

A HONG KONG SPIRIT-MEDIUM TEMPLE

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Hong Kong possesses scores of temples where traditional deities of the Chinese pantheon are worshipped and petitioned by devotees from the local population. Although the temples differ in structural elaboration and popularity the majority are host to a common set of individual and group rituals. It is in the very area of ritual, however, that the temple we will discuss in this paper differs from most others. This particular temple exists primarily to provide a setting where worshippers can communicate directly with selected deities through the services of religious practitioners who act as spirit mediums. Unlike their Western counterparts who specialize in contact with the spirits of deceased mortals the Chinese mediums with whom we are concerned claim possession solely by immortals of the traditional Taoist and Buddhist pantheons.

Our procedure shall be initially to discuss the meaning of spirit-mediumship in general and its more common manifestations within the Chinese cultural sphere. We shall then consider at greater length a particular spirit-medium temple in Hong Kong with special attention to its setting, history, personnel, and ritual. Even though this paper is by design a descriptive account of the temple and its cult we shall in a final section discuss briefly the basis of the apparent success currently enjoyed by each. Does that success indicate a surge of interest in spirits and their mediums among the general population, or is the explanation to be found elsewhere?

Spirit-mediumship

Once man posits the existence of a supernatural realm with precisely or vaguely defined inhabitants he is seldom content with allowing that perception to rest on the cognitive level alone. Almost inevitably there is the further judgement that the supernaturals are

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Plates 1-4 at rear of the Journal illustrate this article.

capable of influencing for good or ill the course of events on the earthly plane. To bridge the gap between supernatural whim and purpose communication is essential. Numerous methods have been devised for achieving that purpose, including some designed to enable man to determine in kind or quality the interaction between mortals and immortals, i.e. magic. Although seldom the most frequently employed or the most culturally approved, spirit-mediumship is a method of communication with the divine that is found in all of the world's major culture areas. A precise understanding of that particular phenomenon necessitates our distinguishing between it and a related but by no means identical phenomenon, that of mere "spirit possession".

Firth offers a statement of the relationship as well as critical differences between each of the above states in the following:

Spirit possession is a form of trance in which behavioral actions of a person are interpreted as evidence of a control of his behavior by a spirit normally external to him. Spirit-mediumship is normally a form of possession in which the person is conceived as serving as an intermediary between spirits and men. The accent here is on communication: the action and words of the medium must be translatable, which differentiates them from mere spirit possession or madness.¹

While in trance the medium's normal consciousness and ordinary behavioral patterns are seemingly suspended, thus anything that he may say or do in such a state is attributed by believers to the possessing deity. In this paper we shall not be concerned with the ontological validity of spirit possession and mediumship nor the psychological reality of the trance state. Our assumption is that spirit possession and mediumship constitute indisputable cultural realities when accepted by devotees and practitioners as an effective means of communication with deities.

One may argue that the historically dominant position of Christianity, a religious tradition favoring a more indirect, sacramental mode of divine communication has relegated mediumship in the West to a heterodox, peripheral position. In China, however, the fact that no particular religion allied with a singular method of divine communication was able to win lasting institutional dominance has allowed the persistence of a wider variety of religious techniques for bridging the gap between man and the spirits.

Especially in Fukien, Taiwan, and the eastern extremity of Kwangtung Province one finds an apparently long-standing tradition of Chinese spirit-mediumship. Among the Western language accounts of that phenomenon the most notable are Doolittle's² description of its practice in Fukien Province during the waning years of the Ch'ing Dynasty; Elliott's³ discussion of such cults among the Chinese of Singapore; and recent monographs by Jordan⁴ and Ahern⁵ on mediums in rural sectors of contemporary Taiwan.

With the exception of an article by Potter⁶ on female mediums in a New Territories village, there is an absence of detailed systematic study of spirit-mediumship in the Hong Kong region; and, for that matter, in Kwangtung Province. The dearth of scholarly literature is complemented by an apparent lack of familiarity with mediumship among Hong Kong's Cantonese residents.⁷ In those few instances when one encounters a knowledgeable informant his knowledge is usually limited to the type of female mediums discussed by Potter.⁸ The female medium known in Cantonese as a *man sing por* 問醒婆 is ordinarily a middle-aged or elderly woman who at the request of clients will contact spirits of the deceased. The *man sing por* in the urban area invariably act on an individualistic basis and conduct seances in their own homes rather than at temples. This type of medium is seldom, if ever, the central focus of an organized cult.

The *man sing por*, however, is not the only type of medium operating in contemporary Hong Kong. A reasonably careful search of resettlement estates and other urban residential complexes having a significant Chiu-Chow, Hokkien, or Hoi-Luk-Fung⁹ population will reveal the existence of not a few temples which serve as the operational base for another type of medium, the *kei tung* 乩童.*

Unlike the *man sing por* the *kei tung* whom we have encountered in Hong Kong are males who do not hold commerce with the spirits of deceased mortals. Instead, the *kei tung* claims a special relationship with one or more traditional deities who on occasion utilize his bodily faculties to communicate with mortals. The urban *kei tung* is also more apt to limit his possession ceremonies to the

* Despite the reference to non-Cantonese speech groups, romanization follows R. T. Cowles' *Pocket Dictionary of Cantonese*, 2nd edition, Hong Kong, 1949, this being the common tongue of Hong Kong. Arthur Wolf touches on the difficulties of transcription for Hokkien in the preface to his edited collection *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (Stanford 1974).

premises of a specific temple rather than conducting them in his own or a client's home.

The Hong Kong spirit-medium temple may be either a humble structure of makeshift materials, akin to a squatter hut, or an ornate edifice constructed and maintained at considerable expense. Our study concerns a cult whose temple falls into the last-mentioned category. Completed in early 1975 and constructed at a cost of over HK\$200,000 the temple is itself a major indicator of the cult's current prosperity. Below we discuss that temple and its cult, with particular attention to spatio-temporal setting, personnel, and ritual.

The Spirit-Medium Temple: Spatio-Temporal Setting

The temple is situated on a small hill immediately behind several residential blocks of the Tsui Ping Road Resettlement Estate in the urban-industrial district of Kwun Tong. The temple structure itself is, in fact, only a part of a larger complex which includes a small, one storey office building, a partially enclosed stage, several outdoor shrines, and a *paak ka chi* "or Hall of One Hundred Surnames", 百家祠. The last-mentioned structure was under construction at the time this paper was written. In marked contrast to the crowded conditions that prevail in the adjacent Mark I estate, the temple complex occupies over 4,000 square feet of land.

The temple bears the horrific title of its patron deity Tai Wong Ye 大王爺 which translates into English as "The Great Ancient King". It is a common title bestowed on deified mortals who were seldom in the literal sense "Kings" but were more often officials of various grades in Imperial China. To better understand the origin and present circumstances of the spirit-medium cult it is necessary that we briefly trace the history of the Tai Wong Ye and his temple.

The patron deity of the present-day cult is reported to have been during his mortal life an official of the Tang Dynasty surnamed Lei 李. After his death he was awarded the honorary title of Man Chung Kung 文忠公. Temple personnel usually refer to him as "Lei Man Chung Kung". The *Old Tang History* 舊唐書 contains the biography of a statesman bearing the surname Lei and the given name Uen-yuen 元紘. After death he was given the title Man Chung Kung by the emperor in recognition of his outstanding loyalty to the emperor, his filiality towards parents and kinsmen, and frugality

in personal expenditures. Cult members assert that he is the Tai Wong Ye of their temple. The manner of his becoming their patron deity is outlined on a scroll prominently displayed in the temple office.

According to the scroll a General Lei fled south with the Southern Sung Court in the late 13th century taking with him the tablet of his illustrious ancestor Lei Man Chung Kung. After the defeat of the Sung at Ling Ting Island near contemporary Hong Kong the general established residence in the Lo Fu Ngam region of Kowloon. Within the area now occupied by the Lok Fu Housing Estate he is reported to have constructed a shrine in honor of his illustrious ancestor. It is further reported that the residents of the region soon recognized the Tang statesman as a powerful supernatural advocate and developed a popular devotion in his honor.

We know little about the fate of the shrine and its deity during the ensuing 600 years other than that it persisted as a small structure tended in later years by Hakka villagers. After the Second World War the Lo Fu region changed dramatically as it became the site for squatter huts housing migrants from China. The immediate vicinity of the shrine was staked out almost exclusively by squatters from the Chiu-chow speaking region of Kwangtung Province. To the best of our present information it was with the arrival of the Chiu-chow that the shrine and its patron deity became the focus of spirit-medium activity.

Former residents of the squatter settlement indicate that they found the shrine in disrepair and untended when they established their squatter huts. A small group of the Chiu-chow migrants soon undertook its repair and began active worship of the deity. After several months one of their number, a dockyard coolie, began to act strangely. An elderly *kei tung* judged that he had become possessed by the shrine's patron, Tai Wong Ye, and had been chosen to serve as that deity's medium. The new *kei tung* soon became the central focus of religious rituals sponsored by the shrine.

A new phase in the temple's existence began in 1957 when the government announced plans for the removal of the squatter area preparatory to constructing on its site the Lo Fu Housing Estate. Most of the Chiu-chow squatters were allocated quarters in the soon to be completed Kwun Tong/Tsui Ping Road Resettlement Estate. The spirit-medium and 18 male devotees of Tai Wong Ye

dubbing themselves "the 19 Brothers" formulated plans for the construction of a new temple in Kwun Tong. With the assistance of leaders from the wider Hong Kong Chiu-chow community they managed to effect peaceful occupation of 4,000 square feet of Crown land immediately behind blocks 18, 19, and 20 of the new estate. The new site was dedicated in 1963 and at the same time the local cult was incorporated as a branch of the predominantly Chiu-chow syncretic cult known as Tak Kaau 德教 The Virtuous Teaching.¹⁰

Today, Tai Wong Ye gives evidence of being one of the most popular, if not prosperous, temples in Kwun Tong. It boasts approximately 200 ritual associates known as *tan sang* 壇生, claims nearly 1,000 worshippers a month, and at the time of original field research was serviced by four spirit-mediums. Members of the temple association are virtually unanimous in attributing the cult's success to the efficacy of their *kei tung*, especially the senior one who was first possessed in the Lo Fu squatter village. Below we discuss in more detail the role of *kei tung* and the personal characteristics of those who perform that role at Tai Wong Ye Temple.

Tai Wong Ye Temple: The Spirit Mediums

As mentioned above the mediums who serve the Kwun Tong temple are known by devotees as *kei tung*. In a literal sense the term refers to a young man who does "spirit writing", i.e. the first character, *kei* 欸, means the process of spirit writing as performed in a basin filled with sand, and, the second character, *tung* 童, indicates a young man who assists in ritual activity. In combination the characters may be used in their literal sense of one who only does spirit writing or they may be used for a spirit medium. Even though mediums are able to do spirit writing it is by no means necessary that one be a medium to perform that ritual. Henceforth in this paper we shall employ the word *kei tung* with sole reference to the type of mediums who service Tai Wong Ye Temple.

To date Jordan¹¹ has published the most detailed study of the Chinese *kei tung* devoting special attention to life history events relating to the initial experience of spirit possession. Like shamanistic religious specialists elsewhere the *kei tung* insists that he has been chosen by the deity rather than vice-versa. The initial possession experience ordinarily occurs at a time of personal crisis and is manifested by behavior that the actor is unable to interpret

without assistance. The diagnosis of spirit possession is invariably rendered by an older *kei tung*. It is a common belief that those chosen by the gods to serve as their mediums are persons destined to die at a rather youthful age. Their lives are prolonged in order that they may serve the possessing deity. Confirmation of a predestined early death is sought by the Taiwanese in the possessed's horoscope and by the Chiu-chow in his having fairy bones 神骨, *shan kwat*.

The mere fact of spirit possession, however, is not sufficient to qualify one as a new *kei tung*, capable of mediating effectively between the world of man and that of the gods. To determine whether the possessing spirit is a benevolent one or an evil spectre the neophyte is initially subjected to ritual exorcisms by an older *kei tung*. He will also be required to demonstrate the authenticity of his possession by an ability to endure without apparent discomfort various types of bodily mutilations. At Tai Wong Ye Temple, even after he is judged authentically possessed, the neophyte is required to undergo a further period of training and observation by the senior *kei tung* before he is allowed to handle the petitions of worshippers during public ceremonies. The length of the "training period" is indeterminate depending in large measure on the judgment of the senior specialist. Once he is satisfied that the neophyte is ready the new "Ki Tong" is allowed to conduct unassisted public ceremonies, dispensing advice, amulets *foo* 符, and/or medicinal herbs to petitioners.

During the period of intensive field research (1973-74) the Kwun Tong temple commanded the services of three "official" *kei tung* and one who was "in training". The undisputed *hap cheung* or cult leader 闍長 was the medium who had experienced his initial possession in Lo Fu squatter camp. Employed now as a foreman of dockyard coolies he is likely on any given evening to be found at the temple. Subsequent to his possession by Tai Wong Ye he has been chosen by another deity, The Third Prince 三太子, to act as his medium.

The second medium is a Chiu-chow in his early 30's whose father is one of the founding members of the temple, i.e. one of "The 19 Brothers". Employed as a textile worker in Kwun Tong he frequently works overtime at the factory and is therefore more often to be found at the temple on feast days than on an ordinary

weekday. His possessing spirit is the saintly monk Buddha Sha 沙僧.

The third medium is also a Chiu-chow in his early 30's. He is employed as a performer in a Chiu-chow opera troupe and seldom appears at the temple except on major feast days, e.g. Chinese New Year. His possessing deity is the Supreme Buddha 如來佛祖.

The medium "in training" is a Chiu-chow in his early 20's who was until recently employed as a security guard at a local transportation facility. He now supports himself by odd jobs such as take-home piece work from local factories. His possessing deity is the mythical Monkey 大聖 of Chinese legend.¹³

It is obvious that an individual *kei tung's* rank within the cult is not based on the relative position of their possessing deities within the Chinese pantheon. Rank is predicated on the *kei tung's* experience as a medium and degree of involvement in the affairs of the temple association. The mere fact that the cult master's possessing deities would be judged as relatively minor personages in the Chinese pantheon in no way affects his recognized position of dominance among the ritual specialists. His over twenty years of experience as a *kei tung*, and his role as one of the founding "19 Brothers" of the temple association, render his position unassailable.

Many elaborate ceremonies are conducted by Tai Wong Ye *kei tung*, the most ostentatious being those held during Chinese New Year and the *Yu Laan* or Hungry Ghost Festival 盂蘭節. It is our contention, however, that the keystone of the cult's appeal as a religious centre lies in the simpler ritual held each evening at 10 p.m. It is that ritual which we will now discuss.

Tai Wong Ye Temple: The Possession Ritual

Eighty-seven years ago a Christian missionary in Amoy described a spirit possession ritual as follows:

"The graven idol can be seen sitting in the shrine, with its attendant figures by its side. The group of men that are chanting in a steady, monotonous voice charms that are supposed to bring the spirit are usually men of no reputation in the village. There is no scholar in his long robe present, and no man of influence standing by to do honor to the idol. The men seem fit for scenes of darkness and remind one of Macbeth's witches making their

incantation around the cauldron. On they go for hours in darkness. The voices at times grow louder and the drum beat more vigorous. All at once the medium who has begun to sway his body from side to side as if to invite supernatural influences begins to be violently affected. He dances and leaps in the air, the beat of the drum becomes more rapid, and the voices of the men louder and shriller. The wildest confusion reigns. It seems as though some horrid scene from the infernal regions were being enacted on earth and the devils had been let loose for a time to carry on their orgies among men."¹⁴

We have quoted at length the 19th century description because it is our opinion even the most zealously anti-pagan observer may have a difficult time identifying it as essentially the same type of ritual enacted each evening at Tai Wong Ye Temple. Scheduled at 10 p.m. for the convenience of a working class population the ceremony incorporates little of the din and frenzy which characterized its Amoy counterpart.

On almost any given evening shortly before 10 o'clock petitioners begin arriving at the temple. The number commonly varies from 10 to 15, with a distinct majority being middle-aged and elderly women. After burning joss sticks and offering prayers to the deity, petitioners at the direction of various *tan sang* who tend the altar, inscribe their name, birthday, and the names of other family members on a red sheet of paper. This accomplished they gather around a red table in the middle of the shrine chamber. The atmosphere is casual as greetings and gossip are exchanged between them. On the red table is a can of red paint, a slender paint brush, a rubber stamp, a stack of yellow paper slips, a rather large compartmentalized box with various types of herbs, and a basin of *foo shui* or "sacred water" 符水. Near the table is a red, throne-shaped chair.

At approximately 10 p.m. the medium enters the temple. After greeting those present he approaches the table and takes a sip of the sacred water. Continuing to stand before the table, he begins to move his head from side to side. He then starts pounding the table with his fists while emitting loud guttural grunts. After a few moments he adopts a stylized posture signifying to all present the identity of the possessing deity. The *tan sang* provide him with the throne-like chair and he sits to hear the petitions of worshippers. The possession is usually effected within two minutes of his sipping the sacred water.

Once possessed the *kei tung* is addressed by *tan sang* and petitioners alike with appellations appropriate to the deity deemed present. Each worshipper is called to approach the *kei tung* individually giving details of his/her particular request. To some the *kei tung* will simply offer advice; to others, especially the ill, he will give a sacred amulet consisting of a character painted in red on a slip of yellow paper. Depending on the specific nature of the illness the amulet is given by itself or accompanied by a handful of medicinal herbs. The petitioner then thanks the deity and leaves the altar to deposit a few dollars in a red box near the temple entrance.

After the last petition has been heard the *kei tung* places his head on the table. The *tan sang* wipe his brow with a towel dipped in sacred water, and in several moments the medium regains his normal consciousness. The worshippers return home, and the *kei tung* with the *tan sang* proceed to the temple office for relaxation.

Readers familiar with Elliott's volume will no doubt find that the ritual conducted at Tai Wong Ye Temple is decidedly more low-key than those held by the spirit mediums of Singapore. Seldom lasting over 20 minutes the Kwun Tong ceremony rarely incorporates acts of self-mutilation or feats of superhuman strength. Mutilation when it does occur is ordinarily limited to major feast days but, even then, seldom involves more than the chewing of broken glass¹⁵ and the ingestion of burning joss sticks. In brief, the Tai Wong Ye mediums present less of a spectacle than one would perhaps expect from religious practitioners who engage in what one anthropologist has labelled as "Ecstatic religion".¹⁶

We suggest that the low-key approach adopted toward ritual by Tai Wong Ye Temple is not accidental, but indicative of the role that the temple plays in the local community. Unlike the Singapore temples studied by Elliott the Kwun Tong one does not cater to a general, undifferentiated population some of whom may be attracted by the feats of its mediums. Tai Wong Ye's appeal is selective, and that selectivity, we suggest, is a major factor in the temple's current success.

The Basis of the Temple's Success

Even a casual observer visiting the temple on several occasions may conclude that it is an enterprise exclusively supported and

managed by members of one Chinese speech group, the Chiu-chow. The "honorary" committee members, the working committee members, the *tan sang*, and the *kei tung* are Chiu-chow. Observation of numerous possession ceremonies reveals that it is rare to discover a non-Chiu-chow among the worshippers. This de facto exclusivity is rendered more formal in a brochure advertising places for tablets of the deceased in the "Hall of 100 Surnames" by the statement that the places are reserved for *heung lei* or fellow countrymen 鄉里, i.e. Fellow Chiu-chow.

While from a ritual point of view Tai Wong Ye is correctly described as a spirit-medium temple, from a social point of view it is akin to a type which Feuchtwang¹⁷ designates a "Compatriot" temple. It is a place where members of the Chiu-chow minority speech group can gather to converse freely in their native tongue, exchange useful information, and enjoy that sense of solidarity which Durkheim posits as the chief product of shared ritual. The low-keyedness of the ritual offerings is understandable when one realizes that the target population is one already predisposed by regional socialization to accept the reality and effectiveness of the *kei tung's* mediumship. Our conclusion therefore is that the success of the Kwun Tong spirit-medium temple is due more to the social selectivity of its appeal than to a heightened interest in spirits and their mediums on the part of the general population.

NOTES

¹ Firth 1959, p. 141.

² Doolittle, 1865, Vol. II, pp. 112-116.

³ Elliott, 1955.

⁴ Jordan, 1972.

⁵ Ahern, 1973.

⁶ Potter, 1974.

⁷ This observation is based on casual questioning of Hong Kong residents over a three year time period.

⁸ Potter, *op. cit.*

⁹ The Chiu-Chow and Hoi-Luk-Fung people's native regions are the eastern coastal counties of Kwangtung Province. The Hokkien are natives of Fukien Province which is immediately east of Kwangtung Province.

¹⁰ *Tak Kaau* is a syncretic cult which claims tens of thousands of supporters from the Chiu-Chow communities in Southeast Asia. Although more ritual attention is awarded to Chinese deities the *Tak Kaau* pantheon includes Christ, Allah, and deities from the Hindu religion.

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11 Jordan, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-86.

12 For a discussion of "fairy bones" see Potter, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-226.

13 For an English translation of the Monkey legend, see Wu, 1942.

14 MacGowan, 1889.

15 It is important that the medium performs this particular act of self-mutilation from time to time because the blood from his tongue is used to make "powerful" amulets known as *ling chue* 靈珠.

16 Lewis, 1971.

17 Feuchtwang, 1974.

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ADDENDUM

A run of annual mimeographed Chinese texts on spirit mediumship, covering the years 1933-1942 and produced in or for Hong Kong, was discovered by the Hon. Editor of this Journal in a second-hand bookshop recently and is now held by the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong.