogou split was dated to 1819 in Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 55, but to 1822 on p. 56.

anthropologist J. J. M. de Groot to Pontianak in 1880 to study the situation. He concluded that Chinese success here rested on Hakka culture and the application of an inherently republican, traditional village society model.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, Yuan Bingling has challenged this village based analysis, proposing instead that the zongting social structures were inspired by stories of the 108 bandit heroes from the fourteenth century novel *Shuihu zhuan* [水浒传, the Water Margin] by Shi Naian [施耐庵].<sup>19</sup> The tale of the 108 heroes promulgated the spirit of the great brotherhood of men, a notion encapsulated in the 2500 year old Confucian teaching: "Across the four seas all men are brothers."<sup>20</sup> This principle informs much of Chinese social behaviour. It is the foundation of the Chinese mutual support system, as well as the rallying call for comrades to join the fight for social justice.<sup>21</sup> Yuan's view that fact followed fiction is also reflected in other scholarship which proposes that story-telling has shaped Chinese society to an extent unknown in the West. As I have argued elsewhere, mythology, theatre and vernacular fiction were historically the ultimate didactic tools for teaching traditional values. Vernacular fiction was the main medium for the transmission of cults,<sup>22</sup> while theatre provided illiterate rural Chinese audiences in imperial times with the iconography of the gods.

West Kalimantan zongtings were voluntary brotherhoods, and familial bonds were often extended to Dayaks. As eighteenth-century Chinese men came without their women, many married Dayaks and took their in-laws as their wider families.<sup>23</sup> A trace of this relationship still remains in the Dayak term for the Chinese, *sobat*, meaning "friend". The Chinese in return call the Dayaks *Lo-a-kia* [唠阿仔 *Lao Azi* roughly "young man from Lao"], possibly reflecting a belief that the Dayaks derived from the Li [黎] people of Hainan.<sup>24</sup> The pejorative "barbarian" [番子 *fanzǐ*] was reserved for Malays.<sup>25</sup> In times of war, the brotherhood was paramount, with Dayaks and Chinese often closing ranks internally,<sup>26</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, pp. 5-11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 277-78.

<sup>20</sup> "四海之内皆兄弟", *Analects of Confucius*, Book XII Chapter 5, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Shuihu zhuan* relates how the 36 Stars of Heaven and the 72 Stars of Earth were reborn as 108 heroes who joined in brotherhood to fight for justice. The symbolic number of brotherhood is thus 108. The founding myth of the Triads, for example, describe the gangs as bands of 108 righteous men (Barend J. ter Haar, "Messianism and the Heaven and Earth Society: Approaches to Heaven and Earth Society Texts," in *Secret Societies Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia*, ed. David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 157. For this reason, *Shuihu zhuan* is generally held as the literary model for the Triads, although Ter Haar has also argued for the significance of oral traditions in Triad lore such as the blood covenant. B. Ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> See Meir Shahar, 'Vernacular Fiction and the Transmission of Gods' Cults in Late Imperial China', in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), pp. 184-211; Jean DeBernardi, *The Way that Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 147-66; and Margaret Chan, *Ritual is Theatre, Theatre is Ritual: Spirit-Medium Worship* (Singapore: Wee Kim Wee Centre and SNP Reference, 2006), pp. 42-55.

<sup>23</sup> See Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, pp. 25-27; Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, pp. 66-72.

<sup>24</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> For example in September and early October, 1967, the Indonesian military instigated the Dayaks to fight the Chinese and drive them out of the interior to the coast. Instead Chinese villagers from the Mempawah and Bengkayang areas joined with Dayaks through *adat pemabang* [ritual ceremonies] in which they vowed, to unite against common enemies from outside the community. Davidson and Kammen, "Indonesia's Unknown War and the Lineages of Violence": 63-64.

when pitched against European colonisers, the brotherhood did extend to Malays, as occurred in 1914.<sup>27</sup>

But what of de Groot's other proposition; that Hakka cultural traits contributed to Chinese success in Kalimantan? Kiang describes Hakkas as "energetic, contentious ... adventurers, explorers, fighters and pioneers". According to him, it is in their history and in their genes<sup>28</sup> as a migratory tribe who had to wrest a living from the poor highlands of Fujian and Guangdong while the local indigenous people enjoyed the fertile lowlands. The Hakka claim to have originated in Central Asia and to have entered northern China before the Qin dynasty, where they fought in the wars that established the Han dynasty [汉 206 BCE–220 CE]. Subsequently they migrated south in five waves.<sup>29</sup> Yuan dismisses this story as a "nobility myth"<sup>30</sup> but, as Constable argues, the rhetoric is far less important than Hakka self-perceptions, because any special qualities the Hakka claim "can take on a special power in the mobilization of ethnicity as a social force".<sup>31</sup> When understood as a cultural construct, ethnicity demonstrates "how realities become real, how essences become essential, how materialities materialize".<sup>32</sup> If so, what might be understood from the fact that books and websites on the Hakka, created by Hakka people, often include a long list of Hakka luminaries? Equally, when I spoke to Hakka people in Indonesia and Singapore about their heritage, they quickly told me about famous Hakka leaders. Kiang, for instance, counts as Hakka Deng Xiao Ping [邓小平], Lee Kuan Yew [李光耀] and Lee Teng Hui [李登辉], among numerous others of distinction.<sup>33</sup> Christiandy Sanjaya, vice-governor of West Kalimantan and Hasan Karman, mayor of Singkawang, are both Hakka.<sup>34</sup> Thus once again today, as in the eighteenth century, there are Hakka leaders in West Kalimantan.

The Hakkas of Singkawang wear their Chineseness like a badge. They have retained their language over the generations in spite of New Order repression. On my research trips I repeatedly noted that Hakka was the main language of conversation among local Chinese, not Bahasa Indonesia or a patois comparable to Low Javanese. In contrast, many of the Chinese of Java know no Chinese.<sup>35</sup> One example of this resurgent Chinese ethnic pride is the resurrection, from the ashes of New Order prohibition, of the only marionette troupe<sup>36</sup> in the region, Xin Tian Cai [新天彩 New Heavenly Colours], with its aging puppet-master Zhong Lian Lin [钟联灵].<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, Singkawang and its surrounds are known as the

<sup>27</sup> In the 1914 rebellion, a sworn brotherhood of Chinese, Dayaks and some Malay initiates fought against the Dutch in Mempawah. They opposed oppressive taxes and colonial corvée. Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, pp. 180-82.

<sup>28</sup> Clyde Kiang, *The Hakka Odyssey and their Taiwan Homeland* (Elgin, PA: Allegheny Press, 1992), p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-69.

<sup>30</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, p. 270.

<sup>31</sup> Nicole Constable, "Introduction: What does it mean to be Hakka?" in *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*, ed. Nicole Constable (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Comaroff in Constable, "Introduction," p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Kiang, *The Hakka Odyssey*, pp. 245-64.

<sup>34</sup> The names Christiandy Sanjaya and Hasan Karman do not sound Chinese because most Indonesian-Chinese have adopted Indonesian-sounding names following Presidium Cabinet Decree 127/U/Kep/12/1966, an Indonesian law passed in 1966 that required Indonesian-Chinese citizens to adopt Bahasa Indonesia sounding names. The Chinese name of Christiandy Sanjaya is Bong Hon San (I do not have the Chinese characters) and that of Hasan Karman is Bong Sau Fam [黄少凡 Huang Shao Fan]. Both are Singkawang born and Christians.

<sup>35</sup> See Ellen Rafferty, "Languages of the Chinese of Java: An Historical Review," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (February 1984): 247-72 and Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Marionette theatre is considered the most ritually powerful of all Chinese theatres since it essentially stages the images of deities that apparently self-animate. See Chan, *Ritual is Theatre*, pp. 135-36.

<sup>37</sup> Personal interview with Zhong Lian Lin in Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin in Singkawang on 20 February 2008. Aged 64 at the time, his body still bore the signs of the torture he suffered while imprisoned under the previous regime.

“Chinese Districts”.<sup>38</sup> However, there is another side to the resistance of the West Kalimantan Hakka community to cultural assimilation into the larger indigenous community,<sup>39</sup> despite more than 250 years of history there. It marks them as the conspicuous “Other”, and exacerbates Malay consternation over the perceived resurgence of Chineseness here. But before exploring these inter-ethnic tensions further, I want to introduce the Cap Go Meh celebrations and describe Cap Go Meh in Singkawang in 2008.

### Overview of Cap Go Meh in West Kalimantan

Historians record that spirit-mediums operated in eighteenth-century Chinese communities in Borneo,<sup>40</sup> but there are no textual records of Cap Go Meh parades in West Kalimantan earlier than the fictionalised account by a European missionary in the 1970s. This is not surprising: Chinese folk religion is not text-based or institutional, in the Western sense, nor is there a written canon or dogma.<sup>41</sup> However, the Chinese like to paste photographs on their walls, so when I visited temples and homes in Pontianak and Singkawang to conduct interviews, I was also able to gather photographic evidence of earlier parades, some of which is reproduced below. The extensive network of informants I cultivated in Singkawang town also gave me access to the key people involved in the Cap Go Meh parade there.



Figure 1: A spirit-medium in trance upon a sedan chair, circa 1960s  
(photo from the Fan Ren Shou collection)

Robert Peterson, a missionary in 1960s and 1970s West Borneo, wrote about spirit-medium rituals in *The Demon Gods of Thorny River*, a fictional account of the life of a female spirit-medium in the Sungei Duri district of Bengkayang, south of Singkawang. It contains a detailed description of a spirit-medium “cleansing ceremony” which accurately depicts spirit medium rituals and which bears significant similarity to the modern Cap Go

<sup>38</sup> See Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Sharon A. Carstens, “Pulai, Hakka, Chinese, Malaysian: A Labyrinth of Cultural Identities,” in *Studies in Malaysian Chinese Worlds: Histories, Cultures and Identities* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), pp. 57-81, reports on a Hakka community in Malaysia. Descendants of gold-miners, they fiercely retain their Chineseness despite having lived in Malaysia since the eighteenth century and having intermarried with Orang Asli.

<sup>40</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, pp. 35-36; Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 93.

<sup>41</sup> See Jean DeBernardi, *The Way that Lives in the Heart*, p. 145 and Chan, *Ritual is Theatre*, pp. 75-91.



Meh parade in Singkawang.<sup>42</sup> The photographs from this period that I collected also corroborate his report.

The first such photo (Figure 1 above) is taken from the collection of Fan Ren Shou (范仁寿), a medium who died aged eighty-one, twenty-eight years ago. Fan is a near mythical character in Singkawang spirit-medium circles, a figure whose religious pronouncements were regarded as infallible. No other medium since has achieved this stature. The medium in the photograph would not have been Fan himself for, when possessed by a spirit, Fan was said to be quiet; he did not jump or dance in typical trance behaviour. The clothing of the assistants dates this photograph to the 1960s. Another of his photos shows a spirit-



**Figure 2: A religious parade down the streets of Singkawang, circa 1960s**  
(photo by courtesy of the Fan Ren Shou collection)

medium parade from the 1960s (Figure 2). We can discern a portable shrine borne by devotees in the background, while the two-storey buildings indicate that the photograph was taken in the main streets of Singkawang, not in a village. A third photo (Figure 3 over page), is said to depict the Cap Go Meh parade in Singkawang in 1960; but it may be from a later date, perhaps 1971, for I have a few photos of an important spirit-medium festival from that year. One photo from the 1971 event shows fire-walking by the spirit-medium Lie Teck Poh [李德保 Li De Bao], who today is in his mid-60s (Figure 4 over page). What can be established from these photos is that there were public spirit-medium festivals taking place in Singkawang in the 1960s.

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<sup>42</sup> Singkawang appears in Peterson's book as "Ocean Harbour". Robert L. Peterson, *The Demon Gods of Thorny River* (London: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, OMF Books, 1974), pp. 129-38.





Figure 3: Cap Go Meh parade in Singkawang (1960 ?) (by kind permission of Hendy Lie)



Figure 4: Spirit-medium Lie Teck Poh [李德保 Li De Bao] fire-walking in 1971  
(reproduced from the collection of his brother, Lie Liong Mui [李良美 Li Liang Mei])

In addition, I photographed certificates issued to the spirit-medium Hioe Tjin Kiong [虎进强 Hu Jin Qiang]<sup>43</sup> dated 1993 and 1996; the first was for an event in August but the

<sup>43</sup> Hioe wrote his name as 房进强 which transliterates as Fang Jin Qiang. But the certificates made out to him named him as a Mr Hioe or Mr Het, nothing approximating "Fang". I have thus made a calculated guess that he wrote 房 [Fang] to mean 虎 [Hu]. Hioe says that there have been at least four generations of his family in Singkawang so that, while he speaks excellent Mandarin, perhaps his Chinese writing might have been amiss.

second was for Cap Go Meh.<sup>44</sup> This evidence indicates that public spirit-medium events occurred at Singkawang, despite New Order prohibitions, a fact that was corroborated in my interviews conducted in 2008 and 2009 with a number of highly-experienced mediums.

Among the mediums I interviewed were some of the most venerable and respected in Singkawang. In 2009, for instance, I met the oldest spirit-medium there, ninety-year-old Cung Yong Hin [钟杨兴 Zhong Yang Xing] who told me that he had become a medium spontaneously at the age of eighteen.<sup>45</sup> He had retired in 2002. Right up to that year, Cung said, he had never needed the chanting of mantras to induce him into a trance state; the spirit would just possess him when necessary. Cung recalled spirit-medium parades when he would ride a nail chair in procession. Xu Song Hua [徐松花], aged eighty, had become a spirit-medium at the age of twenty. His father Xu Ren Duan [徐仁段] was also a medium, and Song Hua's own son, Xu Yong Nan [徐永南] became a medium at the age of eight.<sup>46</sup> Xu Song Hua is famous in Singkawang for the way he would squeeze himself into a small portable shrine to the Monkey God that was carried on parade. I saw the shrine; it is shaped like house with an ornate roof, and is just a little larger than a crate for oranges. Xu must have been a contortionist to get into it. Sandi Mo alias Hong Gu [洪三来], aged eighty-two, became a medium at the age of twelve. He remembers clearly his first outing in 1939. He and the other mediums paraded around the Dutch quarters in the town, following the processional route that took place every year until the Dutch left Indonesia.<sup>47</sup>

There were similar spirit-medium parades in Pontianak. Tan Hua Min [陈和鸣 Chen He Ming], at eighty-four, was reputed to be the oldest practising spirit-medium in that city. Tan said that he had been a spirit-medium since 1961.<sup>48</sup> In his temple was a large, nail-studded sedan chair with two seats, one higher than the other. As far as Tan could remember, there had been spirit-medium parades every Cap Go Meh, but they were confined to temple compounds. It was only from 1999, with the start of the Abdurrahman Wahid presidency, that spirit-mediums began to parade openly on the streets of Pontianak.

Besides mediums, I interviewed all but one of the major players in the Chinese religious community of Singkawang. They were Chin Miao Fuk [陈妙福 Chen Miao Fu], the head of the Singkawang Cap Go Meh parade committee 2008 and 2009<sup>49</sup>; Wijaya Kurniawan [冯爆发 Feng Bao Fa], head of MABT [Majelis Adat Budaya Tionghoa] in Singkawang<sup>50</sup>; Chet Ket Khiong [蔡国强 Cai Guo Qiang], the head of Majelis Tao Indonesia (MTI)<sup>51</sup>, Bong Wui Khong [皇威廉 Huang Wei Kang], head of TriDharma<sup>52</sup> and Zheng Zhen Fu [郑振福], head of Majelis Konghucu Indonesia (Makin) in Singkawang.<sup>53</sup> They all agreed that there were always spirit-medium parades in Singkawang, but that they were largely confined to temple compounds, which included the Dabogong [大伯公] temple in the city centre and Viharra Buddhayana Maha Karuna in the village of Roban. Apparently, in certain years, depending on who was governing the Sambas region, the spirit-mediums

<sup>44</sup> The earlier certificate was issued for 1 August 1993 which was the fourteenth day of the sixth moon and was possibly a celebration of the feast of Guan Gong [关公], God of War or of Dabogong [大伯公], the God of Wealth.

The 1996 certificate was dated 23 February, the fifth of the first moon, and was possibly for a Chinese New Year event in 1996: as it fell on 19 February, Cap Go Meh 1996 would have been on 4 March.

<sup>45</sup> Personal interview with Cung Yong Hin in Singkawang in Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin on 4 July 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with Xu Song Hua and Xu Yong Nan in Singkawang in Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin on 3 July 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Personal interview with Sandi Mo in Singkawang in Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin on 30 June 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Personal interview with Tan Hua Min in Teochew in Pontianak on 19 Feb 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Personal interview with Chin Miao Fuk in Bahasa Indonesia in Singkawang on 20 Feb 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Personal interview with Wijaya Kurniawan in Bahasa Indonesia in Singkawang on 20 Feb 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Personal interview with Chet Ket Khiong in Bahasa Indonesia in Singkawang on 30 June 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Personal interview with Bong Wui Khong in Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin in Singkawang on 30 June 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Personal interview with Zheng Zhen Fu in Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin in Singkawang on 30 June 2009.

might take to the streets; but as no records exist and my interviewees spoke from memory, no earlier Cap Go Meh events can be firmly dated before 2000.

In that year, and also in 2001, parades occurred in the temple in Roban. From 2002 to 2007, however, the spirit-medium procession took to the main streets of Singkawang. The event was endorsed by the municipal administration but organised by communal groups such as FOKET [Forum Komunikasi Etnis Tionghoa, Forum of Communication for Ethnic Chinese] and Tri Dharma. In 2008 and 2009, the organisation of Cap Go Meh was taken over by Chin Miao Fuk's committee which, according to Chin, is made up of representatives from various Singkawang community associations. Chin who was born in Singkawang but now works and lives in Jakarta, described himself as an independent.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to these interviews, I checked newspaper reports to try to pinpoint when spirit-mediums paraded on the streets of West Kalimantan during Cap Go Meh. The earliest verifiable report of public celebrations of Chinese New Year here was in *Kompas* on 5 February 2000,<sup>55</sup> in an article covering festivities around Indonesia in the historic year when open celebrations of Imlek were once again allowed. Pontianak received one paragraph, which said that continual rain since the day before had not dampened the spirits of merrymakers, and that the governor of West Kalimantan, H Aspar Aswin, had made a speech on TVRI Pontianak.<sup>56</sup> Another undated *Kompas* report on Cap Go Meh 2000 noted that six troupes with dragons measuring thirty-five to sixty-four metres long had been involved in the Pontianak celebrations. This same article reported that Singkawang was packed with tourists, mainly from Malaysia. Although no details of the town's Cap Go Meh programme was included,<sup>57</sup> the presence of so many tourists suggested celebrations of a spectacular nature.

The earliest news article on a spirit-medium street procession came from Pontianak in 2001. It reported that on Cap Go Meh, 7 February, thousands of citizens had come out to watch a procession of dragons and lions that was headed by spirit-mediums. The parade had gone down the main roads of Jalan Gajah Mada, Jalan Pahlawan, Jalan Tanjungpura and Jalan Diponegoro and stopped in front of Makorem on Jalan Rahadi Usman.<sup>58</sup>

Newspaper reports were also useful in tracking the growing scale of the spirit-medium parades in Singkawang. Reports from West Kalimantan after 2001 referred mainly to Singkawang, showing the rising dominance of this event over all other Cap Go Meh celebrations in the region. (As early as 2002, Bong Wui Khong of Tri Dharma told me, 104 spirit-mediums had participated here.<sup>59</sup>) In 2003, one press report noted that 243 spirit-mediums would gather at an altar on Jalan Sejahtera and about 140 would meet at an altar on Jalan Budi Utomo. Whether some of the spirit-mediums had dual affiliations, or whether they were from two different groups, thus making a total of 383, is not clear. The report added they comprised Chinese, Dayak and a few Malay mediums.<sup>60</sup> One 2005 article on Cap Go Meh reported that 386 mediums were expected at Singkawang, and that smaller

<sup>54</sup> Chin told me in Bahasa Indonesia, in Jakarta on 6 July 2009, that he has left the Committee for 2010.

<sup>55</sup> The year that Chinese New Year first became an optional national holiday.

<sup>56</sup> "Setelah Tiga Dekade Imlek Dirayakan Terbuka" ["After three decades, Chinese New Celebrations begin"] *Kompas*, Sunday, 6 Feb 2000.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0002/06/UTAMA/imle01.htm>, accessed on 4 July 2008.

<sup>58</sup> "Cap Go Meh Tampilkan Atraksi Naga" ["Cap Go Meh dragon attraction"] *Kompas*, n.d.,

<http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0110/05/OPINI/upay48.htm>, accessed 4 July 2008.

<sup>59</sup> "Ribuan Warga Tumpah Saksikan Lauya" ["Thousands of residents spill out to witness spirit-mediums"] Pontianak Post, Thursday, 8 Feb 2001.

<http://arsip.pontianakpost.com/berita/index.asp?Berita=Kota&id=1924>, accessed 4 July 2008.

<sup>60</sup> When I asked Bong how he could be so sure of this figure, he said he knew because he had issued donation books to the participating mediums so they might solicit for donations door-to-door.

<sup>61</sup> "Lelang Barang 'Persembahan Dewa' di Altar" ["Auction of offerings made to the gods at an altar"] *Pontianak Post*, Saturday, 15 Feb 2003.

<http://arsip.pontianakpost.com/berita/index.asp?Berita=Singkawang&id=20715>, accessed 4 July 2008.

spirit-medium events would also be held at Pontianak, Sungai Pinyuh (in Pontianak county), Pemangkat, and in the counties of Sambas and Ketapang.<sup>61</sup> Numbers rose even further: in a 2009 interview published in *Republika Online* Mayor Hasan Karman remarked that Cap Go Meh 2009 would be the largest in the event's history, with 534 spirit-mediums compared to 474 in 2008.<sup>62</sup>

However, this doubling in participation rates of spirit-mediums from 2003 to 2009 has come at a cost. In organisational terms, Cap Go Meh in Singkawang is now a scene of intra-communal jostling. Until 2008 participating mediums had to solicit donations door-to-door, using a book issued by the organising committee of the parade, to help off-set their costs; but in 2008 and 2009 funding has come largely from a new organisation, Permasis [Perkumpulan Masyarakat Singkawang dan Sekitarnya, the Association of the Community of Singkawang and Neighbouring Regions], a Jakarta-based alumni group of people born in Singkawang who have made good in the capital.<sup>63</sup> Their fund-raising allowed Chin's committee to pay individual spirit-medium troupes up to 1.5 million rupiah each in 2008, and 2.5 million rupiah in 2009, to defray participation costs.

The leaders of Singkawang community groups are unhappy about this situation. When once they had wielded control largely through the issuing of donations books, their mandate to represent members' interests and to raise funds had now been effectively removed. Significantly, this unhappiness has been largely channelled in another direction, which points to another cost arising from the increasing popularity of the parade. For the community leaders, the rise of Chin's committee represents the appropriation of a religious ritual by the municipal administration. In my interview with Mayor Hasan Karman, he was unapologetic about his desire that Cap Go Meh should put Singkawang on the international tourist map, like Tomatina, the annual tomato battle in Buñol, Spain.<sup>64</sup> But Cap Go Meh is hardly comparable to that secular event, if only because of the ritual self-mortification at its heart.

When Peterson wrote of West Kalimantan spirit-mediums in the 1960s and 1970s, he described their practice of thrusting sharpened bamboo daggers through their cheeks and tongues.<sup>65</sup> Sandi Mo told me he had used such a long skewer that it had to be anchored against a table in order to drive it through his cheek. Sixty-nine year old Tjie Sung Kong [徐孙光 Xu Sun Guang] pierced himself with 108 skewers—thirty-six in his face and seventy-two into his body<sup>66</sup>—and smeared his face with black paint, inadvertently tattooing permanent streaks into the skin. However grisly, all these actions were undertaken for specifically religious reasons, to enhance the mediums' spiritual powers.

While today's implements are more sophisticated—at the very least sharpened bicycle wheel spokes make more efficient skewers—mediums are also deploying bizarre new instruments (as discussed in the next section) that suggest a pandering to morbid appetites, as inspired by commodified tourist curiosity, rather than folk religiosity.<sup>67</sup> So has turning Cap Go Meh into a tourist attraction debased the original religious significance of the spirit-

<sup>61</sup> "Tatung," *Pengusir Roh Jahat* ("Tatung", exorcist of evil demons), *Kompas*, Friday 18 March 2005. <http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0503/18/tanahair/1627639.htm>, accessed 8 July 2008.

<sup>62</sup> "Singkawang Dihiasi Kemeriahan Cap Go Meh" [Singkawang, Splendidly Decorated for Cap Go Meh] *Republika Online*, Saturday, 24 Jan 2009, [http://www.republika.co.id/berita/27877/Singkawang\\_Dihiasi\\_Kemeriahan\\_Cap\\_Go\\_Meh](http://www.republika.co.id/berita/27877/Singkawang_Dihiasi_Kemeriahan_Cap_Go_Meh), accessed 30 Jan 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Personal interview with Lio Kurniawan, head of Permasis in Bahasa Indonesia in Jakarta on 6 July 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Personal interview with Mayor Hasan Karman in Bahasa Indonesia and English in Singkawang on 20 Feb 2008.

<sup>65</sup> Peterson, *The Demon Gods of Thorny River*, pp. 80-81 and 131-32.

<sup>66</sup> Personal interview with Tjie Sung Kong in Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin in Singkawang on 3 July 2009.

<sup>67</sup> The self-mortification at the Thai vegetarian festival is even more spectacular than at Singkawang. I have seen Thai spirit-mediums with bicycles, fluorescent light tubes and even one with a ceiling fan thrust through the cheeks. I have argued a theological reason for this. The notion of karma has coloured the Thai practice so that the spirit-mediums bear punishment to atone for the sins of the community, while the pristine reason for spirit-medium self-mortification is to take on spiritual weapons. See Chan, *Ritual is Theatre*, pp. 106-13 and 154-55.



medium parade? Certainly, none of the thousands of spectators I observed waving cameras ever adopted a prayerful attitude, nor did I see people holding incense sticks or setting up any altars along the streets, a typical practice at spirit-medium and temple processions I have witnessed in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan, and China, some of which featured equally innovative instruments of self-mortification. But whether devotional or entertaining in nature, Cap Go Meh in Singkawang is certainly spectacular, as the next section shows.

### The Drama of Cap Go Meh in Singkawang

Singkawang is a small town of about 504 square kilometres with a population in 2006 of 174,064, made up of: Muslims 50 percent; Buddhists 36 percent; Catholics 8 percent; Protestants 4 percent; Hindus 0.1 percent; and others 0.3 percent.<sup>68</sup> Indonesian census figures do not usually record population along ethnic lines, but extrapolating from the data on religion we can guess that the Chinese must number at least 36 percent, for some Chinese are Christians. The Dayaks are Muslims, Christians and Hindu-Kaharingan, an umbrella category for the traditional religions of the Dayak people. Singkawang Mayor Hasan Karman in a personal e-mail communication<sup>69</sup> cited an estimate of 42 percent Chinese in Singkawang, but he believed the figure was closer to 60 percent.<sup>70</sup>

The morning of Cap Go Meh, 21 February 2008, was sunny and very hot in Singkawang. I cowered in a slim ribbon of shade that ran along the perimeter of the reviewing stand, a plank and canvas structure set up on Jalan Diponegoro. Despite the weather, Mayor Hasan Karman welcomed the VIP guests wearing a gold-coloured tunic with high Chinese collar and frog buttons, recalling Yuan's report how, on important occasions, the zongting leaders of the eighteenth century would wear official mandarin robes despite the sweltering heat of tropical Borneo.<sup>71</sup>

Dignitaries who gathered at the grandstand included Dr Sjahrir, Anggota Dewan Pertimbangan Presiden [member of the Indonesian Presidential Council] and Puan Maharani, daughter of former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose presence signalled the importance of West Kalimantan to the PDI-P [Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan, the Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle].<sup>72</sup> In 2009, the luminaries included Vice-Governor Christiandy Sanjaya, Regional Police Chief Erwin Lumbang Tobing, and Fahtul Bachri, Director-General for the Promotion of Culture and Tourism within Indonesia.

West Kalimantan Governor Cornelis M. H. formally opened Cap Go Meh 2008 by beating smartly on a Chinese lion dance drum, and the procession began. Down the main

<sup>68</sup> The numbers cited have been rounded up. The population data was obtained from the 2008 official website of the Pemerintah Kota Singkawang (Administration of Singkawang), <http://www.singkawang.go.id/pages/Wilayah-dan-Penduduk.html>, accessed on 1 May 2008. The 2008 website has now been closed. The 2009 website gives no population details and I have been unable to get other data on the population of Singkawang. From 1930 to 1999, Indonesian census figures generally did not give population by ethnicity. The 2000 census did include data on ethnicity. The figures for West Kalimantan caused much agitation in the Dayak community whose members felt that their numbers had been under-represented. The 2000 Census put the ethnic distribution of Indonesian citizens of West Kalimantan as: Sambas 11.92%, Chinese 9.46%, Javanese 9.14%, Kendayan 7.83%, Malay 7.50%, Darat 7.39%, Madurese 5.46%, Pesaguan 4.79%, Buginese 3.24%, Sundanese 1.21%, Banjarese 0.65%, Minangkabau 0.20%, Betawi 0.05%, Bantenese 0.04%, "Others" 31.12%. Pontianak comprised: Malay 24.52%, Chinese 23.02%, Javanese 13.30%, Madurese 10.22%, Sambas 3.22%, Kendayan 0.96%, Pesaguan 0.92%, Darat 0.82%, "Others" 23.00%. Leo Suryadinata, Evi Nurvidya Arifin and Aris Ananta, *Indonesia's Population: Ethnicity and Religion in a Changing Political Landscape* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), pp. 175-77.

<sup>69</sup> Hasan Karman, e-mail message to author via Hendy Lie, 19 June 2008.

<sup>70</sup> Mayor Karman did not substantiate this claim but repeated it in a press interview. "Singkawang Dihiasi Kemeriahan Cap Go Meh" accessed on 30 Jan 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, p. 263.

<sup>72</sup> West Kalimantan Governor Cornelis M. H. is the Head of the DPD [Dewan Pimpinan Daerah, Regional Leaders Council] of the PDI-P in West Kalimantan.

streets of the town's central business district—Jalan Diponegoro, Budi Utomo Street, Hasan Saad Street, Saman Bujang Street, Kempol Mahmud Street, Niaga Street and Sejahtera Street (see Figure 5)—paraded more than 400 spirit-mediums riding on sedan chairs set with knives or studded with nails. Some contingents carried portable altars and palanquins on which were mounted images of deities. There were fifteen *jailangkung* [possessed divining baskets, see discussion below] troupes.<sup>73</sup> The procession included dragon and lion dancers and a group of youths carrying staffs topped with papier-mâché sculptures of the twelve Chinese zodiac animals. The 2009 parade followed a similar programme but featured more than 500 spirit-medium groups and sixteen *jailangkung* troupes.<sup>74</sup>



**Figure 5: The route of the 2008 Cap Go Meh spirit-medium parade in Singkawang**  
(courtesy of the organising committee of Chinese New Year celebrations, 2008)

Knife and nail-studded sedan chairs comprise the standard equipment of spirit-mediums. At Singkawang in February 2008 I saw mostly *tho kio* [道轿 *dao jiao*, knife chairs]. The “seat” was a blade fixed across two long knives which formed the arms of the

<sup>73</sup> Panitia Perayaan Imlek 2559 dan Festival Cap Goh Meh 2008, Keputusan Walikota Singkawang Nomor 14 [Organising Committee Imlek 2559 and Festival Cap Goh Meh 2008. Announcement from the Office of the Mayor Number 14]. There were altogether 498 groups including spirit-medium, dragon and *jailangkung* troupes on the official registry. Mayor Karman reported a turnout of 474 on Cap Go Meh 2008, see note 59.

<sup>74</sup> Panitia Perayaan Imlek 2560 dan Festival Cap Goh Meh 2009, Keputusan Walikota Singkawang Nomor 174. There were altogether 552 groups including spirit-medium, dragon and *jailangkung* troupes on the official registry. Mayor Karman reported a turnout of 534 on Cap Go Meh 2009, see note 59.

chair. At the end of the arms were fitted halberds. The back of the chair had a blade fitted at the centre which juttred out about 35 cm. The spirit-mediums would sit on the knives, but more often they stood on the chairs bracing their bare feet against the halberd blades. Borne on the shoulders of the chair-bearers, the Singkawang mediums rode high above the crowds, as if on parade floats. The crowd that packed the streets had a good view of the mediums performing on top of the chairs. Some mediums merely posed, while others growled and snarled at the crowds. A good few did acrobatic stunts, balancing on their stomachs, or rocking upon the knives set into the chairs.

The spirit-mediums of Singkawang appeared as a “great brotherhood” of fighting comrades. There were essentially three kinds of mediums—Chinese, Dayak and Malay—who could be distinguished by their dress. The Chinese mediums were dressed in the military uniforms of Ming [明] generals and foot soldiers as depicted on the Chinese opera stage. The latter wore brightly-coloured, pyjama-style outfits of shirt and trousers, trimmed with contrasting fabric (Figures 6a and 6b). The generals wore tunics and “riding chaps” of



**Figure 6a:** A Chinese spirit-medium dressed as a Ming infantryman (author's image)





Figure 6b: Close-up of a medium in military uniform (author's image)



Figure 7: Chinese spirit-medium dressed as a Ming general (author's image)

fabric set with metal plates for armour (see Figure 7 over page). Even the wildly dancing jailangkungs were dressed as soldiers (Figure 8a over page). A jailangkung is a basket believed to be possessed by a spirit. On ritual occasions, the basket is dressed before an invocation is made to invite the spirit to enter. The jailangkung is usually supported by two



**Figure 8a: A jailangkung [spirit basket] dressed in a soldier's tunic seated on a spirit-medium's knife chair (author's image)**

men who hold onto the basket by sashes tied to the base. The possessed basket would swing and bob violently (Fig. 8b).



**Figure 8b: Fighting to hold onto a violently dancing possessed jailangkung (by kind permission of Ronni Pinsler)**

Mediums dressed as Dayak and Malay made up about half of those present. The Dayak-style costume comprised embroidered vests that resembled the traditional *baju burung* [lit. bird garment] or *jaket* [jacket] over trousers, covered by embroidered aprons that passed for the traditional *sirat* or *cawat*. Dayak mediums wore headbands or helmets decorated with hornbill or pheasant feathers (Figure 9). Those who might be termed Malay



**Figure 9: A Dayak spirit-medium with a Dayak sword between his teeth (author's image)**

spirit-mediums wore a distinctive costume, which comprised singlets or vests over trousers with cloth sashes tied criss-cross over their chests and on their arms. On their heads they wore bandanas often written over with what appeared to be Arabic script (Figure 10).



**Figure 10: A Malay spirit-medium's headband with a facsimile of Arabic script (author's image)**

Although one prominent spirit-medium was identified to me by name as an ethnic Dayak, the majority of "Dayak" spirit-mediums were Chinese. Muslims are prohibited from

involvement in the religious rituals of Cap Go Meh,<sup>75</sup> so that almost all Malay spirit-mediums were also Chinese. I did however meet and interview one prominent Malay medium who took part in Cap Go Meh 2008, but who was prevented from doing so by Malay vigilante groups in 2009.<sup>76</sup> Chet Ket Khiong of Majelis Tao told me that on his register of 700 spirit-mediums, seven were Malay and twenty Dayak. Bong Wui Khong said that among the 400 members of Tri Dharma, three were Malay and just more than ten were Dayaks.

Some spirit-mediums performed fierce self-mortification with bizarre instruments. When I first glimpsed one such medium I had thought he was past sixty, but a closer look suggested he was about forty-five, or younger. My first estimate had been based on the sagging skin of his face, which pulled down the outer corners of the eyes. But age was not the cause, it was cans of Guinness stout: four cans, taped end to end in pairs, hung from threads sewn into his cheeks. The cans were clearly full, for they hung heavily from the folds of flesh through which the sewn threads had been anchored with large knots. More cans—of stout, Sunkist orange and Cool winter melon tea, some taped together in twos and threes, hung by threads sewn into the man's shoulders, arms, torso and back (Figure 11). Thus festooned as a bizarre display of canned beverages the man danced, swinging the cans left and right; a cigarette dangling from his lips. What manner of god was this?



**Figure 11: A medium dancing with strung cans sewn into his flesh**  
(by kind permission of Victor Yue)

<sup>75</sup> In an interview with the *Pontianak Post* on 21 Feb 2008, Ahmadi Muhammad, the head of the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* [Council of Muftis] in the municipality of Sambas reminded all Muslims that it is forbidden for them to become tatungs [spirit-mediums] or to carry tatung sedan chairs or even to enter a Chinese temple. "Larang Jadi Tatung," ["Forbidden to become tatung"] *Pontianak Post, Sambas, Terigas*, 21 Feb 2008, p. 24.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Tatung Mat conducted in Bahasa Indonesia in Singkawang on 1 July 2009. Tatung Mat asked that his name not be published. He told me he became a spirit-medium in 1986. He has always joined the Chinese spirit-mediums on parade and he took part in Cap Go Meh 2008. However in 2009, he was confronted by members of FBI [Front Pembela Islam, Front for the Defence of Islam] who threatened to burn down his temple. Tatung Mat had to go into protective police custody and so he missed Cap Go Meh 2009. When I met him in 2009, he was still practising openly at the wooden hut which is his temple. In the session that I watched, three spirits possessed him, two Malay spirits and one Chinese. Tatung Mat wrote Chinese script for me when in trance, but the writing was very simple.



A few hundred metres away, I came across a group of men who looked in their 20s. Three had branches (possibly of the sacred pomelo tree) driven through their cheeks; one was pierced with the shaft of an electric stand fan (Figure 12 below); another had a metre-



**Figure 12: Medium with the shaft of an electric fan through his cheeks**  
(by kind permission of Hendy Lie).

long trophy (the sort that might be won at a sports meet) grotesquely sticking out of his cheek. Next to him was another man who, despite a sword running through one cheek, was smoking a cigarette. But there were yet more. There were mediums dressed up as Dayaks who cut off the heads of chickens and black puppies in full view of the crowds, before drinking the fresh blood and then parading with the carcasses hanging from their mouths (Figure 13).



**Figure 13: A medium with a chicken carcass hanging from his mouth** (author's image)

Nevertheless, it was not the bizarre self-mortification that puzzled me: I am familiar with similar spectacular practices by spirit-mediums at the Thai vegetarian festival<sup>77</sup> that occurs every October-November around Phuket. Rather, I had trouble identifying the gods on parade. I had travelled to Singkawang with five companions from Taoism-Singapore Forum, a group dedicated to the investigation of Chinese culture and religion. My friends and I were left guessing whether any of the popular gods of the Taoist pantheon were present among the Singkawang mediums. Was the medium drinking from a milk bottle the Lotus Nezha [蓮花三太子 Lian Hua San Tai Zi]? Was the man wearing black overalls with a tiger image emblazoned on the back the Tiger General [虎爷 Hu Ye]? We would not have even known that the medium wearing a black soldier's outfit trimmed with red was the Black Thunder General [黑雷將 Hei Lei Jiang] had we not read the name on his banner. The overwhelming presence of so many similarly dressed Chinese military figures and so many Dayak and Malay spirit-mediums equally confounded Ardian Cangianto, founder of the *Budaya Tionghoa* [Chinese Culture] website.<sup>78</sup> Where in this parade of ancestor spirits and local saints, he wondered, was Sanshan Guo Wang [三山国王 Emperor of the Three Mountains], the patron deity of the Hakka?<sup>79</sup>

Before moving to Cangianto's question in the performance reading, however, a brief digression on Chinese spirit-medium worship is necessary to contextualise the later discussion.

Yuan and Heidhues who wrote on the history of the Chinese in West Kalimantan noted the prominent roles played by spirit-mediums in the early Chinese mining communities.<sup>80</sup> Yuan's account links these spirit-mediums directly to the spirit-mediums of southern Fujian and Taiwan. A detail in Heidhues also points to the same connection. She writes of an 1853 battle between the Chinese and the Dutch, when the Chinese marched on the advice of oracles under a commander who wielded a rattan whip and carried a yellow flag marked with the character "lin" meaning "command" on it.<sup>81</sup> This almost exactly describes the practice of present-day Fujian spirit-medium exorcists, who drive away evil demons by cracking hemp rope whips and waving flags marked with the character 令 [ling, command].

From these two sources we can fairly confidently describe the religious practice of the early Chinese immigrants to West Kalimantan as Min [閩] spirit-medium worship practised in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Min communities comprise mainly Hokkien and Teochew, but also include Hainanese. Hakka people, who lived for many centuries in the Fujian-Chaozhou region, absorbed the local Min folk ritual folks into their worship.<sup>82</sup> The majority

<sup>77</sup> On the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, the feast day of the Nine Emperor Gods, Chinese and Thais living in the southern provinces around Phuket Island observe what the country's tourist authorities have named the Vegetarian Festival. The event is typical of Min spirit-mediumship. It is an exorcistic procession that was first staged in 1825 to ward off the demons of malaria. For more on this festival, see Erik Cohen, *The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Phuket: Religion, Ethnicity and Tourism on a Southern Thai Island* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001). For more on the Nine Emperor Gods, see Cheu Hock Tong, *The Nine Emperor Gods: A Study of Chinese Spirit-Medium Cults* (Singapore: Time Books International, 1988); Cheu Hock Tong, "The Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods in Malaysia: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol," *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 55, 1996: 49-72, and Jean DeBernardi, "Performing Magical Power: The Nine Emperor Gods Festival" in *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004), pp. 182-216.

<sup>78</sup> Its address is: [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/budaya\\_tionghua/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/budaya_tionghua/)

<sup>79</sup> Ardian Cangianto, e-mail message to Taoism-Singapore Forum, 2 March 2008.

<sup>80</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, pp. 35-36; Heidhues, *Goldiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 93.

<sup>81</sup> Heidhues, *Goldiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 98.

<sup>82</sup> For more on tang-ki spirit-medium worship see Alan J. A. Elliott, *Chinese Spirit-Medium Cults in Singapore* (1955; London and Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: The Athlone Press, 1990); Alison R. Marshall, "Daoism and Shamanism" in *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*, ed. Mariko Walter and Eva

of Min spirit-mediums are warrior gods who patrol the communal precinct ridding the area of demons. Their distinctive practice of self-mortification is a show of spiritual force.<sup>83</sup>

Cap Go Meh in Singkawang as an exorcistic parade is typical of the work of Chinese spirit-mediums.<sup>84</sup> On important feast-days spirit-mediums will travel in procession through their parish exorcising evil from the community. Such exorcistic parades have roots in the *nuo* [傩] exorcisms of antiquity. Right from the first proto-Chinese Xia [夏 1990-1557 BCE] we find ceremonies styled as attacks on evil spirits. By the Zhou [周 1027-221 BCE], the *nuo* was institutionalized into state rituals, the more important of which were presided over by the emperor himself. The Zhou *nuo* exorcisms were violent performances in which sacrificial animals were torn apart.<sup>85</sup>

In Hokkien, spirit-mediums are called *tang-ki* [童乩 *tongji*], or 'divining child', because they are regarded as spiritual children, no matter their real age.<sup>86</sup> The spirit-mediums of West Kalimantan however are called *lao ya* or *tatungs*. The first name means "old grandfather" [老爷 *lao ye*], but as this is the double honorific it is more appropriately translated as "eminent lord". The meaning of the second term is obscure. Kiang uses the term "Tatung," with a capital "T" not for spirit-mediums but to mean "World Brotherhood" [大同 *da tong* literally, Great Fellowship], the Confucian principle that proposes all men are brothers.<sup>87</sup> However, Cangianto of Budaya Tionghoa, a Hakka, holds that "tatung" comes from the phrase "*tiao tong*" [跳童] meaning "to jump or dance as a spirit-medium".<sup>88</sup>

I would agree with Cangianto but am also drawn to Kiang's sense of a great fellowship, as will be explained in the following performance reading.

#### First Performance Reading: Ritual Meaning

The Min spirit-mediums wear a characteristic costume comprising a stomacher or bib worn over trousers. They often include "riding chaps" in the outfit. The stomacher, an infant's garment, signals the medium's status as a "divine child", while the "riding chaps" symbolise his warrior status. Believers regard a possessed spirit-medium as the god incarnate, and mediums often signify their possessing deities through costumes, props, make-up, or stylised behaviour. For example, the God of War will usually wear green and may have his face painted red; the Monkey God will always carry a staff and use stock theatre gestures appropriate to stage portrayals of the god. There are exceptions: for instance, the spirit-mediums of the Henghua [興化 or 兴化 Xing Hua] community of Putian [莆田] and Xian You [仙游] counties, although speaking Min dialect, characteristically dress as Ming nobility. In Singkawang, all the Chinese mediums dressed as generals and infantry soldiers using the Ming-style costumes favoured on the Chinese opera stage. While none of the Singkawang mediums affected distinctive costumes or behaviour that would serve to distinguish them as individual gods, the banners carried by their entourages did bear Chinese characters that identified the gods by individual names.

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Fridman (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2004), pp. 71-74; Jean DeBernardi, *The Way that Lives in the Heart*; and Chan, *Ritual is Theatre*, 2006.

<sup>83</sup> Chan, "Warrior Gods", forthcoming.

<sup>84</sup> See note 3.

<sup>85</sup> See Tian Min, "Chinese Nuo and Japanese Noh: Nuo's role in the origination and formation of Noh (*gigaku*, *gagaku* and its dance form, *bugaku*), and *sarugaku* (from *sangaku*)." *Comparative Drama* (Fall-Winter), 2003: np.

<sup>86</sup> It is believed that the spirit (as against "fleshy") part of the soul of the child is half-full, whereas that of an adult is full. A half-full soul has room for a possessing spirit to enter. Hence whatever the age of the medium, whether s/he is old or young, as the tang-ki s/he is a spiritual child. See Chan, *Ritual is Theatre*, pp. 56-60. Jean DeBernardi proposes another etymology. Citing linguist Jerry Norman, she notes that the Min language retains an Austroasiatic substratum, and that the Min word "tong" for "shaman" means "to dance". See DeBernardi, *The Way that Lives in the Heart*, p. 11.

<sup>87</sup> Kiang, *The Hakka Odyssey*, p. 109.

<sup>88</sup> Personal interview with Ardian Cangianto in English in Pontianak on 22 Feb 2008.



Ritualists who parade as a company of soldiers in religious processions are common enough. There are, for example, the Taiwanese *jiangjun* [將軍] spirit soldier troupes who paint their faces and dance sacred choreographies.<sup>89</sup> But these are marching troupes, hired to accompany processions and represent generalised spirit armies, not individual spirit-mediums each with his own cult following. The tatungs and laoyas of Singkawang on the other hand are clearly individual spirit-mediums who chose to dress as anonymous comrades of the same army. The overall symbolism appears to be of individual heroes gathering under the same banner.<sup>90</sup>

One vital clue to the identity of these spirit soldiers lies in Yuan's suggestion that the early zongtings of West Borneo had been organised like the 108 outlaws immortalised in the novel the *Shuihu zhuan*. The nineteenth-century "Chronicle of the Lanfang Kongsì through the Ages" [兰芳公司历代年册 *Lanfang Kongsì lidai nian ce*], for instance, supports this by stating that Luo Fangbo [罗芳伯] founded the Lanfang Kongsì with 108 Hakka comrades.<sup>91</sup> An echo of this also appeared in Heidhues' history when she described an 1853 battle against the Dutch that involved eight "banners," each with 108 fighting men.<sup>92</sup> The number 108 has greater mystical than numerical significance: there are 108 beads in a Buddhist rosary; all the woes of Heaven and Earth are caused by 108 evil influences, thirty-six celestial and seventy-two terrestrial but these baleful elements are matched one-for-one by 108 godly generals.<sup>93</sup> In other words, an alliance of 108 heroes, as in the bandits of the *Shuihu zhuan* and the 108 comrades of the Lanfang Kongsì, represents a brotherhood of righteous men sworn under Heaven to fight injustice and to rule honourably.

A second clue lies in the distinctive Hakka veneration of fallen soldiers deified as Yimin [义民 Righteous Citizens],<sup>94</sup> although the worship of Yimin can also be viewed as the general veneration of ancestors who fought and died for Hakka survival.<sup>95</sup> "Divine pigs," oversized animals slaughtered and offered in splayed displays, are the mark of Yimin worship in Xinzhu, Taiwan. In Singkawang 2008, there were no elaborate "divine pig" offerings, but a donor contributed thirty-six large animals which were sacrificed so that the meat could be distributed freely to all participating tatungs and laoyas. The apparent worship of Yimin explains Cangianto's surprise that instead of the usual Taoist pantheon, ancestor spirits and local saints presented themselves at Cap Go Meh 2008. His comment is considered in the second performance reading.

### Second Performance Reading: Chinese Allegiance to the Land of Indonesia

Although Buddhism and Confucianism are the two officially recognised Chinese religions in Indonesia, my research in West Kalimantan, Semarang, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta shows that, on the ground, the people worship syncretically. Buddha and the Taoist pantheon are

<sup>89</sup> See Donald S. Sutton, *Steps of Perfection: Exorcistic Performers and Chinese Religion in Twentieth-Century Taiwan* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Donald S. Sutton, "Transmission in Popular Religion: The Jiajiang Festival Troupe of Southern Taiwan," in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), pp. 212-49.

<sup>90</sup> DeBernardi writes how sworn Chinese brotherhoods employed a form of spirit-mediumship in their ritual practices. Jean DeBernardi, "Rites of Belonging: Initiations into the Chinese Sworn Brotherhoods" in *Rites of Belonging*, pp. 79-110.

<sup>91</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, p. 50.

<sup>92</sup> Heidhues, *Goldiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 98.

<sup>93</sup> Chan, *Ritual is Theatre*, pp. 106-07.

<sup>94</sup> For example, the famous Yimin temple in Taiwan's Xinzhu county [新竹县] is dedicated to those who perished in the eighteenth century insurrection led by Lin Shuang-wen [林爽文]. For more information on Yimin worship, described as a "totem" belief in one website, see Council for Hakka Affairs Executive Yuan, Republic of China (Taiwan), on-line at the following address:

<http://www.hakka.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=10205&ctNode=767&mp=203>, accessed on 8 August 2008.

<sup>95</sup> Kiang, *The Hakka Odyssey*, pp. 110-11.

revered, but in Singkawang and Pontianak there is also a marked regard for local gods and saints.

Local saints are the *tudigong* [土地公] or the tutelary gods of localities. There are many *tudigongs*, ranging from the *tudigong* of a grave yard plot, to that of a mining site, to one of the land on which a shop or a house is built. *Tudigong* may be regarded as the spirits who “own” or oversee a specific precinct. When land is used in some way, an altar, mostly in the form of a humble shrine, is set up to the *tudigong* of the locality in return for his permission to exploit the land and for his protection of the site against evil influences.

*Tudigongs* are usually depicted as indigenous characters. For example, Ong Dia, the Vietnamese *tudigong*, wears a Cham-style scarf (see Figure 14 over page).<sup>96</sup> In Malaysia and Singapore *tudigongs* are often Malay, so that their worship is often tied to Malay shrines known as *keramats*.<sup>97</sup> In Malaysia and Singapore, *tudigongs* are often named *Natok-kong* [拿督公 *Nadugong*]. Here the Chinese term “*Natok*” transliterates the Malay word “*Datuk*,” meaning “grandfather,” but it is more appropriately translated as an honorary title conferred by a Malay ruler (Figure 15 over page). In West Kalimantan the trans-



**Figure 14: Vietnamese Ong Dia tutelary god of locality, from a shrine in a Ho Chi Minh City restaurant (author's image)**

<sup>96</sup> Thien Do, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 117-19.

<sup>97</sup> Cheu Hock Tong, “Malay Keramat, Chinese Worshippers: The Sinicization of Malay Keramats in Malaysia.” *Academic Series* 26, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 1996/1997.



Figure 15: A Malay Natok in a roadside shrine in Singapore (author's image)

literation is “*La Tok Kong Kong*” or “*Latok*” [拉啄公公 *La Zhuo Gong Gong*] (Figure 16 over page), as given on an epigraph in a shrine in a temple courtyard in Pontianak. The Malay and Dayak tatungs in Singkawang were Latoks, and “latok” is an alternative local name for spirit-medium in West Kalimantan. The presence of so many latoks at Cap Go Meh 2008 testified to the respect that the Chinese in Kalimantan accord to deities and saints of the land of Indonesia.

Especially pertinent to any discussion of the local gods of the West Kalimantan Chinese community is the fact that Dabogong worship is the dominant cult in the region. The main temples at which spirit-mediums congregate in Singkawang and Pontianak—Vihara Tri Dharma Bumi Raya in Singkawang and Vihara Paticca Samuppada on Jalan WR Supratman, Pontianak—are both dedicated to Dabogong. Singkawang is popularly known as “The Town of a Thousand Temples,” the majority of which are dedicated to Dabogong [大伯公 literally Grandfather’s Eldest Brother] or Fude Zhengshen [福德正神 the Virtuous and Upright God of Fortune] according to his Taoist canonical title. The worship of Dabogong is a principal feature of Cap Go Meh in Singkawang, for before joining the parade, all tatungs and laoyas must first pay their respects at the Vihara Tri Dharma Bumi Raya. The latter is the central Dabogong temple and it is located at the junction of six roads: Jalan Salam Karman, Jalan Sejahtera, Jalan Niaga, Jalan Setia Budi, Jalan Budi Utomo and Jalan Pangeran Diponegoro.



**Figure 16: Latok Kong Kong in a shrine under a tree in the compound of the main Dabogong temple in Pontianak (author's image)**

Dabogong is the deity specific to the immigrant Chinese community. There is some controversy over his identity; but what resonates with me is Hui's proposal, following Chen Ta, that Dabogong enshrines the spirit of exploration.<sup>98</sup> In Chinese, a pioneer is lyrically named *Kai Shan Da Bo* [开山大伯 literally, the elder who split open the mountain]. Hui argues that to survive as a pioneer emigrant was miracle enough for deification, but I would sharpen this insight to propose that Dabogong is the spirit of *successful* pioneering. For Chinese, success is equated with earning money, which is why Dabogong is depicted as a white-bearded old man giving out coins or ingots (Figure 17).



**Figure 17: A trio of hoary Dabogong statues, Singkawang (author's image)**

<sup>98</sup> Hui Yew-Foong, "Strangers at Home," pp. 214-15. See also Hui Yew Foong, "Tutelary Gods," forthcoming.

Xu Yunqiao has directly linked Dabogong with the practice of Hakka miners who worshipped Tudigong whom they called Pek Kong [伯公 Bo Gong], with the Malay word Datuk later added.<sup>99</sup> Chen Ta shares this view, which equates Dabogong with Tudigong.<sup>100</sup> Hui Yew-Foong has recently suggested that Dabogong is the Southeast Asian Tudigong.<sup>101</sup> How do these arguments square with my view that there are many tudigongs? One explanation is that the worship of various local saints or tudigongs is usually conflated at communal level into the generalised worship of Tudigong, the Earth God. Another would highlight the practice of raising the status of a particularly responsive individual tudigong to the rank of a Dabogong or patron saint of a region, or even to a Buddha.<sup>102</sup>

What is clear from the foregoing is that the worship of tudigongs and Dabogong manifestly demonstrates the Chinese community's allegiance to its adopted homeland.<sup>103</sup> Both are gods of locality, either in terms of the very earth lived and worked upon, or as a pioneering god who opens new land for migrants.<sup>104</sup> From my discussions with the several Chinese mediums who served indigenous spirits among my interviewees, the sincerity of their sense of service to their respective indigenous saints was quite obvious. Let me conclude this section by briefly recording what two of these men told me

The first, Ji Su Jiu [Yu Ci You 余赐友], lives in the Jam Thang [盐汀 Yan Ting Salt District] on the outskirts of Singkawang. Ah Jiu, a shy young man in his 20s, has been the Chinese medium for a Malay spirit since 2005. Ah Jiu's father, Ji Pao Wang [余保光 Yu Bao Guang], is the medium for Guan Gong [关公] the Chinese God of War, a popular deity brought from China to West Kalimantan by the early immigrants. Guan Gong was the patron deity of the Lanfang zongting.<sup>105</sup> But while his father served an ancestral Chinese god, Ah Jiu was loyal to a local spirit of the land of his birth. Most of the coastal Latoks are Malay, and Ah Jiu feels he is possessed by a Malay spirit because he says he does not know Arabic script but when possessed he can write a fine facsimile of Arabic calligraphy (Figure 18 over page).

<sup>99</sup> Xu Yunqiao (许云樵), "再谈大伯公研究," ["Zai Tan Dabogong Yan Jiu," "Further discussions on Dabogong"], 南洋学报 *Nanyang Academic Press* 8, 2 (1952): 20-24.

<sup>100</sup> Chen Ta in Hui Yew-Foong, "Strangers at home: History and subjectivity among the Chinese communities of West Kalimantan, Indonesia," PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 2007, p. 211.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, pp. 212-13.

<sup>102</sup> Many Chinese gods are deified people. Through several incarnations, these people gain merit and attain a divine status. Deification also results from worship: after an image is made people worship it, and if the deity appears responsive, more people come. In this way a lesser deity such as a tudigong, may be raised to Dabogong, or even Buddha status. See Chan, "Bodies for the gods: Image worship in Chinese popular religion," forthcoming.

<sup>103</sup> Carstens writing about the Hakka community in Pulau, Malaysia, also point to their worship of *laduks* [Malay spirit guardians of the local soil] as a sign of the Chinese allegiance to the land of Malaysia. See Carstens, *Studies in Malaysian Chinese Worlds*, pp. 57-81.

<sup>104</sup> For a further discussion on Dabogong as tutelary god of migrants, second only to the Mazu, patron goddess of seafarers, see Jack Chia Meng Tat, "Managing the Tortoise Island: Tua Pek Kong Temple, Pilgrimage, and Social change in Pulau Kusu, 1965-2007," paper presented at the National University of Singapore Religion Cluster Seminar Series, 24 March 2008: 12. Also Datok Gong worship has been argued as a localisation of Chinese worship in Wendy Choo Liyun, "Socialization and Localization: A Case Study of the Datuk Gong Cult in Malacca," *Religion and Society in Malacca*, August 20, 2007. <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/histdd/notes/CHOO.htm>, accessed on 10 August 2008.

<sup>105</sup> Heidhues, *Goldiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p.106.





**Figure 18: A Jiu holds a fan on which, when possessed by a Malay Latok spirit, he wrote words resembling Arabic script (author's image)**

The second medium is Hioe Tjin Kiong, whom we met earlier. Ah Kiong, as he is called by those who come to his temple, cuts an imposing figure. At fifty-three, he has a crop of pure white hair, a white moustache and a beard that sets off his swarthy complexion. Speaking excellent Chinese and Indonesian, Ah Kiong discussed his practice as the medium for Datuk Sungkung, a Dayak spirit from the mountains of Singkawang. (It is believed that most spirits of the mountain are Dayak.) A drawing of Datuk Sungkung set



**Figure 19: Datuk Sungkung's altar (author's image)**

upon an altar showed a deity closely resembling Ah Kiong, except for a headband with two pheasant feathers tucked over each ear (Figure 19 previous page). At the perimeter of his Singkawang terrace house stands a large Chinese jar on a stool. It contains captured evil spirits. It is opened only once a year, when the blood of a chicken and a black dog must be sacrificed to it. At Cap Go Meh, the jar was decorated with *burai pinang* [the inflorescence of the Areca catechu] and several leaves of *daun juang* [Cordyline terminalis] (Figure 20),



Figure 20: The jar filled with captured evil spirits in Ah Kiong's compound (author's image)

a plant sacred to Dayaks for the highly effective exorcising powers of its leaves. In Cap Go Meh 2008 *daun juang* leaves were tucked into the headbands of Dayak *tatungs* and tied in large bunches on spirit-medium sedan chairs.

Against the backdrop of the two performance readings, I now turn to the inter-ethnic communal politics that played out on the stage of the ritual theatre of Cap Go Meh 2008 and 2009.

#### Inter-Ethnic Tensions in Pontianak

As noted earlier, Cap Go Meh in West Kalimantan features major spirit-medium parades in Singkawang, Pontianak and Pemangkat towns. In 2008 and 2009, the Singkawang procession was highlighted on the national tourist calendar. At Pontianak, however, all street celebrations were cancelled in 2008 and in 2009 only a dragon dance parade was permitted. Spirit-medium gatherings were confined to temple grounds and it was ordered that mediums should not walk on the roads: if they wanted to move about, they should ride in trucks. Other spirit-medium events in Pemangkat and elsewhere in the Sambas region continued in both years as before.

The 2008 cancellation of the Pontianak Cap Go Meh spirit-medium parade was the first since its inception in 2000. In Pontianak in February 2008, several people I asked



attributed this cancellation variously to “racist discrimination,”<sup>106</sup> “the need to court the Malay vote for the October 2008 Pontianak mayoral elections”, and “traffic jams in the city”; but the mayor at that time, Buchary Abdurrahman, said it was cancelled because of inter-ethnic conflicts.<sup>107</sup> Inter-communal violence had arisen from a small altercation between some Chinese and Malays, after which Malay community associations had blown the matter up into a political row.

The conflicts behind the cancellation of Cap Go Meh 2008 reflected growing Malay discomfort with the rise of Chinese to leadership positions in regional politics. For the first time in the West Kalimantan history, a Dayak–Chinese pair had been elected to run the provincial government. Dayak Governor Cornelis M. H. and Chinese Vice-Governor Christiandy Sanjaya, elected in November 2007, had just taken office on 14 January 2008. And if this was not enough, on 17 December 2007 Hasan Karman had been sworn in as the first Chinese mayor of Singkawang. These developments made the local Malays uneasy, and the fact that all three had won their posts with comfortable majorities added to the tension.

In West Kalimantan, the people like to speak of the *tiga tiang* [three pillars] of society; the Dayak, Malay and Chinese, but historians describe closer collaboration between Dayaks and Chinese. The alliance of Cornelis and Sanjaya stirs powerful memories of historical animosity between Malays and Chinese, with Dayak involvement adding fuel to the fire. As the political jostling in Pontianak and Singkawang was being played out in the public sphere, reports in the popular press and on the internet tracked the inter-ethnic tensions that followed the success of the Cornelis–Sanjaya ticket.<sup>108</sup>

My account here is drawn from Harsono’s article in *Gatra* magazine. On 6 December 2007, a few weeks after the victory of the Cornelis–Sanjaya ticket, a minor altercation occurred in Pontianak when a Malay man accused a Chinese of denting his car that was parked on Gang 17 off Jalan Tanjongpura. Fisticuffs ensued and within an hour some fifty Malays crowded this small lane, less than 100 metres long, and began pelting stones at one of the homes on Gang 17. The group then turned to vandalising the Nam Tua temple on Jalan Ketapang, 500 meters from Gang 17. The next day, the police summoned leaders from the Pontianak Chinese and Malay communities and asked the Chinese to apologise for starting the trouble. Nine Chinese leaders led by Lie Khie Leng (alias Lindra Lie), head of *Yayasan Bhakti Suci* [Pure Service Association]<sup>109</sup> complied and issued a signed apology which was carried on 8 December by the daily newspapers *Pontianak Post*, *Berita Khatulistiwa*, *Equator News* and the *Borneo Tribune*.<sup>110</sup> But at that meeting a wider Malay agenda was quickly revealed when Erwan Irawan, head of Permak [*Persatuan Masyarakat Melayu Kalbar*, Union of the Malay Community of West Kalimantan], stated that the “sultanate” of Pontianak should be run by a Malay. He complained that the Chinese already controlled the economy, and now it seemed they also wanted legislative and executive powers, so that Malays would be marginalised. “Pontianak will become a second Singapore,” Erwan asserted.<sup>111</sup> That night, about 200 Malays, some with containers of

<sup>106</sup> See for example, “Warga Tionghoa Tuding SK Walikota Pontianak Diskriminatif” [“Chinese Citizens Accuse Pontianak Mayor of Discrimination”] *Antara News* 12 Feb 2008.

<sup>107</sup> <http://www.antara.co.id/view/?i=1202811546&c=NAS&s>, accessed 8 Oct 2008.

<sup>108</sup> Harsono, “Panasnya Pontianak, Panasnya Politik”: 58.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid: 47–59.

<sup>110</sup> Yayasan Bhakti Suci, originally named *Yayasan Pemakaman Umum Bhakti Suci* [Pure Service General Funeral Association], was formed in 1966. Its stated function reflected the New Order ban on Chinese communal organisations other than funeral societies. In 2008 Yayasan Bhakti Suci represented 56 Chinese communal associations making it the main representative of the Pontianak Chinese community.

<sup>111</sup> Some confronted the head of Yayasan Bhakti Suci over the apology. He said he had signed in his personal capacity, to preserve the peace. Harsono, “Panasnya Pontianak, Panasnya Politik”: 56.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid: 53.

gasoline, gathered in front of the Gajah Mada restaurant next to Jalan Hijas but were stopped from burning it down by the police.

On 5 February, Mayor Buchary, issued order SK No. 127, putting a freeze on Chinese New Year and Cap Go Meh celebrations, including the spirit-medium parade, as well as any trading (presumably festive bazaars) and the lighting of firecrackers. Dragon and lion dances were also prohibited from all public spaces outside the Sultan Syarif Abdurrahman Stadium. Buchary told Harsono he knew it would be an unpopular decision, but he had acted in consultation with the head of the police, military, members of the judiciary, the National Security Agency and DPRD Kota Pontianak [*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*, People's Representative Council, Pontianak]. In their view, the tense situation in Pontianak required curtailing the Cap Go Meh celebrations.

I now turn to events in Singakawang at that time not reported by Harsono.

Chinese New Year 2008 fell on 7 February, and the newly-elected Chinese mayor, Hasan Karman, decorated *Rumah Dinas*, his official residence, for the festive season. When I visited on 20 February 2008, there were red Chinese lanterns, branches of plum blossoms hung with red lucky packets in a vase and arrangements of pomelo fruit. On the walls of the reception hall were plastered styrofoam cut-out characters which read "Gong Xi Fa Cai 2559."<sup>112</sup> These decorations angered Sumarno, the head of *Pemuda Pancasila Kota Singkawang* [Pancasila Youth Movement of Singkawang Town]. His open letter published on the *Komunitas Masyarakat Kalbar* [Community of West Kalimantan] website on 17 February 2008 criticized the mayor for decorating his official residence with Chinese words, because it was a public place managed with public funds.<sup>113</sup> Sumarno then invoked the Youth Pledge taken on 28 October 1928 by young Indonesian nationalists who swore that the peoples of Indonesia would be united by the common language of Indonesia. Perhaps, Sumarno wrote archly, the Chinese had not taken the oath at that time.<sup>114</sup> The people of Singkawang, Sumarno claimed, were nervous about visiting *Rumah Dinas* as it seemed the mayor only cared for people from his ethnic group.

Back in Pontianak, we learn from Harsono's report that on 20 February 2008, a few hundred Malays, led by Erwan Irawan, head of Permak, gathered at the *Rumah Melayu* [Malay House] on Jalan Sutan Syahrir. Calling themselves the *Barisan Melayu Bersatu* [Malay Unity Movement], the assembly demanded that: the 2008 Cap Go Meh ban on dragon and lion dances become permanent; that the people of Pontianak use only Bahasa Indonesia; and that any writing in public places must be Indonesian. I had seen many displays of Chinese script in Pontianak city in February 2008. In the run-up to the October mayoral elections, the political value of the Chinese franchise was evident, as many political groups erected banners wishing the Chinese community Gong Xi Fa Cai (Figure 21). But Erwan wanted to return to banning all displays of Chinese culture—essentially a return to New Order prohibitions—so he deliberately mixed religion into racial politics. From the podium, he shouted; "Hidup Melayu, hidup Melayu! Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar." ["Long live the Malays, Long live the Malays! God is Great, God is Great."] <sup>115</sup>

<sup>112</sup> "Gong Xi Fa Cai" means "Wishing You Prosperity," a traditional Chinese New Year greeting. The "2559" is because Chinese-Indonesians number New Years from the assumed birth of Confucius in 551 BCE, making 2008 the year 2559.

<sup>113</sup> *Komunitas Masyarakat Kalbar*, "Dipersoalkan, Tulisan Gong Xi Fa Cai Rumdin Walikota Singkawang," ["Questioning the text Gong Xi Fa Cai in the official residence of the mayor of Singkawang"] KalbarInfo.com website,

[http://www.kalbarinfo.com/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=91](http://www.kalbarinfo.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=91) 17 Feb 2008. The text appeared in the *Pontianak Post* of 18 Feb 2008, accessed on 1 May 2008.

<sup>114</sup> However, there were 5 Chinese were among those who took the Youth Pledge in 1928: Kwee Thiam Hong (Daud Budiman), Ong Khai Siang, Jong Liaw Tjoan Hok, Tjio Jin Kwee and Muhammad Chai. Benny G. Setiono, G. *Tionghoa dalam pusaran politik* [Chinese in the political maelstrom] (Jakarta: Elkasa, 2003), p. 496.

<sup>115</sup> Harsono, "Panasnya Pontianak, Panasnya Politik," 58.



Figure 21: Political banners wishing the Chinese community “Gong Xi Fa Cai”, in the run-up to the October 2008 mayoral elections in Pontianak (author’s image)

Three months later, two Chinese dragons performed at the opening ceremony of the Gawai Dayak XXII, the Dayak festival held at *Rumah Betang* [Dayak Longhouse] on Jalan Sutoyo. A leader of the Chinese contingent told Harsono that, as the Gawai was a Dayak celebration, course the Chinese would join in. Reviewing the situation, Harsono recalled the words of Dr. Yusriadi, a lecturer at *Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Pontianak* [Islamic Religious High School of Pontianak],<sup>116</sup> who had described the Dayak–Chinese political alliance as *ibarat retak menunggu belah*, “a symbolic union, cracked and waiting to be split.”<sup>117</sup> Yusriadi believed Malays would find Dayak backing for Chinese intolerable, so they would pressure the Chinese until the Cornelis–Sanjaya collaboration broke apart.

In 2009, the Cap Go Meh spirit-medium parade in Pontianak was also banned, but a dragon dance procession was allowed on Jalan Gajah Mada for six hours on the afternoon of 9 February.<sup>118</sup> Pontianak Mayor H. Sutarmidji, who had been elected in October 2008, argued that the brutality of spirit-medium self-mortification was an unsuitable sight for children who would be among the spectators. More interesting was the second justification, that, unlike the dragon dance, spirit-mediums were not about culture and so should be banned. Mayor Sutarmidji revealed that his predecessor had been reprimanded by the central provincial government for prohibiting dragon processions during Cap Go Meh 2008. This was because the regional government had to synchronise its programme with that of the central government to receive any allocation of funds, Mayor Sutarmidji explained. As

<sup>116</sup> Dr. Yusriadi is joint author with Hernamsyah of *Orang Embau: Potret Masyarakat Pendalaman Kalimantan* [The Embau People: Portrait of a Community in the Kalimantan Interior] (Pontianak: STAIN Pontianak Press, 2003).

<sup>117</sup> Harsono, “Panasnya Pontianak, Panasnya Politik”: 59.

<sup>118</sup> “Naga Diizinkan Tatung Dilarang” [“Dragon accepted Spirit-Medium Prohibited”], *Pontianak Post*, Friday 30 Jan 2009, on-line at: <http://www.pontianakpost.com/index.php?mib=berita.detail&id=13846>, accessed 5 Feb 2009.

the year 2010 was to be devoted to promoting tourism, the dragon dance was already included in the programme.<sup>119</sup>

Despite his explanations, the decision to allow the dragon dance was hotly challenged by Erwan Irawan, head of Gerakan Barisan Melayu Bersatu [Malay Unity Movement]. In a meeting with Mayor Sutarmidji on 22 January 2009, members of Erwan's party banged on the table for ten minutes before walking out shouting protests. Erwan proclaimed his group had not attended the meeting to enter into a dialogue, and vowed to attack the dragon parade if it was held, because an Idul Fitri [the end of the Muslim fasting month] prayer procession had been prohibited. Mayor Sutarmidji responded that not only would he allow the different communities to stage cultural performances but that he would lead the Idul Fitri prayer procession himself.<sup>120</sup> Thus an Idul Fitri procession, but not one of spirit-mediums, was deemed to be acceptably cultural.

Following this incident, Pontianak Police Chief Syahrudin committed the police to ensuring the peaceful staging of the dragon procession. He urged interest groups to remember that Pontianak was part of the Indonesian nation, which cherished unity in diversity.<sup>121</sup> The dragon procession went ahead safely under police protection.<sup>122</sup>

In the meantime, in Singkawang the spirit-medium parade of 2009 was not only the biggest in its history but it was also unique for the presence of two Barracuda steel plated vehicles belonging to *Brimob* [the special weapons police] West Kalimantan. Some 500 police officers from the District Police Singkawang, Brimob Regional Police West Kalimantan and the District Military Command had been mobilised to keep the peace. Regional police chief of West Kalimantan, Erwin Lumbang Tobing, attended the Singkawang parade as VIP spectator.<sup>123</sup> Mayor Hassan Karman, defying the outcry against his use of the greeting "Gong Xi Fa Cai," issued a poster showing him and his wife, Emma Febri, with their hands clasped in traditional greeting and Chinese New Year good wishes in Chinese script (Figure 22 over page).

<sup>119</sup> "GBMB Tetap Menolak Arakan Naga" ["GBMB will definitely oppose the dragon procession"], *Pontianak Post*, Friday 23 Jan 2009, on-line at:

<http://www.pontianakpost.com/index.php?mib=berita.detail&id=13519>, accessed on 10 Feb 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., "GBMB Tetap Menolak Arakan Naga".

<sup>121</sup> "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" ["Unity in Diversity"] is the official motto of the Indonesian nation.

<sup>122</sup> "*Polisi Klaim Ritual Bakar Naga Aman*" ["Police Claim that the Ritual Burning of the Dragon was Safely Carried Out"], *Pontianak Post*, Thursday 12 Feb 2009, on-line at:

<http://www.pontianakpost.com/index.php?mib=berita.detail&id=14610>, accessed on 3 March 2009. The police were on full alert in West Kalimantan for Imlek 2009 with the chief of regional police (Polda) West Kalimantan, Brigadier General Police Raden Nata Kesuma, stating that the potential for trouble over Chinese New Year was high because of a lack of communication among interest groups, a lack of understanding by non-Chinese of Chinese culture, and the impending April general election. See "*Perayaan Imlek 2009 dan Cap Go Meh 2560 Rawan Konflik*" ["Imlek Celebrations 2009 and Cap Go Meh 2560 Troubled by Conflict"], *Harian Sinar Indonesia Baru* [*The New Indonesia Daily Sun*], 24 Jan 2009, on-line at: <http://hariansib.com/2009/01/24/perayaan-imlek-2009-dan-cap-go-meh-2560-rawan-konflik/>, accessed on 3 March 2009. The Pontianak police guarded the 3 major Chinese temples so that New Year passed safely. "*Polisi Perketat Pengamanan Imlek di Vihara Pontianak*" ["Police Tightened Security at Temples in Pontianak for Imlek"], *Okezone*, Sunday 25 Jan 2009, on-line at: <http://news.okezone.com/index.php/ReadStory/2009/01/25/1/186230/polisi-perketat-pengamanan-imlek-di-vihara-pontianak>, accessed on 3 March 2009. Jamie S. Davidson (personal communication), who has researched violence in West Kalimantan, noted that police intervention here represented a big and very positive local change, tied perhaps to wider post-Suharto developments.

<sup>123</sup> "*Ratusan Manusia Sakti Sukseskan CGM*" ["Hundreds of spirit-mediums made a success of CGM"], *Equator News Online*, Tuesday, 10 Feb 2009, on-line: <http://equator-news.com/index.php?mib=berita.detail&id=8306>, accessed on 3 March 2009.



Figure 22: Mayor Hasan Karman and his wife Emma Febri wish Singkawang citizens  
“Gong Xi Fa Chai” (by kind permission of Hendy Lie)

### Epilogue

On 22 February 2008, I returned to Pontianak from Singkawang. With the morning to spare, I strolled along Jalan Gajah Mada and, spying a beautiful dragon head sticking out of a second floor window, I dropped into the *ruko* [shophouse]<sup>124</sup> of the *Budi Perkerti* [Mark of Kindness] voluntary fire brigade just a few doors from the Gajah Mada restaurant that had almost been burnt down on 7 December 2007. The people graciously received me and allowed me to photograph their dragon and the rows of photographs hanging on the wall of the office which testified to a proud record of annual dragon dance performances since 2002. Were they disappointed that this year they could not perform? “No” they said, and smiled.

I then went to the office of Yayasan Bhakti Suci, the umbrella group of the Pontianak Chinese community associations to speak with Liaw Sie Bun [廖世文 Liao Shi Wen], the education officer who acts as the group’s executive manager. I told him about viewing a most exciting parade in Singkawang and asked “Weren’t the Chinese of Pontianak angry or upset that Cap Go Meh was cancelled this year?”

“Cap Go Meh was not cancelled” Liaw corrected me, “the venue was changed to the stadium.”

“But nobody wanted to go to the stadium,” I pointed out. Liaw smiled and said nothing.

<sup>124</sup> “Ruko” is a popular term for a shop-house (with the place of business on the ground floor, and the residence on the second floor). It conflates the words “rumah” meaning house and “toko,” “shop”.

## Analysis

Clifford Geertz argued, with such authority and elegance as to be entirely persuasive, that *Negara* [state] in nineteenth-century Bali was theatre. It was neither tyranny nor government but mass ritual. According to him, the Western obsession with governance and command—the statecraft of state—has consigned the pomp and splendour of stateliness to mere mummery, whereas for Geertz, the show was the true substance. As he put it, to “reduce the negara to such tired commonplaces, the worn coin of European ideological debate, is to allow most of what is most interesting about it to escape our view”.<sup>125</sup> James Boon has argued as much, urging anthropologists to examine performances and spectacles: it’s “showbizall and seriously so,” he proclaimed.<sup>126</sup>

These perspectives inform my reading of the events of Cap Go Meh in West Kalimantan 2008 and 2009. The more familiar approach to performance analysis is epitomised in the Indonesian labelling of political posturing as “*wayang*” or shadow play, where what we see are merely shadows while what is real is the hidden *dalang* [puppeteer] behind the scene. But what would we learn if we followed Geertz and Boon to consider what was on display, rather than what was going on behind the scenes? Let us begin with the ritual theatre.

Cap Go Meh in Singkawang, with its army of spirit soldiers, was a ritual enactment of the history of the Chinese in West Kalimantan. The Chinese tatungs, dressed up as generals and infantry men, represented the spirits of the pioneers who fought and died to set up the immigrant settlements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Chinese of Kalimantan today look to their ancestral spirits for the continued protection of their communities. Indeed, in 2008 Hasan Karman, mayor of Singkawang, told me that the Cap Go Meh parade is a ritual cleansing of Singkawang, and that it arose from an eighteenth-century practice in Chinese mining communities during times of plague when exorcists dressed as warriors would go about waving weapons to scare away the demons responsible for the calamity.<sup>127</sup>

The inclusion of so many Dayak and Malay spirits among contemporary tatungs demonstrated the growing allegiance of the Indonesian-Chinese to indigenous deities and saints. Cheu Hock Tong’s analysis of the Chinese veneration of Malay Natoks in Malaysia is useful here. He sees in the practice an intercession in inter-ethnics relations which has contributed to a greater sense of “*communitas*” in the country’s multi-ethnic society.<sup>128</sup> Certainly the worship of Natok-kong in Singapore embraces the cultures and beliefs of other ethnic communities within an overall wish for mutual understanding and peace.

The coming together of Chinese and Dayak martial spirits in Cap Go Meh recalls historical reports of the alliance between the two peoples while, at the same time, aligning Chinese popular religion with Dayak Hindu–Kaharigan. Dayak lore has much in common with the popular religious ideas of the Chinese: Dayak Temenggung Maniba Bupisot of Pontianak is quoted as saying as much. He equates the principle concept in the Dayak belief system, of the need for balance between *ji hung ngambu*, the forces above, and *ji hung ngiwa*, the forces below, with the Chinese concept of yin–yang [阴阳].<sup>129</sup> Although

<sup>125</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 121–23 (my emphasis).

<sup>126</sup> James A. Boon, “Showbiz as a Cross-Cultural System: Circus and Song, Garland and Geertz, Rushdie, Mordden, ... and More,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 15, 3 (August 2000): 446.

<sup>127</sup> Personal interview with Hasan Karman in English and Bahasa Indonesia at Rumah Dinas, 20 Feb 2008.

<sup>128</sup> Cheu, “Malay Keramat, Chinese Worshippers”: 16, 33. Cheu invoked the Turnerian concept of *communitas* which denotes feelings of social togetherness and communion between groups with definite and determinate identities. *Communitas* is often spontaneous, uniting people of different groups so they are said to stand together “outside” their society.

<sup>129</sup> Ibnu Qoyim and Dwi Purwoko, “Agama dan Masyarakat Suku Daya Kanayatn di Pontianak, Kalimantan Barat” in Agama & Pandangan Hidup: *Studi Tentang “Local Religion” Di Beberapa Wilayah Indonesia* [“Religion and



there is a notion of a supreme god, often called Hattalla, who might be compared with the Chinese Tiangong—or even Confucius or Buddha—the Dayaks deal mostly with a pantheon of *dewas* [saints] and *rohs* [souls] who can be likened to Chinese gods and spirits. The Dayaks, like the Chinese, practice shamanism and mediumship.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, Dayak lore is less a religion than a way of life, and the consolidation of the various tribal practices under the single classification of Hindu–Kaharigan in order to fit within the Indonesian rubric of six official religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Confucianism)<sup>131</sup> can be compared to the uncomfortable fit of the congeries of folk cults under the umbrella of Chinese popular religion.

What of the political circus? Here the message is overt and familiar. While the Malays resent Chinese dominance in the economic sector, Chinese encroachment into politics is more vigorously rejected on the grounds of *pribumi* (native born) versus immigrant status. Politically, Islam is inseparable from Malay racial issues; but Pontianak mayor Sutarmidji held he could refuse the street parade of spirit-mediums in 2009 on the grounds that it was not culture. The New Order assimilationist ideology which holds that overt displays of Chineseness, particularly the use of the Chinese language, meant that a person was not loyal to Indonesia is still current, as is demonstrated by the hostility aimed at the words “Gong Xi Fa Cai” decorating the Singkawang mayor’s official residence during Imlek 2008.

While this drama was largely a matter of sound and fury, there was also pathos. The published apology of the Chinese community for the December 2007 incident would have been comical if it had not seemed so pathetic—a Malay mob had stoned a Chinese home and vandalised a Chinese temple, but it was the Chinese who had apologised. What is the message in this tragicomedy? It reminded me of old reports that the Dutch had considered the Chinese were cowards.<sup>132</sup> Later Davidson reported that the expulsion of Chinese from the interior of West Kalimantan in 1967 had happened in a matter of weeks, with little overt resistance.<sup>133</sup> Lie, the Yayasan Bhakti Suci leader who had signed the written apology on behalf of the Chinese community for causing trouble in Pontianak, had explained his action in these words: *Sudah mengalah demi menyelamatkan keseluruhan* [“We had to surrender to bring peace to all”].<sup>134</sup> How could I reconcile such actions with accounts of valiant battles between the Dutch and the out-numbered, less well-equipped members of the eighteenth-century zongtings? Then I remembered a Hakka saying, which I render in traditional characters to convey its flavour:

公唔颌頭老虎唔敢打狗  
*Kung m ngam theu, lau fu m kan ta keu*  
If the gods do not nod their heads, the tiger won’t kill the dogs.

In other words, the hot bloods will not attack if the elders do not consent.<sup>135</sup>

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Society of the Kanayatn Dayak in Pontianak, West Kalimantan” in Religion and Views on Life: A Study of Local Religion in some Indonesian Regions] ed. Ibnu Qoyim (Jakarta: Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia & Puslit Kemasyarakatan dan Kebudayaan, 2003), p. 122.

<sup>130</sup> *The Seen and the Unseen: Shamanism, Mediumship and Possession in Borneo*. Borneo Research Council Monograph Series Vol. 2, ed. Robert L. Winzeler (Williamsburg, VA: The Borneo Research Council, Inc. 1993).

<sup>131</sup> Anne Schiller, “An ‘Old’ Religion in ‘New Order’ Indonesia: Notes on Ethnicity and Religious Affiliation,” *Sociology of Religion*, 57, 4 (Winter, 1996): 409–17.

<sup>132</sup> Yuan, *Chinese Democracies*, p. 70.

<sup>133</sup> Jamie S. Davidson, *From Rebellion to Riots: Collective Violence on Indonesian Borneo* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p. 71.

<sup>134</sup> Harsono, “*Panasnya Pontianak, Panasnya Politik*,” 56.

<sup>135</sup> D. Maciver, *A Chinese-English Dictionary, Hakka Dialect as spoken in Kwang-Tung Province*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., revised and rearranged with many additional terms and phrases by M. C. Mackenzie (1926, Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc. 1992), p. 584.



## Conclusion

The main conclusion we can draw from the performance of the spirit-medium parade in Singkawang is that it demonstrates the allegiance of the local Chinese community to its Indonesian homeland. Heidhues noted that the eighteenth-century Chinese had come to this part of Indonesia not as sojourners, but to settle.<sup>136</sup> The spirit-mediums gathered as a great brotherhood of men in the spirit of the Confucian teaching that all men are brothers. This sense of the socio-political system as a collective promotes compromise as the main strategy for settling differences. In the Hokkien spirit-medium communities that I research, the phrase *chamsiang* is often heard. There is no Mandarin equivalent and the closest I can provide is *can xiang* [参像]. It means “to negotiate to reach a compromise” or “to consult to reach a solution”, but a literal reading is evocative. “Cham” can be translated as “bring together” or “mix,” while “siang” stands for “similarities”. That is, when negotiating, we bring together similarities rather than differences. The conciliatory tendency of “chamsiang”, as against notions of adversarial politics, is the Chinese attitude that is often mistaken for cowardice.

Multi-ethnic, multi-religious Indonesia needs leaders who preach forbearance rather than anger, who set aside differences to promote harmony. This is the founding motto of the modern Indonesian nation, which proclaims *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, “Unity in Diversity”; it is a principle of integration rather than enforced assimilation. Since the end of the New Order in 1998, the succeeding presidents of Indonesia have pursued this policy of integration but, on the ground, the ability to negotiate and compromise may be a matter of life and death.

Jamie Davidson, in his analysis of the Kalimantan Dayak–Madurese conflicts of 1997, 1999, and 2001, noted that economic and political competition rather than ethnicity per se were integral to the violence.<sup>137</sup> However the trigger that set off the killings was cultural. The Human Rights Watch report on the 1996–1997 Dayak–Madurese violence in West Kalimantan reported that the two sides had a different view on bloodshed. For the Madurese, settling scores with their *carok* [sickle] is a part of everyday life; for Dayaks, however, the moment Dayak blood is shed the entire clan is duty-bound to violence and to warfare enacted in ritual slayings which reportedly included cannibalism.<sup>138</sup> R. Masri Sareb Putra, a Dayak ethnologist from Sambas, made a similar analysis of the 1999 Dayak–Madurese conflict. Putra argued that the usual solution of sending in troops would never solve inter-ethnic conflicts involving Dayak, that a cultural approach was needed. As Putra explained, when blood is shed, local leaders must act fast to stop the problem escalating to involve the entire Dayak community. “[A] rite to recall the spirit of war must be immediately performed. Then, as is customary, ethnic groups embroiled in the dispute should draw up, agree to and pledge to comply with a peace pact.”<sup>139</sup> History recalls such an understanding between the Chinese and the Dayaks. In September 1967, the military instigated Dayaks to take revenge on Chinese, claiming Chinese communists had caused the death of nine Dayaks and a Dayak leader. Instead of war, however, Dayak and Chinese leaders performed traditional ceremonies where they vowed to unite against common enemies. The peace held for a month, until Dayaks attacked Chinese because they believed the oath had been broken.<sup>140</sup> This incident, and Putra’s advice, reminds us not to let modern thinking lead us to diminish the importance of the gods in social life.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Heidhues, *Goldiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, p. 11.

<sup>137</sup> Jamie S. Davidson, *From Rebellion to Riots*, pp. 175–183.

<sup>138</sup> Human Rights Watch/Asia, “Communal Violence in West Kalimantan,” 9,10 (C), (Dec 1997): 3–7.

<sup>139</sup> R. Masri Sareb Putra, “The solution to the Sambas riots,” *The Jakarta Post*, 20 April 1999.

<sup>140</sup> Jamie S. Davidson and Douglas Kammen, “Indonesia’s Unknown War”: 63–67.

<sup>141</sup> Conflicts may be about other considerations such as politics, but becomes highly dangerous when couched in religious terms, for example, the 1884 Lanfang War was started because the Dutch had removed statues of the

Cheu Hock Tong's suggestion that the worship of Natoks represents a cosmic balance between the Chinese and Malay spirit worlds<sup>142</sup> may be usefully cited here to support an understanding of Cap Go Meh in Singkawang as a sort of *Tolak Balak* [spiritual reconciliation] ceremony, a Dayak ritual aimed at restoring the natural balance that brings peace and good harvests. Viewed in this way, Cap Go Meh appears as an annual renewal of harmonious ties between the Chinese, Dayak and Malay spirits, a reconciliation that in turn brings peace among the people. But can we continue to hope for this benefit in the future, when many would now regard Cap Go Meh in Singkawang as an appropriated religious procession that is well on the way to becoming little more than a commodified tourist attraction?



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gods from the kongsì hall, which was considered as an act of desecration. See Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders*, pp. 106-17. See also Jamie S. Davidson, *From Rebellion to Riots*, pp. 175-83.

<sup>142</sup>Cheu, "Malay Keramat, Chinese Worshippers": 16.