

Article

The Cult of the Underworld in Singapore: Mythology and Materiality

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Abstract: Myths provide hagiographic and iconographic accounts of the gods, which shape rituals that are performed in cults associated with these gods. In the realization of iconographies and ritualization of narratives in myths, material objects play an active role. This article examines the pattern of worship in the cult of the Ah Pehs, a group of Underworld gods whose efficacy lies in the promise of occult wealth, and focuses on the material aspects such as offerings and paraphernalia associated with these gods. Though ritual texts and scriptures are absent in the Ah Peh cult, symbols in the form of material objects play a crucial role. These objects are also considered as synecdoche for the gods in certain cases. The first part of this paper presents a case study of the autonomous ritual of “Burning Prosperity Money”, which reveals the cycle of occult exchange between gods and devotees. The second part involves an imagery analysis of the material objects central to the cult, and argues that in the system of reciprocity with the gods, material objects common to the everyday life are reinterpreted and enchanted with a capitalist turn, resulting in the development of occult economies within the local Chinese religious sphere.

Keywords: Underworld gods; Ah Peh; materiality; mythology; occult economy

Spirits to be sent for reincarnation stood on a bridge. As they were reading a poem carved on a cliff on the opposite shore, two tall and huge ghosts suddenly jumped from the shore onto the surface of the river, and scared the spirits off their balance. One of the duo wore a black official hat, a presentable ritual costume and well-embroidered coat. He had pen and paper in his hands, a sharp blade planted into his shoulder, and instruments for torture hung around his waist. His round eyes stared wide, and “ha-ha” he laughed. He was called “Life is Impermanent”. The other of the duo was dressed in a white robe. His bleeding face was covered in filth. He had an abacus in his hand, a rice sack slung over his shoulder, and silvery paper money hung around his neck in front of his chest. He carried a deep and sorrow frown, and let out endless sighs. He was called “Death is Set”. The duo hastened and shoved, and down the river the spirits went.

Excerpt of “Amnesiac Wine Pavilion” in *Precious Records of the Jade Regulations*

Myths provide hagiographic and iconographic accounts of the gods, which shape rituals that are performed in cults associated with these gods. In the realization of iconographies and ritualization of narratives in myths, material objects play an active role. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara note in their study on Hinduism and Buddhism that anthropomorphic images coexist with other sacred objects instead of the latter being relegated to the margins of orthodox worship. Moreover, the “‘image’ of a deity may even be an assemblage of objects, in which an anthropomorphic element is the least important in determining its identity.” (Granoff and Shinohara 2004, p. 2). This article examines the pattern of worship in the cult of the Ah Pehs, a group of Underworld gods whose efficacy lies in the

promise of occult wealth, and focuses on the material aspects such as offerings and paraphernalia associated with these gods. Though ritual texts and scriptures are absent in the Ah Peh cult, symbols in the form of material objects play a crucial role. These objects are also considered as synecdoche for the gods in certain cases.

Research on Chinese religion, especially popular religion, relies substantially on the material aspect, such as the importance of statues and also how myths are constructed upon material objects. In Chinese religion, as a part of the larger Asian religious tradition, materiality and textuality are not mutually exclusive and should be considered alongside one another (Fleming and Mann 2014, p. 13). Material objects possess symbolic values, and in the case of religious paraphernalia and offerings, these objects usually carry a metaphorical function that require a textual translation in order to reveal their embedded meaning(s). That religion is “a system of symbols” relates closely to Chinese religion, as different gods are associated with different symbols, such as being equipped with different paraphernalia and require different types of offerings, and these symbols are able to “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” in devotees (Geertz 2017, p. 91).

As synecdoche for the gods, material objects in the Ah Peh cult not only allow for the absence of ritual specialists, such as spirit mediums and priests, but also empower devotees with the agency to carry out autonomous ritual and shape their own understanding of the cult. The first part of the article provides an overview of the Ah Peh cult in Singapore, focusing on its reception and patterns of worship. Through a case study of the autonomous ritual of “Burning Prosperity Money”, the second part of the article examines the cycle of occult exchange between gods and devotees. Lastly, the third part involves an imagery analysis of the material objects central to the cult, and argues that in the system of reciprocity with the gods, material objects common to the everyday life are reinterpreted and enchanted with a capitalist turn, resulting in the development of occult economies within the local Chinese religious sphere.

1. Overview of the Ah Peh Cult in Singapore

“Life is Impermanent” and “Death is Set,” as described in the epigraph cited from the *Precious Records of the Jade Regulations*, are more commonly known as the Black and White Impermanence Ghosts (Heibai Wuchang 黑白無常), which is the anthropomorphized form of the Buddhist soteriological concept of Anicca or impermanence. Although the Black and White Impermanence Ghosts originated from a key concept in Buddhism, they are usually seen instead in Daoist and Chinese popular religious sites of worship. A similar description of the Impermanence Ghosts, as in the *Precious Records of the Jade Regulations* (Yuli baoshao 玉歷寶鈔), can also be found mirrored in the *Precious Records of Penetrating the Underworld* (Dongming baoji 洞冥寶記).

In contrast to *Jade Regulations*, *Penetrating the Underworld* was compiled during the early republican period based on spirit writing. Characteristics of “Life is Impermanent” and “Death is Set” are described in chapter 19:

[At the Border of the Yin and Yang, spirits of men and women burdened with instruments for torture flooded the pavement . . .] Two strong men appeared from the back, one of them is more than ten feet tall, puts on a tall hat, covered in a white shirt, and wore a pair of straw shoes. His mouth is as big as a basin, red as blood, and has a pair of eyes shining like the brightest star. He holds an umbrella in his left hand, fanning himself with his right, and “ha-ha” as he laughs. The other is dark-skinned and appears short. He is disheveled, dressed in a black shirt, and has a face similar to a metal wok. Carrying an abacus on his back, he held on to a chain and official tablet respectively on his left and right hands. Appearing sorrowful and crying, he opens and shuts his eyes while blood flowed out. They are identical to the statues of the Black and White Old Masters enshrined inside the Temple of the Eastern Marchmount . . . The one in white is called “Life is Impermanent” while that in black is called “Death is Set.” Both traverse into the Yang realm to arrest spirits of the deceased. (Dongming baoji 2011, p. 86)

Despite differences in the paraphernalia equipped and the inverse in Black and White color attribution, the usage of similar names, personalities, and roles of the Impermanence Ghosts highlights a form of intertextuality between both *Jade Regulations* and *Penetrating the Underworld*. Moreover, reference to the statues in the Temple of the Eastern Marchmount suggests that the Impermanence Ghosts of Buddhist origin have been adopted into the Daoist pantheon by late Imperial China, delegated as assistants to the Emperor of the Eastern Marchmount (Dongyue dadi 東嶽大帝)—the apex of the Underworld bureaucratic system who is in charge of rewards and punishments as well as life and death of mortals.

In addition to the Temple of the Eastern Marchmount, iconographies of the Black and White Impermanence Ghosts are also found in City God temples, or for that matter, most Daoist temples in Singapore. This pair of Impermanence Ghosts is more commonly known as the First and Second Grand Uncles (Da Er Yebo 大二爺伯), and the casual form as “Ah Peh,” where “Peh” is derived from the Hokkien pronunciation of “bo” in the phrase “yebo (Grand Uncle)” and “Ah” as a prefix without meaning. For there is no specific identity such as historical figures or persons with proper names and identification attached to the Black and White Impermanence Ghosts, and the term “Ah Peh” is also one that is generic that can refer to a collective group of Underworld gods. The roles of these Ah Pehs are wide ranging, from impartial law enforcers and fearsome ghost catchers to paragons of moral values, and also gods of wealth who are portrayed as one that accept bribes from the mortals in return of the granting of occult wealth.

Shrines dedicated to the Ah Pehs are usually separated from the main altar of a temple, either situated beneath, by the side of the main altar, or behind the main hall of a temple. Similar to the shrines dedicated to accompanying deities such as the Five Camp Generals, Tiger God, and Earth God, shrines to the Ah Pehs can also be examined as a type of “para-temple,” a concept derived from paratext in literary interpretation. Paratexts are additions in a published work that accompany the main text, such as the author’s name, illustrations, and preface, which affect the reception of the text itself (Genette 1991, pp. 261–63). Similarly, shrines to the Ah Pehs do not form a part of the main temple altar that is usually dedicated to the main god(s), but the contents of their shrine, along with those dedicated to the Tiger God, Five Camp Generals, etc., are able to shed light on the general reception of the temple as an entity. An elaborated shrine dedicated to the Ah Pehs, inclusive of a range of paraphernalia used during spirit medium consultation suggests that the cult of the Underworld in this temple is one that is active and engaging with the devotees. However, if the shrine for the Ah Pehs is only one that is small and contains minimal icons of worship and religious paraphernalia, it suggests then that the reception of the cult of the Underworld in that temple is low and that the shrine only carries a symbolic function.

Notably, the Ah Peh cult sees an absence of ritual texts or scriptures, but centralizes on a set of symbols instead. These symbols consist largely of everyday material objects that possess a sacred function under its secular guise. Hence, in the words of Laurel Kendall, the study of material religion raises the question of “how aspects of the material world come to be regarded as sacred, empowered, and agentive things” (Kendall 2020, p. 110). Referring to Figure 1, the photo shows an altar dedicated to the First and Second Grand Uncles in the New Heng San Teng temple (Xin heng shan ting 新恆山亭) located in Bukit Brown cemetery. Figure 2 shows another altar to the First and Second Grand Uncles in Hiang Tong Keng temple (Xian dang gong 賢當宮). Statues of the First and Second Grand Uncles are not enshrined in both altars, but both shares in common objects such as the abacus, palm-leaf fan, cigarette, and liquor.

The very act of devotees praying to these “objects” render them as synecdoche for the gods. While imageries and statues of the Ah Pehs are important aspects of the cult’s reception, the efficacy of these gods is usually expressed and achieved through these objects that are being used to interact with the devotees, thereby enhancing their reception. The following sections examine the material aspect of the Ah Peh cult, focusing in particular on the offerings to and the paraphernalia associated with the gods. In the system of reciprocity with the gods, material objects common to the everyday life are

being reinterpreted and enchanted with a capitalist turn based on the “look at me and get auspicious (*Yijian daji* 一見大吉)” and “look at me and strike it rich (*Yi jian facia* 一見發財)” mentality, resulting in the development of occult economies within the local Chinese religious sphere. Either of the phrases are commonly seen written on the tall hat of the First Grand Uncle (White Impermanence Ghost).



Figure 1. Altar to the Underworld gods in New Heng San Teng temple (Source: PF Foto).



Figure 2. Altar to the Underworld gods in Hiang Tong Keng temple. The characters on the black and white fans placed in front of the abacus read: “Hiang Tong Keng. Second Grand Uncle” and “Hiang Tong Keng. First Grand Uncle” respectively (Source: Author).

2. Money for the Gods and the Cycle of Occult Exchange

The very act of devotees burning paper money to gods essentially constructs a capitalistic relationship between both parties, where answered prayers are reciprocated with gifts that take on monetary forms. As the “imperial metaphor” of gods as bureaucrats, and the division of gods, ghosts, and ancestors are mirrored after the real-world social order, devotees have also perceived that gods do in fact require money. Paper money is thus burnt to the gods in exchange for real money. Hill Gates sees the political economy of the Underworld as one where the interaction of commoners with gods and ghosts results in petty-capitalist bargaining, and also one where the “conspicuous use of money in funeral and death-related ceremonies derives from a belief in the important supernatural transactions between people and gods believed responsible for each person’s incarnation and fate.” (Gates 1996, pp. 163, 170). In his influential study on reciprocity and systems of gift exchange, Marcel Mauss notes that the real-world economy is filled with religious elements, and money still possesses its magical power (Mauss 1967). Similarly, Peter van der Veer contends for the transcendental value of money that calls for a reevaluation of rational choice theories under different socio-economical contexts, for “the very transcendence and abstraction of money shows that the ways we break the religious and the sacred apart from the secular and the profane does not help us to provide better understandings of the disjunctures and differences that constitute social life” (van der Veer 2016, p. 58).

Figure 3 shows a type of paper money offered to the Ah Pehs, designed and produced during the early 2010s. Simplified versions of these “Ah Peh money,” which only include symbols of the paraphernalia carried by the Ah Pehs and printed in duotone with lesser motifs, have been in circulation since the twentieth century. Prior to using these “Ah Peh money,” devotees have largely modeled the paper offerings to the Ah Pehs after those offered to the ghosts, such as the “Ancient Clothes (Guyi 古衣),” which is a type of paper offerings filled with motifs and pictures of clothing and daily necessities. The act of burning such paper offerings places a strong emphasis on the idea of transformation (*hua* 化), that is turning images of clothes, accessories, and living necessities printed on the incense paper into respective real objects that can be used by the wandering ghosts.¹

Similarly, the act of burning the “Ah Peh Money” is thus to transform pictures of the abacus, chain, smoking pipe, robes, and headgear into real paraphernalia that the Ah Pehs use. Chinese characters printed along the border read “look at me and strike it rich” and “peace reigns all under heaven,” phrases written on the headgears that are unique to the First and Second Grand Uncles. Notably, motifs printed on the top and bottom corners include symbols of the Chinese golden ingots and coins, along with the characters “Ushering Wealth and Prosperity (Zhaocai jinbao 招財進寶),” thereby suggesting that the purpose of devotees burning the “Ah Peh Money” is to pray for personal luck and fortune.

The transaction between devotees and the Ah Pehs, in terms of “currency exchange” and to a certain extent bribery, is made explicit in the case of the burning of a type of incense paper known as the “Prosperity Money (Facai jin 發財金).” Figure 4 shows the cover of a box of “Prosperity Money” dedicated to the First and Second Grand Uncles, and also the Filial Son God who is known locally as the Third Grand Uncle.

¹ For a general discussion on the transformation of spirit money, see Hill Gates, “Money for Gods,” (Gates 1996, p. 261).



Figure 3. Modern paper money offered to the Ah Pehs (Source: Author).



Figure 4. Cover of the “Prosperity Money” box (Source: Author).

Printed on the box are the tall hats and paraphernalia unique to the three Grand Uncles—from left to right are those belonging to the Second, Third, and First Grand Uncles. Contents inside the box are laid out in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Contents inside a box of “Prosperity Money” (Source: Author). (A) is the front of the “Prosperity Money” incense paper featuring statues of the trio and embellished with motifs of hell notes, while (B) is the back of the “Prosperity Money” filled with pictures of golden and silver coins, ingots, and treasure urns. The couplet (printed in white font) on both sides of the “Prosperity Money” translates as “ten million taels of golden ingots and ten million strings of silver coins.” Along with the incense paper is a talisman (C) bearing the names of the City God and the three Grand Uncles, which is required to be burnt together with the “Prosperity Money,” thereby directing these incense paper to the respective gods. Lastly, a memorandum (D) is included in the package to guide the person making the offering on the proper procedure with a verse to recite.

The main text of the memorandum (D) is translated as follows:

To the First, Second, and Third Grand Uncles:

I (insert name), born in (insert date and time of birth), hereby burn (insert quantity) boxes of “First, Second, and Third Grand Uncles Prosperity Money.” I sincerely invite the three Grand Uncles to come forth and receive the offerings. Please bless me with good health, a thriving career, and my family with peace and harmony. May I have an abundance of wealth, be distanced from villains, and free from lawsuits. Please assist me in ushering in the good and warding off the evil, fulfil my wishes, and allow me to make a fortune.

Devotees’ logic behind burning such forms of incense paper to the gods is straightforward, that is Subject X gives Subject Y, and Subject Y receives and reciprocates. The key assumption is that there will always be reciprocity from the receiver. From the purchase of the “Prosperity Money” to the receiving of wealth (if any), however, involves a complex cycle of occult exchange (shown in Figure 6) with non-obligatory gifting, receiving, and reciprocating.

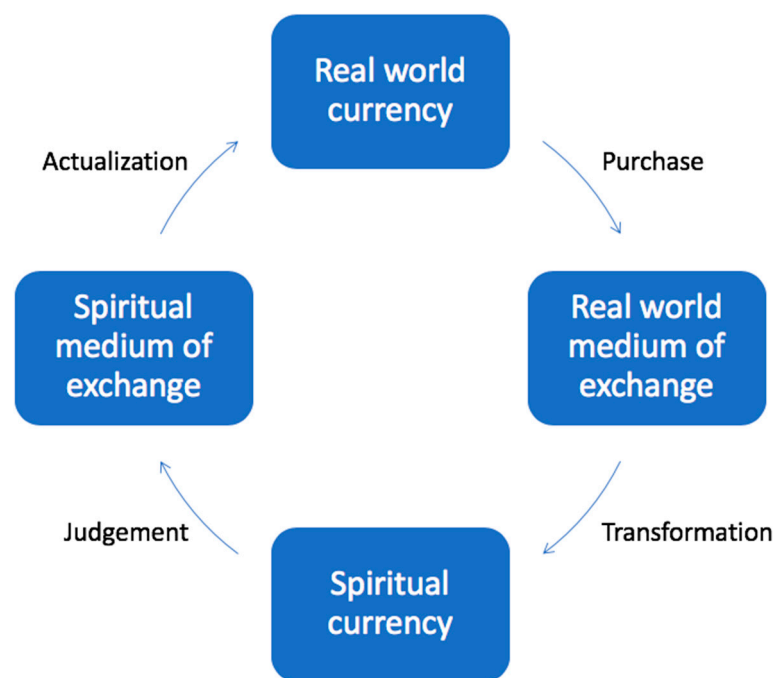


Figure 6. The cycle of occult exchange.

The cycle begins with the devotee purchasing a “real-world medium of exchange”—such as incense papers or other forms of offerings—using “real-world currency,” followed by transforming the medium of exchange—usually through burning—into “spiritual currency” for the gods. However, instead of reciprocating directly upon receiving the spiritual currency, the devotees will nevertheless be judged upon by the gods based on their sins and merits to determine whether blessings, if any, should be granted. All things positive, a “spiritual medium of exchange”—referring to the intangibles such as luck, fortune, and good karma—will be bestowed upon the devotees.²

Finally, the last stage of the cycle of occult exchange involves the process of actualization, converting the intangibles into real-world currency. In the case of the cult of the Black and White Impermanence Ghosts, the process of actualization is closely associated with the workings of occult economy—defined as the “deployment of magical means for material ends” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, p. 297)—such as through winning the lottery or winning a gamble. In comparison to intricate Daoist rituals that require the involvement of ritual specialists, the ritual of “Burning Prosperity Money” is essentially self-guided, granting autonomy to the devotee. Autonomous ritual not only accords agency to the devotee, it also vacates the necessity of having a role of a mediator between the realms of the sacred and profane. Devotees, while enjoying self-directing freedom to conduct autonomous rituals, would also have the moral independence to shape and reason the aim of conducting such rituals.

3. Morality, Materialism, and Materiality

Devotees’ pursuit of wealth and rush for gold, acts of greed, could have resulted in a negative image of the Ah Peh cult per se, but the identity and role of the Black and White Impermanence Ghost—one that is closely associated with moral judgement and the terrifying notions of death and punishments—and the Filial Son God—who symbolizes the highly revered Confucian value of filial piety—have largely retained the moral and orthodox image of the cult. However, the capitalistic slant in religious practices and its changing moral implications have resulted in the rise of amoral cults,

² For further information on the role of karma in the Daoist tradition, see Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition*, p. 127.

such as the Eighteen Kings in Taiwan, and prosperity religion, such as the cult of Luang Phor Khoun in Thailand.

Commenting on the Eighteen Kings cult, where cigarettes are used as offerings and the efficacy of the cult measured by the accurateness of predicting lottery numbers, Robert Weller argues that such cults “affirm the lack of shared values in the society, certainly a lack of shared Confucian values” (Weller 1994, p. 158). While not being labeled as amoral, the appearance of Luang Phor Khoun in the media, his appropriation into politics, and eventually being seen as a pop cultural icon have made the cult an object of criticism because of its supernatural and highly commercial character (Jackson 1999, pp. 5–60). Similarly, shamans in South Korea have invoked materialist spirits—gods and/or ancestors who promise wealth in exchange for cash—as an enticing and seemingly amoral measure to deal with the consequences of the country’s economic transformation before, during and after the financial crisis (Kendall 2009, chp. 5 and 6). Returning to the Ah Peh cult, its development into one that can be seen as a prosperity religion supporting an occult economy is unlike the Eighteen Kings or Luang Phor Khoun where the main target of worship per se is the focus of occult capitalistic practices, but relies more on devotees’ reinterpretation of material objects closely associated with the cult.

3.1. Umbrella and Bridge

In comparison to the Eighteen Kings cult or the veneration of Luang Phor Khoun, the occult economy of the Ah Peh cult and the efficacy of the cult per se is markedly enhanced with the involvement of spirit mediums. Consultation sessions with these Ah Pehs usually occur at night, due to the Yin or “ghostly” nature of these deities, but there are also instances where the Ah Pehs are invoked and invited to participate in religious street processions that take place before sunset. It is during the period of time between sunrise and sunset where the trancing of these Ah Pehs require the use of an umbrella. As an everyday tool to shelter from rain and shine, the umbrella is also used as a religious tool functioning as a divider between the Yin and Yang realms, while protecting the Yin spirits from the harsh Yang energy emitted via the Sun.

More importantly, however, the umbrella also carries a symbolic function in the origin myth of the First and Second Grand Uncles, who were given the identity of Generals Xie and Fan (Xie Fan Jiangjun 謝范將軍) in folklores:

Two bailiffs in Fuzhou, Fujian province, named Xie Bi'an 謝必安 and Fan Wujiu 范無救, were sent on an official duty one day. Upon reaching Nantai Bridge, Xie rushed back to fetch an umbrella as it was about to rain. Fan was told to wait under the bridge to seek shelter. Soon heavy rain came pouring, and in no time the current became violent while the water level rose rapidly. As Fan believed that Xie would not break his promise by not coming back to meet him, he decided not to leave and chose to hold onto a pillar of the bridge. Unfortunately, due to his height, Fan drowned shortly after with his face turned black due to the persistent struggling. Xie returned moments later only to realize Fan was dead. He blamed himself for causing the tragedy, and hung himself on a nearby tree in a state of devastation. Xie died with his tongue sticking out. In honor of their martyrdom, Xie and Fan are canonized as law enforcers of hell, assigned to assist the City God.³

This narrative essentially manifested the values of trust (*xin* 信) and righteousness (*yi* 義)—Fan trusted that Xie would return with an umbrella, and Xie hung himself as an act of righteousness after the wrongful death of Fan. Devotees commonly draw a relationship between these moral values and the credibility of the words of the Ah Pehs, such as the promise of fortune or any other predictions, and in most cases the accuracy of lottery numbers. This is similar to the worship of Guan Yu or Lord Guan (Guandi 關帝) among merchants, for he “personifies the qualities of loyalty and trust upon which

³ Known as the “Legend of the Nantai Bridge,” and the origin and source of the text is unknown, suggesting that records of this legend is via oral narrative. The discussion of the relationship between the different identities of the manifestation of the Black and White Impermanence Ghosts is beyond the scope of this article.

business transactions depend” (von Glahn 2004, p. 223). Therefore, the symbol of the umbrella serves two functions, first the practical function of a divider between realms and a protection against harsh forces, and second the representational function of trust and righteousness, which are moral values derived from the origin myth.

Relating to the symbol of the umbrella is that of the bridge, which is also the site of tragedy in the origin myth of Generals Xie and Fan. Mircea Eliade noted that it is “especially the images of the bridge and the narrow gate which suggest the idea of a dangerous passage and which, for this reason, frequently occur in initiatory and funerary rituals and mythologies” (Eliade 1959, p. 181). The Bridge of No Recourse (Naihe qiao 奈何橋) and the Ghostly Gateway to Hell (Guimen guan 鬼門關) are two key sites in Chinese hell, commonly featured in religious rituals and mythologies. The former is believed to be a passage to hell that crosses the Yin and Yang realms, while the latter is the entrance to hell, both guarded by the Black and White Impermanence Ghosts, otherwise Generals Xie and Fan. Interestingly, one version of the incantation to invoke the two ghostly gods drew a connection between the Nantai Bridge in the origin myth and the Bridge of No Recourse:

Brotherhood was sworn at the Nantai Bridge, [南臺橋頭雙結義]
and in death they now guard the Bridge of No Recourse. [奈何橋尾哥倆守]
Upon exiting the Ghostly Gateway they cross the Bridge of No Recourse, [出了鬼門渡奈何]
ascending to the human realm where the pure incense awaits. [清香拜請到凡間]⁴

In addition to the commonly known Bridge of No Recourse, traditional Chinese funerary and salvation rites also involve the usage of the Golden Bridge (Jinqiao 金橋) and Silver Bridge (Yinqiao 銀橋), both as passageways for the reincarnation of spirits into the nobles or wealthy families. Paradoxically, the Golden and Silver Bridges, once paraphernalia reserved for rituals conducted for the dead, are now also used in the occult Yin Luck Replenishing (Bu Yinyun 補運) ritual conducted for the living. This ritual involves the Ah Pehs, through spirit mediums, leading devotees across consecrated paper or wooden models of the Golden and Silver Bridges, signifying the simultaneous discharging of bad luck and replenishing of good luck during the process of crossing. Devotees crossing the bridge were instructed to hold on to two boxes of Underworld paper money, one containing incense paper for the karmic creditors (yuanqin zhaizhu 冤親債主) that are believed to haunt and cause harm to the devotee, and the other a box of “Ah Peh Money” to usher in good luck and wealth after the ritual. The two boxes of Underworld paper money were later burnt together with a slip of green paper containing the details of the devotee—name, date of birth, and address—thereby marking the end of the ritual.

3.2. Coffin

The transposition of ritual from one that is dedicated to the newly deceased or spirits in hell into one that targets human beings who are eager to receive occult wealth can also be observed in rituals involving the usage of coffin. The sight of a coffin is often regarded as inauspicious to most Chinese, for not only does it emit a strong Yin aura, the coffin is also regarded as dangerous due to its pollutive nature (Tong 2004, p. 107). However, attributing to the effect of wordplay, a reinterpretation of the Chinese term for coffin—*guancai* 棺材—has led to contrasting receptive attitude towards it. The respective characters of *guancai* are homophonous to several terms that, when combined, are able to achieve auspicious results. For example, *guan* can be interpreted as “to look at (觀)” and *cai* as wealth (財), hence collectively referring to the act of “to look at wealth,” which echoes the “look at me and strike it rich” mentality.

In contrast to common understanding that the very act of resting in a coffin is only reserved for the deceased, rituals that involve the use of coffin are now also specially designed and catered for

⁴ Excerpt copied from the invocation of “Inviting the First and Second Grand Uncles” written around the 1990s by the founding master of Yinde Tan (temple of Yin virtue), located in the Serangoon area of Singapore.

the living. As a variation of the Yin Luck Replenishing ritual discussed above, a coffin is used to replace the Golden and Silver Bridges, whereby the Ah Peh (through a spirit medium) will guide the devotee to lay down inside a coffin filled with incense paper and hell notes, mimicking a newly deceased.⁵ Without shutting the coffin lid, the Ah Peh next covers the top of the coffin with a red cloth, recites lengthy incantations, and draws several talismans on the cloth. Once the red cloth is removed, the devotee will be asked to rise from the coffin, while concurrently grabbing a stack of incense paper money. This ritual signifies a renewal of spiritual state, and is believed to be able to change one's luck by shedding off the old self (mimicking death) to be reborn into a wealthy state. The ritual is conceptualized based on a reinterpretation of the Chinese idiom *shengguan facia* 升官發財, meaning "to be promoted and to gain wealth," but instead of *shengguan*, as in to be promoted, the term is understood as *shengguan* 升棺, as in to rise from the coffin, for the character for official (*guan* 官) is homophonous to the character for coffin (*guan* 棺).

Notably, the same coffin used during the Yin Luck Replenishing ritual can also be used as a carriage for the spirit medium in trance during street possession in certain temples and spirit medium altars. Secured with heavy hemp ropes and lifted using four solid timber poles, the spirit medium would sit on top of the coffin-palanquin (assuming a horse-riding posture), carried on shoulder by at least ten to fourteen devotees. The only other time when a coffin is carried on street possession is during the grand send-off segment of traditional Chinese funerary ritual, whereby it is considered a taboo and inauspicious act to get close to or even catch sight of the coffin. Ironically, however, the entourage with the presence of an Ah Peh, is warmly welcomed by the people of the places visited—including other temples, spirit medium altars, shop houses, factories, or residences of the temple's sponsors—for it is believed that the coffin that is now blessed by the Ah Peh will usher in good luck for the places visited.

3.3. Abacus

Visitors to most, if not all, City God Temples will notice the presence of an abacus hung either above the main door or on a side of a wall, allowing it to be easily noticeable. With the main function as an arithmetic instrument, the religious dimension of an abacus is also closely related to the act of accounting. As described in the epigraph, the abacus is one of the paraphernalia held by the Impermanence Ghosts who use it to calculate the good and bad deeds of the newly deceased, thereafter passing judgement based on one's karma. Due to its wide usage in ancient times as a business tool by merchants, the symbol of an abacus possesses a capitalistic nature, and the ferocious knocking and clashing of the abacus beads when the user performs the task of calculating would thus signify cash flow.

While the abacus, as a religious symbol, suggests a factor of fear associated with the act of judgement, it is also well received by devotees for its symbolism of wealth and luck. During a consultation session with the spirit medium possessed by the Impermanence Ghost, the abacus functions as a paraphernalia that is used to address the concerns of devotees, such as seeking lottery numbers and enquiring on one's luck. When approached by the devotees for lottery numbers, the Impermanence Ghost begins by calculating frantically on the abacus, pausing after a seemingly satisfying result is derived, picking up a black ink brush and scribbling a character on a piece of joss paper earlier prepared, and repeating the entire process for a total of four times. The four pieces of joss paper with characters written by the Impermanence Ghost will later on be displayed on the main table or pasted on the notice board. "As heavenly secrets are not to be revealed, the Ah Peh is not allowed to write the four digits for lottery betting legibly on the joss paper. A same character can be read

⁵ According to the spirit medium of Faxian Tan (temple of manifested method), Mr. Wu Cheng Song, 54, who tranced the Second Grand Uncle, such ritual is considered as a form of unorthodox Daoist ritual. Although it is more popular in Malaysia, only a few temples in Singapore conduct such ritual since the late 2000s.

differently by everyone, so it is up to the devotees to interpret themselves and it all depends on their luck and good karma,”⁶ commented a spirit medium, when asked on the accuracy of such predictions.

Very often, the space where spirit medium consultation session with the Impermanence Ghosts took place is filled with the continuous clashing sound of the wooden beads of an abacus knocking against one another. Due to the unique sound produced, the abacus is used as a beat counter and accompanying instrument when incantations to invoke the Impermanence Ghosts during spirit medium possession are sung. As an ornament, the miniature of an abacus is worn as a pendant to enhance one’s luck, and the bead(s) of an abacus consecrated by the Impermanence Ghosts are strung and worn to ward off evil and invite fortune.

3.4. Palm-Leaf Fan

“I feel a sense of relief whenever the Ah Peh fan me. The feeling cannot be described in words, but it is as if there are no more stress in me, and my body feels good and lightened.” Narrated by a devotee who frequents spirit medium consultation with the Impermanence Ghosts, it shows that the very act of the spirit medium fanning him with a palm-leaf fan had “cooled” him down psychologically. The Chinese term for fan—扇*shan4*—is homophonous with the term for kind—善*shan4*—and interestingly the phrase for kind-hearted in Chinese—善良 *shan4liang2*—is homophonous with the terms 扇 *shan4*, as in “to fan” and 涼 *liang2*, as in cooling. Hence, while the abacus is associated with judgement, the palm-leaf fan acts as a reminder for devotees to perform kind acts, for it is only when acts of kindness are performed that one will feel good and be relieved of fears of judgement.

The relationship between kindness and luck is closely knitted in the occult economy operating in the Ah Peh cult. In the cycle of occult exchange, as discussed in the previous section, the process of judgement is based largely on one’s accumulation of good karma. As a devotee recalls, “I remember vividly that there was once I asked the Ah Peh for a lottery number to tide over my financial crisis. He smiled at me, fanned me from my forehead to my chest three times, and held the fan right in front of my face. Ah Peh told me to make my own guess and advised me to do more charity work. I betted on the number 5 later on, since the fan resembles a stretched-out palm, and won the lottery. Of course, I donated the remains of my prize back to the charity organization where I have been supporting.”⁷ In fact, most of the devotees interviewed shared similar accounts of how being fanned by the Ah Peh had brought them good luck, especially in cases where the palm-leaf fan is made of or plated with gold, where it felt like “being painted with golden luck.” The enchantment of the palm-leaf fan, similar with the abacus, has resulted in these everyday objects becoming associated with occult practices yet guided by a set of strict moral guidelines.

3.5. Opium for the Ghostly Gods

Reciprocity is an essential action to keep the cycle of occult exchange between devotees and the Ah Pehs circulating, perhaps even spiraling upwards. It is a common practice for devotees to offer items such as drugs and alcohol in addition to the usual incense papers and food as a form of thanksgiving to these ghostly gods who granted occult wealth and the blessing of luck. In particular, prior to 1989—the year when the death penalty was imposed for opium drug dealers—it is not uncommon in Singapore to find statues of Ah Pehs whose mouth or hanging tongue were smeared with opium. Since as early as the 1950s, “opium is sometimes used by superstitious Chinese in Singapore to allay the wrath of their temple gods and appease the spirits of the dead.” However, the opium is not secreted in the gods’ mouth for long, for a more serious issue that arises from this form of offering is that this practice provides regular supplies of the drug for priestly addicts (Boon 1953, p. 12).

⁶ Text translated from Hokkien dialect. Mr. Ong Tian Huat, 48, is the spirit medium of Yinde Tan temple. Ong trances the Monkey God and the First Grand Uncle.

⁷ (Sic) Transcription of an interview with Johnny Lim, 40, owner of a car dealing company and a devotee of Faxian Tan.

Patches of opium pasted onto the tongue and mouth of the olden statues of these Ah Pehs that survived till today remain in the form of a scar that functions as an emblem of the symbiosis between social, economic, and religious culture in early Singapore. Carl Trocki has shown that although capitalism came with European colonialism and with the connection of Southeast Asian economies to the global capitalist system, the Chinese largely created capitalist institutions and forms of organization in this region. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, opium farms played a major role in the establishment of Chinese capitalism in the region (Trocki 2002). Chinese societies then were mainly made up of Chinese merchants, members of the secret societies, and a large portion of laborers otherwise known as the coolies. Opium was not merely a drug consumed for pleasure, but also an essential energy booster and painkiller to these laborers. As Trocki argues in another article, “both the opium trade and opium use have played a major part in the formation of the culture, economy and politics of the Chinese in Southeast Asia” (Trocki 2005, p. 148). In this regard, opium too has a part to play in the religious culture and the occult economy of the region.

Figure 7 shows a newly enshrined statue of the White Impermanence Ghost (or First Grand Uncle) in Tien Sen Tua temple, whose left hand is holding onto a traditional opium smoke pipe instead of the abacus or bamboo slip. Such rendition of the iconography of the White Impermanence Ghost differs from the textual description in the *Jade Regulations* and *Penetrating the Underworld*, portraying the White Impermanence Ghost instead in a relatively more secular and less bureaucratic image, which has enhanced its affability. In 1999, two statues of the Black and White Impermanence Ghosts that “have been known to ‘grant wishes’ of the pious followers” were reportedly stolen from the temple. According to the spokesman of the temple:

[The two gods] are supposed to ‘like’ high quality Chinese tea, the occasional cigarette and opium. So for the past 58 years, devotees have been smearing opium on the long tongues of these idols . . . Just imagine the amount of opium that has gathered at the feet of the idols after all these years of offering. (Ng 1999, p. 10)



Figure 7. Statue of the White Impermanence Ghost in a local temple (Source: Author).

Similarly, as it was reported in *The Straits Times* in 1989:

“You also get deities like *Da Yeh Bo* [referring to the First Grand Uncle] being offered opium. This is also bad for the image of the religion.” At a Toa Payoh temple [referring to the City God temple], a life-size idol of *Da Yeh Bo* stands against a column on the right side of the altar. On some days, worshippers smeared a substance that looked and smelled like opium on the deity’s long protruding tongue. Others placed lit cigarettes in his mouth and hands or on his ears. This, like so much else, adds to the perception that in Taoism, almost anything goes. (Heng 1989, p. 22)

Although the act of offering opium to deities might have cast an immoral image onto the cult per se, one has to consider the fact that prior to being labelled as a harmful narcotic drug, opium was used in most parts of the world for its medicinal purposes, and it is only the abuse of opium that was worrisome. Frank Dikötter and others argue that “in most cases habitual opium use did not have significant harmful effects on either health or longevity,” for “moderate smoking could even be beneficial, since it was a remarkable panacea in the fight against a wide range of ailments before the advent of modern medications.” Most importantly, however, opium paste “was considered to be at the extreme Yin-end of a balanced intake, and strong Yang elements were ingested by customers to counterbalance it, mainly in the form of tea, food or herbal tonics” (Dikötter et al. 2004, p. 34). Hence opium was always offered to the Ah Pehs, along with tea and a special blend of herbal wine that will be discussed in the following section. Such a gesture not only ensures that offerings of Yin nature were being presented to these ghostly gods, but at the same time they maintain a balance of harmony between Yin and Yang.

While the act of offering opium to gods is unique to the Ah Peh cult and largely as a consequence of the coolie and opium cultures of early Singapore, opium as an offering has been substituted with tobacco—cigarettes, cigars, hand-rolled cigarettes, and smoking pipes—signifying a form of historical evolution following societal change. Specifically, cigarettes as a “marker of modernity” have benefited the most and gained the widest reception among other forms of narcotics following the prohibition of opium (Dikötter et al. 2004, p. 34). In addition to being presented as offerings in the temple, cigarettes are also commonly offered to the Ah Pehs via the spirit mediums in trance. In contrast to other deities (especially Yang gods), whereby incense sticks are offered, the image of a spirit medium with a stick of cigarette clipped in between the index and middle fingers, while drinking from a bottle of cognac, during consultation sessions are not only unique features of the cult, but more so a collective sign of shift in material cultural following modernity.

3.6. From Wujiapi to X.O.

The offering of wine to gods is a long-standing tradition in Chinese sacrificial culture, signifying the most honorific form of thanksgiving to the gods for the blessings bestowed—wine is fermented from harvested natural crops, and the success rate of the harvest was largely attributed to the blessings from gods in ancient agricultural society. Moreover, the official post of the Libationer (祭酒 Jijiu) inaugurated since the Han dynasty further highlights the importance of wine in rituals and sacrifices. In his study on the reception of the cult of Crazy Ji in Taiwan, Meir Shahar notes the importance of wine in both the legends of the deity and during spirit medium consultation sessions with the deity. Supposedly, “a god obsessed with wine and meat,” the unruly Crazy Ji was known to have helped punters in an illegal gambling craze in Taiwan during the 1980s, the same period that saw a significant growth of its spirit-medium cult (Shahar 1998, pp. 181–84). Similarly in South Korea, Laurel Kendall notes the rise in shamanic possession by materialist spirits or greedy gods during the Asian Financial Crisis, who promised wealth in exchange for cash and drunk imported whisky that they had never tasted when alive (Kendall 2009, chp. 5 and 6).

As aforementioned, food and beverages containing strong Yang elements are usually ingested during opium smoking to counterbalance the Yin element in opium. Wine offerings to the Ah Peh

consist of a wide selection, ranging from the traditional herbal wine to stout, cognac and other hard liquors. Traditionally, Wujiapi wine 五加皮酒, a type of Chinese herbal wine named after the main ingredient, Cortex Acanthopanax, is offered to the First and Second Grand Uncles. The herb Wujiapi is able to “dispel wind-dampness, tonify the liver and kidneys, and strengthen the sinews and bones,” (Yang et al. 2013, p. 178), which is appealing to the coolies, who needed it for nourishment in addition to the consumption of opium. In order to show one’s sincerity and to have their prayers answered, sacrificing to the gods required one to offer the best and his or her most treasured consumables. Hence the offering of opium and Wujiapi wine to the First and Second Grand Uncles, two of the most treasured consumables of the coolies, further suggests the close relationship between the cult and the social class of hard laborer during early Singapore.

The effects of modernization and Westernization on sacrificial commodities to the Ah Pehs are also evidently seen in the offering of Guinness Stout, or colloquially known in Min dialect as the “*Ang Ji Gao*” (Hongshe gou 紅舌狗, trans. Red Tongued Dog). The colloquial term drew reference from Blood Wolfe’s pictorial trademark label of a wolf head with red tongue sticking out printed on the exported version of Guinness Stout to Singapore since the 1870s.⁸ However, due to the “often-illiterate foreign drinkers,” the symbol of a wolf and the wordings “Wolf Brand” have been misinterpreted as a dog instead.⁹ According to Chinese superstition, it is believed that the blood of a black dog is able to ward off evil, for dogs are considered to contain the supreme Yang essence. Hence offering alcohol that is “blessed” by the powerful Yang energy of supposedly a black dog to the Ah Pehs achieves the similar effect of offering Wujiapi wine, if not better.¹⁰

As the demography of devotees changes over time, shifts in consumption patterns have gradually phased out the once popular sacrificial items, only to be substituted by prevailing commodities. Similar to Korean gods possessing shamans while drinking imported whisky that they have never tasted when alive, the Ah Pehs have also been compelled to accept consumables of current times. Since Wujiapi wine and stout are considered to be “old fashioned” and belonging to an earlier generation, new alcoholic offerings to the Ah Pehs have gradually changed to include various types of cognac, whisky, vodka, and red wine. In terms of food offerings, traditional Chinese pastries can also be seen offered alongside local Malay cuisine, sushi, and the spirit medium in trance can also be seen cutting a birthday cake during certain festivals and celebration of an Ah Peh’s birthday.

4. Conclusions

Myths of the Underworld gods are the source of these material objects that are later being enchanted as sacred symbols for varied uses, deviating from the initial intent of invoking these objects. Specific religious paraphernalia such as the tall hat of the First Grand Uncle with the characters “look at me and get auspicious” or “look at me and strike it rich” and the abacus have shaped devotees’ understanding and reception of the cult as one that is capitalistic, materialistic, and able to generate occult wealth yet guided by a set of moral guidelines. The autonomous ritual of “Burning Prosperity Money” or the simple act of offering “Ah Peh Money” to the Underworld gods essentially engages the devotee in the cycle of occult exchange, and the reinterpretation and enchantment of everyday material

⁸ See <https://www.guinness.com/en-sg/advertising/singapore-limited-edition/>.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Similar usage of Guinness Stout as an offering to gods is also observed in the cult of the Vagabond Buddha (Crazy Ji) in Penang, Malaysia. According to Jean DeBarnardi, “the Buddha’s fondness for Guinness Stout is based on a complicated play of meanings in Hokkien.” The story of Crazy Ji depicted him as a monk who eats black dog meat, which is an “especially impure food but also a powerful prophylactic against black magic.” However, as local speakers had difficulty pronouncing the name Guinness, and coincidentally the “label was illustrated with a bulldog the call it instead ‘black dog.’” Because Hokkien-speakers use the same word for ‘eat’ and ‘drink’, drinking Guinness Stout is ‘eating black dog’” (DeBarnardi 2006, p. 260). For there are no textual records or field observations suggesting that the Ah Pehs eat black dog meat, and the offering of Guinness Stout (due to the misinterpretation of the label) is largely for the presence of Yang energy. Nevertheless, there is room for further comparative research on the reception of Guinness Stout in Chinese religiosity between the two regions.

objects have also suggested that the anthropomorphic element of the cult is the least important in determining its identity.

Akin to the symbolism of the bridge and gate, uses of the abacus, umbrella, fan, and various offerings have shown how objects from ordinary life can be “valorized on the religious and metaphysical plane,” and how familiar everyday life is “transfigured in the experience of religious man.” (Eliade 1959, p. 183). As a synecdoche of the gods, these objects unique to the Ah Peh cult are also commonly found venerated out of the context of a temple, in secular places such as markets, hawker centers, and factories, sometimes enshrined along with tutelary gods such as the Earth God or Landlord God. Vineeta Sinha uses the idea of “signs of the sacred”, as opposed to “places of worship”, to describe urban sites that have been inserted and embedded with religious edifices that function as sacred indicators (Sinha 2016, p. 470). I extend the argument further in this conclusion to include secular everyday material objects that are not necessarily enshrined in religious edifices, yet possess sacredness and efficacy when enchanted by devotees’ ritualistic acts. While this article is a preliminary study of the materiality of the cult of the Underworld in Singapore, it also suggests future research on a spatial, contextual, and systematic analysis of materiality in Chinese religion.

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