

The dynamic process of syncretism: Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia

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The Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia is a fusion of Malay *keramat* and Chinese Tudi Shen, hence easy to be labelled 'syncretism'. Nevertheless, the rich dynamism of syncretism as a process in Datuk Gong worship is still underexplored. Through the combination of historical documentary method and anthropological multi-sited field work, this article examines the three stages in the syncretic process of Datuk Gong worship: syncretic amity, syncretic encompassment and synthesis, as well as diverse strategies Chinese devotees adopted in each stage. Compared with other worship of non-Chinese deities in Southeast Asia, the peculiarity of Datuk Gong worship in West Malaysia is that it has reached a high level of synthesis, hence its own independence.

Contribution: Through the examination of Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia, a syncretism of Chinese Religion, local animism and Islam, the study provides a rare and excellent example to mirror the rich dynamism of syncretism as a process in Southeast Asia, a meeting point of different civilisations.

Keywords: syncretism; Datuk Gong; Malaysian Chinese; *keramat*; Tudi Shen; Chinese Religion.

Introduction

The Datuk Gong cult is a particular folk belief of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia.¹ Datuk Gong is a combinative term of the Malay word *datuk* and the Chinese *gong*, both of which mean grandfather² and are honorifics. Although there are variations such as Chinese, Orang Asli (aborigines), Indian and Siamese (Thai) Datuk Gong, the Chinese usually consider the ethnicity of Datuk Gong as Malay and worship him in a manner consistent with his Malay-Muslim identity, for example, speaking Malay to him, using traditional Malay food as offerings and prohibiting the use of pork. Today in Malaysia, Datuk Gong idols are very popular in small shrines under a tree, by the roadside or in the compound of Chinese temples.

Existing research mainly used three concepts to explain the special worship: localisation, sinicisation and syncretism. Localisation means Malaysian Chinese localised Chinese Religion,³ especially the Tudi Shen⁴ concept in Malaysia in the form of Datuk Gong (Choo 2007; Ong 2012; Tan 2001:22). Sinicisation means that the Chinese sinicised the Malay locality cult (*keramat*)⁵ and incorporated it into their belief system (Cheu 1998:55; Ong 2012). Actually, localisation and sinicisation are just two sides of a coin, and the more accurate term for this two-way process is syncretism (Chin & Lee 2014; DeBernardi 2006:Chapter 4; See 2012; Tan 1983:218).

Syncretism is the temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religious and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern (Pye 1971:93). Thus, Datuk Gong worship, a fusion of *keramat* and Tudi Shen, is easy to be labelled 'syncretism'. But, this is far from enough, because 'the fascination of a syncretistic situation lies in its still unresolved dynamics', which may lead to the assimilation of weaker elements by a dominant tradition, the reassertion of the separate identity or

1. Datuk Gong has a variety of writings in different Chinese speech groups, such as *Datuk/Dato/Datok/Nato/Na Tok/Lah Tok/Nadu (Gong/Kong/Kung)* 拿督/那卓/哪督/藍督/籃啤/籃桌/籃卓/藍卓/藍啤/哪啤(公). Today in Malaysia, the most common writing is 拿督公 following the Mandarin pronunciation of Nadu Gong, but we prefer to use Datuk Gong to emphasise its syncretism of Malay and Chinese terms.

2. In Fujian and Guangdong, ancestral home of most Malaysian Chinese, *a-gong* 阿公 is a form of address for grandfather.

3. Chinese Religion, or Chinese popular religion/Chinese folk religion: the complex of Chinese indigenous beliefs and practices involving the worship of ancestors, deities and ghosts that most ordinary Chinese observe in their daily and festive life, in contrast to Buddhism and Taoism. See Tan (2018:2-4).

4. Tudi Shen 土地神 in Chinese Religion does not refer to a particular god, but a series of deities related to the earth including Tudi Gong 土地公 (the Earth God), Da Bo Gong 大伯公 (or Tua Pek Kong in Hokkien, Thai Pak Koong in Hakka dialect) or Fude Zhengshen 福德正神 (the God of Blessing and Virtues) in a formal manner, Houtu 后土, Dizhu 地主 (Lord of the Land), etc.

5. A cult of worshipping spirits and supernatural powers of persons, locations, animals and objects, was once popular among the Malays. *Keramat* is a fusion of pre-Islamic spirit belief (including nature worship and ancestor worship) and Sufi saint worship.

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divergent meaning of disparate elements which are consequently drawn apart (dissolution), or the production of a new religion with a new pattern of religious elements which functions as a system with its own distinctive identity (synthesis) (Pye 1994:222, 228). A special issue of the *Asian Journal of Social Science*, dedicated to the examination of religious syncretism and everyday religiosity in Asia, also emphasises dynamic processes of negotiation and performance of religious boundaries (Goh 2009).

Nevertheless, most of the existing research ignored the rich dynamism of syncretism as a process in Datuk Gong worship. Despite successfully applying the anthropological approach to make an ethnographic description of the worship, they neglected the mining of historical materials. Cheu (1998) and Ong (2012) summarised the historical development of the worship from the pre-colonial period to the present, but they did not provide sufficient evidence to support the arguments. As a result, despite the consensus that Datuk Gong worship has been incorporated into Chinese Religion, many questions remain to be explored – how many stages has the syncretism gone through? When did Datuk Gong emerge as a new worship? What is the relationship between Datuk Gong and similar Chinese deities, for example, Tudi Gong and Da Bo Gong?

Therefore, this article tries to explore the dynamic process of syncretism in Datuk Gong worship through the combination of the historical documentary method and anthropological multi-sited field work. The author visited 20 Datuk Gong temples, hundreds of shrines and interviewed 36 respondents from five states of West Malaysia: Penang, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka. The methods of interview, observation and epigraphy are applied to collect first-hand data, while the documentary method is used for second-hand data including academic literature, news reports, as well as folk publications. While focusing on the Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia, the scope of this article also covers other Asian countries such as China, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia for comparisons.

Syncretic amity: Juxtaposition and obfuscation

Using DeBernardi's (2009b) terms, we may call the first stage syncretic amity. The basis of amity is the commonalities between *keramat* and Da Bo Gong: Both of them can refer to guardian spirits of land, founders of settlements and natural objects spirits. As a result, Da Bo Gong and *keramat* were worshipped side by side early. In Vihara Bahtera Bhakti, or Klenteng Ancol (Chinese temple in Ancol) established ca. 1650 in Jakarta, the altar for Da Bo Gong coexists with Muslim tombs (Salmon 1993:284–287). On Kusu Island in Singapore, at the top of the rugged hillock stand three holy shrines of Malay saints, while located by the sea is the famous Chinese Tua Pek Kong Temple. The pilgrimage to the island may date back to the 1840s (Lu 2012; 'Wednesday, 11th August' 1875),

and after praying to Da Bo Gong, many Chinese pilgrims go on to make the same obeisance to the Datuk keramat. In addition, the tiger is Da Bo Gong's *zuoqi* 坐骑 (mount), and Da Bo Gong can transform himself into a tiger to protect his territory; similarly, the conjunction of a saint and a tiger offering spiritual protection to a neighbourhood is also often met in the Malay animistic worship (DeBernardi 2009a:152). Perhaps because of these resemblances, a Chinese 'joss' or idol could be known as 'Datuk', and 'Da Bo Gong' was used to address a *keramat* spirit called *dato' pekong* (Datuk Bo Gong) (Wilkinson 1901:175, 283). For example, Malayan Chinese called tiger and crocodile Bo Gong (Han 1940:19), and both animals were often believed by the Malays to be incarnations of *keramat*.

Because both Da Bo Gong and Datuk can refer to a Chinese joss or a *keramat* spirit, sometimes these two terms were mixed indiscriminately in the late 19th century. For instance, the *Straits Times* published on 01 November 1883 reported:

[T]he procession yesterday paraded through nearly every street on the Chinese part of the town, on the way to and from the Joss House of the New Harbour Road, to which their Toh Peh Kong or Datoh is carried in State, and then brought back to the temple in town. ('The Ching-gay' 1883:2)

In some places, the mixed use can still be found. For instance, the Chinese Datuk Gong in Parit Buntar, Perak is also called Teh Peh Kong 郑伯公 (the Bo Gong surnamed Teh).

Datuk Gong in this period was often regarded as the blood brother of some Chinese deities. The spirit tablet in the Sak Dato Temple in Broga, which is said to have been erected by Chinese tin miners in the 1860s, had Sak Dato (the Orang Asli Stone Datuk Gong) on the right side and Xian Si Shiye 仙洒师爷 (the Chinese patron deity of Hakka tin miners) on the left side. The two deities were believed to have sworn to be blood brothers and guard Broga together (Sak Dato Temple Committee 2016:22). In 1930, Malayan Chinese writer Hai Dishan 海底山 published a novella entitled La Duo Gong Gong 拉多公公 (Datuk Gong Gong), stating that La Duo Gong Gong (the pioneer of the Malay Archipelago, the deity and leader of the Malays) and Sanbao Gong 三宝公 (the deification of Admiral Zheng He 郑和, the deity and leader of the Chinese) swore to be blood brothers (Hai 1930). The Da Bo Gong on Kusu Island, according to a legend, is a Chinese fisherman, and the Datuk keramat is a Malay fisherman, and they died on the island and became blood brothers (Street 1932). These brotherhoods indicate an amity between Datuk Gong and Chinese deities, who had equal status but distinct identities and clear boundaries. For instance, the pilgrims on Kusu Island brought along two sets of sacrifices for the two gods – boiled pork, fowl, turtle-shaped buns for Da Bo Gong, and *nasi kunyit* (turmeric rice) and flowers for the Datuk, and pilgrims must divest themselves of pork and other 'impurities' before they proceeded to the Mohammedan shrine (Sit 1948).

Early representations of Datuk Gong spirits were mainly natural objects in the wild, such as a tree, a rock, an earth mound or a termite mound, but no tablet, sign or idol. Chinese devotees kept a respectful distance from the spirits, and some Chinese regarded them as 'unclean'. In line with the concept of Dizhu, Datuk Gong spirits were considered as wandering ghosts occupying a certain area, who were potentially dangerous to Chinese settlers and so they were required to be placated through offerings and sacrifices. Unless people wanted to cut down trees or clear jungles to begin a construction, when they were afraid of offending Datuk Gong, they would erect a shrine or give offerings for him. A minority of believers still hold this idea. When the author did fieldwork in a remote place in Melaka, a respondent warned him, 'Don't go to the wild land, there are unclean spirits over there; don't offend them, otherwise they will punish you' (Respondent 19, a male villager in Kampung Bachang, Melaka, interview, 16 July 2017).

Syncretic encompassment: Incorporation and subordination

The second stage is syncretic encompassment. The Chinese tried to control Datuk spirits using Chinese ritual strategies such as erecting shrines, adopting spirit tablets and incorporating spirit mediumship, but meanwhile adapting acts of ritual etiquette to the spirit's religion and ethnicity such as halal offerings, Malay inscriptions and the *ronggeng*⁶ (DeBernardi 2009b:149). As a respondent said, 'We worship Datuk Gong in our Chinese way, but the offerings we provide are what they need, what they request' (Respondent 6, a committee member of Jugra Thian Poh Keong Temple, interview, 02 July 2017). Various Chinese religious elements absorbed into Datuk Gong worship partially blurred the boundary between the Malay deity and Chinese deities, but meanwhile, some unique Malay rituals still stressed his distinct identity.

Around the 1960s, simple shrines resembling traditional Malay houses made of *attap*/iron/zinc were built for Datuk Gong, and wooden tablets were adopted to represent him. Usually written on the tablets was *nadu gong shenwei* 拿督公神位 (the spirit tablet of Datuk Gong) or *tang-fan nadu shenwei* 唐番拿督神位 (the spirit tablet of Tang-Fan Datuk) in Chinese characters. The use of spirit tablets to represent deities or ancestors is a Chinese tradition. But meanwhile, the design of Datuk Gong temples/shrines also incorporated some Malay cultural elements. One typical example is Klang Lian He Temple with two yellow Islamic domes on the top built in 1965 when the new temple was erected. The designer of the dome, Mr Ong, explained, 'Datuk keramat is a Muslim, he is not Chinese, so you are not going to build a Chinese architecture, you must choose something to near the Malay' (Respondent 33, the General Affairs Manager of Klang Lian He Temple, interview, 26 November 2017).

6. *Ronggeng* is a traditional Malay dance often accompanied by singing. A Malay *ronggeng* troupe was often hired to perform on the birthday of Datuk Gong (Elliott 1955:115; Ng 1983:114).

With the proliferation of Datuk Gong shrines, they were not only erected at construction sites, but also in various Chinese settlements (roadside, houses, shops, factories, temples and even cemeteries and schools). In a manner of speaking, Datuk Gong integrated into all aspects of Chinese life, and attracted devotees of divergent social backgrounds, across class, education level, gender, age, occupation, language and dialect. By the roadside, in the compound of Chinese temples or in Chinese cemeteries, Datuk Gong serves as a local alternative to Tudi Gong or Houtu, while in front of Chinese houses, shops or factories, it replaces the role of Menkou Tudi Caishen 门口土地财神 (the Earth God & Deity of Wealth of Entrance) worshipped by the Cantonese in China, which can only be located outdoors to stop unclean spirits from entering the house and to bring in wealth and treasure (Wu, Zeng & Huang 2013:150–152).

Datuk Gong in this period began to be incorporated into the pantheon of Chinese Religion but usually in a subordinate position. Although in some temples Datuk Gong is the main deity, it is more common to be found as a secondary deity in temples of other deities. For example, when searching 'Datuk Gong' on the website *angkongkeng.com*, a database of Chinese temples in Malaysia, the author finds it worshipped in 431 temples, but among them, only 59 are dedicated to Datuk Gong (Accessed on 14 March 2022). Datuk Gong is closely connected to Da Bo Gong, but his position is lower than the latter. In Malaysia, Da Bo Gong refers to the Chinese Earth God, and has been upgraded to a heavenly deity,⁷ so a Da Bo Gong temple often becomes the main temple in the local area; Datuk Gong generally refers to the non-Chinese Earth God, that is, spirits on the Earth and ghosts from the underworld, so Datuk Gong idols are more common in small shrines by the roadside, under a tree or outside the main altar of Chinese temples (Cheng 2004:69). The lower ranking of Datuk Gong in Chinese pantheon is reflected in its ritual of worship, which is simple and casual overall. Devotees often say, 'Apart from pork, everything can be offered to Datuk Gong', 'It does not matter for Datuk Gong'. Except for birthday celebration, the usual offerings are very simple, such as a cup of water and a packet of *Datuk Gong liao*.⁸ But on the other hand, the Malay-Muslim identity of Datuk Gong is especially respected by Chinese. For instance, pork can be offered to non-Muslim Datuk Gong theoretically. However, in the fieldwork, the author found that pork was still prohibited in two Chinese Datuk Gong temples. One respondent explained that this was because the devotees respected those Malay Datuk Gong worshipped as secondary deities in the temple (Respondent 26, the caretaker of Kuala Kurau Chua Boon Leng Dato Temple, interview, 28 August 2017).

Like many Chinese gods, Datuk Gong evolved into a title of an office in the bureaucratic system of Chinese Religion which can be held by one person or another; the office can continue through the years but the position can be held by one spirit in one part of the country and by another elsewhere

7. According to Yang (1961:150), the dominant religious belief for Chinese common men was in Heaven, Earth and the underworld, which represented a hierarchy of supernatural beings, Heaven in the top, Earth in the middle and underworld in the bottom.

8. *Datuk Gong liao* 拿督公料, a specialised Datuk Gong offering package, including shredded tobacco, native cigarette, areca nut flakes and betel leaves with lime paste wrapped in the form of triangular packets, can be easily purchased from market stalls (Cheu 1992:390).

(Choo 2007). This feature of Datuk Gong was patterned after Tudi Gong, but in the domain of Malaysia, as a respondent explained:

'If I am Yang di-Pertuan Agong, I can manage the whole of Malaysia; if I am Yang di-Pertua Negeri Melaka, I can manage Melaka State; I am the village chief, then I can only manage the village. The Datuk Gong manages our village, and he cannot cross the border; if you come to my place from somewhere else to worship me, I can help you, but I cannot cross the border, because I need to respect the deities in your place.' (Respondent 16, the village chief of Machap Baru, Melaka, interview, 15 July 2017)

Thus, generally, the jurisdiction of Datuk Gong is limited to a particular area, and Datuk Gong who reigns supreme in the east is powerless in the west, and vice versa (Cheu 1992:384). One exception is Datuk Zunwang 拿督尊王 (Datuk King) in Jugra, who is said to be Datuk Abdul Samad, the fourth Sultan of Selangor who resided in Jugra during his reign from 1857 until his demise in 1898. Chinese followers believe that he is the highest-ranking Datuk Gong in Malaysia and can, thus, manage the whole country. Nevertheless, the celestial rank of Datuk Zunwang is still lower than the Jade Emperor 玉皇大帝 – his title was conferred by the latter.

Synthesis: Invention and re-creation

The last stage is synthesis, meaning that a new worship is created. The Chinese applied the framework of Chinese Religion to transform Datuk Gong, reshaping a new worship structure. The creation of stereotypical idols and new deities made Datuk Gong distinct from both Chinese Tudi Shen and Malay *keramat* and this was to form a kind of worship with its own independence.

The idols of Datuk Gong appeared in the 1970s. Stevens (1979) collected a precious sketch of Datuk Gong by a Fukienese (Hokkien) god carver in Singapore which depicted Datuk Gong as a seated elderly man with a dark skinned face with a short moustache, dressed in the cap, jacket and robes of a Malay, holding a walking stick in his right hand and a pipe in his left. He further added that some places had him swathed in white 'Arab' robes, and some images depicted him clutching a book or writing materials in his left hand instead of a pipe. Tan (2018:71) recorded that Mrs Ong of Eastern Garden in Teluk Intan, interviewed on 18 November 1981, said that she installed a shrine of the Malay saint Datuk Yilaiman and bought the photo of the Datuk for MYR13. Simple *attap*/iron/zinc shrines were gradually replaced by colourful solid concrete shrines produced by specialised companies, and the devotees started paying attention to the design of shrines (Chen 2013). Some shrines incorporated Malay/Islamic symbols such as stairs at the entrance, the Islamic dome or the star and crescent. In recent years, the image of Datuk Gong tends to be stereotypical, usually an old Malay man with a benevolent smile, wearing a *sarong*⁹ and *songkok*,¹⁰ holding

9.Traditional Malay 'skirt'.

10.Traditional Malay brimless hat.

a *kris*¹¹ or a *tongkat*¹² in his right hand, but a *sycee*¹³ in his left hand. In short, early Datuk Gong idols appear to be real Malay elders, but current Datuk Gong is more like a deity in Chinese Religion – a synthesis of Malay elders' appearance and Tudi Gong's shape and expression.

The worship of Datuk Gong idols seems to be a paradox. These idols depict Datuk Gong as Malay Muslims, but idolatry is forbidden in Islam. The reason for this paradox is that the Chinese shaped the image of Datuk Gong according to their own understanding and imagination of the Malays. In their opinions, Datuk Gong originates from Malay *keramat*; when the majority of Malay community abandoned *keramat* with the rise of Islamic Revitalisation known as the *dakwah* movement since the 1970s, it was Chinese who took over the worship; the *ling* 灵 or efficacy of Datuk Gong comes from the Malay culture, so they added 'orthodox' Malay elements such as Jawi and Muslim inscriptions and white *haji* caps¹⁴ to Datuk Gong shrines/idols to increase its legitimacy. However, in the eyes of Malay authorities, the use of Islamic symbols on Datuk Gong shrines was an offense to Muslims and a threat to Islamic orthodoxy, and thus quite a few such shrines were demolished by the government in the 1980s (Lee 1988: 411–412; 'Stop use of Muslim signs' 1987).

In the development process of Datuk Gong worship, some new deities were created, and among them, the most prominent is Tang-Fan Datuk. *Tang* means China or Chinese, *fan* means foreign or non-Chinese, so *tang-fan* can be translated as Chinese and non-Chinese. Tang-Fan Dizhu 唐番地主 (Chinese and non-Chinese Lord of the Land) is worshipped by the Chinese in many countries, including the United States, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Early Chinese immigrants in Malay Peninsula worshipped Tang Tudi only. As the Chinese took root in this land, they gradually realised the importance of local territorial deities, hence the integration of Tang Tudi and Fan Tudi on one spirit tablet. Now, Tang-Fan Tudi is rare in Malaysia, while Tang-Fan Datuk is very common because, with the increasing localisation, Malaysian Chinese increasingly value the importance of the local territorial deity Datuk Gong. As a result, the term Datuk Gong almost replaced Tudi Gong, thus Tang-Fan Tudi evolved into Tang-Fan Datuk. Moreover, now most Malaysian Chinese explain Tang-Fan Datuk as 'Sino-Malay Datuk', indicating the simplification of *tang-fan*'s meaning from 'Chinese and non-Chinese' to 'Sino-Malay'. Cheu (1998:45) argued that it was only after the May 13 Sino-Malay riots in 1969 that the invocation of Tang-Fan Datuk became common. The synthesis of Tang-Fan Tudi and Datuk Gong, Chinese and Malay in the new form of Sino-Malay Datuk indicates further blurring of their boundaries and the expectation of the Chinese for harmonious ethnic relations.

11.Malay or Indonesian dagger with a wavy-edged blade.

12.Walking stick.

13.Sycee or *luanbao* 元宝: a type of silver or gold ingot currency used in imperial China; for the Chinese, a sycee remains a symbol of wealth and prosperity.

14.A *haji* cap is commonly worn by a Muslim who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The second new deity is female 'Datuk', who is generally called Datuk Nenek 拿督奶奶. The original meaning of 'Datuk Nenek' is 'ancestors' (Wilkinson 1901:283), because *datuk* means grandfather and *nenek* means grandmother. Later, the Chinese use the term to refer to female Datuk in general, just as they use 'Datuk Gong' to refer to male Datuk by and large. In the meanwhile, the Chinese also use Datuk Po(po)¹⁵ 拿督婆(婆) or Datuk Niangniang¹⁶ 拿督娘娘 to address a female Datuk, as indeed they do to female Chinese deities like Tudi Po(po) 土地婆(婆) and Wangmu Niangniang 王母娘娘 (Queen Mother of the West). The invention of Datuk Nenek may be related to the worship of female saints in *keramat*. For example, on Kusu Island stand three holy shrines of Malay saints to commemorate a pious man (Syed Abdul Rahman), his mother (Nenek Ghalib) and sister (Puteri Fatimah) who lived in the 19th century. Nevertheless, the conception of Datuk Po as the wife of Datuk Gong is obviously an imitation of Tudi Po and Tudi Gong.

The third one is a very special Chinese Datuk called Wu Taizi 伍太子 (the Fifth Prince), who is said to be the fifth son of the Jade Emperor, and the godson of Datuk Zunwang. The name and statue of Wu Taizi look like an imitation of Nezha 哪吒 (Third Lotus Prince) except that he wears a *songkok*, and the synthesis makes him act like an intermediary between Malay Datuk Gong and Chinese deities:

'Datuk Zunwang requested the Jade Emperor for a heavenly deity to help us, so Wu Taizi was sent here; if we have something to repay to the Jade Emperor, we will send him to the heaven.' (Respondent 6, a committee member of Jugra Thian Poh Keong Temple, interview, 02 July 2017)¹⁷

'When Wu Taizi wears a *songkok* he will speak Malay, but he will speak Chinese without wearing it.' (Respondent 14, the wife of the caretaker of Jugra Tokong Tian Lin, interview, 02 July 2017)

Conclusion

We have examined the three stages in the syncretic process of Datuk Gong worship and diverse strategies the devotees adopted in each stage. Although the three stages have a chronological and hierarchical sequence, it does not mean that each stage/strategy is completely separate. Instead, they are often co-existing or even intertwined. For instance, in the period of synthesis, the method of juxtaposition like virtual brotherhood between Datuk Gong and Chinese deities is still widely used, but compared to the previous two stages, invention and re-creation are the most prominent new strategies.

In Southeast Asia, a meeting point of different civilisations, it is not uncommon to find the cases of syncretic amity and syncretic encompassment between Chinese and non-Chinese deities. In the Philippines, the practice of worshipping deities of different faiths (mostly Buddhist,

15.Grandmother or old woman.

16.A Chinese honorific title for goddess.

17.In the hierarchy of heaven, earth and the underworld in Chinese Religion, Datuk Gong pertains to the earth, so generally he is not able to go to heaven.

Taoist and Catholic) on the same altar is repeated in some temples and many home altars of the ethnic Chinese (Dy & Ang 2014:119–120). In Thailand, the Chinese worship *lak-mueang*, the 'pillar of the State' or 'pillar of the city', which was derived from the *Siva-linga* of India, via Cambodia, and was assimilated to the animistic *phi* or spirits and came to be regarded as the supreme *phi* of the city or state in the popular Thai religion (Skinner 1957:130–131). Sometimes, *lak-mueang* is worshipped in the same place with some Chinese deities, especially with Chenghuang 城隍, the Chinese 'God of the Walls and Moats' (or the City God), as in the case of Songkhla San lak-mueang (Songkhla City Pillar Shrine), and the reason for this connection may be that both of them are guardian spirits of cities (Bannon 2016:57–59). Unsurprisingly, these non-Chinese deities are frequently venerated with Chinese ritual styles.

Nevertheless, the cases of synthesis are relatively rare as it requires persistent and widespread worship of certain non-Chinese deities, which is the peculiarity of Datuk Gong worship in West Malaysia, where it has become an integral part of Chinese Religion and Chinese society. Although Datuk Gong worship exists in other regions, they have not yet reached such a level of integration. In Sabah, although Datuk Gong is considered to be in charge of outdoor or wild fields, he is nowhere to be seen in Chinese cemeteries (Ng 2020:57). In Medan, Dizhu and Datuk Gong have formed a set of dual structure marked by a series of distinctive *tang-fan* ethnic characteristics (Zhou 2020). The reason for the difference is that the Chinese enjoy a long history in rooting in West Malaysia and worshipping Datuk Gong. In the development of more than 100 years, the syncretism of Datuk Gong worship based on continuous ethnic interaction has experienced a long-term dynamic process. The respective strong ethnic and cultural identities of the Chinese and Malays prevented either party of the syncretism from being assimilated by the other, and Chinese recognition of the dominant position of the Malays and their respect for Malay culture avoided the dissolution of the syncretism after the Malays abandoned *keramat*, hence a production of a new worship with its own distinctive identity.

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Z.Y. Wang is the sole author of this article.

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Data availability

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