PRAY TO THE HEAVENLY FATHER: A CHINESE NEW RELIGION IN MALAYSIA

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Unlike the flourishing literature on Japanese new religions, there have been very few published accounts of Chinese new religions. To date, Marjorie Topley has reported on the Great Way sect based on material she collected in Malaya and Singapore between 1954 and 1955.\(^1\) Welch and Yu have given an interesting description of a sect known as The Holy Teaching of Heaven's Virtue which they had studied in Hong Kong and Taiwan between 1958 and 1978.\(^2\) The authors reported that both sects practise a syncretic religion that has been exported to overseas Chinese communities from mainland China.\(^3\) Suppression of these sects in China and their spread overseas have prompted Marjorie Topley, in the conclusion of her 1963 article, to question their survival in the modern world. She speculated that they will gradually fade away as the older generation of sect leaders is replaced by younger men influenced by modern Western ideals and values. However, her speculations have become obsolete in the light of some recent events in the Malaysian Chinese community which we will describe in this paper.

We discovered the existence of a Chinese new religion in Malaysia\(^4\) while conducting research on trance and spirit possession in 1978. This religious sect known as Baitiangong (Pray to the Heavenly Father) had been formed less than two years prior to our discovery of it. We have followed its activities over the past four years, observed its rituals and conducted many hours of interviews with its leader and members. In this paper, we will trace the history of the sect, describe the background of its leader, summarize its ideologies and relate its emergence to sociopolitical developments in the Malaysian Chinese community.

History of the Sect, 1976-1981

The origins of the sect can be traced to the claims of its leader-founder, Guan Tianming,\(^5\) who believes that he has been reincar-
nated on earth to rescue the Chinese in Malaysia from the
diabolical influences of polytheism and to introduce them to
monotheistic worship. Guan "discovered" his mission after ex-
periencing a vision in which he heard a voice instructing him to
destroy temples. When he protested that he lacked the powers, the
voice told him to examine his wrists. Guan saw rays of light
emanating from his wrists which he interpreted as divine powers for
his iconoclastic mission. He was flown on a pilotless airplane to a
place with Chinese and Hindu temples which he destroyed with his
laser beams. When his mission was completed, he heard the voice
say, "I am pleased. You are a disciple of God. You are the
deliverer of all unclean spirits."

This vision made a profound impact on his life, at a time when he
was experiencing employment frustrations. Guan, a garrulous,
English-educated Chinese in his mid-forties, is employed as a
teacher in a local school. Guan is illiterate in Chinese but speaks the
Cantonese dialect. He is married with two children. He received his
education in a teachers' college and university in peninsular
Malaysia. His career as a teacher was interrupted when he enrolled
in a local university to study public administration. After gradua-
tion, he lost his teaching job but found a job as a management
consultant in a local firm. His brief stint in the business world
ended a year later, following disagreements between him and his
employers. He returned to teaching but was gravely disappointed
by his failure to obtain a position as a school principal. It was
during this time that he experienced this vision which prompted
him to reinterpret his frustrations and disappointments as a
necessary preparation for his role as God's messenger.

As an initial effort in organizing his sect, Guan attempted to
unite various Chinese spirit mediums and occult groups in his
neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur. His tactic was to demonstrate
the superiority of his powers over them. He invited them to attend
meditation sessions in the grounds of an unused Chinese temple but
none came. However, he proselytized a group of elderly Chinese
women known as the Baiqijie (Seven Praying Sisters) who met
regularly at the temple to chant and go into trance. Guan awed
them with his alleged supernatural powers and taught them to
meditate. Soon, crowds of Chinese curiosity-seekers flocked to his