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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CHINESE SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP IN URBAN MALAYSIA

The spirit medium occupies an important position in popular Chinese religion. As an arbiter between the spiritual and the mundane world, he not only provides services in healing and divination but also performs vital roles at temple and spirit festivals. The history of Chinese spirit mediumship can be traced to the Shang Dynasty of the second millennium B.C., where priest-shamans (*wu*) were accorded high official standing in the imperial courts, until their decline in the late Chou period in the third century B.C.[1] However, spirit mediumship did not become obsolete but continued to be practised at the popular level (Yang 1967: 106, 303). Few reports of spirit mediumship in modern China have appeared in print, except for the detailed observations of De Groot (1964) made in the southern provinces in the late nineteenth century. Since then, most anthropologists have studied Chinese spirit mediumship in various Chinese communities, particularly in Taiwan (Jordan 1972, Seaman 1978, Kleinman 1980) and Hong Kong (Potter 1974). Spirit mediumship is also practised in various Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, but few ethnographies have been published. One such rare ethnography, by Elliott (1955), focuses on Chinese spirit mediumship in Singapore.[2] A comparable study on the Malaysian Peninsula has yet to be accomplished. In this essay, I wish to fill some of this lacuna by describing the practices of Chinese spirit mediums and their organization in contemporary urban Malaysia.[3]

Chinese Folk Religion in Malaysia

It is necessary to describe briefly Chinese folk religious practices in Malaysia in order to understand the role of the Chinese spirit medium.

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The essence of Chinese folk religion is best summarized by the term 'shenism' as introduced by Elliott (1955:27) to describe the wide range of deities and spirits that are largely worshipped for pragmatic reasons.[4] *Shen* worship (or *bai shen*) as a folk category transcends the nominal dissection of Chinese religion into Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, since many of the gods worshipped are not confined in practical terms to these divisions. Among the 3.9 million Chinese in Peninsular Malaysia, about 3.5 million or 90 percent are listed in the 1980 Census as practitioners of Chinese religion (of whom 2 million reside in urban areas).[5] The large number of *shen* worshippers suggests that Chinese religious practices are still maintained among the Malaysian Chinese population, despite the relatively strong influences of Islam and Christianity.[6]

The multitude of deities venerated by *shen* worshippers include those from the Buddhist-Taoist pantheon and various innovations unique to the Malaysian milieu. Among the latter are deified spirits of various Chinese dignitaries and pioneers. For example, Admiral Cheng Ho of the Ming Dynasty, who visited Melaka in 1408 and 1414, is worshipped as *San Bao Tai Shen,* especially in Penang and Melaka (Purcell 1967: 123). Yap Ah Loy, the Kapitan China and leader of the Hai San Society in mid-nineteenth century Kuala Lumpur, is also worshipped by many Chinese today. A temple dedicated to his spirit is found in Kuala Lumpur (Choo 1968:137). Another notable deity is *Dabogong* (most commonly known by its Hokkien designation, *Tua Peh Kong*), who is thought to be derived from *Tudigong,* the earth god, but is occasionally treated as the personification of the pioneer spirit (Sakai 1981:135). Shrines dedicated to *Dabogong* are sometimes known as *Datuk Kong,* in reference to their linkage with Malay territorial spirits.[7] An interesting development in recent years concerns the inclusion of Satya Sai Baba, a Hindu saint in South India, in the pantheon of many *shen* worshippers who are attracted to his alleged healing powers (Lee 1982). Pictures of Satya Sai Baba adorn the altars of many *shen* worshippers, many of whom have journeyed to South India to receive his blessings. This development does not imply that many *shen* worshippers have become Hindus, but that the eclecticism of the Chinese religious system is maintained as long as its practitioners are free to tap any available *shen* power for thaumaturgical purposes.

As the most open system among the established religions on the Peninsula, Chinese folk religion is also the least centralized in terms of administration and organization. Most Chinese temples specializing in *shen* worship are individually managed by a local committee which may be linked to a particular Chinese voluntary association. Each temple is an independent body but may have some ties with other temples. A national level Chinese temple organization has yet to be formed. The independence enjoyed by these temples implies that each is autonomous

in its activities, especially in the introduction of new deities and new forms of worship, as in the case of *Xinru Jingshe* (The Temple of Inner Peace), which will be described later.

Despite the weak links between *shen* temples, many are characteristically similar in providing the services of a spirit medium. Many temples that are maintained by residential communities, voluntary associations and clubs employ spirit mediums on a regular basis to answer the needs of the worshippers. Some spirit mediums may also double as temple keepers. The principal role of the spirit medium (known popularly in Hokkien as *dang ki,* or 'divining youth') is thaumaturgical. He delivers advice and performs healing in an entranced state occasioned by *shen* possession. Most of the descending deities are Chinese in origin, although there are some mediums who are frequently possessed by Malay spirits (Elliott 1955:113; Lee 1983). Spirit mediumship has become more popular since Peninsular Malaysia became independent in 1957. According to Choo (1968:48), during the first ten years of independence 35 Chinese temples of various sizes were built in Kuala Lumpur. The economic prosperity of this period contributed to the rapid expansion of these temples. At the same time, the legalization of lotteries stimulated an increased flow of fortune seekers to these temples. Consequently, spirit mediums specializing in possession by lottery deities enjoyed a booming business. Many urban Chinese also sought spirit mediums as an alternative to Western medicine. This pattern of mediumistic consultation continues to this day. Given the high demand for spirit mediums in contemporary urban Malaysia, it is necessary to examine how their services are organized and delivered.

The Organization of Spirit Mediumship

Spirit mediums can be professionally categorized as temple employees or individual entrepreneurs. The former generally receive a monthly salary from the temple committee in return for their services as spirit medium and occasionally as temple keeper. Nowadays, spirit mediums who double as temple keepers are rare, since the salary offered is not attractive and is equivalent to a small allowance against the rising cost of living in urban Malaysia. This double role is usually fulfilled by older single Chinese men who treat the temple as their home. Younger mediums who are temple employees tend to conduct seances on a part-time basis, since they hold other jobs in the day and maintain a family elsewhere. These temple mediums usually do not receive direct payment from their clients, who are expected to offer a donation to the temple's coffers.

Spirit mediums who practise on their own are either former temple employees with an established clientele or an individual entrepreneur whose early career was supported by friends and family members. These mediums normally operate in their homes, part of which is converted

into a consultation chamber complete with altars, images of deities, and various religious paraphernalia. Their homes are often treated as temples, where a character board for religious identification hangs over the main door-frame. Some mediums, however, conduct their business away from their homes in shacks or rented buildings that are furnished to look like a temple. Like the younger mediums employed by temple committees, many independent mediums conduct seances only in the evening after they have finished their day jobs. The oath which mediums take at the beginning of their careers usually forbids them to perform healing for large profits (although this does not necessarily mean that all mediums will abide by it). Thus, most mediums are forced to seek other employment to supplement their low income. Independent mediums who have no other jobs may be available for consultation around the clock and some of them run herbal dispensaries to earn extra income.

The services provided by spirit mediums range from counselling to soul raising. Generally, most mediums follow the standard practice of giving advice and preparing talismans (*fu*) while under possession by a particular *shen*. Specialists in automatic writing and soul raising are rare. The former dispense advice in an entranced state by writing with a stick on sand or tablets. It is believed that the *shen* possessing him directs his hand. In Kuala Lumpur, the *Quxian Miao* located in the Gombak area is one of few temples which offer this specialized service. This temple has been established for more than sixty years and is run by a committee of local Chinese traders and businessmen. The medium is a Chinese man in his seventies who performs automatic writing and offers other services such as palm-reading and horoscope consultations. Soul raising tends to be a specialty performed by older Chinese women known as *wen mi po* (Cantonese, *man meai poh*, and Hokkien, *kang bong*). These women are reputed to have the ability to communicate with the souls of their clients' dead relatives. Soul raisers usually do not conduct seances in temples but at appointed times in their homes or rented premises. In Kuala Lumpur, two soul raisers who work independently of each other have gained wide reputations in the Chinese community. Both are Hakka women. One is in her forties and operates in a shack in a working-class area. The other is in her twenties and conducts seances at her home in a middle-class suburb. The methods of these specialists will be described later.

Spirit mediums seldom advertise their services in print, although their presence is usually indicated by a flag with the Eight Trigrams (*Bagua*) outside their places of practice. The most common means of gaining access to a medium's services is through personal introduction. Thus, the wider a spirit medium's reputation and network of contacts, the easier for new clients to reach him. A popular medium usually treats a large clientele every evening, so much so that his home or temple resembles a doctor's waiting-room with patients holding number tags as part of the queue. Many mediums attend to their clients in public view, with the

result that the latter's personal problems are not effectively concealed from others. In the case of the older soul raiser, onlookers even participate in the seance by responding emotionally to the exchange between her and the client. At *Quxian Miao,* clients are required to relate their problems to a temple interpreter, who records them on a paper talisman which is later burned on the altar. The clients return to the temple at an appointed time and consult the medium in one sitting. Some mediums, however, are more discreet in their practices, as in the case of the younger soul raiser who conducts seances behind a closed door. At the end of a consultation, clients may drink a glass of water mixed with ashes from burnt incense paper, or may receive herbal prescriptions, or may be given a paper talisman stamped with the temple's seal and daubed with the medium's blood. In some cases, the medium prescribes a special amulet but does not immediately deliver it until the required materials are gathered and necessary incantations performed.

The wide range of individualistic styles in spirit mediumship suggests that its organization is somewhat loose and fractioned, which in a way reflects the decentralized nature of Chinese folk religion. There is an implicit recognition among spirit mediums that each is an individual claimant to a source of *shen* power and is therefore personally obligated to the *shen* concerned and not to other fellow-mediums. Each medium carefully guards the boundaries of his specialty and tends to be circumspect about the motives of others in the profession. For most mediums, occult knowledge is not freely available unless it is to be imparted to an apprentice. Thus, spirit mediumship is characterized by the development of individual cults, each centering on the reputation of a particular medium whose guarded attitude towards others maintains the competitive atmosphere of the profession.

Mediumistic Performances.

The craft of mediumship largely comprises a public display of an altered demeanour and certain stereotyped behaviours that supposedly signify *shen* descent into a medium's body. Clients generally accept this display as a genuine demonstration of *shen* possession because of their trust in the medium's reputation, the beginnings of which can be traced to the medium's accounts of divine selection. The recurring theme in such accounts focuses on the discovery of mediumistic abilities through a spontaneous exhibition of trance-like behaviours or a series of dreams which involve a patron deity. These signs are initially ignored unless they persist for a long time, or until a tragedy occurs which is interpreted as a prelude to a career of mediumship. When a person heeds these signs seriously, he either seeks the tutelage of an experienced medium or allows himself to be guided by his patron deity. These narratives of mediums' careers form an important corpus of inspirational knowledge that provides a legitimizing base for their later performances.

Mediumistic performances fall into two main categories: those that are routinized at consultations and those that require elaborate orchestration at spirit or temple festivals. The former type of performances may be considered perfunctory in the sense that each medium follows a fixed pattern of behaviour which is somewhat predictable but revered by clients as conduct of a divine order. This pattern of trance behaviour usually varies from one medium to another, but can be generally classified into three stages. The first stage involves trance induction of which there are several methods. The medium may sit still, inhale incense, or cough violently as though he is about to vomit. These procedures are usually accompanied by chanting. Some mediums prefer to listen to chants played from a tape recorder. The onset of trance is signified by head swirling, rolling back of eyes, trembling in various parts of the body, and changes in the pitch of the voice. When a medium begins to show signs of possession, his assistants (who are family or temple committee members) will dress him in an apron-like garment which is embroidered with the names of the temple and descending *shen*. Sometimes he is given a sword, flags, or a whip depending on the identity of the descending deity. A Chinese medium who is possessed by a Malay deity does not wear an embroidered garment but a coloured head band, each colour identifying a particular deity.[8] Most mediums do not open their eyes during trance. Upon possession, the medium bows before the main altar and performs the Eight Trigrams Movement (in some cases, this Movement is performed before trance begins). Some mediums begin the trance by whipping in the air. When he is ready for consultation, he moves to a large red table and hits it with a small red wooden block to his left, right and front as a gesture to frighten away evil spirits. Then he sits on a large large red wooden chair known as the Dragon Seat that is marked with the temple's name and the Eight Trigrams.

In the second stage, clients consult the entranced medium on problems related to health, family conflicts, auspicious dates for various ceremonies, charms, jobs and so on. In most cases, communication between the clients and medium is mediated by an assistant who is alleged to have the experience and ability to understand instructions from the *shen*. Mediums tend to speak in Mandarin when they are possessed by the principal deities of the Chinese pantheon. However, they will speak in Chinese dialects, such as Cantonese and Hokkien, if they are possessed by a *shen* with specific regional origins. Mediums who are possessed by Malay deities will speak only in Malay. During consultation, the medium adopts the gait and characteristics of the possessing *shen*. For example, if he is possessed by *Dashengye* (the Monkey God), he will grimace and scratch his body like a monkey; if he is possessed by *Santaizi* (or *Nazha*, the Third Prince) he will speak in a high-pitched voice and act in a childish, recalcitrant manner. Most clients are given a paper talisman or *fu* when the consultation ends. *Fu*

are strips of yellow, green or white paper on which arcane characters or diagrams are inscribed. A medium usually writes with black ink on a *fu*, although occasionally he may use blood from his cut tongue as a substitute. A *fu* is considered efficacious only after it has been stamped with the temple's seal. Some clients may request the medium to stamp their clothing with the temple's seal for protection. In the third stage, the medium emerges from his trance by announcing the departure of the *shen* and performing various dramatic actions such as throwing weapons on the table, hitting his head against the table, or shouting loudly. If possession is successive, the medium will announce the identity of the next descending *shen*. His assistants will change the embroidered garment and hand him the appropriate weapons and other objects of *shen* identification.

Mediumistic performances also comprise an important aspect of various Chinese calendrical festivals (such as *Jiuhuangye* or the Nine Emperor God Festival held in the ninth lunar month) and the birthday celebrations of patron deities. At these festivals, several mediums and their apprentices become possessed by different deities and perform a variety of awe-inspiring acts to demonstrate their apparent imperviousness to physical pain. Because these festivals are large-scale public events, the special performances by mediums are held over several consecutive evenings, in addition to Chinese opera performances organized by the temple committee. *Shen* possession on these occasions is either systematically induced or spontaneously demonstrated.[9] The former method is usually preceded by group chanting that is participated in by both mediums and temple committee members. Chanters who do not read Chinese are sometimes given romanized verses to recite. After the chanting is over, the chief medium presides over the possession of other mediums by seating and holding each individual who chants silently until falling into a trance. Assisted by other mediums, the chief medium pierces a skewer (that may be 2 metres in length) through one or both cheeks of the possessed medium. This is done by pinching the fleshy portion of the cheek and gently introducing the sharp end of the skewer through it, often without drawing much blood if skillfully done. As the skewer is pushed through the cheek, the chief medium wraps incense paper and pours alcohol as a sterilizing agent over it. An embroidered garment is tied around the entranced medium to identify the descending deity. Other mediums are pierced in the same manner or with shorter skewers in other parts of the body. The chief medium and his immediate subordinates may abstain from this mode of self-mortification, reserving their strength for other feats such as walking barefoot over a bridge of knives, flagellating themselves with prickballs, drinking boiling oil, and so on. These feats of physical endurance are performed following a procession led by the entranced mediums and their entourage of temple assistants carrying images of deities strapped to red sedan chairs. The

presence of the deities is suggested by the swinging of the sedan chairs. The climax of the festival is reached in a fire-walking ceremony performed by the entranced mediums, who walk barefoot over a bed of hot coals, followed by supplicants who have made vows to or requested blessings from the deities.

Briefer and less elaborate displays are put on at smaller temples or homes of independent mediums who have limited access to the required resources for grand celebrations. Possession may not be so well coordinated at these smaller-scale festivals. Each participating medium may become entranced independently of the others, practising his own form of self-mortification without adhering to any fixed schedule.

The performances of spirit mediums specializing in automatic writing and soul raising are quite different from those of the ordinary mediums described above. In the case of automatic writing, the performance centers on the medium's ability to provide advice in the form of divinely guided writing rather than on his personality changes under possession. At the *Quxian Miao,* the medium goes into a trance while his assistants chant to invoke the patron deity, *Guandi* (the God of War, Wealth and Literature). Once in trance, the medium hits the table with a peach stick that is also his writing instrument. When the writing begins, an assistant sits near the medium to interpret the characters that are etched out on a rectangular hardwood table. He reads aloud the characters, which are written on paper by another assistant. If the assistant misreads or mispronounces a character, the medium will strike the table continuously until a correction is made. The advice or remedy given is usually in the form of a poem with seven-line stanzas in classical Chinese that requires expert interpretation from an assistant who is a graduate in this field from a Taiwanese university.[10] After performing for three or more hours, the medium collapses on the table. An assistant slaps him on the shoulder and calls out his name to rouse him from the trance.

Soul raisers usually begin seances by requesting basic information from their clients about the dead relatives they wish to contact, such as the names of the deceased, dates of their birth and death, and so forth. She then closes her eyes and throws uncooked rice over her shoulders as she chants. The rice that is tossed is believed to be an important element for establishing spiritual contact, although there are some soul raisers who do not use it. Sometimes a soul raiser may cover her face with a piece of cloth while chanting. If the spiritual guide is *Guanyin* (the Goddess of Mercy) she will recite the *Guanyin zhou.* If the guides are child ghosts,[11] she will chant the *Tongziku zhou.* During the seance, the soul raiser may belch continuously or vomit if contact is to be made with the soul of a person who has been dead for less than a hundred days.[12] While in trance, the soul raiser may ask the client for further details about the deceased or she may describe the soul that is sought. When a client indicates that the correct soul has been contacted, the soul raiser

changes the tone of her voice to assume the role of the deceased. Conversations between clients and their deceased relatives, speaking through the soul raiser, are often conducted in a Chinese dialect and are generally concerned with the latter's well being in the spirit world. Another common theme of these conversations centers on the deceased's needs, such as food offerings, clothing and money (in the form of hell bank notes). Some clients may request lottery numbers from the raised souls, promising to burn paper effigies of houses, cars and other luxury items as spiritual gifts if they win. At the end of a seance, clients leave their payment on the tin of uncooked rice.

Cultic Innovations

The above descriptions have focused on the practices of 'conventional' spirit mediums whose function as spiritual intermediaries is largely undisputed by the practitioners of Chinese folk religion. Possession ideologies as accepted aspects of the traditional religious belief system tend not to vary greatly among these mediums. The more flamboyant mediums are not likely to challenge these ideologies but may embroider on them to enhance their self-image. These ideological manipulations range from fanciful claims (as in the case of a Chinese female medium in Kuala Lumpur whose possessing deity is Satya Sai Baba) to exotic theories of divine intervention in human life. The amorphous character of Chinese folk religion provides a fertile ground for such innovations to flourish. Spirit mediums are not answerable to any central religious authority for their innovative claims. Instead, they can use these claims to attract the clienteles of other mediums. These developments in mediumistic ideologies and practices are best illustrated by the emergence of the *Xinru Jingshe* which I will now describe.

The *Xinru Jingshe* was founded in 1976 by Zhou, a Chinese businessman in his forties. Zhou in his younger days had experienced a series of business failures until he met a Taoist teacher who taught him the art of divination. After the death of his teacher, he left his hometown in Ipoh for Petaling Jaya. Soon after his arrival he established a successful business in divination, palm reading and horoscope consultation. In late 1978, Zhou began receiving visions from a higher spiritual being known as *Tiandi Datong* (whose other name is Orthomaliwate), claiming that he had been chosen to lead the world out of its spiritual chaos. Revelations about human origins and various worldly predicaments were incorporated into a set of teachings called *Zhenli Shengfa* (The Teachings of the True Principle), the scope of which is still expanding as Zhou receives more visions from his spiritual guide. By 1983 he had recruited 15 Chinese disciples, whom he hopes to use as instruments for the gradual expansion of his cult. His new status as a cult leader has not eclipsed his career in fortune telling. He continues to practise divination and runs a retail business in consumer items.

The *Xinru Jingshe* is housed in a rented two-storey bungalow in a busy Chinese section of Petaling Jaya. The upper floor comprises the living-quarters of the Zhou family, while the ground floor is utilized for religious and business purposes. The living-room has been converted into a large worship area, one end of which is dominated by a long altar decked with candles, urns, teacups, and a small lime tree. On the wall behind the altar hangs a large pentagonal mirror marked with a white circle and five white lines radiating from the centre. On the white circle are some esoteric writings somewhat similar to those seen on *fu* talismans. A small air-conditioned room adjacent to the worship area is used for consultation and various business transactions. A larger room reserved for private meetings and ritual performances is located behind the worship area near the kitchen.

The membership of this cult is divided into three groups: the inner disciples, 'refuge' devotees, and ordinary supplicants. The first group is made up of 15 members who have been selected and tutored by Zhou in meditation and divination techniques. Of these 15 individuals, three are considered to be the most advanced disciples. They make and administer temple policies in consultation with Zhou. Disciple status is determined according to nine degrees of advancement in spiritual knowledge. Zhou is said to have reached the fifth degree, the highest thus far attained. The various degrees of spiritual advancement are marked by a complex dress code of different-coloured sleeves, robes and mitres worn on ceremonial occasions. 'Refuge' devotees are individuals who, in using the temple's consultation services, learn about Zhou's teachings but show an uncommitted interest in the cult's activities. The size of this group varies from time to time. Ordinary supplicants are members of the public who merely seek the thaumaturgical services provided by Zhou and his inner disciples. They are either unaware of or show no interest in Zhou's teachings. Only the inner disciples participate in group prayers thrice a week. At these prayers, the disciples chant in Mandarin while listening to special hymns composed by Zhou which are recorded on cassette tapes. This is followed by a short period of meditation. Zhou does not participate in these prayers. He meditates alone in a separate room and claims that only he attains spiritual communion with Orthomaliwate in either a state of waking or dreaming.

The main body of Zhou's teachings is concerned with cosmic laws and the origins of mankind. Zhou believes that the existence of the universe is maintained by a general mass of positive and negative forces. The unity of the five elements (*wu xing* – wood, metal, water, earth, air) provides equilibrium for these forces. The pentagonal mirror symbolizes harmonious existence in relation to *wu xing*. Human life force is subsumed under this general cosmic principle. An understanding of this principle is therefore a prerequisite for manipulating life forces, which can result in various psychic phenomena such as astral travel and mental

telepathy. An individual can develop this psychic ability provided he places himself under Zhou's guidance in meditation and prayer. Zhou's instructions in meditation techniques comprise some of the arcane knowledge that has been revealed to him by *Tiandi Datong* and are inaccessible to outsiders.

According to Zhou's revelational theory of human evolution, *Tiandi Datong* 'visited' earth 72,000 years ago and discovered a rich, variegated environment that supported all forms of life. Within this environment, all life forms were involved in a fierce struggle for survival. He chanced upon Man, who was a primitive creature crawling on all fours, living in caves, and possessing only an instinct for survival. Sensing that Man had the potential to develop spiritually, the divine visitor imbued him with some of his own intelligence. As Man's consciousness evolved, Orthomaliwate sent four of his sixteen disciples to chart Man's religious progress. The first disciple landed in the Himalayas and through him some of his master's teachings were passed on to Gautama Siddharta, who later founded Buddhism. The second disciple arrived on the island of Atlantis and imparted his knowledge to the people there. This knowledge was inscribed on a black stone which sank with the island but surfaced in the Mediterranean 12,000 years later. The stone was retrieved and found its way to Arabia to become the Kha'bah, the sacred stone of Islam. The third disciple journeyed to the Middle East and found his successor in the person of Jesus Christ, while the fourth disciple introduced Taoism to the people of China. Orthomaliwate's other disciples are awaiting instructions to perform their earthly duties as the world becomes enveloped by different crises. Zhou insists that his theory is incomplete, since his acquisition of divine knowledge is still continuing. When all visionary information about Man's past is complete, he will record it to form the basic scriptural text of the cult.

Zhou's style of mediumship differs radically from that of the conventional spirit mediums. Unlike most mediums who practise healing in an entranced state, Zhou delivers advice to his clients in a wakeful, conscious state, without using methods that involve blood-letting. His role as a Chinese thaumaturge is distinguished from that of a spiritual leader. Orthomaliwate is not perceived as a descending deity but as one who is expanding Zhou's consciousness for the betterment of mankind. Zhou performs divination and various healing rituals for his clients, but not under the auspices of any spiritual figure. This separation of roles suggests that Zhou is not a spirit medium in the strict sense of the term, but an individual who utilizes his position as a thaumaturge to reinforce certain ideas syncretized from Chinese folk tradition and Western pseudo-science in the promotion of a religious cult. Yet, his practices cannot be dismissed as atypical of Chinese mediumistic performance in Malaysia. Although most mediums do not offer elaborate ideologies of their earthly role, their activities are nevertheless publicly perceived as

having been sanctioned by divine powers. Similarly, Zhou's claim of spiritual linkage to Orthomaliwate provides an important reference point from which all his activities, spiritual and thaumaturgical, are evaluated. It is within this context of exclusive spiritual claims that mediumship can assume a variety of forms, especially in the absence of a central authority regulating Chinese religious practices.

This new type of mediumship has a tendency to generate wide appeal in all sections of the Chinese community. Aside from its emphasis on divination and healing, it is presenting a new image in the form of mystical teachings that sometimes contain millenarian themes. Some Western-educated, middle-class Chinese may avoid seeking the assistance of conventional spirit mediums for fear of being stigmatized as backward and superstitious. However, there is less likelihood that they will be reluctant to identify with a modern medium whose healing abilities are undiminished by a sophisticated claim to divine knowledge. The attraction of Westernized Chinese to the new mediumship is attested by the socio-economic backgrounds of the inner disciples of *Xinru Jingshe,* several of whom are English-speaking, middle-class professionals. A similar development has also been observed in the membership of *Baitiangong,* a new Chinese religious movement whose leader exhibits mediumistic characteristics parallel to Zhou's (Ackerman and Lee 1982, Lee and Ackerman 1983). Innovations in Malaysian Chinese mediumship are in a sense ethnically regenerative, since they provide the necessary ideological trappings for arousing interest among Westernized Chinese who are sceptical of the more baroque aspects of their religious heritage. This increased emphasis on ideological manipulations suggests that the new mediumship represents an important intermediate stage between a thaumaturgical cult and a religious movement. The new breed of spirit mediums, like Zhou, have not totally abandoned healing and divination, but have arranged them as adjunct activities to an elaborate ideological framework for the establishment of a religious movement. In other words, *Xinru Jingshe* represents an alternate form of Chinese spirit mediumship which not only competes with the conventional spirit medium cults but also provides a nucleus for the development of a religious movement.

Conclusion

The organization and activities of Malaysian Chinese spirit mediums as outlined above seem to show much continuity with those observed three or more decades ago, if we are to use Elliott's ethnography (1955) as a base of comparison.[13] However, Elliott (1985:168) argued that the introduction of modern, secular education would contribute to a decline of Chinese spirit mediumship. The foregoing data suggest that there is little evidence of such a trend. On the contrary, Chinese spirit mediumship and its innovations continue to attract clients of various back-

grounds. Even many Westernized Chinese are members of these spirit medium cults, thus rendering questionable the predicted dissonance between Western rationalism and traditional occultism. To understand the survival of these cults, we must consider the status implications of Chinese spirit mediumship in contemporary Malaysia.

Spirit mediumship cannot be considered a lucrative occupation, since the earnings are usually small and hardly sufficient for an urban livelihood. As pointed out earlier, many mediums resort to taking other jobs to make ends meet. Yet, spirit mediumship is not a dying profession but continues to draw many enthusiastic novices, particularly from lower middle- and working-class backgrounds. If the future of the profession is not determined primarily by financial factors, then we must consider non-economic rewards, such as social prestige, as a source of its occupational continuity. A spirit medium is generally recognized as a unique individual endowed with special abilities or specially selected by divine forces to perform various spiritual tasks that ordinary humans are incapable of doing. This social recognition implies that most spirit mediums enjoy some public respect for their demonstrations of spiritual powers. Such respect does not necessarily end with the departure of a *shen* from a medium's body, but may comprise an important component of his social identity. By working-class youths with high social aspirations, a claim to spiritual powers conferred by popular *shen* in the form of spirit mediumship may be perceived as an alternative means of gaining social prestige which members of their class often lack. At temple and spirit festivals, young apprentices are often to be seen lounging around in their medium outfits, parading their newly gained status before acquaintances and strangers. They have to undergo painful initiation rituals to confirm their status as spiritual emissaries of the Chinese community. The prestige gained on such occasions transcends the pain experienced in acts of self-mortification. When an individual has established a reputation as a powerful medium, he usually has difficulty in relinquishing that role to seek total involvement in another occupation. For example, one of the mediums investigated had treated a wealthy Malay client so effectively that the latter offered him a partnership in the pub business. Although he spent much time running his new business, he continued his practice as a spirit medium on some evenings of the week. In other words, the prestige motive provides a strong incentive against the termination of a medium's spiritual calling.

The social recognition of a spirit medium's powers provides an important measure of the strength of Chinese spirit beliefs in contemporary Malaysia. The evidence to date suggests the unfaltering quality of these beliefs, to the extent that they have acquired new veneers in the form of syncretic ideologies as in the case of *Xinru Jingshe*. The tenacity of these beliefs is grounded in a practical orientation towards the acquisition and utilization of supernatural powers for the fulfilment of mundane needs.

For many ordinary individuals, the powers of the spirit medium represent the instrument by which these beliefs are translated into action. These powers are not necessarily perceived as incongruent with the techniques of Western science, but as a complementary resource for manipulating the world at large. The prevalence of these attitudes ensures that spirit mediumship will not be reduced to an anachronistic folk practice in the Malaysian Chinese community.

NOTES

1 I do not wish to make a sharp distinction between the terms 'medium' and 'shaman'. It is often argued that mediums lend their bodies to descending deities for possession, while shamans engage in magical flights. Despite these alleged differences in trance characteristics, the role of medium and shaman are often interchangeable. Heinze (1982), for example, has presented data showing that shamans are capable of experiencing mediumistic phases during their performances, just as mediums are known to exhibit shamanic characteristics in their trance states. This interchangeability of roles suggests that pure types of shamans and mediums are rare. For practical purposes, I use the term 'medium' to refer to an individual who claims to possess the ability to communicate with deities in a variety of ways and to exteriorize his soul into various spiritual realms.

2 Elliott's study was conducted in Singapore in the early 1950s. Some of his observations have been updated in an unpublished thesis by Wee (1977) and by Choong (1983), Heinze (1983) and Ju (1983).

3 The data for this paper were collected intermittently between 1980 and 1984 in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. The survey reported here does not represent an exhaustive study of Chinese spirit mediumship in Malaysia. Rather, it is limited to some mediumship practices in an urban locale in Malaysia. Altogether 14 spirit medium establishments were investigated during this period of research. I wish to thank the following individuals who assisted me at various stages of this study: Kong Lai Mei, Rosalyn Lim, Wong Keng Chun, Yap Beng Choo, and Yong Lai Peng.

4 'Shenism' is derived from the Chinese word *shen,* which loosely translated means 'spirit manifestations of powerful beings which exist in another dimension but have the ability to influence events in the material world'. *Shen* is also considered the positive component of the soul *ling hun* (Harrell 1979).

5 In the 1980 Census, Chinese religion is arbitrarily divided into three categories: Buddhism, Confucianism/Taoism, and folk practices. As these categories are not exclusively distinct in popular religious practice, it is reasonable to lump them together to produce an overall population figure. See Tan (1983) for a discussion of the arbitrariness of these categories.

6 Islam is the official religion of Malaysia and all Malays, who comprise about 55 percent of the population, are Muslims by birth. Only 0.2 percent of the Chinese population in Peninsular Malaysia is Muslim. Christianity in Peninsular Malaysia is a minority religion and is the professed faith of about 4 percent of the Chinese population (Government of Malaysia 1983). Chinese Christians and Muslims are most active in the urban areas. In recent years there have been concerted efforts by Christians and Muslims to convert *shen* worshippers.

7 *Datuk* is a Maly title or term of respect. It also means 'grandfather'. *Datuk* spirits are generally thought to be present in specific areas, such as mining pools, large trees or uncleared jungle lands. It is often believed that persons who trespass upon these areas without proper propitiations will incur the wrath of the *Datuk* spirits.

8 The descending Malay deities are usually identified according to specific colours

(rather than actual names), such as *Datuk Hijau* (the Green Deity), *Datuk Hitam* (the Black Deity), and so on. These deities are in most cases connected with Malay legendary heroes and warriors.

9 The descriptions that follow are derived mainly from my observations of two spirit medium festivals held in 1980 and 1981 in honour of their patron deities' birthdays. Both were held at the mediums' houses in suburban Petaling Jaya.

10 To some extent, these poems correspond to the morality books (*shan shu*), which are ethical tracts in the form of poems characterized by stanzas of four lines produced by Taiwanese spirit mediums under trance, as described by Seaman (1978:52).

11 It is believed that soul raisers are often helped by the souls of dead children. Soul raisers are said to cultivate these souls by burying placentas in flower pots planted with bamboo shoots. The bamboo is cut when a particular child is a year old. This action is alleged to result in the child's death, and his soul is stolen by the soul raiser.

12 Soul raisers claim they vomit because of the stench emitted by the decomposition of dead bodies. However, soul raising within 100 days of a death is considered the best time because the soul is allegedly still wandering on the earth plane. However, if a person has been dead for more than 60 years, his soul would be difficult to locate as he might have been reborn in another life on earth.

13 I am limiting my discussion to Chinese spirit mediumship in Malaysia. Comparison with contemporary spirit mediumship in mainland China is not feasible, as the necessary data are presently unavailable.

GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS
(in order of their occurrence in the text)

Pinyin Romanization	*Chinese Characters*	*English Equivalent*
Bai shen	拜神	Worshipping the deities
San Bao Tai Shen	三保太神	The Great Three Precious Spirit
Dabogong	大伯公	Honourable Grand Uncle Spirit
Tudigong	土地公	Honourable Earth Spirit
Xinru Jingshe	心如精舍	Temple of Inner Peace
Jitong (H., dangki)	乩童	Divining youth
Quxian Miao	聚仙廟	Temple of Multiple Deities
Wen mi po	問米婆	Rice divining old woman
Bagua	八卦	Eight Trigrams
Dashengye	大聖爺	Name of the Monkey God
Santaizi	三太子	Name of the Third Prince
Nazha	哪吒	Name of the Third Prince
Fu	符	Paper Talismans
Jiuhuangye	九皇爺	Nine Emperor God Festival
Guandi	關帝	The God of War, Wealth and Literature
Guanyin zhou	觀音咒	Chants invoking the Goddess of Mercy
Tongziku zhou	童子嚳咒	Chants invoking child ghosts
Tiandi Datong	天地大同	The Great Unity of Heaven and Earth
Zhenli Shengfa	真理聖法	Teachings of the True Principle
Wu xing	五行	The five elements
Baitiangong	拜天公	Pray to the Heavenly Father
Shan shu	善書	Morality books

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