

TANG-KI SPIRIT MEDIUM WORSHIP

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In *tang-ki* worship it is believed that warrior gods incarnate through medium possession to battle evil spirits. The ritual-theatre is actively practised within the communities of the Hokkien diaspora in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. The worship was suppressed in Fujian during the period when religion was dismissed as feudal superstition, but there is clear evidence that the practice is being imported back to its 'motherland' largely through religious pilgrimages from diasporic temple groups to mother temples.

The Hokkien people were a community of sailors, traders and adventurers. They have a reputation among other Chinese as fighters, built largely upon the fact that the Hokkiens were the last Chinese people, to capitulate to the foreign (Manchu) rule of the Qing emperors.

The intrepid Hokkien spirit informs their cultural practices. Arguably, Hokkien indomitability is best epitomised in their religion of *tang-ki* worship. Self-mortification, by the piercing of the flesh with skewers, or by injuring the body with swords or mace-like weapons, is a hallmark of *tang-ki* performances and signifies the warrior *tang-ki* doing violent battle against evil demons (plates 1a and 1b). The bloodletting aspect of *tang-ki* worship betrays its ancient origins, which this research demonstrates extend back to pre-Sinic tribal dances that were performed some five thousand years ago in the south-eastern region of present-day China.



Plates 1a and 1b: A *tang-ki* with skewers pierced into his neck, arms and spears in his back. Photo: Author

Yet, so ‘primitive’ a religious practice is alive in today’s globalised world; *tang-ki* worship thrives in modern Singapore. It is here that the spectacle of a medium, dancing in the throes of a head-shaking, eye-rolling trance, spilling blood upon the asphalt roads in the shadow of great skyscrapers, appears to be most anachronistic. *Tang-ki* ceremonies in Phuket, southern Thailand and Chap Goh Meh in Singkawang, West Kalimantan present explicit publicly enacted theatre of pain. In Taiwan, *tang-kis* attend public festivals such as the *Burning of the Plague Gods’ Boat*, a celebration carried out on a scale exceeding carnival in Rio.

The oldest, and the youngest of Chinese religions

Tang-ki spirit medium worship can be described as the oldest, and the youngest of Chinese religions. *Tang-ki* worship is a living palimpsest of the religious yearnings of a Chinese people. It is steeped in history but continues to grow and change in response to society. Contemporary *tang-ki* performance elements rehearse the magic rites of a pre-Chinese people 5000 years ago, but from this ur-ancestor the notion of *tang-ki* worship has evolved absorbing some of the best ideas of mainstream religions. The genealogy of the modern *tang-ki* show clear links to shamans of the proto-Chinese Xia and Shang, the ritualists of Zhou and the magicians of Han Taoism. The Chinese took *tang-ki* worship to Fujian during the Tang period, and when Hokkien emigrants crossed the seas to Taiwan and Southeast Asia, they brought their religion with them to the new lands.

The roots of *tang-ki* worship are ancient but the worship is not history. *Tang-ki* worship is a living ritual theatre that remains relevant in our modern world. From the earliest needs to have control over nature, to the present dreams of winning big money in the state lottery; *tang-ki* worship still satisfies. The practice is ever evolving in quick response to the needs of its congregations.

Spontaneity and free expression

Creativity and diversity are the new buzzwords from management gurus, but these are the tenets by which the *tang-ki* worshippers live by. Afraid of death? Call up the deities of the Underworld and wine and dine them (plate 2). Use the modern technology of air-conditioning and ultra-violet light to make our guests feel comfortable, after all it must be cold and dark where they come from. The setting is one of pure theatricality; *tang-ki* altars to hell deities are grottos of canvas and *papier mâché* which house gruesome tableaux of torture scenes from hell (plate 3) – but this is not mimesis, it is a genuine expression of the fear of mortality and a manifestation of a coping mechanism that is directly intervenient and relevant to the times.



Plate 2: A Hell deity. Photo: Author



Plate 3: A scene from Hell in the altar to Hell deities. Photo: Author

This scenario of worship of hell deities underlines the importance of making readings of a culture within the context of performance. Not to understand the cultural context of a performance is to risk constructing exotic views, after all the idea of hell is abhorrent only according to monotheistic polarization of the one God versus the Devil. It is from the view that theatre is a cultural practice, that this discourse on *tang-ki* worship has been affirmatively set within the social context of the Hokkien community.

A religion of the marginalised

Tang-ki (a Hokkien term, 乩童 pinyin *jítóng*) worship evolved among peasant people disenfranchised by the state religion. In imperial China rights to worship followed a strict hierarchy and lay entirely in the hands of the educated establishment. The response of the marginalised was to create a religion of people power. Where the emperor had to petition heaven and pray to be heard, *tang-ki* worshippers could summon gods to appear before them to do their bidding.

Tang-ki spirit medium worship, where ritual is theatre, theatre is ritual

Tang-ki worship is ritual theatre. Mediums theatrically take on the roles of gods and employ the appurtenances of theatre. The mediums wear costumes and make-up and they use props. When entranced, they adopt gestures and theatrical movements culturally appropriate to the possessing spirit, for example the *tang-ki* of Sun Wukong (孙悟空), the Monkey God, affects the simian-like behaviour used by Chinese opera actors in the role. On the ritual stage the *tang-ki* transforms from an ordinary man into the Monkey God in the flesh.

Tang-ki worship relies on a performance contract between actor and spectator. *Tang-kis* perform for their audiences of devotees, the roles of well-loved gods drawn from Chinese folklore and mythology. The devotee-spectator accepts that the performance is a divine manifestation. Although the spectators can clearly see that the performer is a person (and probably one that they know as a family member or friend) they suspend disbelief, and believe, as an article of faith, that they are seeing a performance by a god incarnate. In *tang-ki* worship the staging of theatre is not for entertainment; among believers it is a magical ritual that transforms a mortal into god *en-theos*. The concept is one of transmogrification, not mere spirit possession and devotees believe that the *tang-ki* is truly a god in the flesh. In *tang-ki* worship the very act of theatre is a rite of incarnation where *ritual is theatre, theatre is ritual*.