Tua Ji Peh: The Intricacies of Liminality in the Deification of Chinese non-Buddhist Supernatural Beings in Chinese-Malaysian Communities

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Abstract: The pragmatic, responsive, and syncretic nature of popular Chinese religion is well known and is thought to result, in part, from the religion's close connection to the fluxes of the social system in which its adherents live. These characteristics often result in considerable change when the social fabric is disrupted, such as in the immigration of Chinese to new and unfamiliar places. This process of change is commonly seen among Chinese deities. Tua Peh 大伯 and Ji Peh 二伯 (in Hokkien dialect "First Uncle" and "Second Uncle"), two ghostly deities of popular Chinese Malaysian religion, are understood to have an ambiguous status in the Chinese pantheon as they possess characteristics of both gods and ghosts. In China, these figures were simply part of the otherworldly bureaucracy of the hell realm with a very limited role and were worshipped infrequently. In the past 20 years, their worship has become extremely ubiquitous, with many shrines and temples proliferating. Now a variety of people come to them for wealth, for healings, and for protection. This coincides during a time in which the economic situation of Chinese Malaysians has become more difficult which parallels a significant rise in political tensions between Malays and non-Malays. This has caused a shift towards favorability in the deities' reputation, the demographics of their worshippers, and the reasons patrons seek their assistance. Overall, the elevation of Tua Ji Peh seems to work towards lending legitimacy to those desperately seeking efficacious aid in a increasingly discriminatory and poltically unstable environment with harsher realities.

Keywords Malaysia; Mediums; Chinese popular religion

INTRODUCTION

The pragmatic, responsive, and syncretic nature of popular Chinese religion is well known and is thought to result, in part, from the religion's close connection to the fluxes of the social system its adherents inhabit.[1] These characteristics often result in considerable change when the social fabric is disrupted, such as the immigration of Chinese groups to new and unfamiliar places. Thus, popular religion in Chinese migrant communities can evolve dramatically in a relatively short amount of time due to the cultural and social upheaval inherent in adapting to a new land and society. In this case, the religion becomes increasingly localized in many respects, often changing how practitioners relate to recognized supra-human beings. Yet, the general categories assigned to these beings remain largely intact. Localization, however, can influence how these categories are understood, worshipped, and, occasionally, transcended.

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Nature of Supernatural Beings

Supra-human beings in popular Chinese religion are generally placed into one of three broad categories: gods, ghosts, and ancestors.[2] Ancestors are typically only relevant to practitioners with whom they share the bond of kinship. They are generally more private and exclusivist beings.[3] Their worship and functionality only extend through a particular kinship group, though the extent and size of this group are variable. Gods and ghosts are figures understood to operate more in the public sphere, though this is the only significant similarity they share. Gods are frequently subdivided depending on whether they are related to on a personal or bureaucratic level.[4] The gods of the personal model often include gods that cannot be included in the bureaucracy due either to their gender or a foreign origin. The gods of the bureaucratic model parallel figures of the human bureaucracy, possessing both a specific jurisdiction and a specific role. This specificity determines their religious function (e.g., why they are worshipped, who is a worshipper) as worship occurs when a practitioner seeks assistance on a matter they feel cannot be accomplished by their power alone.[5] Because of the parallels inherent in the bureaucratic model of understanding divinity, the fallibility of the human bureaucracy is also present in the celestial bureaucracy. This potential imperfection in the divine leads to a high degree of variability in the behavior of these bureaucratic gods as well as in how their behavior and roles are interpreted. Ghosts, however, tend to be viewed as either malicious or pitiable spirits and can frequently be viewed as both simultaneously.[6] In addition, ghosts tend to lack recognizable identities and are regarded as both politically and socially marginal figures as they exist outside of the realms of bureaucracy and kinship. The purpose of their worship tends to be largely directed at their placation and the prevention of their potential mischief.[7]

The most important determinant of worship in Chinese religion is *ling* (靈), which is often translated as efficacy. *Ling* determines the power of a supra-human being to either grant assistance or cause harm to an individual or group. In the case of gods as well as some godlike figures, *ling* directly influences the popularity of a deity's patronage, as there is little practicality in seeking the assistance of an ineffective god. However, there are limits to a figure's *ling*. In the case of deity worship, Chinese notions of predestination limit the aid one can receive, as one's lifespan and financial standing, for example, are predetermined for every individual and, though not rigidly inflexible, are often unable to be altered radically. However, there are some factors that are easily influenced by a supra-human being's *ling*, such as an individual's luck.

Deification & Liminality

The category of beings related to as gods is hardly static. Mortal beings can be integrated into the divine realm, but only upon their death. If the being or beings in question lack a foreign origin and are male, they are often incorporated into the otherworldly bureaucracy. The Jade Emperor, the highest figure in this establishment, then assigns them a specific role and function.[8] Occasionally, deification fails to occur this neatly. This often results in supra-human beings who posthumously come to possess characteristics of both gods and ghosts. Such figures typically begin their supernatural careers as ghosts, often as a result of a tragic death, who have become enshrined and, as a result, come to possess a recognizable identity. Some then undergo a "popular apotheosis" that causes them to be transformed into powerful patrons.[9] This liminality is also incredibly relative, leading to differences among how individuals in a given religious community understand and relate to them. Some may view them as more god-like while others may view them more as ghosts. These figures' most ardent followers tend to be those whose own social status is questionable, such

as those involved in illegal activities like gambling, as such beings are believed to be more sympathetic to the needs and desires that accompany more disreputable professions.[10] The ascent of these intermediate figures is understood by some scholars to end in one of two ways. Either they rise to prominence quickly and then decline again or they may become transformed entirely and take on the status of a god.[11] An intermediate being's fate is frequently determined by fluxes in the needs of the community that recognizes the figure. If the external factors that propelled the being into popularity dissipate, then so too will the community's need to worship it.

Chinese-Malaysian Communities & The Rising Importance of Tua Ji Peh

Chinese-Malaysian communities offer unique opportunities to examine the effects of localization on the practice of popular Chinese religion. The Chinese first came to Malaysia in large numbers during the latter half of the nineteenth century as laborers, though Chinese immigrants before this time were frequently traders. However, British colonial rule in Malaysia led to a huge demand for labor as the government sought to expand infrastructure and increase urbanization.[12] Chinese-Malaysians soon grew to become incredibly economically successful and thus powerful despite their minority status. Yet, despite their economic power and their existence as a demographic majority or near majority in several populous areas, discriminatory policies against the Chinese do exist in Malaysia. Nearly all of these measures are focused on hampering their financial strength and redistributing wealth. These policies have existed in some form for approximately the past forty years.[13] During this time frame, the worship of two beings called "First and Second Uncle" has risen precipitously in Chinese-Malaysian popular religion. First and Second Uncle, often called Tua Ji Peh (pinyin: Da'er Bo 大二伯) or Bo Tiao Peh (pinyin: Baochang Bo 保常伯) in Chinese-Malaysian communities, are understood to be of intermediate status as they possess characteristics of both gods and ghosts. Tua Peh (大伯) is the "First Uncle" and Ji Peh (二伯) is the "Second Uncle" and they generally appear as a pair. In China, these figures are understood to be part of the otherworldly bureaucracy of the hell realm. Yet they are conferred intermediate status in Chinese-Malaysian communities. In the past twenty years especially, temples dedicated to Tua Ji Peh as well as the spirit mediums who channel them have increased significantly. This increase is paralleled by a shift in the deities' reputation, the demographics of their worshippers, and the reasons patrons seek their assistance. This study seeks to understand how localization and external factors have and continue to influence Tua Ji Peh's deification in Chinese-Malaysian communities through the examination of the intricacies surrounding their intermediate status.

Background on Tua Ji Peh: Chinese Origins, Traditional Roles, and Iconography

Heibai Wuchang – Chinese Beginnings

Tua Ji Peh originated in mainland China, where they still exist today. However, they differ significantly from their Chinese-Malaysian counterparts. In China, Heibai Wuchang (黑白無常), as they are colloquially known, are ghosts of the hell bureaucracy charged with escorting souls to the underworld for judgment. Heibai Wuchang roughly means "Black White Impermanence." This name refers to both the dualism of Tua Peh and Ji Peh, who represent *yang* (陽) and *yin* (陰) respectively, and their role as agents of mortality and impermanence.[14] Despite their importance in mortal death and the afterlife, the Chinese

Heibai Wuchang are viewed as fairly lowly figures in the ghostly hell bureaucracy and are venerated as efficacious ghosts who possess the ability to potentially extend lifespans and grant wealth to the deserving.

The origin myths of Tua Ji Peh are numerous, though many accounts are variations of two narratives that can be traced back to China. One narrative focuses only on the origin of Tua Peh and stresses the virtue of filial piety whereas the other deals with the origins of both figures and stresses the virtues of loyalty and fraternity. In the first narrative, Tua Peh was initially a gentleman, though he was very unfilial. He would hit his mother on occasion but, at one point, realized the extent and shame of his unfilial behavior. He was very remorseful and ran to kneel before his mother in repentance. However, his mother was afraid he would strike her, leading her to run from him. While running, she fell down a well and died. Tua Peh dedicated himself after this tragic event to make amends for his filial lapse and remained in mourning for the remainder of his mortal life, an incredible display of filial piety.[15] The only mention of Ji Peh in this first narrative is as the sworn brother of Tua Peh. It is unclear if the pair met in the underworld or during their time as mortals. This narrative will be referred to later as "the unfilial narrative." The second narrative in which both figures appear tells a different story about two good friends/coworkers whose mortal lives ended in tragedy. One day, Tua Peh and Ji Peh were walking together when it began to rain heavily. Tua Peh told Ji Peh to wait under a bridge and seek shelter while he went to retrieve an umbrella. However, in Tua Peh's absence the rain became a deluge, causing the river to burst its banks and begin to rise. Ji Peh, loyal to his friend, did not move and drowned as a result. Upon finding Ji Peh dead, Tua Peh was so overcome with grief that he hung himself. In death, they were rewarded for their loyalty to each other and given the charge of leading souls to the underworld.[16] A variation of this second story asserts that the reason for this fateful walk was due to Tua Ji Peh's occupation as prison wardens who were searching for an escaped prisoner, hinting not only at their loyalty to each other, but also to their duty. This second narrative will later be referred to as "the drowning/hanging narrative." The reason for existence of two narratives is likely due to different regions, areas, or groups enshrining different mortals as the progenitors of Tua Ji Peh as a means of localizing and relating these well-known figures to their particular community. It is difficult to tell if one narrative precedes the other. Chinese-Malaysian communities likely inherited both of these narratives. An individual's view of their origin is then likely contingent on the Chinese provinciality from which a particular group or patron originated that shaped the individual's religious understanding the most.

Iconography

Tua Ji Peh are almost always presented as a duo. Ji Peh is depicted as short and stout, wearing all black, and Tua Peh is depicted as tall and thin, wearing all white.[17] Tua Peh wears a tall white hat emblazoned with characters representing the phrase "fortune at one glance" and holds a fan in his right hand, signifying his ability to remove obstacles. Tua Peh is also portrayed as having long black hair and eyebrows as well as a lolling tongue. The lolling tongue is said to be symbolic of Tua Peh's death by hanging and, in his worship, serves as a place where opium offerings are placed. Ji Peh, in contrast, wears a tall black hat, though it is noticeably shorter than Tua Peh's. His hat reads "auspiciousness at one glance." In his left hand he holds a tablet signifying his authority to take souls to the afterlife and in his right hand he carries a chain used to drag the souls of the dead. Ji Peh is also shown with a lolling tongue though this is generally only seen in temple icons. It is much shorter than Tua Peh's and is likely extended for the receipt of opium offerings. Ji Peh also has a more

intimidating countenance, as his eyes often seem to be bulging. In contrast, Tua Peh's face is much more serene. As their iconography suggests, Ji Peh is typically considered to be the more fearsome and temperamental of the two figures, in part due to his coloration and his intimidating "props" and features. In practice, this often translates into patrons consulting Tua Peh with greater frequency as it is believed that he is more likely to grant their requests based on his more friendly countenance.

Worship

Before their increase in popularity, Tua Ji Peh were chiefly approached for assistance in issues concerning an individual's lifespan or in issues regarding wealth. The first of these motivations is directly related to Tua Ji Peh's function in the bureaucracy. They are the beings who collect souls and escort them to the afterlife. Thus, by dealing with them directly, one may be able to extend one's own or a loved one's lifespan. In addition to this function, Tua Ji Peh are also believed to be wealth gods. This may be due to Tua Peh's relation to the Chinese wealth god Wuchang Gui (無常鬼) as the two figures are essentially analogous.[18] Tua Ji Peh are understood to be very efficacious in regards to the divination of lottery numbers. Their efficacy in this regard is somewhat related to their lower rank in the bureaucracy compared to more *yang* figures such as highly ranked gods. This lower rank characterizes them as closer to humankind, leading them to be more sympathetic to human desires compared to the loftier, more distant *yang* gods. Thus, they understand the need of the "common man" for some extra income and are more generous in granting wealth to their patrons. Offerings given to Tua Ji Peh in temples and through mediums further illustrate the link between these figures and the ordinary Chinese-Malaysian. For instance, dark beer, such as Guinness, and cigarettes are common offerings to Tua Ji Peh though such offerings would be unfit for *yang* deities. However, offering given to *yang* figures such as incense and sweets are common as well. In some cases, opium is also offered, but its illegality sometimes makes this difficult. However, some temples are able to offer opium to Tua Ji Peh. The opium is usually placed on the effigies' tongues at regular intervals. Opium is almost always absent from Tua Ji Peh medium performances, though some may smoke cigarettes out of an opium pipe as a substitute. These "vices" characterize Tua Ji Peh as much more accessible than other figures who are also generally worshipped in a temple setting. Prior to the recent increase in their veneration, many viewed these offerings as a means of "bribing" Tua Ji Peh, reflecting their fallibility as supra-human bureaucrats.

Mediums

Many temples dedicated to Tua Ji Peh employ spirit mediums. When a medium goes into a trance, he or she is recognized to be in direct contact with the spirit world, as the supra-human being is understood to have possessed the human body that serves as its conduit.[19] This allows the medium to self-inflict bodily injury without pain and to speak with divine wisdom. Most Tua Ji Peh spirit mediums follow the standard medium practices of giving advice, divining numbers, and writing talismans.[20] Tua Ji Peh mediums generally dress according to the classical iconography of the particular uncle they are channeling, though some mediums in the present day forgo much of the ritual costume. Mediums' performative styles are incredibly variable, which is likely a reflection of the decentralized nature of Chinese religion.[21] However, most Tua Ji Peh mediums do attempt to convey their accessibility and similarities to the "common man" in their performances.[22]

Liminality of Tua Ji Peh

In Chinese-Malaysian communities, Tua Ji Peh have characteristics associated with both gods and ghosts. Much like gods, Tua Ji Peh are worshipped by those who wish to receive their assistance and are often worshipped in temples. Ghosts, in contrast, are worshipped as a means of placating them and preventing potential harm they may cause. The worship of ghosts usually occurs in large public festivals at certain yearly intervals. In addition, patrons of Tua Ji Peh relate to them via the bureaucratic model of relating to gods. Tua Ji Peh do not then experience the political marginality of ghosts. However, they do exhibit the kinship marginality and thus are intermediate beings in this respect. Also, the hell bureaucracy in which Tua Ji Peh operate is the *yin* counterpart to the *yang* heavenly bureaucracy. Tua Ji Peh are understood to be *yin*, unlike the gods who are *yang*. Thus, Tua Ji Peh are more like ghosts in this regard. Prior to their recent and dramatic rise in prominence, Tua Ji Peh were viewed as having a questionable social status and as being disreputable in their behavior by partaking in drugs and some illegal activities. A god would never participate in such activities. Tua Ji Peh have held such intermediate status since their importation from China into Chinese-Malaysian communities.

complexities in the deification of *tua ji peh*

Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted in Penang, Malaysia during July 2010. Various temples and shrines in a variety of districts were visited. If they were present and willing, patrons, priests, and temple owners/workers were interviewed and generally asked questions involving Tua Ji Peh; their demographic information; and their views of the Chinese-Malaysian economic, social, and political situation over the past few decades.[23] Questions obviously varied depending on the individual being interviewed, as some were more knowledgeable about these figures than others. Overall, fourteen individuals were interviewed, including seven temple workers or priests. The information concerning Tua Ji Peh obtained from these interviews was categorized depending on which aspect of Tua Ji Peh's identity they concerned. These categories include: origin narratives and positions in the otherworldly bureaucracy; motivations for Tua Ji Peh's patronage, reputation and morality; and spirit mediums. Information was also organized based on the individual's age, or in the case of temple workers/priests, the approximate time at which Tua Ji Peh figures were installed in the temple. Temples and individuals whose origins precede 1960 are referred to as "older." Those whose origins fall between 1960 and 1980 are referred to as "intermediate." Those whose origins occurred any time after 1980 are referred to as "newer."

Origin Narratives & Positions in the Bureaucracy

There was considerable disagreement concerning the origins of Tua Ji Peh and their position in the celestial hierarchy both among and within the three constructed categories. Those in the older category differed in which origin narrative they subscribed to, but drew these narratives from the two "well-known" origin stories previously mentioned. These individuals tended to view Tua Ji Peh as being figures somewhat equivalent to "Chiefs of Police" with their own retinue of minions. Their charge, however, was still viewed as taking souls to the underworld. This places them considerably lower than the King of Hells (Yanluo Wang 閻羅王), the chief deity of the hell bureaucracy, but higher than what would constitute a "lowly" deity.

Many intermediate participants did not know any origin story for Tua Ji Peh. However,

both the drowning/hanging narrative and unfilial narrative were present. The chief temple priest of the intermediate temple Jalan Perlis Tua Ji Peh Temple presented an origin story of Tua Ji Peh that closely resembled the filial narrative with one notable difference. Instead of being unfilial in the beginning and undergoing a transformation, Tua Peh was always considered filial. The only notable part of this story is his premature death from excessively mourning his mother's demise. All intermediate participants viewed Tua Ji Peh as serving directly under the King of Hells. Many also upheld the view of Tua Ji Peh as Chief of Police figures in the bureaucracy. However, some viewed them as either closer or lower to the King of Hells in the hell bureaucracy in comparison to older participants. Some intermediate participants suggested that Tua Ji Peh were lower than locality divinities such as Tudi Gong (土地公) and not very close to the King of Hells in the aristocracy.

Newer temples either presented the origins of Tua Ji Peh as the reimagined unfilial narrative mentioned above or suggested that their origins were no longer known. All newer participants viewed Tua Ji Peh as occupying a position in the bureaucracy directly subordinate to the King of Hells.

The shifts from the older views to the intermediate suggest changes in how Tua Ji Peh's accessibility and morality are understood. Representing Tua Peh as a filial figure suggests that he has always been a figure of upright moral standing. This has important implications for the reputation of Tua Ji Peh, which will be discussed later. In addition, the view of Tua Ji Peh serving a lowly role in the bureaucracy can be viewed as a matter of increased accessibility. Gods lower in the bureaucracy are generally understood to be more open to patron's requests and easier to channel via a spirit medium. Loftier gods are often above granting many of the requests the uncles receive, especially wealth, and are viewed as harder to access. Newer participants and temples either perpetuate the reimagined unfilial narrative, which elevates the deities morally, or regard their origins as unimportant to their function in the popular religious community. The newer view of Tua Ji Peh occupying a very high position in the bureaucracy can also be seen as increasing their *ling*. Individuals in the newer category also view Tua Ji Peh as so compassionate that they will listen to most "reasonable" requests regardless of their bureaucratic status. Thus, by elevating Tua Ji Peh to a higher position, they are able to increase the perceived power of Tua Ji Peh without damaging their efficacy and accessibility.

Motivations for Patronage

There is also considerable variation in one's motivation for patronage of Tua Ji Peh, though wealth is a constant theme. Older participants tend to uphold the "traditional" reasons for patronage discussed earlier: wealth and mercy concerning an individual's lifespan. Gamblers, prostitutes, and others involved in illegal businesses are recognized as common patrons. However, all older participants did recognize that these illegally involved patrons did not currently dominate Tua Ji Peh worship. Several noticed that more and more "everyday" people have come to worship Tua Ji Peh in the last few decades. Intermediate participants generally expanded the reasons for patronage, adding motivations such as spirit disturbances, medical issues, and luck. One intermediate participant claimed that Tua Ji Peh worship could address multipurpose needs. These expanded reasons proliferate greatly in the testimony of newer participants. Motivations such as health, studies, children, family matters, and jobs were added to those asserted by both intermediate and newer participants.

This proliferation of purposes seems to suggest an expansion of the clientele base for Tua Ji Peh. In addition, it is possible that this proliferation is related to their demonstrated or rumored efficacy as well as to certain individuals or temples seeking to legitimize these

figures. By associating Tua Ji Peh with less illegal business and underworld concerns, their reputation is able to be more effectively elevated, their worship is able to become more widespread, and their temples are able to become more successful.

Reputation & Morality

According to older sources, Tua Ji Peh had a reputation that characterized them as "scary" or "unsavory" individuals. For instance, the chief temple priest of the older temple Seng Ong Beow (pinyin: Chenghuang Miao 城隍廟) asserted children were, prior to the 1960s, too afraid to enter the temple. He also added that Tua Ji Peh were also considered "fierce" at this time. In addition, during the 1930s in Penang, there were reports of sightings of Tua Ji Peh at opium and gambling dens as well as brothels, leading Seng Ong Beow to chain their statues during this time. However, all older participants that cited this fierceness felt that it had since been relaxed, beginning several decades ago. In terms of morality, older participants viewed Tua Ji Peh as morally ambiguous at best. One older temple priest viewed patronage of Tua Ji Peh as nearly equivalent to bribery. This bribery had no consequence in the afterlife of the briber because the rewards or wealth Tua Ji Peh bestow comes directly from them and thus do not concern other deities. Another older temple attendant viewed such "bribery" differently. Tua Ji Peh will help bribe higher-ranked hell bureaucracy officials than them on the patron's behalf. Tua Ji Peh may also either help those involved with illegal business by making their business more prosperous or by allowing them to make a better life in another profession, leaving Tua Ji Peh's moral reputation ambiguous and circumstantial.

Interestingly, most intermediate participants echoed these same views, including the lessening of Tua Ji Peh's once fierce reputation. However, all intermediate participants doubted whether Tua Ji Peh would participate in illegal activities themselves. Newer temples and participants overwhelmingly understood Tua Ji Peh to be morally didactic and of outstanding moral character. Tua Ji Peh were generally viewed as granting patrons' requests out of their great "compassion." All newer participants asserted that Tua Ji Peh try to talk their patrons involved in immoral and illegal actions into reforming their ways and making a better life. If they are unsuccessful, then they help these patrons balance their immoral livelihood with moral deeds, teaching them to use their blessings "the right way." This shift to direct moral didacticism seems to suggest a more recent trend in how Tua Ji Peh are coming to be understood. This elevation of moral character is likely associated with Tua Ji Peh's elevation in the bureaucracy, but also with the expansion of their clientele base. Few "everyday" individuals would seek out an "unsavory" god who catered to "unsavory" types as this could impact one's own reputation in the community.

Spirit Mediums & Tua Peh Emphasis

At every temple visited that employed spirit mediums, Tua Peh was channeled almost exclusively. There was one exception. In this case, Ji Peh was rarely channeled whereas Tua Peh was channeled several times a week. This is likely associated with the widely held view (by new, intermediate, and old alike) that Ji Peh, though just as efficacious as Tua Peh, has a much shorter temper and is much stricter than his sworn brother. This then limits his potential efficacy. Thus, there seems to be a disproportionate emphasis on Tua Peh. This is further illustrated in temples as well. One intermediate temple, Baosheng Dadi (保生大帝), possessed only a Tua Peh statue and has never had a Ji Peh statue present. A newer temple, Farlim Tua Ji Peh Temple, had dozens of Tua Peh figures but only a few Ji Peh figures, which were also much smaller and placed more peripherally in the shrine. This suggests that effi-

cacy is leading Tua Peh to eclipse Ji Peh in importance. Seemingly, Ji Peh is coming to serve the role of a sidekick rather than a partner of equal standing. In addition, spirit mediums were not present at any of the older temples. Tua Ji Peh mediums then seem a contemporary phenomena, likely owing to their increased popularity in recent years, their renowned efficacy, and the elevation of their reputation.

IMPLICATIONS

These developments in how Tua Ji Peh's divinity is understood resonate with some scholar-noted trends while rejecting others. Robert Weller noticed that the resurgence of popular Taiwanese religion in the past two decades has placed far greater value on deities that undermine the bureaucratic metaphor in some way. These deities, like Tua Ji Peh, are individualistic and tend to lack associations with the community morality typical of more standard divine figures.[24] However, I would further argue, based on my findings, that these deities do not necessarily stay individualistic or outside of the greater moral community indefinitely. In the case of Tua Ji Peh, resurgence movements seem to rally around these atypical divinities, later altering them as part of a strategy to legitimize themselves and their worshippers. Thus, based on C. Stevan Harell's discussion of liminality, Tua Ji Peh are becoming increasingly less intermediate as their social status gains security and their worshippers proliferate. They are no longer specialized toward those with a questionable social status. They are instead becoming more and more part of the public Chinese-Malaysian religious community.

In addition, Harell's view of liminality suggests one of two possible outcomes for intermediate divinities: either they rise to prominence and gradually decline again or they are transformed entirely into respectable divinities.[25] In the case of Tua Ji Peh, it seems unlikely that they will experience a decline into obscurity anytime in the near future. Their perceived efficacy in granting wealth is common knowledge in Chinese-Malaysian religious communities and it is highly unlikely that the desire for it will lessen, especially considering the continuation of discriminatory Malaysian economic policies against those of non-Malay descent. It also seems unlikely that Tua Ji Peh will ever be able to fully become a standard *yang* god as they are part of the hell bureaucracy and are inherently *yin*. However, the insertion of moral didacticism into Tua Ji Peh worship, especially in newer temples, may help to overcome this in some way. Thus, it seems unlikely that either of these outcomes describes the end result of the elevation process of Tua Ji Peh. Based on the uniqueness of Tua Ji Peh, however, it is difficult to tell if they are the exception to Harell's proposed system of liminality or if they are indicative of its inaccuracy in this regard. Further research could help illuminate this.

Overall, however, the elevation of Tua Ji Peh seems to work toward lending legitimacy to those desperately seeking efficacious aid in an increasingly discriminatory and dynamic environment with increasingly harsher realities.

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