

CHAP GO MEH IN SINGKAWANG, INDONESIA

Margaret Chan

Chap Go Meh (十五暝 *shi wu ming*, the fifteenth night of the first month of the Chinese year) is celebrated in Singkawang, West Kalimantan with a remarkable parade of spirit mediums.

The practice originated with the Chinese miners in the 1700s when a terrible plague was threatening the people. Then exorcists dressed up as warriors went about the place waving weapons to scare away the demons of misfortune. *Chap Go Meh* as exorcistic parade has roots that extend back to the *nuo* exorcisms at the dawn of Chinese civilization. As early as the first proto-Chinese Xia (夏 1990-1557 B.C.E.) there were ceremonies styled as attacks on evil spirits. By Zhou (周 1027-221 B.C.E.), the *nuo* was institutionalized as state rituals, the more important of which were presided over by the emperor himself. The Zhou *nuo* exorcisms were violent performances with sacrificial animals being torn apart (Tian, 2003).

Hundreds of spirit mediums in biggest ever *Chap Go Meh* parade.

For the first time, this year's *Chap Go Meh* in Singkawang, held on 21 February 2008, was an official event listed on the nation-wide tourist calendar of *Visit Indonesia Year*. The parade was the biggest ever seen in the town.

Down the main streets of the town's central business district: Jalan Diponegoro, Budi Utomo Street, Hasan Saad Street, Saman Bujang Street, Kepol Mahmud Street, Niaga Street and Sejahtera Street, paraded 430 teams, each bearing a spirit medium sedan chair aloft on which sat one to three mediums. In addition there were 147 spirit medium groups without sedan chairs, some carried palanquins on which were mounted images of their deities.

Knife and nail sedan chairs comprise the standard equipment of spirit mediums. At Singkawang in February 2008 I saw mostly knife chairs. The "seat" was a blade fixed into two long knives which formed the arms of the chair. The back of the chair had a blade fitted at the centre which jutted out about 35 cm. At the end of the arms were fitted halberds. 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 they were on parade floats, so that everyone had a good view of the mediums who performed 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 social actors *Tatungs* and *Laoyas*

The spirit mediums of Singkawang appeared as a “great fellowship” of fighting comrades. There were essentially two kinds of mediums who could be distinguished by their dress; those who wore the military uniforms of Ming (明) generals and foot soldiers (Plates 1a and 1b), and those who wore what resembled Dayak costumes of embroidered vests and aprons over trousers, with headdresses decked with feathers and leaves.



Plates 1a and 1 b: *Tatungs* possessed by soldier and general spirits. Note the skewers in their faces. Photos: Author

In Hokkien, spirit mediums are called *tang-ki* (童乩 *tongji* divining child). This is because, mediums are regarded as spiritual children no matter what the real age of the medium (Chan, 2006: 56-60). The spirit mediums of West Kalimantan are called *lao ya* or *tatungs*. The first name means old grandfather (*lao ye* 老爷), this is the double honorific and is more appropriately translated as “eminent lord”. The meaning of the second term has to be guessed at. Kiang (1992: 109) uses the term “*Tatung*”, with a capital “T” not in reference to spirit mediums, but to mean “World Brotherhood” (*da tong* 大同 literally, Great Fellowship), the Confucian principle that proposes that all men are brothers. Ardian Cangianto, founder of the *Budaya Tionghoa* (Chinese Culture) website, a Hakka who devotes himself to the promotion of Chinese culture in Indonesia, holds that the term “*tatung*” comes from the phrase “*tiao tong*” (跳童) “to dance as a spirit medium”. The verb “*tiao*” “dance” or “jump” is used by devotees to refer to the energetic performance of a possessed spirit medium (Cangianto, personal interview, 22 February 2008).

Chinese, Dayak and Malay spirits possessed mediums

In Singkawang all the Chinese mediums dressed up as generals and infantry soldiers using the Ming style costumes favoured on the Chinese opera stage. There were also more than a hundred spirit mediums dressed in Dayak style in that they wore embroidered vests that resembled the traditional *baju burung*, or jackets (*jaket*) over

trousers covered by embroidered aprons which passed for the traditional *sirat* or *cawat*. On their heads they wore headbands or helmets decorated with hornbill or pheasant feathers (plates 2a and 2b). Although one prominent *tatung* was identified to me by name as Dayak, there was no saying for sure that the other “Dayak” mediums genuinely belonged to the ethnic group and many were likely to have been Chinese mediums possessed by Dayak spirits.



Plates 2a and 2 B: *Tatungs* possessed by Dayak spirits

There were also Malay *tatungs*; Chinese mediums possessed by Malay spirits. Their costume comprised singlets or vests over trousers with many cloth sashes tied criss-cross over their chests and on their arms. On their heads they wore characteristic bandanas written over with what appeared to be Arabic script. The mediums of Malay deities were most probably Chinese. Malays are prohibited from getting involved in the religious rituals of *Chap Go Meh*.

Performance Analysis

Chap 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 *laoyas* 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 ancestors for the continued protection of their communities.

The inclusion of so many Dayak and Malay spirits in the ranks of *tatungs* and *laoyas* demonstrated the Chinese allegiance to indigenous deities and saints. Cheu’s (1996/1997) analysis of the Chinese veneration of Malay Natoks in Malaysia may be useful here. He sees in the practice an intercession in inter-ethnics relations which has contributed to a greater sense of “communitas” (Cheu invokes Turner, 1969 here) in the country’s multi-ethnic society (Cheu, 1996/1997: 16 and 33).



Chap Go Meh in Singkawang also saw bizarre self-mortification such as this medium who pierced his cheek with the shaft of an electrical fan – Photo: With kind permission of Rudi Dustika Teja.

A *tatung* possessed by a Dayak spirit. His face is pierced with a branch of the pomelo tree and he has threaded through one earlobe a fluorescent light tube – Photo: With kind permission of Rudi Dustika Teja.

Acknowledgement

My research in Singkawang, West Kalimantan received the generous support of the SMU Research Grant System.

I would also like to thank: Mayor Hasan Karman for receiving me in Singkawang and for giving me further information via email. My Indonesian friends Ardian Cangianto, Rudi Dustika Teja, Hendy Lie, Jack Mulyana Husodho, Nusantio Setiadi, 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.

Reference

- Chan, Margaret. 2006. *Ritual is Theatre, Theatre is Ritual: Spirit Medium Worship*. Singapore: Wee Kim Wee Centre and SNP Reference.
- Cheu, Hock Tong. 1996/1997 “Malay Keramat, Chinese Worshippers: The Sinicization of Malay Keramats in Malaysia.” Academic Series No. 26, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore.
- Kiang, Clyde. 1992. *The Hakka Odyssey and Their Taiwan Homeland*. Elgin, PA: Allegheny Press.
- Tian, Min. 2003. “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): n.pp.

Official Release

Keputusan Walikota Singkawang Nomor 14 Tahun 2008, Panitia Perayaan Imlek 2559 dan Festival Cap Go Meh 2008 Kota Singkawang (Release from the Office of the Mayor of Singkawang Number 14 for the year 2008, Organising Committee Imlek 2559 and *Chap Go Meh* Festival 2008, Singkawang Town).

Interviews

Cangianto, Ardian. 22 February 2008. Personal interview in English at Pontianak.
Karman, Hasan. 20 February 2008. Personal interview in English and Indonesian at Rumah Dinas, the Official Resident of the Mayor on Jalan Gunung Poteng in Singkawang.