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THE ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF CANTONESE DAOIST
PRIESTS (DAOSHI) IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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SYNOPSIS

This project paper, comprising five chapters, tries to give a general picture of daoist priests in Malaysia, in particular their roles as Chinese religious specialist. In the first chapter, the scope of this project is briefly discussed and some relevant works are reviewed too. Then, one can also find the definition of daoist priests and the rites they conduct too. In addition, the historical background of the Daoist Religion as well as the research methodology are described.

In the second chapter, I discuss the background of daoist priests and try to look into the organizational aspects of the daoist priests by referring to their relationship with other parties concerned and their apprenticeship. In Chapter 3, the roles and functions of daoist priests are examined and in Chapter 4, the focus is on the various rites, in connection to death, conducted by daoist priests.

Finally, a conclusion is drawn in Chapter 5 and we shall see the significance of daoist priests in Chinese community and Chinese Religion in Malaysia.

SINOPSIS

Projek ini mengandungi lima bab dan cuba memberi satu gambaran umum mengenai penyebar Agama Daoist, sebagai pakar Agama Cina, di Malaysia. Dalam Bab 1, skop projek ini dibincang dan penyelidik juga meneliti buah hasil yang relevan dengan projek penyelidikan ini. Definisi mengenai penyebar Agama Daoist dan cara-cara perkembangan Agama Daoist serta metodologi penyelidikan juga boleh didapati dalam bab ini.

Dalam Bab 2, penyelidik mencungkil latar belakang penyebar Agama Daoist dan juga meninjau aspek organisasi kumpulan penyebar agama tersebut dengan merujuk kepada perhubungan mereka dengan pihak yang berkenaan. Cara perlatihan penyebar agama ini juga disentuh. Dalam Bab 3, penyelidik memaparkan perbincangan tentang peranan dan fungsi penyebar agama ini dan Bab 4 adalah menfokuskan kepada cara-cara penyebar Agama Daoist bersembah terhadap si mati.

Akhirnya, penyelidik akan membincangkan kesimpulan yang sewajarnya dalam Bab 5 serta meneliti kepentingan penyebar Agama Daoist ini terhadap masyarakat Cina dan Agama Cina di Malaysia.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 SCOPE OF STUDY

This is an exploratory but pioneer study on daoist religious specialist in Malaysia called *daoshi* (道士). Among the Chinese, *daoshi* or daoist priests are generally associated with death rituals, and they are, sometimes, even seen as an omen which signals the arrival of death. Thus, in daily life, people tend to avoid meeting *dao shi*; but when there is a death, *daoshi* may be engaged to perform the appropriate rituals for the dead. This paradoxical phenomenon, avoidance of contact with *daoshi* whose services are in demand, poses interesting questions, with regards to the significant functions and roles of *daoshi*. Thus, in the later part of this paper, I shall examine the roles and functions of the *daoshi* in the Malaysia Chinese community.

As noted above, Chinese associate *daoshi* with rites, especially funeral rites. I shall describe the kind of rituals carried out by daoist priests. Not many people know that *daoshi*, besides conducting funeral rites, perform

other rites too, such as the rite of *kaiguang* (开光)¹ and the rite of *hedan* (贺诞) and *deities'* celebration.² Nevertheless, the above-mentioned rites are not daoist priests' major activities and they constitute only a small portion of their activities, roughly only about 10% of their activities, according to the estimate of one of my respondents.³ In Chapter Four, I shall concentrate on the funeral rituals only.

The scope of this study is limited. I intend this to serve as an introductory paper which will pave the way for further study.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Daoism, being a popular research topic for many scholars, has many published works available in the market. In the academic field, Daoism has two major facets for

¹This rite serves to bind the deity's spirit into the object (tablet or statue) and normally only one *daoshi* or other spirit-medium is needed to perform it.

²This rite is usually conducted in a group comprising odd number of *daoshi*. Some examples of the deities' celebration are *Huaguan* Celebration (华光诞), *Taishan Laojun* Celebration (太上老君诞) and others.

³No accurate statistics can be obtained as the target group is no longer keeping a proper record.

research: that of the philosophical nature and that of the religious nature. The term Daoism is, sometimes, misleading in certain aspects because for different scholars, the definition of the term differs. To philosophers, Daoism refers to a school of philosophy but to the scholars on religion, the term means a system of religion. But for Chinese scholars, there is no such ambiguity of the term as the former is normally known as *daoia* (道家) and the latter, *daoiao* (道教). Dr. Tan Chee Beng (1983:229) observing the problem of the above-mentioned term in English language, has suggested Daoist Religion to denote the latter. In this project, I shall use this term to refer to the religion practiced by the daoist priests.

Scholars have studied many aspects of the Daoist Religion : its developmental history, its texts and doctrines, its liturgies, its practitioners and others. For a discussion of the historical background of Daoist Religion, one can refer to the works of Fu (1937), Fung (1966), Kaltenmark (1969), Wang (1990) and others. Rites and liturgies are another major aspect of Daoist Religion which many scholars concentrate on. Topley (1952),

Freedman (1957) and Saso (1972) are some of them. Saso (1972) studied the life and the teachings of the daoist master Chuang in Xinju (新竹) of Taiwan. Besides his teachings, Saso examined the relationship between Chuang, a daoist priest, and other parties, such as his family, his neighbours and other daoist priests, in the social environment. Through observation, Saso noticed how common people tried to keep a fairly safe distance, which seemed so to them, from the daoist priest as a result of the fear for the daoist magical power. To the researcher, the Malaysian Chinese also do so due to the closeness between the *daoshi* and the funeral rites of which the latter link to the inauspicious event of death.

Freedman (1957 : 189-224) touched on a few topics connected to death. He examined the role of association, the nature of ancestor worship and others but his emphasis was on the rites, inclusive of funeral rites and post funeral rites, which he related to the social status of the deceased. He also pointed out "the gulf between the knowledge of the expert and the ignorance and indifference to meaning [of the elaborate rite] on the part of the layman," where the layman wanted simplification and the

expert had to give in. To Freedman, cultural specialization and estrangement of the symbolic value of rites are some causes of this phenomenon. This, certainly happens too to Chinese community in Malaysia as the younger generation, of earlier immigrants, are in the different setting and social environment of their ancestors. And this can be proved by the localized development of Daoist Religion.

Tong (1990:91-112) also touched on the above rites, but from a very different angle. To him, "the ritual associated with death may best be viewed as attempts to purify, then transform, the dead person into an object of worship." Here, Tong tried to explain the function of the funeral rites to the alive. But here, in this project, it is much of the researcher's interest to see the conductors of the rites, that is the daoist priests.

Discussing the religion of Chinese in Malaysia, Tan (1983:217-221) has aptly described it as "part and parcel of Chinese ways of life" which "involves the worship of Chinese deities of both Daoist and Buddhist origins, nature spirits, and the ancestors." He also pointed out the fallacies of social researchers in assigning a definite

term for the diffused religion of Chinese in Malaysia, of which Tan has suggested to name it as Chinese Religion, distinctively distinguished from other religions among its multi-ethnic members of the same Malaysian society. His second notion was about the erroneous expectation, by social researchers, of religious stereotype that supposedly make up the Malaysia Chinese's culture. In this project, the researcher will try to see how Daoist Religion incorporates into the Chinese ways of life when dealing with the event of death. Further from this, the roles and functions of daoist priests, the religious specialists of Daoist Religion, will also be examined so as to unveil the reason for their survival.

1.3 DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND

Before we really study the subject matter, we must first get an operationalized definition of daoist priests. According to *Zongjiao Cidian* (宗教辞典) (1981) or *The Dictionary of Religion*, daoist priests are "those who follow the teachings of Daoist Religion and who know various rites and ceremonies, for instance, *zhai* (斋), *jiao* (醮), *dao* (祷) and *ji* (祭)." *Zhai* is actually the process of mental and physical purification

before one worships deities and this is done so as to pay respect to deities. And *jiao*, according to the explanation of "Jingjizhi" (经籍志), a subtitle in *Suishu* (隋书) or *The Book of Sui Dynasty* (Wei 1973 : 1092-1093), means worshipping Heavenly Master and other deities by tabling some food and wine on a starry night. This definition has not changed much, except the involvement of *daoshi* as a new element in which they conduct rites on behalf of the worshipper. Today, the *zhai* and *jiao* are invariably combined in the liturgy, but they have different emphasis. Liu Chih-wan, a contemporary Chinese scholar has suggested, "... their emphases are not the same: the *zhai* places its emphasis upon the prayers of the individual for blessings and salvation of the dead; whereas the emphasis of the *jiao* is upon the prayer of the public (i.e. the community) for averting calamities and ensuring tranquility." And to Saso, a leading figure in the study of Daoist Religion, the *jiao* has its purpose, "to win blessing from heaven and union with the transcendent Dao", whereas the *zhai* is intended "to free the souls from hell." (Thompson 1979:110) For the respondent group of this project, the above notion is more or less acceptable and in their own jargon, the rites which solely connects to death are called

huangtan (黄 壇) or "yellow altar", and the rites dealing with deities are called *qingtán* (清 壇) or "pure altar". However, there is also a rite, combining the above, which is called *qing huang tan* (清 黄 壇) or "pure and yellow altars". Some examples of this rite are *Yulan Shenghui* (盂 兰 胜 会) and *Chongyang Shenghui* (重 阳 胜 会). *Ji* is the prayer offered by the deceased's descendants, with the help of monks or daoist priests and normally paper objects are burnt as offerings.

In the context of this paper, the *daoshi* studied are *huoju daoshi* (火 居 道 士) or "fire dwellers", who lead a secular life and they do get married and have children. The *huoju daoshi* in Kuala Lumpur claim to be the upholders of the *jingdian pai* (经 典 派). This is the daoist sect which emphasizes the study of *Laozi* (老 子) and *Zhuangzi* (庄 子). (Welch 1966:201). The main objective of this sect is to, through experiencing the marvellous mystery or *canxuan* (参 玄) and studying text or *jiudian* (究 典), understand the method or *li* (理) of unity between human and nature or *tian* (天) and, by chanting texts and being supple, to ameliorate one's sin. (Zhang 1977:13).

Daoist Religion is one of *three components* of *sanjiao* (三教) or "three teachings".⁴ *Daoist Religion* is of ancient origin and one can trace *its history* back to the late Han (汉) dynasty. According to Wang Yuan Hua (1990), there are four developmental periods of Daoist Religion in China. In the beginning stage which stretched from the late Han dynasty to Weijin (魏晋) dynasty, the formation of early Daoist Religion took shape by syncretising several elements which included the philosophical teaching of Laozi (老子) and Zhuangzi (庄子) and their successors, *Yinyang* school of thought (阴阳家), knowledge of hygiene and medicine of ancient origin, the magician and the legendary immortals and lastly, local beliefs as well as the beliefs and practices of ancient China (Wang 1990:9-16). As there was more than one origin of Daoist Religion, it is not surprising that in the early stage, Daoist Religion had several sects such as *Taiping Dao* (太平道) or "The Way of Great Peace", *Wudoumi Dao* (五斗米道) or "The Way of Five-Peck-Rice", and *Dandin Dao* (丹鼎道) or "The Way of Meditation".

⁴ *Sanjiao* (三教) or "three teachings" comprise Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoist Religion/Daoism.

The development of Daoist Religion reached its peak during the Tang (唐) dynasty as its emperor, with political intention, placed priority on Daoist Religion over Confucianism. With the encouragement from its emperor, Daoist Religion soon flourished. The Tang emperors, who sought the daoist priests' help to attain immortality, granted high status to daoist followers. They set up daoist organisations and monasteries to accommodate the growing number of daoist priests and daoist followers. Under this liberal and encouraging atmosphere, Daoist Religion continued its development from the preceding stage.

Then, in the third stage, during the Sung (宋) and Yuan (元) dynasties, Daoist Religion reformed through absorbing the teachings of Confucianism and Buddhism. Daoist Religion did not get any special preference from the imperial court as it was in Tang dynasty, but it was popular among the commoners. And it began to develop new sects, like Quanzhen Dao (全真道) or "Perfect Realization Sect", Shenxiao Pai (神霄派), Tianxin Pai (天心派) and others.

The Ming (明) and Qing (清) dynasties marked the final developmental history of Daoist Religion. During this stage, due to internal difficulties and external factors, Daoist Religion began to decline, although it was once preferred by the Ming emperors. At this stage, there were only two major sects, *zheng yi Dao* (正一道) or "Proper Unity Sect" and *Quanzhen Pai* (全真派) or "Perfect Realization Sect" and the former survives till today.

1.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methods play an important role in social studies. They are tools which will help the researchers to probe their problems and the tools used will affect the findings of the researchers. Therefore, researchers must choose their research methods carefully by considering all the relevant factors.

1.4.1 Place of Research

One can find *daoshi* or daoist priests in several major cities in Malaysia, especially in the areas where there are concentrations of Chinese, such as Pulau Pinang, Ipoh, Seremban, Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru. This study cannot

possibly cover all the above areas. First, the financial status of the researcher did not permit her travel and did research in all these places. Secondly, the researcher did not have easy access to the *daoshi* groups in the above-mentioned areas except in Kuala Lumpur where the researcher's father, grandfather, uncles and a cousin have been *daoshi*. Lastly, the time constraint in completing the fieldwork for the project paper also affects the choice of the researcher.

After considering all the above factors, the researcher decided to choose Kuala Lumpur as her base to study daoist priests. In Kuala Lumpur, the daoist priests studied normally assemble at the back portion of a shophouse in Petaling Street before they leave for the deceased's residence or funeral parlour to conduct funeral rites at about 6.30 p.m. Then, they will come back, at midnight to unload the tools before going home. This gathering place of daoist priests had become the main venue where the researcher carried out most of her interviews.

1.4.2 Research sample

This paper studies Daoist Religion and daoist priests. In Kuala Lumpur, there are, at least, four groups of daoist priest according to speech group (dialect group) origin. They are Guangdong (广东), Fujian (福建), Chaozhou (潮州) and Kejia (客家) daoist priests. In this paper, the target group is Guangdong (广东) daoist priests (i.e. Cantonese daoist priests) and there are twenty three of them in Kuala Lumpur.

It is important to take note that the concept of retirement does not exist among the daoist priests. They work as long as they can. This is probably due to the nature of their profession (the organisational weakness of daoist priests' group): they have no Employee Provident Fund and pension which are supposed to be borne by their employers. Consequently, they are forced to work so as to support themselves.

1.4.3 Methodology of research

The researcher had employed three methods to complete this study.

1.4.3 (a) Library studies

This is one of the main resources of researcher in locating the relevant materials for the topic studied. The researcher had read several articles and books which helped her to gain insight into the target group. From the works of various scholars, the researcher had a better understanding of the historical background of Daoist Religion and its development in other parts of the world, especially Taiwan. Besides, library studies have also enabled the researcher to have a better grasp of theoretical construction of studying and understanding. Daoist Religion which is so beneficial in completing this project.

The researcher first examined works pertaining to the historical background of Daoist Religion; then, some works which detail the rites performed by *daoshi* and lastly, she concentrated on the works on Chinese Religion in Malaysia and Singapore.

1.4.3 (b) Interview

Interview is a method to gain information from the respondents. Some twelve respondents were interviewed

intensively from April to June 1993. Every interviewee was requested to fill up a questionnaire which contains questions on the interviewee's background, his spouse and his family members. Besides, I also asked some questions pertaining to Daoist Religion and daoist priests in Malaysia nowadays.

The interview method is very dependent upon the probing skill of researcher and co-operation shown by the interviewee. Furthermore, the interviewer has to be sensitive to note the changes in the environment and atmosphere and alter his or her strategies accordingly.

1.4.3 (c) Participant observation

This method is employed when the researcher had to do observation, especially when *daoshi* or daoist priests performing their rites. This method helps the researcher to participate and observe systematically and avoid certain misinterpretation on the interviewee's oral account.

CHAPTER 2

DAOIST PRIESTS : THEIR PROFESSION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter shall concentrate on exploring the background of daoist priests. People often employ daoist priests to perform various rites, mainly funeral rites, but they know very little about these daoist priests: their education level, their origins, their income and so on. In this chapter, I shall describe the daoist priests based on the interviews with my twelve respondents. Besides, this chapter will also try to deal with the organisational aspects of daoist priests as a group, which include apprenticeship, their relationship with the undertakers⁵ and the bereaved, their working network, their internal constitution as a group and others. This will help us to understand how daoist priests, as a group, function among the Chinese in Malaysia.

⁵In the context of the Chinese community in Malaysia, these undertakers are, normally, those who buy and sell coffins.

2.2 BACKGROUND OF DAOIST PRIESTS

The twelve respondents interviewed are all Chinese males from the same speech-group whose ancestors originated from the province of Guangdong (广东) in China. Although the majority of them are Chinese-educated, there are two respondents who had never studied Chinese formally. They admitted to have faced much hindrance in the course of their apprenticeship as all the texts used for chanting during rituals are written in Chinese.

Regarding the place of birth, most of them were born locally, although in different states of Malaysia, except one respondent who migrated from Shansui (汕水) in China to Malaya in 1932. When asked about their religion,⁶ they claim to be the followers of Daoist Religion, and who worship *Taishan Laojun* (太上老君) which is the daoist title for Laozi (老子). As a respondent put it, "Surely we are the followers of Daoist Religion." But it is observed that not every one of them set up the altar for

⁶I only managed to ask four respondents, as my key informant told me that the daoist priests were sensitive about this issue. Their sensitivity, from the researcher's viewpoint, may partly due to the attitude of the Chinese community which often links Daoist Religion, with its obvious practitioner - *daoshi*, to superstition and magical power.

worshipping *Taishan Laojun* at home, and usually only the altars for such popular and common deities as Goddess of Mercy, *Guandi Ye* (关帝爷) are visible.

The age of these twelve respondents differs very much, from twenty two years old, the youngest, to eighty years old, the oldest. I have separated them into three age groups accordingly, see Table 1 below.

Age	No. of person	Percentage
<30	4	33%
30-55	6	50%
55-80	2	17%
	12	100%

Table 1 : Number of daoist priest in age groups.

It is interesting to note that three out of four daoist priests from the lower age group, do take up other jobs too. Actually, among all the twelve respondents, there are four of them who have other sources of income and among the four, only two perceive "daoist priests" as their main profession. As for their monthly income, they normally

earn between the range of RM1,000 and RM2,000 a month. From Table 2, there is roughly one third of the respondent group who earn more than RM2,000 per month.

Monthly income (RM)	No. of person	Percentage
500 - 1,000	1	8%
1,001 - 1,500	2	17%
1,501 - 2,000	5	42%
>2,000	4	33%
	12	100%

Table 2 : Monthly income and number of daoist priests

To the researcher, the figure shown, pertaining to the average monthly income, is more or less understated, as the researcher observed, at least, some 50% of the research sample possess their own means of transport and advanced communication tools. As to the level of education, eight of the respondents completed secondary school and three

finished primary school⁷ and lastly, a respondent holds a professional diploma in Graphic Design.

Half of the respondents took up daoist priests in the mid eighties and the rest of the group in the late sixties or early seventies except one in the nineties. When asked for the reason why they became daoist priests, they accredited *yuan* (缘) or fate⁸ as the main cause and some mentioned the financial factor. These daoist priests lead a secular life and seven of them are married. When asked about training their own children to become daoist priests, none of them gave a positive answer and at the best, they held a neutral attitude in that they would let their children decide on their own. And from the questionnaire, not even one from the younger generation (children) of these daoist priests followed their fathers to be daoist priests. But there is one respondent who teaches his children the daoist texts and techniques as he

⁷This group is also inclusive of those who received their education in *sishu* (私塾) or "private school" which was set up by clan members or a family or the teacher himself, normally with a teacher applying different pedagogy for different students.

⁸The concept of *yuan* (缘) or fate is actually of Buddhist origin.

believed "this will help my children in protecting and defending themselves when necessary."

It is interesting to observe how these daoist priests expressed their opinion regarding the succession of daoist priest profession by their children. Firstly, none of them answered affirmatively. To the researcher, this is very puzzling. This is because these specially trained daoist priests apparently did not keep the professional secrets within their families, of which they should, by training their own children. And paradoxically, they would like their children to pursue other better jobs, even though four out of the twelve respondents were trained by their fathers or elders, who were daoist priests too. Anyhow, they did show their own dignity and respect to their identity by emphasizing that they are *daoshi* and not *nanfulao* (喃无佬) (In Cantonese, *nammolo*), a colloquial term which has, commonly, a derogatory meaning. The latter is given to these Chinese religious specialists due to their hardly audible way of chanting, of which some commoners perceive this negatively and thus, labelled these *daoshi* as cheats. But it is interesting to note that the Fujian speech group views these daoist priests differently,

by honouring them as *saikong* (师公) or "the master".

To conclude this part, daoist priests are different. In their backgrounds but they do share some things in common. From the findings, they are of middle class, but with a very unique profession.

2.3 DAOIST PRIESTS : ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS

The daoist priests have their very own organisational systems. Their organisation is very unique and flexible in tapping manpower for ritual purposes, unlike the more rigid situation between employees and employers in the commercial world. In order to understand this, we must first examine the relationship between daoist priests and *daoyuan* (道院) or "monastery", in which they are being trained.

A *daoyuan* is a place run by daoist priests where they facilitate their management and administration internally and externally. Internally, they may use it as a training ground to teach their disciples various rites and daoist texts. Sometimes, this monastery is also used as a storeroom for keeping chanting instruments. Externally, the *daoyuan* serves as a place of contact between daoist

priests and the parties concerned, for instance, the bereaved family, undertakers or other monasteries. Normally, a *tan* (壇) or altar, for worshipping daoist deities, is set up in the monastery.

This kind of monastery is usually established and headed by a daoist priest who have a few disciples and a good relationship with undertakers - for the undertakers will contact the head of the monastery so that a funeral rite can be arranged for the deceased, surely with the consent of the bereaved that they will pay. Here, the function of the undertaker as a middleman who makes the contact between the daoist priests and the bereaved possible is clearly seen. Sometimes, the monastery will have to perform major funeral rites, which require at least three daoist priests, for different bereaved families simultaneously. The head of the monastery, facing the problem of insufficient number of disciples or daoist priests, will summon daoist priests of other monasteries to help out. Actually, all the monasteries trained their own disciples and after graduating, the disciples will be placed in a pool, literally, and they can be summoned by other monasteries. Here, the relationship between a master

and his disciples is an issue of training and identity. And from my observation, this phenomenon arises mainly due to the small number of daoist priests, only twenty three of them, from five monasteries,⁹ in the only group of Guangdong daoist priests, in Kuala Lumpur, being studied in this project, who not only cater the religious demand of the same speech group as well as others, and thus forced them into co-operation.

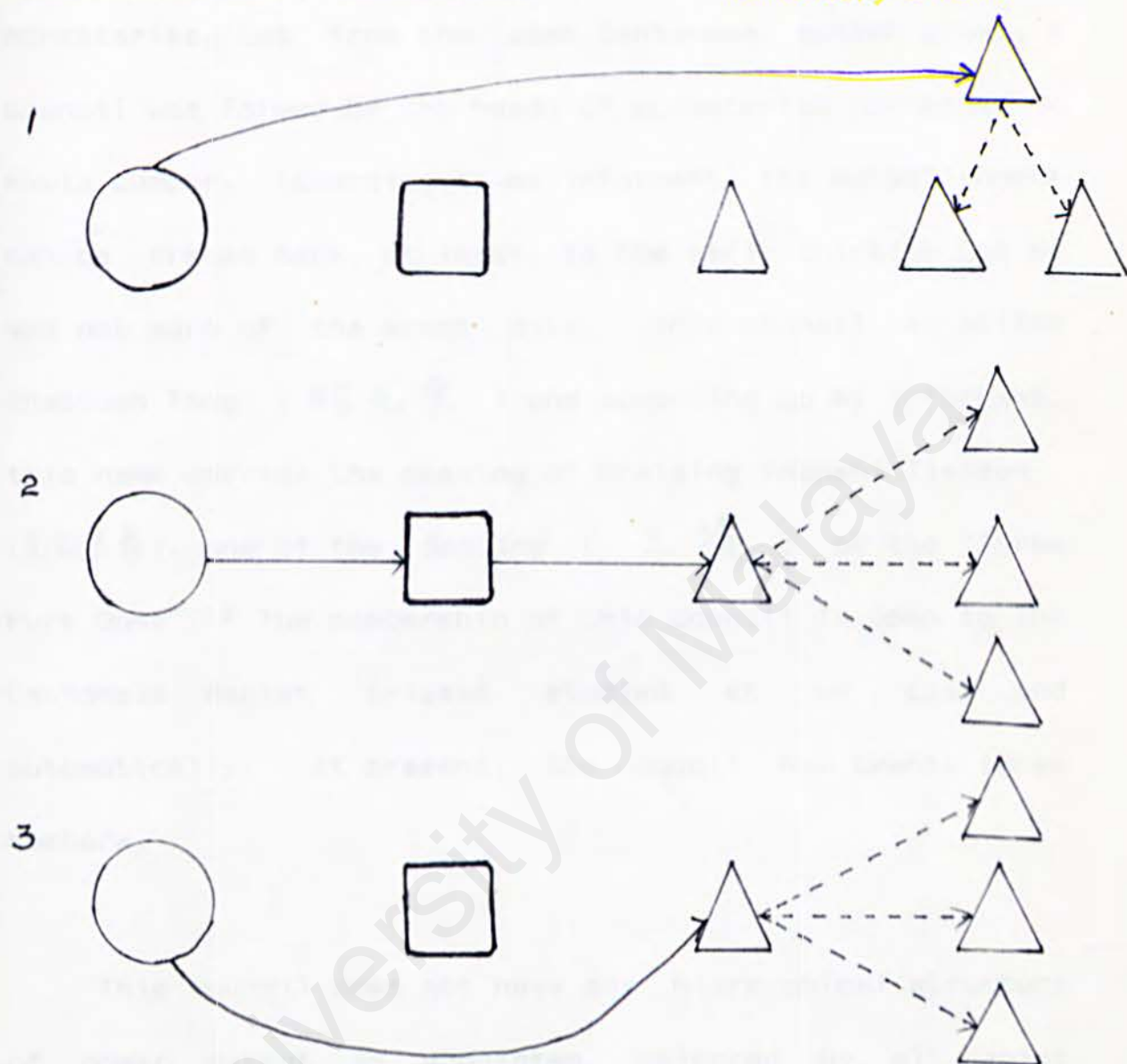
As mentioned above, it is always through undertakers that daoist priests and the representatives for the bereaved families meet. However, sometimes, a bereaved family may get into contact daoist priest directly and personally. Then, the bereaved may appoint a daoist priest, who may not be the head of a monastery, to organize a funeral rite for the deceased. In this way, any daoist priest in the group can become an organiser as long as he gets the bereaved family's appointment. One can observed the above discussion in Figure 1.

⁹Among these five monasteries, only one was registered, by its owner, under the Company Act and thus, a legal entity by the law.

Bereaved
representatives

Undertakers

Daoist priests' pool
Head of monastery Disciples



Illustration

→ line of contact
---→ line of organizing

Figure 1 : Three ways of contact and organising daoist priests

In order to unite daoist priests of the different monasteries, but from the same Cantonese speech group, a council was formed by the heads of monasteries concerned in Kuala Lumpur. According to my informant, its establishment can be traced back, at least, to the early thirties but he was not sure of the exact date. This council is called Zhaoyuan Tang (昭元堂) and according to my informant, this name carries the meaning of praising Yuanshi Tianzun (元始天尊), one of the *Sanqing* (三清) or the "Three Pure Ones".¹⁰ The membership of this council is open to the Cantonese daoist priests studied at no cost and automatically. At present, the council has twenty three members.

This council does not have any hierarchical structure of power except an appointee, selected by all daoist priests in the council, to look after its financial matters. The council would levy a certain amount to be collected from the income earned from each major rite

¹⁰According to my informant, this *sanqing*, comprises Shangqing Lingbao Tianzun (上清灵宝天尊), Yuqing Yuanshi Tianzun (玉清元始天尊) and Taiqing Daode Tianzun (太清道德天尊), are the major daoist deities. Taiqing Daode Tianzun is actually another daoist title given to Laozi whose other title is Taishang Laojun. Please refer to page 58 and 59 for the photographs of *sanqing*.

organised by each of the daoist priests. The appointee would manage the above collection until a time when he would distribute equal portion of the money to all the daoist priests. This kind of distribution took place twice a year, that is, on the 15th day of the sixth and twelfth month in the lunar calendar. The appointee would also keep some money aside for the purpose of buying a building as a base to promote Daoist Religion among the Chinese community. But since the mid eighties, the council had stopped collecting the funds due to opposition from its members. The funds accumulated before was redistributed among its member equally.

The council is also important in granting approval to the daoist priests who wish to train any new disciples. This procedure guarantees that only suitably qualified candidates are admitted and trained, with the acknowledgement and consent of all daoist priests in the council. Besides, this would also help in controlling the number of daoist priests,¹¹ as a precautionary step to

¹¹According to my respondent who has 59 years of experience as a Cantonese *daoshi* in Kuala Lumpur, there were less than ten Cantonese daoist priests in the late forties, and very slowly, with disciples coming in and going out, this institution expanded and reached its present state. To him, the number of *daoshi* is very few and never has it had more than thirty *daoshi* at a time.

ascertain every daoist priest will have sufficient opportunity of performance of rites so as to earn a living. Anyhow, the council stopped carrying out this duty since the late eighties. But there is no significant increase in the number of daoist priests after the above-mentioned abolition. And this leads to the question of effectiveness of Zhaoyuan Tang in controlling its number of Cantonese daoist priests. Thus, the small number of this daoist priests' group may due to other factors. Now, Zhaoyuan Tang has remained as a collective entity for all the daoist priests from the same Cantonese speech group.

To train a new disciple, a mentor does not set any requirement, except that one must be a Chinese male who speaks the Cantonese language. In the course of training, the disciple will follow wherever his mentor goes and performs rites. Through observation, the disciple will learn the steps and procedures of performing the rites. The mentor will also reveal the ritual texts to his disciples, so as to co-ordinate with the other daoist priests performing in the same rite. The duration of training varies with the disciple's ability in learning all the necessary skills. Not until the mentor thinks that one

is eligible and fully equipped, will the disciple be place in the pool for others to summon.

With regards to its apprenticeship, the researcher learned that this group of Cantonese daoist priests had once in contact with the 63rd Zhang Tianshi (张天师) or Heavenly Master Zhang from Taiwan, the late Zhang En Pu (张恩溥). Zhang, along with his two assistants,¹² visited Malacca, Seremban and Kuala Lumpur, in the summer of 1964, where he conducted special course for daoist priests, which included the techniques of performing rites, the doctrine of Daoist Religion and others. Upon completing the courses, Zhang ordained these daoist priests concerned at a ceremony called *kaitan shoulu* (开壇受祿) or "opening the altar and receiving prosperity". With these daoist priests kneeling before the altar, Zhang Tianshi prayed to the gods and deities about this ordination. Then, a *zhidie* (职牒) or "diploma"¹³ stating the *fazhi* (法职) or "religious position" in the Daoist Religion, was given to the daoist priests concerned. Upon receiving this "diploma", the daoist priests would take vow to abide by the *chuzhen shijie* (初真十戒) or equivalently, the "ten

¹²One of them was Zhao Jia Zuo (赵家焯).

¹³Refer to Appendix 1.

commandments of purity".¹⁴

This group of Cantonese daoist priests ordained was the forth batch in Malaysian¹⁵ and they were thirteen of them in 1964. And now ther are only six ordained daoist priests in my research sample, two of whom are my respondents. According to my informant, since 1964 Zhang Tianshi had never visited Malaysia again and thus, there was not an increase in number of ordained Cantonese daoist priests.

Externally, by establishing a good relationship with the undertakers, the daoist priests ensure that their service is in demand. Internally, by regulating an unique pool system so as to maintain its continuity, the daoist priests ensure their survival as well as the ability to meet the challenge of time.

¹⁴Refer to Appendix 2.

¹⁵This is stated in their "ten commandments of purity".

CHAPTER 3

DAOIST PRIESTS : THEIR ROLES AND FUNCTIONS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Daoist priests, as Chinese religious specialists, cannot possibly exist without fulfilling some needs of the community which they live. Their existence, is very much dependent on what they can do for the Chinese community, especially from the religious perspective. Daoist priests and the rites they perform are believed to cause some effects to the parties concerned, either the living or the deceased. As for the living, believing the rites may help to relieve the suffering of the deceased in the other world or may bring luck or blessings to them, and as a result, they obtain some psychological comfort or contentment. For the deceased, according to my informants and from the daoist priest's viewpoint, the rites performed do not compensate the sin one has committed in this world, rather they ensure a less difficult access in the courts of "Ten Officials" or *shiwangdian* (十王殿) in the other world. I will examine some significant roles and functions of daoist priests in Malaysia in the following sections.

3.2 ROLES AND FUNCTIONS

3.2.1 As a specialist

Daoist priests, who had undergone a special training in performing rites and dealing with the other world, are more well-versed than the commoners in religious matters, especially funeral rites. In Taiwan, there are the red headed masters (红头师公) and black headed masters (乌头师公) with the former performed yang ceremonies (阳醮,) like divine worship and prayers for good fortune, while the latter handled yin ceremonies (阴醮,) like masses for the dead and summoning souls (to be reborn) (Welch 1957:199). But in Malaysia, no such distinction can be observed among the daoist priests studied. Not only are daoist priests involved in *hedan* (贺诞) or deities' celebration which is sacred in nature, they also perform rites in connection with death, which is polluting and dangerous as De Groot (1892) had observed.

With their apprenticeship and experience, daoist priests also help to safeguard the taboos and customs of their clientele, who may come from a different speech group, when performing rites. Here, one must note that the daoist priests studied provide their service to the people

from the same speech group as well as other speech group too. Daoist priests will tell the bereaved family what the do's and don'ts are.

Besides performing rites, daoist priests, with their special knowledge, also provide other kinds of service. For example, with the request of commoners, they will choose an auspicious time, suitably matched with the time of being born (生辰八字) of the would be brides and bridegrooms for which they can carry out the traditional process of marriage with blessing and harmony. Or to indicate which zodiac must avoid meeting the newly-wed couple in the marital process so as to avoid meeting any misfortune.

There are also daoist priests who can read *Book of Three Lives* (三世书) for their clients, explaining the causes of the present life by referring to their deeds in the life before (前世) and to learn in advance, how the next life (来世) will be, by inspecting one's deeds in this life. To the researcher, this book which emphasizes the causes (因) and effects (果) is very much of Buddhist influence.

According to my informant, not all daoist priests know the work of time-choosing and reading the above book. Daoist priests seldom consider themselves as specialists, but as followers of Daoist Religion who wish to help the community with their religious knowledge. Thus, as religious specialists, daoist priests help to keep the religious tradition of the Chinese community.

3.2.2 As a curer

Besides being a specialist, daoist priests also play the role as a curer. Surely they are not applying the modern medical treatment, but a combination of divination techniques. Daoist priests normally diagnose minor ailments, such as fever, coughing, discomfort of the limbs and others. To daoist priests, if one is sick, in their concept, the patient must have run into the *xie* (邪) or evil¹⁶ accidentally; thus for a patient to gain recovery, the evil must be expelled through divination.

¹⁶This *xie* (邪) or evil is mostly of two kinds, the *gui* (鬼) or "ghost" and the *shen* (神) or "deities". The *shen* meant here are not of the orthodox origin and they normally bring bad luck or misfortune. Some examples are Wudaowangshen (五道亡神) or "deity of death from five directions", dasha shangshen (大煞伤神) or "deity of injury".

In order to relieve a patient's suffering, the daoist priest will first examine the symptoms shown by the patient. Then he will also ask the patient when his symptoms start appearing. With the necessary information acquired, the daoist priest then refers to the *Tong shu* (通 书) which is the Chinese Book of Horoscope. With the *Tong Shu*, the daoist priest will be able to identify which evil the patient has offended. After that, the daoist priest will write a relevant *fu* (符) or "charm" with which will be used, with relevant amount and right type of *yuan bao* (元 宝) or "incense papers", to sweep both the back and chest of the patient thrice. While sweeping, the daoist priest will, in a hardly audible way, chant a prayer. Nobody is allowed to watch the sweeping session, the major step in expelling the evil, being afraid that any person around will be bewitched by the evil and falls sick.

After the sweeping session, the daoist priest will burn the incense paper and the "charm" in the direction indicated by the *Tong Shu*. With incense sticks and candles lit, incense paper is burnt and sometimes a small offering is made too. This burning process usually takes place at

the junction of roads. According to the daoist priest, this eases the evil to leave.

From the above, one can observe that curing services provided by daoist priests, are an alternative curing to recover from illness.

3.2.3 As an occupation

By providing religious services for their clients and community, daoist priests earn their living. For each service provided, the daoist priests will charge a certain amount of money. As mentioned in chapter 2, there is a very flexible form of boss-and-employee¹⁷ hierarchy among the daoist priests' group. It is observed that among the daoist priests studied, only very few of them, who are heads of monasteries, are active organisers as a result of their close relationship with undertakers. But establishing a monastery is not sufficient to guarantee one's status as a boss because there are a few daoist

¹⁷A daoist priest is a boss if he organises other daoist priests, as his temporary employees, to perform rituals for a bereaved family. He will gain a net profit, after deducting wages for the daoist priests involved and other necessary expenditure from the payment being made by the bereaved family.

priests, without running a monastery but with a well-built bond with undertakers, are also actively involved in the organizing work and thus, become bosses. This loose hierarchical form of boss-and-employee relationship is only applicable to rituals arranged under the management of an organiser. If a daoist priest is contacted directly by the party demanding his service, there is no such relationship and the amount charged depends on the negotiation between the two parties concerned.

Daoist priests do not have any basic salary. The total amount they earn every month depends on the frequency of being summoned by organizers and other parties to conduct rituals. The amount received by a daoist priest from each rite performed varies between RM70 and RM130. The nature of daoist priest as an occupation is very similar to casual worker who only gets wages by work done, has neither Employee Provident Fund nor pensions.

As an occupation, daoist priests have not much vertical mobility such as promotion. Moreover, their remuneration does not grow proportionately with their accumulated experience and seniority as in the business

world, except gaining respect from others. In addition, these daoist priests are not protected from diseases, old age and others which will affect their opportunity of performing rites. Thus, from the occupational perspective, the better way for a daoist priest is to become a boss or an organizer. With all these, it is not surprising to find out that some six respondents, out of twelve, commented the nature of this job is only of sustenance. This is further supported by their attitude towards the issue of succession by their children, discussed in section 2.1.

For this section, it is suffice to conclude that daoist priest, as an occupation, is not as prosperous and highly profitable as most people thought to be.

3.2.4 As a status

Although daoist priests, as discussed in section 3.2.1, are specialists who acquire their religious knowledge through apprenticeship, they do not enjoy any good status. Generally, the Malaysian Chinese community often associate daoist priests with magical power and superstition. Some even considered them as of

heterodox nature or xiemen (邪 門), without truly understand Daoist Religion and daoist priests.

Financially, daoist priests achieved a middle-class status, but socially, their status is low as their level of education is not high and the nature of their occupation appears rather very secretive to the layman, to the extent that they are sometimes seen as cheats. My respondents said that this is unfair to them, as they are orthodox daoist priests who perform proper rites, with the intention to help those who are in need.

To the researcher, the low status of the daoist priests is also due to the diffused nature of Chinese Religion in Malaysia Chinese community and daoist priests do not have any organized institution, as that of Buddhism or Christianity, to promote its doctrine among the Chinese. Nevertheless, daoist priests, are knowledgeable about the Daoist rites and symbolism, and so they are most eligible to promote daoist teachings. They are the right people to interpret daoist texts and rites.

From this chapter, we can conclude that it is because of the roles played and functions performed by the daoist priests in Chinese community that they survive till today.

CHAPTER 4

DAOIST PRIESTS AND FUNERAL RITES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Daoist priests deal with funeral rites as well as other rites such as rite for deities' celebration, rite of the dotting, rite of *wangwu* (旺屋) or "prospering the residence" and others. Daoist priests do not limit their religious services to providing only funeral rites. To them, it appears that there are three categories of rites. The first is *huangtan* (黃壇) or "yellow altar" which deals solely with the death. The second is *qingtán* (清壇) or "pure altar", the rites of which focus on the deities. Lastly, there is the *qinghuang tan* (清黃壇) or "pure and yellow altar", combining the two above-mentioned rites. Below I shall deal with the first rite, excluding the *qing tan* and *qinghuang tan*, and to see how daoist priests perceive these rites. *Huangtan* is the major activity of daoist priests and the other two rites constitute only a small portion of their activities. Thus, focus on *huangtan* is of more importance and a better approach to understand daoist rites.

4.2 rites dealing with death : Huang Tan or Yellow Altar

4.2.1 Concepts involved in yellow altar

Before we start dealing with the subject matter, we must first understand how daoist priests perceive death. First, they believe in *hun* (魂) or *hunpo* (魂魄), literally soul or spirit, which may leave the human body temporarily or permanently. If it is the first case, it is called dreaming and the latter is death. The second belief of the daoist priests is that of the existence of *diyu* (地獄) or "hell", a place where all the *hun* or *hun po* have to report themselves to the officials in charge and to face the final verdict of one's deeds in the earthly world before a presiding magistrate. To daoist priests, all these *hun* or *hunpo* should be in the hell, the specific region for them. If, instead of hell, they linger around this earthly world, according to my informant, this would cause the disturbance to the equilibrium between the *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽). And, thus people, whose luck is low, would have met these *hun* or *hunpo* and fall sick. According to a daoist priest, this special kind of spirit or soul is called *youhun yegui* (游魂野鬼) or "wandering spirits and ghosts" who have been neglected by their descendants by not performing the appropriate funeral

rites.

4.2.2. Pre-funeral rite

The very first rite of *huangtan* involving the daoist priest is *kailu* (开路) or "opening the way".¹⁸ Daoist priest carries out this rite as soon as possible after the death of a person. Because it is believed that the spirit of the deceased will stray around this earthly world in a lost state, without knowing where to go if this rite is not conducted. To conduct this rite, a daoist priest, wearing his yellow robe, leads the bereaved who kneel before the small improvised altar of the deceased, to chant a prayer and at times, waiving the *fan* (幡) or "streamer" which "is said to represent or alternatively to hold the soul of the deceased." (Freedman 1957:196). During this rite, a *lupiao* (路票) or "ticket" will be burnt for the deceased so that he or she can use the ticket to ease his or her way to the hell. Besides helping the deceased to gain his access to the hell, the daoist priest will also, during this rite, inform the officials in-charge, in the hell,

¹⁸Before this rite, the rites of *shang xiao* (上孝) or "wearing of mourning costumes" and *mai shui* (买水) or "buying the water" may be conducted with the assistance of the undertaker, without the presence of daoist priest.

through his incantation that the deceased, whose name, date of birth, date of death (both expressed in the way of the lunar calendar) and place of origin are mentioned, will soon go to report to the nether world. Here, we see that the concept of daoist priest regarding the nether world which has much resemblance to this world. After completing this rite, the daoist priest will tell the bereaved family the necessary preparations for the next rite held, either in the same evening or the next evening.

4.2.3 Major funeral rites

In the evening, another rite will take place and this is the major rite of *huangtan*. Normally, an odd number of daoist priests will be involved in this rite. Upon arriving at the scene,¹⁹ the daoist priests will soon set up their daoist altar which they hang the drawings of Daoist deities. Clad in their yellow robes, daoist priests will bow to the drawings and start "opening the altar" or *kaitan* (开 坛) by chanting and welcoming the deities. Then, they will start the incantation of the daoist texts, namely *Taiyue Jiugu Jing* (太 越 救 苦 经) and *Wulu Deng*

¹⁹This refers to the funeral parlour, void deck of flats, canopy set up near the residence of the deceased or the residence.

(五 路 灯) or "The Lamps of Five Directions",²⁰ with the accompaniment of gong, "wooden fish"²¹ and tinkling bell. Then, the daoist priest will take some rest before the next rite, *zhao wang* (招 亡) or "summoning the deceased". During the *zhao wang*, the spirit of the deceased is summoned into a duck, prepared before the rite, of which the daoist priests will symbolically bathe it and change its clothes after chanting certain prayers. Then, the daoist priest will place the duck aside and walk to the altar of the deceased and start the rite of "flower throwing" or *sanhua* (散 花) in front of the coffin. This "flower throwing" rite intends to console the deceased over his/her departure from this earthly world and advise him/her to go to the nether world without worrying for his/her descendants. Then, the daoist priest will send the deceased off to the nether world and finally, the daoist priests will *xieshi* (谢 师) or express their gratitude to the patroned daoist deities, which marks the end of this major funeral rite.

²⁰According to my informant, some of their texts can be found in the Daoist Canon.

²¹"Wooden fish", an object which gives out a hollow sound when struck.

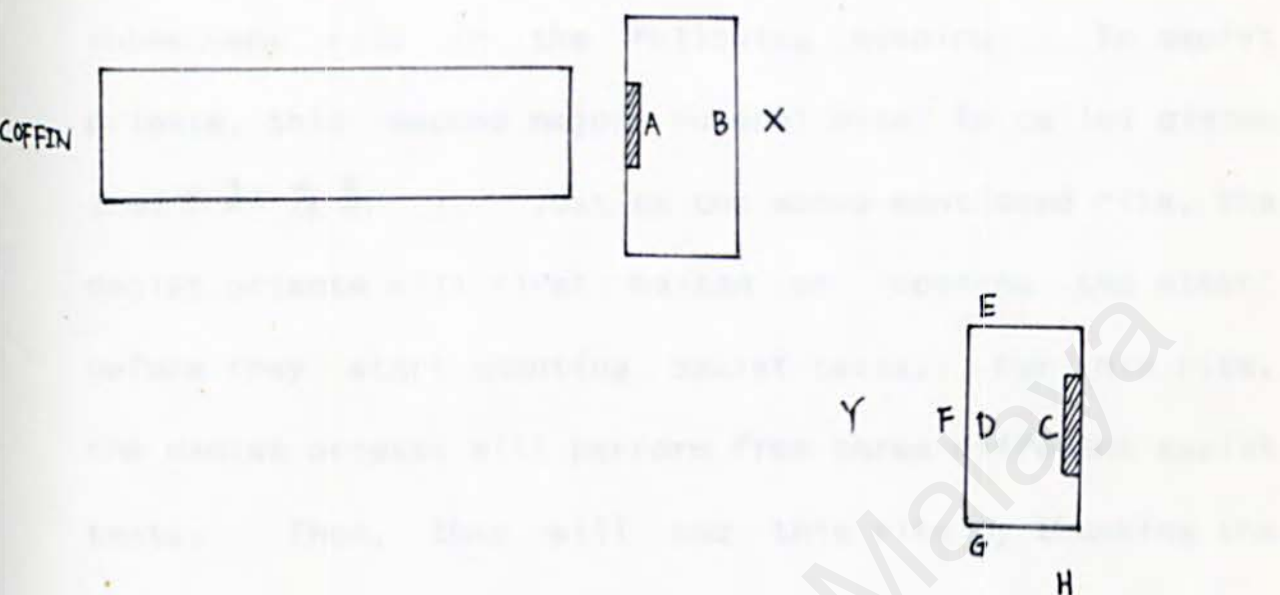


Figure 4 : Sketch of daoist altar, altar for the deceased and coffin

The sketch above indicates the position taken by daoist priest in the above-mentioned *huangtan* or "yellow altar". B is the funeral table where one can find a joss urn, candles, some favorite food of the deceased being offered and the photograph, A, of the deceased facing the position X. D is the daoist altar with the daoist deities drawings, C, facing the Y. The positions of E, F and G are taken by the daoist priests. The position H, is reserved for the daoist priests' assistant musician who plays the trumpet-like Chinese instrument.

Sometimes, the bereaved family, who is financially well-off, will engage the daoist priests to perform the subsequent rite in the following evening. To daoist priests, this second major funeral rite is called *qishen zhai* (起身齋). Just as the above-mentioned rite, the daoist priests will first *kaitan* or "opening the altar" before they start chanting daoist texts. For this rite, the daoist priests will perform from three different daoist texts. Then, they will end this rite by thanking the daoist deities who have been invited to the rites. "This rite will help the deceased to make his or her atonement for his or her oral, mental or physical sins committed in this earthly world", remarked a daoist priest.

After conducting the rites requested by the bereaved family, the daoist priest will choose a suitable time for sending the coffin to the cemetery. The daoist priest will write an obituary, indicating the time of departure and other details, and paste it over in the vicinity of the coffin so to inform anyone who is interested to join the hearse.

On the day of the departure of the coffin, a daoist priest will come to conduct the particular rite for this event. In a delicately embroidered red robe,²² daoist priest, leading the members of the bereaved family, chants a prayer before the deceased. After that, he will order the undertaker to nail shut the coffin. Then, every member of the bereaved family has to change into red clothes for the rite of raising the flag or *qijing* (起旗). To daoist priests, this rite of *qijing* is a good occasion and thus, those involved should wear in red. According to my informant, only those who enjoyed a good social status may perform this rite but now this rite has become so popular that every deceased may do so. "It is the responsibility of the son-in-law to make this flag for the deceased," said an informant. This flag contains the particulars of the deceased. After this rite, the bereaved will change back their mourning clothes, with the fade colour such as black, or blue. At this time, the undertaker has shifted the coffin onto the lorry. The bereaved family will head for the cemetery as well as others.

²²According to my informant, there are five classes of daoist robes, ranging from the lowest, white, yellow, blue, red and lastly the highest, purple.

At the cemetery, before arriving at the scene of the grave, the bereaved family has to pray before the Dabo Gong (大伯公) whose temple is in the vicinity of cemetery. "This is to tell the above deity that a "new comer" has arrived," claimed my informant. At the graveyard, the daoist priest will deliver his incantation, with the alternate accompaniment of the gong and the horn of a cow. Then, the daoist priest orders one male member of the bereaved family to stand by at the head of the grave, and the daoist priest, at the foot of the grave, throws a live cock (with its legs tied) to him. This act marks the rite of "prospering the cave" or *wangxue* (旺穴) Resuming his incantation, the gravediggers will start covering the coffin. After this, the daoist priest would ask a member of the bereaved family to burn a joss-stick in front of the grave of the deceased so to guide the spirit of the deceased back to his residence where the rite of dotting an ancestral tablet was to carry out. After the rite of dotting, the daoist priest conducted the rite of "prospering the residence" or *wangwu* (旺屋) which is believed that this rite will get rid of the bad luck or uncleanness caused by the death.

4.2.4 Post-funeral rites

First, I would like to mention the rite of "prospering the grave" or *wangshan* (旺山). Only after the grave is properly built, will the daoist priest perform this rite. At the carefully selected time of a particular day, the daoist priest and the bereaved family come to the grave. Tabling a plate of pork, a cooked chicken, and some other sacrifices, the daoist priest chants his prayer. After chanting, the daoist priest will tell the bereaved family to burn incense sticks to the deceased and some mock money and incense papers are burnt too. This rite of *wangshan* is rather simple and its very purpose is to "ensure the comfort of the deceased in his or her grave," claimed my respondent, "and thus, to bless his or her descendants".

Other post-funeral rites performed for the newly dead fall on the periods of seven days in the first forty-nine days, hundredth day, one year and three years after the death. The first forty nine days after death are divided into seven periods of seven days each. Each such period is known as a *qi* (七) or "seven". To the Cantonese daoist priests, only the first, third, fifth and seventh (the last) *qi* are of importance and are said to be the

responsibility of different persons related to the dead, in the following manner:

- First *qi* : son
- Third *qi* : son
- Fifth *qi* : daughter and her husband
- Seventh *qi*: children of the son.

Daoist priests believe that the soul or spirit of the deceased will visit the "Ten courts of hell" or *shidian* (十殿) on the above-mentioned seven *qi*, the hundredth-day, one-year and three-year periods.

To daoist priests, a complete set of rites which should be performed for the deceased should include the pre-funeral rite (in section 4.2.2.), major funeral rites (in section 4.2.3) and post-funeral rites (in section 4.2.4). But I doubt very much if all these rites are ever conducted in their full set as it is financially quite burdening to do so. Moreover, it is very time consuming too. Furthermore, the customs and traditions will change to meet the requirement of this ever changing modern world.

To conclude this chapter, the importance of daoist priest in Chinese Religion cannot be simply denied as they are the specialists who help to preserve the customs and traditions of Chinese.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Daoist priests, the Chinese religious specialists, have their very unique roles and functions in the Chinese community. But one must know that not every member of the Chinese community views the daoist priests as important. The significance of daoist priests only appears in religious rites, especially the funeral rites. They are specially trained and have the religious knowledge in helping people to follow the necessary customs and religious tradition. To those who employ daoist priests to perform various rites, they may not be the devotees or believers of Daoist Religion, in the strict sense, but rather the followers of Chinese Religion which embraced the worship of Chinese deities of both Daoist and Buddhist origins, nature spirits, and the ancestors.

To Comber (1958:44), "the form of Daoism that was brought to Malaya by the earliest Chinese immigrants was not the lofty metaphysical dialectics of the sage Laozi but the debased version with its accretion of superstition and magical practices." To certain extent, his notion more or

less described the nature of Daoist Religion which was brought into Malaya. This is because historically, most of the earliest Chinese immigrants were from the lower class of society who were much influenced by the popular religion.

Daoist priests, in Chinese Religion, have assured that the common people can resort to them in religious matter and thus, generating the daoist knowledge to the public and keep their continuity growing. Anyhow, the daoist priests do not get respect from the Chinese community as they are always negatively labelled. As Marcel (1975:145) puts it, "Respect goes to the practice and not to the practitioners."

Talking about their future, the daoist priests studied have totally contrasting view regarding this matter. Some of them claimed that the daoist priests will remain in future as the rites, conducted by daoist priests, form a very integral part of the common culture of Chinese and it is also the traditional value of filial piety which may propel the Chinese community to engage the daoist rites so as to conform to the social norms of Chinese community.

Those who do not expect a future for daoist priests, are of the opinion that the stiff competition from the more organised religious sects such as Buddhism and Christianity will drive them to extinction. Nevertheless, to the researcher, the daoist priests contribute to the continuity and dynamics of Chinese Religion, and they still play important roles for the Chinese in Malaysia, most of whom observe Chinese religion traditions.

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P1: Painting of Shangqing Lingbao Tianzun



P2: Painting of Yuqing Yuanshi Tianzun



P3: Painting of Taiqing Daode Tianzun



P4: Common yellow robes of daoist priests



P5: Full set of specially embroidered yellow robe



P6: Front view of specially embroidered yellow robe



P7: Back view of specially embroidered yellow robe



P8: Specially embroidered red robe for
"yellow and pure altar"



P9: Symbolised setting of diyu(地獄) or "hell"
in qi or "seven"



P10: Daoist priest starting rite of po diyu(破地獄)
or "breaking the hell" in qi(七) or "seven"



P11: Rite of po diyu(破地獄) or "breaking the hell" in process



P12: Elaborate paper objects and paper statue of the deceased in qi(七) or "seven"



P13: Rite of Guo Jinyingqiao(过金银桥) or
"crossing the golden and silver bridges"
in qi(七) or "seven"