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THE ALIEN COMMUNAL PATRON DEITY
A comparative study of the Datuk Gong worship among Chinese communities in Malaysia

Wang Zhaoyuan, Danny Wong Tze Ken and Welyne Jeffrey Jehom

ABSTRACT
When many Chinese immigrants settled in the Malay peninsula in the late 19th century, they not only brought the patron gods of their homeland, but also created a new local patron deity – the alien Datuk Gong. Datuk Gong worship is a combination of Malay *keramat* and Chinese Bo Gong worship. Although usually regarded as a personal guardian spirit, Datuk Gong is also seen as a communal patron deity of some Chinese communities in Malaysia. Different communities shape their own images of the patron deity based on the social reality, especially that of ethnic groups in these communities. This article selects two Chinese communities in Malaysia, Broga in Negeri Sembilan and Machap Baru in Melaka, as examples of distinct types of Datuk Gong worship: Chinese spirit worship versus trans-ethnic saint worship. A comparative analysis of similar legends of Datuk Gong, and disparate rituals and development of the worship in the two communities indicates that Datuk Gong worship reflects the Chinese community's understanding of the social reality they have experienced, and their response to changes in the social environment.

KEYWORDS
communal patron deity; Datuk Gong; ethnicity; *keramat*; Malaysian Chinese; social reality

Introduction

In writing about the communal aspects of popular cults in imperial and pre-1949 republican China, C.K. Yang (1961: 81) notes, 'No community in China was without one or more collective representations in the form of patron gods, the cults of which served as centres for communal religious life'. Similarly, today most Chinese communities in Malaysia have at least a communal temple (Tan 2018: 17), because many Chinese immigrants who settled in the Malay peninsula in the late 19th century brought the patron gods of their homeland. The immigrants used the symbol of the patron god to bring together Chinese of similar speech groups.[1] Organising local communities through worship and religious celebrations gave a sense of community and of being Chinese (Tan 2018: 5–6).

However, the patron deities of some Chinese communities in Malaysia, Datuk Gong, are non-Chinese in most cases. The Datuk Gong cult is a particular folk belief of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia; just as Datuk Gong is a combinative

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[1]The three major Chinese speech groups in Malaysia are Hokkien, Hakka and Cantonese, followed by Teochew (Chaozhou), Foochow (Fuzhou), Hainanese, Kwongsai (Guangxi), Henghua (Xinghua, i.e. Putian) and Hokchia (Fuqing) (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2003, cited in Voon 2007: 30).
This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

term of the Malay word *datuk* and the Chinese *gong*,[2] Datuk Gong worship is a combination of Malay *keramat*[3] and Chinese Bo Gong[4] worship. Datuk Gong is usually Malay, although there are variations such as Chinese, Orang Asli (aborigines), Indian and Siamese (Thai) Datuk Gong. As a result of its wide spread in the 20th century, Datuk Gong worship has become popular and an integral part of Chinese Religion[5] in Malaysia (Wang et al. 2020).

The worship of non-Chinese deities as Chinese communal patron gods in Malaysia is unusual, and has not been seriously explored. Although some scholars have studied Datuk Gong (Cheu 1992, 1998; Goh 2005; Ong 2012; See 2012; Chin and Lee 2014; Tan 2018: 62–79), they treated the worship as a whole (a popular belief), and placed it in the national rather than the community context. In practice, Datuk Gong worship in different communities is often divergent, thus this approach ignored the diversity within the worship. Moreover, there is an apparent shortage of in-depth case studies in existing research on Datuk Gong.[6]

Therefore, this article focuses on the community level of Datuk Gong worship. Through a comparative analysis of the worship among Chinese communities in Malaysia in general, and in two communities in particular, it explores how the 'alien'[7] deities became communal patron gods for the Chinese, how Chinese communities sustained the special worship for over a century, which reality the worship reflects, and how it responds to social reality[8] in everyday life. In research methods, this article emphasises the comparative analysis among multiple field sites, which not only refers to different locations in anthropological fieldwork, but also includes diverse 'sites' in the course of the historical development of Datuk Gong worship. Thus anthropological observations and interviews, as well as historical epigraphy and documentary methods were combined for data collection.

Datuk Gong as a communal patron deity

In Malaysia today, Datuk Gong are very common in shrines usually 110 cm tall which often can be found by the roadside, under a tree, or in the compound of Chinese temples; thus Datuk Gong is generally regarded as a personal guardian spirit. However, Datuk Gong can also be worshipped in a communal temple where he serves as a patron deity of a community. In Char Tiel town, Klang, Selangor, there is a '12 Datuk Temple' managed by the Chinese. The name of Tun Datuk Samsudin, one of the 12

[2]*Datuk* (Malay) and *gong* (Chinese) are traditional honorific titles and have a similar meaning.

[3]A cult worshipping spirits and supernatural powers of persons, locations, animals and objects, which was once popular among the Malays. *Keramat* is a fusion of pre-Islamic spirit belief (including nature worship and ancestor worship) and Sufi saint worship.

[4]Bo Gong, a general term for Tudi Gong [the Earth God], is a very popular deity in China. His formal title is Fude Zhengshen [the God of Blessing and Virtues]. In Malaysia, he is usually called Da Bo Gong.

[5]Chinese Religion, or Chinese popular religion/Chinese folk religion: the complex of Chinese indigenous beliefs and practices involving the worship of ancestors, deities and ghosts that most ordinary Chinese observe in their daily and festive life, in contrast to Buddhism and Taoism (Tan 2018: 2–4).

[6]For example, there are at least ten Datuk Gong temples in Malaysia with a history of more than 100 years, but none of these studies has carefully examined any of them.

[7]Datuk Gong is non-Chinese in most cases, but its devotees are mostly Chinese. In this sense, Datuk Gong is considered as 'alien'.

[8]Here 'social reality' means universal group distinction systems existing in society (such as gender, rich and poor, noble and ignoble, nationality, etc., and ethnicity in the case of Datuk Gong worship), which are constructed and maintained by political power, as well as relevant customs, common sense, social norms (such as morality, law) and aesthetics (Wang 2016: 29).

datuk, was found by local Chinese on the earliest title deed, so the Chinese worshipped him, respecting him as the earliest pioneer of the land and considering him as the Datuk Gong to protect this area (Ong 2012). Some local temple publications also claim that their Datuk Gong is the patron deity of their community:

> The Datuk Gong in this temple is our communal patron deity, who protects all beings and attracts many worshippers … Through the efforts of our predecessors, the temple has been a Chinese temple of high standing in Klang. More importantly, for centuries the local people live and work in peace, and unpleasant things rarely happen.
>
> (Klang Lian He Temple 2015: 9)

> Sak Dato is a mountain god to guard Broga, and also a local deity of Malaysia.
>
> (Sak Dato Temple Committee 2016: 24)

As early as the late 19th century, the Malays regarded the *keramat* as a communal patron deity. According to W.W. Skeat (1900: 61):

> Although officially the religious centre of the village community is the mosque, there is usually in every small district a holy place known as the *keramat*, at which vows are paid on special occasions, and which is invested with a very high degree of reverence and sanctity.

In contrast, the Chinese view Datuk Gong as a communal patron deity, and community residents raise funds to build or renovate the Datuk Gong temple. A committee is elected to manage the temple and there is an annual large celebration of his birthday at the temple. In these ways, the temple becomes a community centre of worship and Datuk Gong a communal patron deity.

Except for these common practices in Chinese Religion, different communities shape their own images of the patron deity. Among the most prominent are his diverse ethnicities. For example, Sak Dato in Broga (Negeri Sembilan) is Orang Asli; Datuk Abdul Samad in Jugra (Selangor) is Malay; Datuk Teh Ya Wen in Parit Buntar (Perak) is Chinese. Nowadays Datuk Gong in all these three places refers to a real person, but the situation was probably different in the early days. The Sak Dato Temple in Broga is said to have been erected by Chinese tin miners in the 1860s, who regarded huge rocks and stone caves as spirits to worship; Sak Dato means 'stone *datuk*' in Hakka, and there is an old stone cave in the temple (Lin 1989b).[9] The Datuk Gong in Thian Poh Keong Temple (Jugra, Selangor), is said to be Abdul Samad (1804–98), the fourth Sultan of Selangor, but the oldest censer in the temple was offered in 1897, when Abdul Samad was still alive, and thus could not be worshipped as Datuk Gong. One committee member of the temple also confirmed that the earliest Datuk shrine was erected by Chinese quarry workers, who called the spirit of the land Datuk, and worshipped him before quarrying. And it was not until the 1950s that the name of Datuk Gong was known as Abdul Samad through spirit possession.[10]

[9]Regarding the origin of Sak Dato, a more popular legend is that an Orang Asli lived in a stone cave on the way to the mine; he often helped the Chinese miners. One day he told the miners that he would become a Datuk, and he was missing not long afterwards. One night, all the miners dreamed that he had died and was conferred Datuk by the Jade Emperor. The next day his remains were discovered in the stone cave, so the Chinese miners buried him and erected a temple to worship him (Sak Dato Temple Committee 2016: 21). Large rocks are often regarded as sacred in both Chinese Religion and *keramat*. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* in 1995 reported that a few decades earlier, a boulder near the site of the former Persatuan Hoi Loke at Jalan Rasah in Seremban was worshipped and also called Sak Dato (Chen 1995). Considering the popular belief in *keramat* among Chinese miners in the late 19th century, the statement on stone *datuk* is more credible.

[10]Respondent 6, interview, 2 July 2017. Spirit possession: a common divination method in Chinese Religion; a Chinese deity manifests himself through the body of a spirit medium, resulting in noticeable changes in body functions and behaviour.

There was also no information about the person Teh Ya Wen in the early records of the Datuk Gong temple in Parit Buntar. The earliest records in the three old Chinese Datuk Gong temples around Parit Buntar – Chua Boon Leng Dato Temple in Kuala Kurau, Datuk Gong Temple in Parit Buntar, and Datuk Gong Temple in Tanjung Piandang – had only 'Datuk Gong' without a named person, so we can speculate that they were initially all spirit worship, rather than saint worship.

The origins of Datuk Gong in Broga, Jugra and Parit Buntar were all spirits without a given ethnicity. With the development of Datuk Gong worship, these spirits were personified as men with different ethnicities by different communities, based on the social reality about ethnic groups in these communities. The Orang Asli had settled in Broga before Chinese tin miners arrived in the 19th century. Thus Datuk Gong was personified as an Orang Asli, and was worshipped in the temple together with Xian Si Shiye, the Chinese patron deity of Hakka tin miners from Huizhou, China.[11] The devotees believe that these two patron deities have sworn to be blood brothers and guard Broga together (Sak Dato Temple committee 2016: 22), which reflects the expectations of local Chinese towards harmonious ethnic relations between Orang Asli and Chinese. In Jugra, Malay is the dominant ethnicity. According to records in Muzium Insitu Jugra (Jugra In-situ Museum), Jugra was already a settlement in the 1800s, and it became the administrative centre of Selangor when Sultan Abdul Samad resided there during his reign from 1857 until his demise in 1898. In addition, Skeat (1900: 163–166) recorded a well known tiger *keramat* in Jugra, which was the guardian of the shrine at the foot of Jugra Hill, and was formerly the pet of the Princess of Malacca (Tuan Putri Gunong Ledang). Thus, after the Chinese began to worship the Datuk at Jugra in 1897, the worship would inevitably be affected by the dominant Malay ethnicity and the long *keramat* tradition. This could explain why the Datuk was later personified as Abdul Samad. In Parit Buntar, the Chinese formed the dominant ethnic group. Parit Buntar was opened up by the Chinese in the 1870s to develop sugar cane plantations. It was earlier known as Xinxing Gang, a Chinese name meaning a newly developing port. As early as 1913, the community had established a Chinese primary school; over the years the Datuk Gong temple has been committed to the preservation of the Chinese cemetery and the development of Chinese education in the community (Persatuan Penganut Datok Kong (Cina) Parit Buntar, Perak 2016). In addition, a Federated Malay States Government Gazette preserved in the Datuk Gong temple, dated 24 October 1912, states:

> The Resident of Perak proclaims that parcel of land situated at Parit Buntar Town, described in the schedule hereto, … to be a reserve for the purpose of a place of Public Worship – that is, a Chinese Temple, to be maintained by Tan Lo Heong, Ng Ah Juat and Wong Ah Wong, as representatives of the Chinese community of Parit Buntar.

Since the Datuk Gong temple started as a Chinese temple, and Chinese ethnicity has always been strong in Parit Buntar, it is no wonder that the Datuk Gong was personified as a Chinese.

[11]The worship of Xian Shiye/Xian Si Shiye arose from the veneration of Sheng Ming Li, a Hakka from Huizhou who migrated to Malaya in 1851 and became a Chinese leader in early Sungei Ujong, Negeri Sembilan (Voon et al. 2014).

Datuk Gong worship in two Chinese communities

Two Chinese communities, Broga in Negeri Sembilan and Machap Baru in Melaka, are selected as cases for a comparative analysis. Datuk Gong worship in Broga and Machap Baru share much in common. The worship in both communities has a history of more than 100 years; Datuk Gong is respected as a patron deity by the whole community;[12] similar collective memories of Datuk Gong have been circulated for many years in both communities. The major differences in the Datuk Gong worship of the two communities lie in the origin and ethnicity of Datuk Gong which reflect their respective divergent rituals and development of the worship. The origin of Sak Dato in Broga (an Orang Asli) is spirit worship, while that of Datuk Machap in Machap Baru (a Malay[13]) is saint worship.

Broga is a small town situated on the border of Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. The Temuan, an Orang Asli group, were the earliest inhabitants of Broga. Because of rich tin ore, Broga was settled in the 1850s by Hakka miners from Huizhou, China. By the 1870s Broga had become an important tin producing area. The leader of the Hakka miners was Goh Ah Ngee, whose mines near Sungei Broga (Broga River) employed 3,000 coolies in 1897 (*Straits Times* 1897). In the late 19th century, through a Hokkien Catholic, Lin Fan, the British recruited more than 1,000 *xinke*[14] from Fujian, China, for crop planting in Broga (Lin 1989a). The rise of the rubber industry in the early 20th century boosted the economy of Broga, making it a prosperous town in the 1920s. During the Japanese Occupation (1941–45), many shops in Broga were burned by the Japanese and many villagers fled. In 1950, the British colonial government resettled the Chinese in the area in Broga New Village.[15] The outflow of population continued during the Malayan Emergency. In 1953, 850 villagers tried to escape but failed, and were detained for 10 days. Broga now has a population of more than 3,000, 90% of whom are Chinese, and others are Malays and Indians. More than 300 Temuan currently live in Kampung Orang Asli Broga, a small village beside Broga New Village.

The Sak Dato Temple in Broga is one of the oldest Datuk Gong temples in Malaysia. The temple still holds many old plaques; the oldest one was offered by a devotee Li Yuchang to Sak Dato in 1904. Another plaque dated 1910 recorded the names of 67 donors, most of whom were Chinese coolies, contributing money towards a sedan chair

[12]In other words, Datuk Gong worship has become a common belief in both communities, and each community member, even though he or she has been working or living in other places, has to return to worship Datuk Gong on his birthday (Respondent 1, the village chief of Broga, interview, 19 June 2017; Respondent 16, the village chief of Machap Baru, interview, 15 July 2017).

[13]According to a board erected by Jabatan Warisan Negara (Department of National Heritage) beside his tomb, Datuk Machap, who lived in the 16th century, was a Bugis scholar from Makassar, Sulawesi. The Bugis are included as ethnic Malays in modern Malaysia. The Chinese devotees in Machap Baru all consider Datuk Machap a Malay.

[14]Mandarin and literally, new guests (immigrants), that is, those China-born Chinese who emigrated to Malaya in the late 19th or early 20th century.

[15]Newly created settlements termed New Villages provided homes for the resettlement of Chinese squatters who lived on the fringes of the Malayan jungle after the Japanese Occupation. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which launched an armed insurrection (Malayan Emergency, 1948–60) to topple the British colonial government, relied on Chinese squatters for recruits, food and medical supplies, and intelligence. Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs devised the Briggs Plan – an ambitious resettlement of half a million Chinese squatters into New Villages to sever the supply line of the communist jungle guerrillas. During the Malayan Emergency, New Villages resembled concentration camps with high fences and barbed wires surrounding the perimeters, restricted entry and exit, thorough searches, round-the-clock surveillance, and curfews. Basic amenities such as piped water, electricity, and sanitation were provided. Long after the Emergency ended, many New Villages developed and shed the image of their early years. Currently, there are 450 New Villages throughout Peninsular Malaysia with 1.2 million inhabitants (Ooi 2009: 225–226).

to carry the spirit tablet of Sak Dato for the procession on his birthday.[16] Since then, the Sak Dato procession at Broga has been held annually, even during the Malayan Emergency and the 13 May 1969 race riots. After the establishment of Broga New Village in 1950, entry and exit were strictly controlled, so the villagers brought the spirit tablet of Sak Dato to a small new shrine in the New Village. Following the end of the Emergency, the villagers returned the spirit tablet, and renovated the old temple in 1965. In 1991, the temple was renovated again, at a cost of MYR700,000. The temple experienced rapid development after that period and has developed into one of the largest Datuk Gong temples in Malaysia (see Figure 1).

Machap Baru is a small town in Alor Gajah district, Melaka. Machap Baru (New Machap) was named when Machap Baru New Village was established in 1950 to distinguish it from Machap Lama (Old Machap). The Bugis were the earliest inhabitants of Machap. It is uncertain when the Chinese settled here, but probably not later than the late 19th century. Early Chinese villagers made a living by farming, vegetable growing and rubber tapping. During the Japanese Occupation, a massacre occurred at Machap where the remains of victims were discovered (*Straits Times* 1948). In 1950, the British colonial government resettled the Chinese living there in Machap Baru New Village. During the Malayan Emergency, some village sympathisers secretly supplied food to the MCP; on one occasion two MCP members were discovered by the British Army and shot dead when sneaking into the New Village (Pang 2000: 9). When the Durian Tunggal Dam was built in 1974, Machap Lama was declared a reservoir and the residents moved to Machap Baru. Machap Baru now has a population of more than 5,000, of whom 95% are Chinese; others are Malays and Indians. Machap Baru New Village is the largest Chinese New Village in Melaka, as well as the biggest Hakka New Village in Malaysia.

The Datuk Gong in Machap Baru is called 'Datuk Machap'. According to a board erected by the Department of National Heritage in Masjid Lama Machap (Old Machap Mosque), Jailani Mendik Masab, better known as Datuk Machap, was a Bugis scholar from Makassar, Sulawesi. His religious knowledge and high morality attracted the Sultan's attention so he was appointed Royal Imam. When the Portuguese invaded Melaka in 1511, Datuk Machap fought with the Sultan of Melaka against the Portuguese; but Datuk Machap's attempt failed, and he and his followers fled upstream Malacca River and arrived at a settlement where they built a mosque. In 1865 a Chinese Muslim cleric replaced the wooden structure with a brick mosque decorated with Chinese architectural elements and murals. In 1907 a stone tablet was erected to record the names of 90 donors contributing money towards a pavilion for Datuk Machap, stating that 'The Datuk worship in Machap has a history of more than 200 years, and both Chinese and non-Chinese are blessed by the Datuk'. These 90 donors came from Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, and Singapore, indicating that Datuk Machap was already well known in Malaya at that time.[17] The mosque remains to this day with the name of Masjid Lama Machap (see Figure 2), and the tomb of Datuk Machap is beside the mosque. Before the 1970s the mosque was situated at the top of a hill, and the pavilion at a lower level. With a distance

[16]This is probably the earliest Datuk Gong procession in Malaysia. Datuk Gong processions were quite rare in the past.
[17]Datuk Machap was so renowned that in about 1937 a spirit medium in Machap moved to Singapore and erected a branch temple for him in Telok Kurau Road (*Straits Times* 1946; Elliott 1955: 114).

Figure 1. Front view of the Sak Dato Temple. Photo by Wang Zhaoyuan, 2017.

of less than 100 metres, they were connected by a bridge over a small river and a few steps on the hill. The Durian Tunggal Dam built in 1974 turned the small river into a large reservoir, submerging the pavilion and the steps, thus separating the mosque from Machap,

Figure 2. Front view of Masjid Lama Machap decorated with Chinese architectural elements and murals. Photo by Wang Zhaoyuan, 2017.

and since then the worship of Datuk Machap has gradually declined. In 2008 the mosque was designated a national heritage site by the Department of National Heritage.

Similar collective memories of Datuk Gong

In both Broga and Machap Baru, some collective memories of Datuk Gong have circulated for many years. The first type is about the origin of Datuk Gong worship:

> Before receiving the name of Broga, this place was the only way for miners to get to the mine every day. There is a big stone cave beside this mountain road, and an Orang Asli called Aman lived there. Because Aman lived in the stone cave, the Chinese called him Shi Man.[18] Shi Man is a kind and helpful Orang Asli. When many *xinke* from China arrived here and met Shi Man, he always voluntarily led them to the mine. The living conditions of the *xinke* were very poor. Some did not acclimatise well and were often ill. When Shi Man realised about their poor health, he went up to the mountain to gather herbs to treat them. Thus the miners all liked Shi Man very much and regarded him as a brother. One day, Shi Man told the miners he would train himself to be a Datuk, guarding the area and helping more people. The miners thought he was joking and did not think much of it. But after a few months, Shi Man suddenly went missing. The miners searched for him everywhere, but did not find him. One night after some time, all the miners dreamed the same dream: Shi Man passed away in the cave, and was conferred as the patron deity of Broga by the Jade Emperor. The next day, a miner found a huge rectangular termite mound in the cave where Shi Man had lived. The miners hoed the termite mound and found complete human bones within. The clothes and ring on the bones identified him as Shi Man. Looking at all of this, the miners believed that the dream was real. Afterwards, they buried the remains of Shi Man at this place according to traditional Chinese rites. In order to show appreciation of the great kindness of Shi Man, the miners erected a temple for Shi Datuk (Sak Dato) to worship him for averting disasters for the people, and to bless and bring safety and peace to the area.
>
> (Sak Dato Temple committee 2016: 21)

> It is said that once upon a time, a Chinese and a Malay went into the mountain forest to gather wild edible plants. When they came to the place where the mosque (Old Machap Mosque) is located now, the Malay passed away suddenly. The Chinese thought, 'This is bad! How can I go back after you die?' He was willing to accompany the Malay, so he committed suicide. Later generations made a tablet to worship the Chinese Datuk and the Malay Datuk.
>
> (Respondent 16, the village chief of Machap Baru; Respondent 17, a committee member of Datuk Machap Temple, interview, 15 July 2017)

The backgrounds of these two legends are both representations of social reality in these two communities in the early days. The Orang Asli were the earliest inhabitants of Broga; then many *xinke* poured into Broga because of tin ore and some of them were often ill due to poor living conditions, reflecting the physical conditions of Broga in the 19th century. In early Machap, it is also true that the Chinese and the Malays lived together and made a living by farming.

These two legends also share the same narrative structure in that an Orang Asli/Malay in a good relationship with the Chinese passed away suddenly, and became a Datuk worshipped by the people. Worshipping deceased saints is a *keramat* tradition

[18] *Shi*, a Chinese surname, means 'stone'.

so it followed that the Orang Asli/Malay became a *datuk* after death. The huge termite mound in the first legend, often appears in other *keramat* legends. In contrast, it is the distinguishing feature of these two legends in emphasising the amicable relationship between the Chinese and the Orang Asli/Malays, which reflects the expectations of early Chinese immigrants in wanting to establish harmonious relations with local ethnic groups on the one hand, and rationalising their worship of the alien Datuk, on the other hand.

The ethnicities of the characters in both legends are also representations of social reality as the Orang Asli and Malays were the earliest inhabitants of Broga and Machap Baru respectively. It is worth noting that the *Datuk* is identified as an Orang Asli/Malay rather than a Temuan/Bugis. This corresponds with the ethnic identification among the Chinese in these two communities. The Chinese are unconcerned whether their neighbours are Temuan, Bugis, or other minorities as they are only identified as Malays/Indians/Orang Asli by the Chinese in accordance with the conventional ethnic classification. In addition, although Sak Dato is an Orang Asli, his Orang Asli identity is weaker than his Chinese identity. He lived alone in the cave rather than with his fellow Orang Asli; he acquired a Chinese name, Shi Man; his title of Datuk was conferred by the Jade Emperor, the ruler of Heaven in Chinese Taoism; after his death, he was buried according to traditional Chinese rites. These representations indicate that the worship of Sak Dato reflects Chinese tradition despite his Orang Asli ethnicity, which will be described later. In short, Sak Dato in the legend is a special Orang Asli, and thus does not represent his ethnic group. In comparison, the Malay Datuk in the legend of Machap Baru does not own any personal characteristics, indicating that he is a symbol of the Malay community. The reason for this difference is that the Orang Asli are a minority in Malay(si)a, hence the Chinese ventured to shape the image of the Orang Asli Aman into the sinicised Shi Man. However, the Malays are the dominant ethnic group, hence the Chinese had to consider their feelings. A sinicised Malay Datuk, i.e. a Datuk Machap with a Chinese name is probably unacceptable to the Malays and therefore did not appear in the legend.

These two legends may bear some historical truth. As we have discussed above, the origin of Sak Dato was probably a stone worshipped as a spirit by tin miners whereas Datuk Machap was a Bugis scholar. The origin of the Datuk Gong worship in these two communities differ, namely, spirit worship in Broga versus saint worship in Machap, but the Chinese created two legends about the origin with the same narrative structure. Even though seeming less real, the legends do reflect the Chinese community's understanding of the social reality they faced.

The second type of collective memories centres on the *ling* (the efficacy of a spirit) of Datuk Gong:

> During the Japanese Occupation, when the villagers of Broga were summoned by the Japanese army to front of the police station to be massacred, a Japanese military officer in a trance suddenly rushed to the scene from Kajang, ordering the soldiers to release the villagers and the troops to withdraw from Broga. All the villagers brutally abused by the Japanese army escaped death. Afterwards the villagers recalled that the whole event was unusual and full of magic. It is said that a villager later revealed that before the intended massacre, the crying of an old man was heard in the Sak Dato Temple for three days and nights, and the sound got stronger day by day. Therefore, the villagers believed that the Japanese military

> officer was the embodiment of Sak Dato, rushing to prevent the disaster, and to bless the people with safety and peace.
>
> (Sak Dato Temple committee 2016: 23)

> The day of the 13 May 1969 incident happened to be the birthday of Sak Dato. It is said that about 10 o'clock in the morning, the spirit medium was suddenly possessed by Sak Dato, and kept saying that the flames of battle would rage everywhere this year, and advising the villagers to stay at home rather than to travel far. In the afternoon, the bloody incident broke out, and the villagers of Broga escaped disaster again under the blessing of Sak Dato.
>
> (Sak Dato Temple committee 2016: 23)

> During the Japanese invasion, more than 20 villagers of Machap, accused of contact with the Anti-Japanese Army, were taken by the Japanese army to the bridge in front of the Datuk Gong temple. Covered with cloth on their heads, they were to be beheaded in public. At that time, their families knelt in front of the Datuk Gong one after another, and prayed for the Datuk to save the innocent villagers. Then the military vehicles carrying the Japanese troops for the execution broke down, and the military officer in charge of the mission suddenly had a stomach ache. The execution was cancelled and the villagers were released on the spot. The villagers thought it was the efficacy of Datuk Gong, so they regarded the day, the 13th day of the 8th lunar month, as the birthday of the Datuk Gong. A grand celebration, comparable to the Chinese New Year celebration, was held on the day every year.
>
> (Yao 2007)

These three legends also share the same narrative structure. When the community experienced a major crisis (the intended massacre by the Japanese/the 13 May 1969 incident), Datuk Gong manifested his timely intervention and resolved the crisis. The Japanese invasion was a major trauma for Malayan Chinese, and many similar legends about different Chinese deities manifesting their efficacy during the Japanese Occupation were circulated in Malay(si)a. In comparison, although the 13 May 1969 incident was also a calamity, the legends about it were rare due to its sensitivity in ethnic relations. It is noteworthy that although Sak Dato predicted the incident, he acknowledged that he was not able to prevent the disaster (Lu 1991), which indicates the sense of powerlessness of the Chinese in ethnic conflicts.

Whilst these legends lack historical authentication, there are other accounts of the incidents cited above. According to a Broga villager born in 1940, it was because the sister of a traitor was missing that the Japanese army summoned the villagers for communal punishment; later his sister was found, so the villagers were released.[19] During the Japanese Occupation, a massacre did occur at Machap as mentioned earlier. However, the villagers chose to believe these legends probably because these enhanced the worship of the Datuk Gong. Firstly, the legends made the devotees more convinced of the *ling* of the Datuk Gong. The Chinese value the *ling* of deities when worshipping, and the more efficacious deity will attract more worshippers. Therefore, those temples with a long history have their own legends. Secondly, the legends justified the continuous worship of the Datuk Gong as a communal patron deity. As the village chief of Machap Baru said, those villagers saved by Datuk Gong told their children and grandchildren, 'After we pass away, you must transfer the worship to the next generation; wherever you go, even overseas, you must come back to worship the Datuk to thank him'.[20]

[19]Respondent 2, interview, 19 June 2017.
[20]Respondent 16, interview, 15 July 2017.

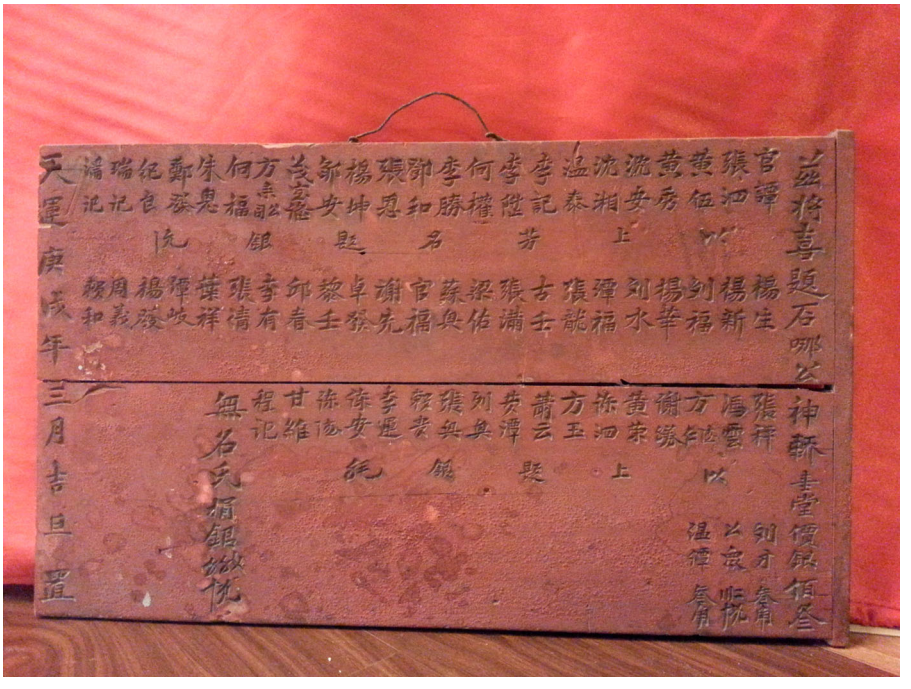

Figure 3. The plaque dated 1910 recording the names of 67 donors contributing money towards a sedan chair to carry Sak Dato for the procession on his birthday. Photo, courtesy of Lai Pok Cheng, 2016.

Different rituals and development of the Datuk Gong worship

In Broga, a plaque dated 1910 recorded the names of 67 donors (see Figure 3), contributing money towards a sedan chair to carry Sak Dato tablet for the procession on his birthday. In Machap Baru, a stone tablet was erected in 1907 with the names of 90 donors (see Figure 4) contributing money towards a pavilion for Datuk Machap. Although erected in contiguous years, these two tablets indicate many differences in the early 20th century. Firstly, most of the names on the plaque at Broga only include two Chinese ideographs, and very simple given names, among which several characters like *Fu*, *An*, *En*, *Fa* appeared multiple times, indicating that the donors had little if any formal education. In comparison, most of the names in the Machap tablet include three Chinese ideograms, and elegant given names, and the cities of Malaya such as Melaka, Seremban, and Kuala Lumpur, were written as native places before the personal names, indicating that the donors were mainly educated Peranakan Chinese.[21] Secondly, most donors of Broga contributed 1 dollar or 80 cents, suggesting that they had equal social status; but the donations at Machap varied from 5 dollars to 250 dollars, indicating different social status among donors. Among the Machap donors, the one with the highest status was Tan Bin Cheng (also known as Tan Jiak Whye), the then *tingzhu* (*teng choo*, president of the Temple Board) of the famous Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, that is, the then leader of Chinese community in

[21]Peranakan Chinese, or Straits Chinese/Straits-born Chinese/*Baba-Nyonya*, are the descendants of Chinese immigrants who came to the Malay archipelago between the 15th and 17th centuries. Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia displayed many Sino-Malay syncretic attributes.

Figure 4. The stone tablet erected in 1907 recording the names of 90 donors contributing money towards a pavilion for Datuk Machap. Photo by Wang Zhaoyuan, 2017.

Melaka. Thirdly, the Broga plaque did not give the native places of the donors, suggesting that they were all residents in Broga, but the Machap tablet recorded different native places of all donors. Lastly, all the donors of Broga were Chinese, and the main birthday celebration activity for Sak Dato was the procession, a tradition in Chinese Religion. In comparison, although most donors of Machap were Chinese, several were Malays, and the tablet also recorded the names of two Malay *pawang* (diviner), who were probably employed by the Chinese devotees for the ceremonies before the construction. In short, Datuk Gong worship in Broga in 1910 was a spirit worship basically of Chinese style, mainly followed by Chinese coolies, and limited to the area of Broga, while Datuk

Gong worshipped in Machap in 1907 was of a famous saint whose devotees included both Peranakan Chinese and Malays; it was not only trans-ethnic but cut across class and region.

The Sak Dato procession at Broga has been held annually since 1910. One news report in 1963 recorded in detail the birthday celebration for Sak Dato:

> The birthday celebration for Sak Dato in Broga is a great annual event. According to the rituals of previous years, in addition to setting up a preparatory committee to arrange a grand celebration, the villagers also hired a Chinese troupe to play day and night in Sak Dato Temple, and one Mandarin movie and two Cantonese movies were screened to entertain villagers for free. Today is the last day of the celebration. The Sak Dato procession, which was held yesterday, attracted a great number of devout men and women as well as visitors from nearby places. The procession paraded in a circle around the New Village, before returning to the temple. Where the procession passed by, the sound of firecrackers resounded through the clouds, adding unprecedented fun and enjoyment to the lonely mountain town. The devout men and women in an endless stream headed for the temple to worship. Countless pilgrims crowded in the busy temple, which was filled with the smell of incense and bustling with joss paper. Broga was full of joy until late at night.
>
> (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 1963)

The report shows that the celebration was completely of Chinese style given the Chinese troupe, films, procession, firecrackers, incense and joss paper. According to our respondents in Broga, in celebrations prior to 1992,[22] the spirit medium, sitting on a chair with a Chinese sword in hand, was paraded around the village to exorcise evil spirits. The only taboo is pork, which was not sold in the village on the day of procession.

By contrast, the celebration in Machap included many Malay aspects. According to Pang (2000: 66–67), Yao (2007), and our respondents in Machap Baru, until the late 1960s Machap villagers had two most important days: Chinese New Year and the birthday of the Datuk Gong. On the night before the birthday, films were shown and a Malay *ronggeng*[23] troupe was hired to perform with Chinese, Malay and Indian devotees dancing together, and spending a pleasant evening. On the birthday itself, regardless of distance between their home and Machap, all the devotees invariably gathered at the Datuk Gong temple. The ox cart, the vehicle at that time, formed a one-mile tailback. The devotees crossed the river and climbed the steps to the tomb of Datuk Machap. After a Malay *pawang* chanted to 'invite' Datuk Machap, the Chinese devotees worshipped in front of the tomb with joss sticks, incense, joss paper, candles and *kemenyan*,[24] and later returned to the pavilion, where cattle, goats and chickens had been slaughtered as offerings. The Chinese, Malays and Indians then participated in a communal meal of *nasi kuning*[25] or curry rice. The offerings had to be prepared by the Malays, who were hired by the Chinese, to ensure the food was halal. When consulted by the devotees, the spirit medium possessed by Datuk Machap would give each person some advice and a yellow string, which is a common ritual of *keramat*.

[22]The service of spirit possession has been cancelled by Sak Dato Temple since 1992 due to the misconduct of some spirit mediums.
[23]A traditional Malay dance, often accompanied by singing.
[24]Incense made of resin obtained from the gum benjamin (*Styrax benzoin*) tree. It was traditionally used for exorcism or worship by the Malays, but the Chinese only use it to worship Datuk Gong and Dizhu (Lord of the Land).
[25]'Yellow rice', a fragrant rice dish cooked with coconut milk and turmeric.

The Sak Dato Temple has undergone two major renovations since the 1960s. The first involving the rebuilding of Guanyin Tang (the Goddess of Mercy Hall), was completed in 1965, when two Chinese members of parliament allocated MYR15,000 for the restoration (Lu 1991). The second, launched in 1991, cost MYR700,000, and received funding of MYR10,000 from the then Minister of Transport Ling Liong Sik (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 1994). In 1993, the temple established the charitable foundation, Shanguo Yuan, which has since donated more than MYR5 million to thousands of beneficiaries. In 2001, the temple purchased an adjacent four-acre plot for MYR500,000, increasing its area to six acres (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 2000). Also in 2001, the Goddess of Mercy Hall was rebuilt, and the then Minister of Transport Ling Liong Sik officiated at its opening ceremony. He obtained MYR30,000 to support the project (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 2001). Currently, the temple, one of the largest Datuk Gong temples in Malaysia, attracts devotees from all over the country, as well as from Singapore and Brunei. It is also a well known tourist attraction.

The Durian Tunggal Dam built in 1974 turned the small river in Machap into a large reservoir submerging the Datuk Gong pavilion and the steps to the mosque, thus separating the mosque from Machap. This meant the devotees had the inconvenience of having to cross a large rubber plantation to reach the mosque, so the Chinese erected a small Datuk Gong shrine on the shore of the reservoir, and worshipped Datuk Machap remotely, as his tomb was located on the shore across. However, not long after that, the local government demolished the shrine and according to witnesses:

> Many people came to the shrine, but they failed to push it over. How extraordinary! It was incredible even when you watched that. Then we prayed to the Datuk. We did not want to see race problems. We prayed to the Datuk, really, at that time. Finally, the shrine was demolished. Another shrine for the Datuk Nenek (female Datuk) was also demolished.
>
> (Respondent 16, the village chief of Machap Baru; Respondent 17, a committee member of Datuk Machap Temple, interview, 15 July 2017)

According to above respondents, the demolition was to prevent the Chinese from worshipping the ancestors of the Malays, but the local government might have had other concerns. With the rise of Islamic orthodoxy from the 1970s, the authorities banned Malay Muslim worship of *keramat* as it is believed to be *syirik* (practising idolatry or polytheism), and meanwhile pulled down some of the Datuk Gong shrines for fear that non-Muslims seen undertaking worship might encourage Malay Muslims to follow suit.

Following that, the Chinese offered a censer instead of a shrine, and now burn incense there to worship the Datuk on his birthday. The birthday celebration became much simpler without the earlier fanfare that included screening of films, *ronggeng* troupe, Malay *pawang*, and the number of devotees subsequently declined. When one of the authors visited the site in 2017, there were two shrines: one for Guanyin (the Goddess of Mercy), and the other for Tianguan (the Official of Heaven), but there were no symbols of Datuk Gong. In 2005, about 100 Chinese devotees contributed MYR48,860 to build a road to the tomb for better access for non-Muslims to worship the Datuk Gong, but the authorities enclosed the tomb with wire mesh and locked it (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 2005; see Figure 5). Comparing this contribution and the one to the pavilion for Datuk Machap in 1907, there are three differences a century apart. Firstly, the contributors in 1907 included several Malays while all the

Figure 5. The tomb of Datuk Machap beside the mosque enclosed and locked by the authorities to prevent worship. Photo by Wang Zhaoyuan, 2017.

donors in 2005 were Chinese. Secondly, the contributors in 1907 included many devotees from other regions while most donors in 2005 were local villagers. Lastly, the fundraising in 1907 included a donation from the then leader of Chinese community in Melaka while the one in 2005 had no support from well known figures. After the mosque was designated a national heritage site by the Department of National Heritage in 2008, the authorities further prohibited the Chinese from worshipping Datuk Machap at the tomb. A board erected by PERZIM (Perbadanan Muzium Negeri Melaka, Museum Corporation of Melaka), beside the tomb states 'Dilarang melakukan kegiatan yang boleh membawa kepada perbuatan syirik dan khurafat',[26] illustrated with a photo banning the burning of incense.

Conclusion

With the massive Chinese immigration to Malaya in the late 19th century, the immigrants not only brought their patron gods, but also created a new local patron deity, Datuk Gong. The two examples of Sak Dato and Datuk Machap show two distinct types of Datuk Gong worship, namely, Chinese spirit worship in Broga versus trans-ethnic saint worship in Machap. Sak Dato can be regarded as a re-creation of Chinese Religion by newly arrived Chinese immigrants in Malaya, while before the 1970s Datuk Machap could be seen as a continuation and variation of Islamic saint worship, although they are both a combination of Chinese Religion and Malay *keramat*. These two types are also the most important classification of Datuk Gong worship. The former is the localisation of Chinese Tudi Gong (Earth God); the only difference is that the *xinke* used the concept

[26]'It is prohibited to carry out activities that can lead to acts of idolatry or polytheism *syirik* and superstitions.'

of Datuk Gong to replace Tudi Gong. This explains why Sak Dato is purely worshipped by the Chinese. But the latter is the joining of Chinese devotees into a long-standing trans-ethnic saint worship – historically, *keramat* drew people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds and therefore should be viewed as a significant site of social and cultural diversity (Mandal 2012: 355). This explains why Datuk Machap was in the past worshipped by Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Datuk Gong worship in the two communities experienced different development processes. Originating from a small worship only followed by Chinese coolies in Broga, the Sak Dato Temple developed into one of the largest Datuk Gong temples in Malaysia with the support of the government, attracting devotees from all over the country and even abroad. In comparison, from a well known trans-ethnic worship, Datuk Machap declined into a small worship only followed by Chinese villagers in Machap Baru under the dual influence of changes in the natural and social environment. The Durian Tunggal Dam separated the tomb of Datuk Machap from Machap Baru geographically, but more importantly, the ban imposed by the authorities separated Datuk Machap from the Chinese psychologically. After the Malays no longer participated in the Datuk Gong worship in the 1970s, the worship rituals of Datuk Machap became increasingly sinicised. As a result, Datuk Machap could no longer be regarded as a continuation of *keramat* saint worship, but should be seen as a part of Chinese Religion in Malaysia, that is, a localised Tudi Gong.

The development process of Sak Dato and Datuk Machap is a microcosm of the history of Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia. Initially, the more popular and influential Datuk Gong worship was saint worship, which displayed unique trans-ethnic characteristics, but later spirit worship gradually occupied a dominant position, resulting in the worship's sinicisation in substance. Obviously, this transformation is closely related to changes in social reality in the national context. For instance, the government ban on Malay Muslims and Chinese non-Muslims worshipping Datuk Machap is clearly the result of Islamic revitalisation known as the *dakwah* movement from the 1970s, which promoted Islamic orthodoxy and hence abandoned the *keramat* cult as it is believed to contradict official Islam. A detailed analysis of the relationship between the structural change of Datuk Gong worship and changes in social reality is beyond the scope of this article and needs to be studied further.

The most striking feature of Datuk Gong worship is its inter-ethnicity. Sak Dato is an Orang Asli, Datuk Machap is a Malay, but both are worshipped by Chinese devotees as communal patron gods. In this sense, Datuk Gong is considered as 'alien'. However, this is the perspective of outsiders, not insiders. Chinese devotees in Broga and Machap Baru do not regard Datuk as unfamiliar, nor do they think that worshipping Datuk Gong is a strange practice. Despite clearly recognising the non-Chinese ethnicity of Datuk Gong, they regard him as a 'native' and 'familiar' deity. The predecessor of Datuk Gong worship, *keramat*, was a native belief in Malaya, and the Orang Asli/Malays were native peoples before Chinese immigrants, thus the acceptance of Datuk Gong as a native deity reflects their respect for native ethnic groups and their beliefs. The familiarisation with Datuk Gong is the result of a mixture of different belief systems through a continuous interaction between Chinese and other ethnic groups. This has parallels in other Southeast Asian countries. For example, in Thailand, the Chinese worship *lak-mueang* (pillar of the city or state), the supreme *phi* (spirit) of the city or state in the popular Thai religion and equate it with Chenghuang, the Chinese

'god of the walls and moats' (Skinner 1957: 130–131); in the Philippines, Chinese and Filipino (mainly Catholic) rituals and practices have enriched each other in the everyday lives of Chinese Filipinos, resulting in blending of traditions that is unique to Filipino Chinese (Dy and Ang 2014: 104); in West Kalimantan of Indonesia where the Dayak is the majority group, the Chinese worship the Dayak deity Latok Kong, and the practices, belief and symbolism in Chinese and Dayak deities pervade many areas of the community's lives (Chai 2018). These examples prove that the religious world of Southeast Asian Chinese has undergone localisation while it remains historically Chinese and linked to the religious dimension of Chinese civilisation (Tan 2018: 127). Viewing Chinese Religion as a mode of expressing identity, we can say that it accurately indicates the dual identity of Southeast Asian Chinese – the continuation of worshipping traditional Chinese deities is a symbol of common Chineseness, while the incorporation of non-Chinese deities signifies their distinctive local identity.

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