

Emerging Chinese Public Sphere in Multi-ethnic Malaysia:
A Case Study of the Hungry Ghost Festival and Philanthropic Activities

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Introduction

Malaysia is a land of diverse ethnic groups where people who speak different languages, follow different religions, and enact different practices coexist. According to Tan, Chinese religions in Malaysia are very diverse among worshippers. They may worship different Chinese deities and visit various types of temples, but they all participate in the overarching complex of Chinese Religion (Tan 2000: 284). Chinese religion in Malaysia combines Chinese folk religion with elements of Taoist and Buddhist traditions and Confucian ethics (Tan 2000: 283).

In the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar, it is common to come across the vivacious ritual of the Hungry Ghost Festival in the Chinese communities of most Southeast Asian cities as seen in figure 1 below. It is the most widely observed festival in Malaysia, second only to the Chinese New Year (Wong 1967: 136). This ritual is believed to have origins outside of Buddhism and Taoism.



Figure 1: The Hungry Ghost Festival on the street of Singapore
August 25, 2012

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The Hungry Ghost Festival, also known as Zhong Yuen Jie (中元節), or Yu Lan (盂蘭) is the most popular and important folk ritual festivity practiced by Chinese culture in many countries. Traditionally, Chinese have considered the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar as the 'ghost month' in which ghosts, spirits, and deceased ancestors are believed to migrate from the lower realm (陰間) of the dead to the upper realm (陽間) where living descendants conduct their lives. During ghost month, people of the Chinese community believe that the deceased come up from the lower realm to visit their living descendants who pay them homage and request their protection.

This short paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Johor, Malaysia in the summer of 2012. By referring to brief ethnographic data of the Hungry Ghost Festival as practiced in a Chinese community of an average modern housing estate located in a Johor suburb, I will discuss how this extremely ethnic and intimate ritual event came to acquire significance as a public celebration for its support of community and philanthropic traits.

1. The Hungry Ghost Festival at Home and in the Community

The Hungry Ghost Festival is also popularly known as 'the feast for the wandering souls', and is held on the seventh lunar month. In this month, ghosts, spirits and the souls of dead ancestors are released from lower realm to wander the earth for 30 days, where the livings subsist. The souls of the dead who are ignored by living descendants or relatives may act out in mischievous ways. Therefore, descendants and relatives must prepare and burn a sufficient amount of paper money (紙錢), joss sticks, paper clothes (燒衣紙) and fine goods made of paper such as laptop computers, cell phones, and luxurious wrist watches in order to satisfy the material needs of the visiting ancestor spirits. Various foods and fruit are also offered so that the deceased souls are not hungry. Rice (both cooked and uncooked) and candies are thrown onto the road to gratify any straggling ghosts (Wong 1967: 136).

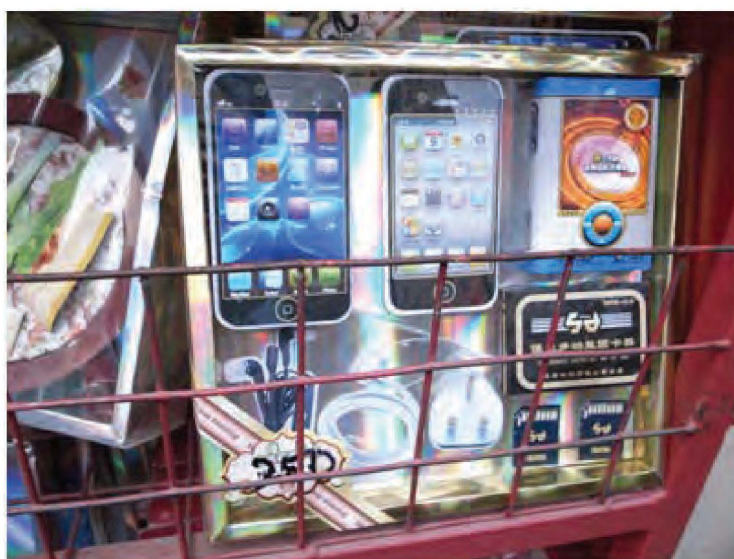


Figure 2: Paper-made cell phones for ancestors
August 25, 2012

In 2012, the 'ghost day' (the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month) fell on August 31st. On that day, most Chinese families in Malaysia conducted the domestic rituals for the deceased ancestors by preparing ritual food such as fried rice vermicelli (炒米粉), roasted pork belly, boiled whole chicken, fried whole fish, and Chinese biscuits. The main focus of the Hungry Ghost Festival seems to be paying respects to deceased relatives and ancestors by preparing and offering a feast as though the spirits were still living members of the family. Mass celebration opportunities also occur in the community; the Hungry Ghost Festival society organizes community events to hold Taoist rituals, traditional Hokkien opera (閩劇), concerts (歌台), and a charity dinner accompanied by an auction (平安宴).

From September 2nd to 4th, 2012, the community-based Hungry Ghost Festival was held at *Taman Tawar Jaya*. This is a modern housing estate pseudonym used in this paper. I participated and observed this festival from the first day of preparation to the charity auction dinner on the final night. Usually, Chinese Malaysians organize the Hungry Ghost Festival according to the social groups to which they belong such as occupational, regional, and clan associations, ritual communities, street communities, and so on. Therefore, the Taman Tawar Jaya Hungry Ghost Festival is considered a community event that connects residents. Each family who wish to participate in the society has to pay RM360 (USD110) a year. In the year of 2012, 288 families participated the Taman Tawar Jaya Hungry Ghost Festival.

Ceremonial rituals were carried out in the open space of the Taman Tawar Jaya housing estate and were conducted by the same Taoist priest every year, accompanied by traditional music, and gong drums. A shed was erected in order to house the improvised altar, tablets, and joss stick pots accompanied by offerings such as whole roasted pigs, fruit, tea, rice wine, and cake. The main purpose of these offerings is to satisfy wandering ghosts so that they do not interfere in the business of the living. The offerings are also for the spirits of ancestors (Chang 1993: 51). After completing all rituals, the Taoist priest allowed people to collect small ritual offerings as candies, tealeaves, uncooked rice, and coins by throwing into the crowd. Organizers also let the crowd bring food back for them (分福物). Every participant was given a 25kg packet of rice, one thick slice of roasted pork, multiple cakes, 5kg of cooking oil, and a bucket filled with other foods.

After cleaning up the ritual space, participants were at the eight-course dinner banquet at the association hall located in the center of Tawar. Every family who paid participation fee was given two admission tickets for the banquet. During the dinner, all participants enjoyed charity auction where men and women zealously placed a bid for expensive liquor, such as brandy, whisky and wine. Total sum of proceeds were donated to the local ethnic Chinese schools, lions club, undeveloped area such as *Kampung Baru*, or New Village where major residents are Chinese Malaysians. In 2010, donation was used for renewing streetlights of *Kampung Baru*.

2. Modernization of Malaysia after Independence and Housing Estate

Following Malaysian independence from British colonial rule in 1957, the government of Malaysia strove to industrialize the nation by relocating "economically inferior" Malays into the larger cities

such as Kuala Lumpur. In colonial times, British administrators had arranged the importation of Tamil and Chinese laborers to work in tin mines and on rubber plantations. Those plantations were mainly located in the central area of the Malaysian peninsula, so after independence it was possible for Chinese workers to benefit from urbanization and easily advance economically. However, the Malays had been forced by the colonial government to engage in rice farming in the northeastern region of the peninsula. Relocating village populations into urban centers in order to achieve industrialization was the centerpiece of the national policy following Malaysian independence.

House ownership became part of the objective of the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1971 to 1990 because urbanization and industrialization were promoted. Providing affordable public low-cost housing that satisfied the basic needs of citizens is one of the most important social objectives to date, and is called “home-owning democracy” (Mohd Razali Agus 1997: 30). Since 1981, the Ministry of Housing and the Local Government of Malaysia have introduced and implemented a concept of low-cost housing, providing homogeneous housing units to low-income groups as part of a welfare solution.

Table 1: Standard Low-Cost Housing in Malaysia

Selling Price	Not exceeding RM25000 (USD 7770) per unit
Target Group	Households with a monthly income not exceeding RM750 (USD 230)
Housing Type	Flats, single-story terraced house, detached house
Floor Plan	Standard built-up area of 550-600 square feet Two bedrooms, Living room, a Kitchen and a Bathroom-cum-toilet

[Mohd Razali Agus 1997: 39]

Low cost housing is defined as houses sold at a price not exceeding RM25000. This ceiling was set in 1982 and has been a contentious issue for developers and consumers alike because the cost of construction of low-cost housing is typically higher than the selling price. It is obvious that the policy expects some form of cross-subsidy. Buyers of the low-cost housing units must provide evidence of a combined household income not exceeding RM750 per month. In 1980, about 60% of urban households in Malaysia fell within this income range (Ghani and Lee 1997: 24).

The policy specifies that each low-cost housing unit must have a minimum finished area of 550 to 600 square feet comprising of two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. The property may be of any type including flats, terraces, or even detached houses.

3. Social Significance of the Festival as Community Event

It is clear that housing estates, popularly known as *taman* in Malay, are a politically oriented universal space for citizens of Malaysia. Here, we should pay more attention to the fact that this residential space is designed to be totally detached from the multicultural/ethnic backgrounds of

Malaysians. It is arguable that this is a political attempt to produce *Bangsa Malaysia*, or Malaysian people, to build a harmonious society. Modern housing estates of Malaysia are places where traditional human relationships based on the place they live are cut off and dismantled. However, people try to reconnect their dispossessed connection by organizing and practicing a community-based Hungry Ghost Festival.

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