The Hungry Ghosts Festival: A Convergence of Religion and Politics in the Chinese Community of Penang, Malaysia*

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This paper is an attempt to explore reasons for the revitalization of the Hungry Ghosts Festival in Penang, Malaysia. The Hungry Ghosts Festival, at one level, is a traditional celebration, the second of three major festivals which involve the Chinese community as a whole, and which celebrate in turn the Taoist principles of Heaven, Earth, and Water. During the seventh lunar month, it is said, ghosts, or pretas, are released from the "prisons of earth", that is, hell. Ancestors are said to visit their homes to receive offerings of food and clothing from their descendants, and ghosts who have no descendants to make them offerings will be appeased and honoured by collective festivities in the market-place, and in more recent years, in the low-cost housing projects.

So stated, it would seem that the Hungry Ghosts Festival is nothing more than a colourful event, an example of the rather eclectic religious practices of the overseas Chinese. On closer examination, however, it turns out to be sociologically and symbolically complex: what at first glance appears to be a revitalization of "tradition" is in fact a self-conscious effort on the part of the Chinese community and its leaders to pour new content into old social forms.

More specifically, the revitalization is the direct result of the involvement of one of Penang's political factions in the events. This faction, led by two of Penang's State Executive Councillors, took note of the fact that the Hungry Ghosts Festival mobilized the informal territorial organizations of Penang in a cycle of rituals and banquets; through their efforts, a central coordinating committee was created which took advantage of this cycle of events for fund-raising and for political mobilization. The Central Committee of the Hungry Ghosts Festival connects hawkers and shopkeepers with the larger political structure and with Penang's wealthy establishment, in pursuit of collective aims for the Chinese community. The organizers have used a ritual structure to accomplish this aim: in so doing, they have, to quote one of the two primary organizers, "taken peasant customs which are behind the times and transformed them into an alliance and a progressive symbol". In this paper, the interaction of these various dimensions of the Hungry Ghosts Festival — symbolic, sociological, and political — will be discussed.
The Festival: Mythic Charters

The mythic charter for the Hungry Ghosts Festival had its origins in filial rituals of salvation for one's ancestors. The offerings made to ancestors are said to speed them through the eighteen courts of hell where the soul faces judgment and punishment before it can be reborn. Communication can be established with this realm, that is, hell, through the mediation of Taoist priests, Buddhist monks, or spirit mediums, and by offerings at the ancestral altar.

The Orthodox Mahayana Buddhist version of the myth stresses the importance of the mediation of the monks in aiding one's ancestors. In this version, a monk discovers through a vision that his mother is being punished in hell, and that the food offerings which he has made to her turn to hot coals before she can eat them. The monk asks the Buddha for help, and is given a magical staff so that he can break earth and enter hell, and an alms bowl to give his mother so that her food will not turn to coals. However, she takes the bowl and hides it from the other ghosts with her left hand: since greed is the sin for which she is being punished, she finds that she is still unable to eat. In the end, only the community of Buddhist monks are able to save her and other hungry ghosts like her: this is accomplished through the performance of rituals on the 15th of the 7th lunar month in the Chinese calendar. Orthodox Buddhists are taught to offer to the monks and to support the performance of these rituals rather than to perform the folk religious rituals of the home which will be described below.

There is another version of the origin of these filial practices which derives from the folk religious tradition rather than the Buddhist tradition. This story also tells how one of the deities worshipped during the seventh lunar month came to serve as an official in hell. This deity, whose various names translate as the "Wealth God" or the "Tall One" is represented as a god of territory, or god of the earth, and like most Chinese "gods" of territory, is in fact a ghost. The story, as told to me by a woman spirit medium, is as follows:

Bo Diao Bek is very filial, and wears mourning dress for his parents. Originally, he was a gentleman, and was unfilial to his parents. One day he was working in the fields, and his mother was late in bringing him food. He hit her, and frightened her. Later he saw baby goats suckling milk from their mothers, and he thought, "The mother goat loves her kids, and lets them suckle milk. I've been so unfilial to my mother, and this is bad." The next day he was remorseful, and when his mother came to bring him food, he ran to kneel to her. She thought he intended to hit her again, and trembled with fright. She ran away and jumped into the well, and drowned. When his mother died, an ancestral tablet floated to the surface of the water. This is how the Chinese came to use the ancestral tablet.

The images made of Bo Diao Bek for worship during the Hungry Ghosts Festival are quite macabre: this god presents at the same time an image of both death and mourning. He is represented wearing the coarse hemp mourning costume worn by the eldest son at the funeral of a parent. His face is ghastly white, and the morbid tone is enhanced by the fact that his long red tongue hangs from his mouth (indicating death by strangulation), and is smeared with opium, the god's favourite intoxicant. On the other hand, as mentioned, this god is known as the "Wealth