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FABIAN GRAHAM

Visual anthropology: a temple anniversary  
in Singapore

Max Planck Institute for the Study of  
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser  
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften



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Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,  
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## Abstract

Based on the hypothesis that the inclusion of visual media provides insights into non-verbal communication not provided by the written word alone, this paper represents an experimental approach to test the usefulness of reproducing fieldwork photography in directing reader's attentions to probe the emic understandings of deific efficacy, and the researcher's selective bias which the images implicitly or explicitly portray. This paper therefore explores the use of the visual image to illustrate that a reader's own analysis of proxemics and kinesics allows for a deeper understanding of emic perspectives by drawing insights from the manipulation of material objects and from non-verbal communication – insights that the written word may struggle to accurately portray. Framed around a photo-rich ethnographic account of trance possession cults in Singapore, the intent of the paper is to contribute towards the broader discourse of the future of the visual image in anthropology in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Visual anthropology, Chinese religion, spirit mediums, temple ritual, Taoism.

## Author

FABIAN GRAHAM is a research fellow in the “Temples, rituals and the transformation of transnational networks” research project headed by Peter van der Veer. Having completed two years of fieldwork in Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan on spirit mediumship, rituals and temple culture, he is now working on writing up his research data into a book. Previously, Fabian has studied Taiwan studies, social anthropological analysis and social anthropology in Taipei, Cambridge and SOAS in London. His doctoral dissertation compared the folk Taoist landscapes in Taiwan and Singapore with the aim of locating historical and socio-political explanations for the recent evolution of difference between the two religious cultures. Working closely with spirit mediums and their devotees, and adopting a participatory approach to fieldwork, his analysis encompassed temple based ritual and material culture; spirit mediumship and trance states; inter-temple organization and expanding temple networks, and the societal factors that have influenced the development of these religious elements in each location.

His research interests include the anthropology of Chinese religion, folk and orthodox Taoism, *tang-ki* spirit mediumship, temple ritual and material culture, the invention and reinterpretation of tradition, ethnographic approaches to the study of religious phenomena, and evolving forms of new syncretic practices in Southeast Asia.



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This paper represents an experimental approach to test the usefulness of reproducing fieldwork photography in directing reader's attentions to probe the emic understandings of deific efficacy, and the researcher's selective bias which the images implicitly or explicitly portray. Based on the hypothesis that the inclusion of visual media provides insights into non-verbal communication not provided by the written word alone, this paper therefore explores the use of the visual image to illustrate that a reader's own analysis of proxemics and kinesics allows for a deeper understanding of emic perspectives by drawing insights from non-verbal communication and from the way in which material objects are handled – insights that the words alone may struggle to accurately portray. For this end, the embedded visual essay is photo rich and the captions framed in the suppositional or interrogative, thus inviting the reader to consider both emic understandings of deific efficacy, and the multifunctional uses of the visual image in fieldwork, analysis, and in its reproduction. Whilst the subject of and issues raised by the ethnography are framed within the context of a spirit-medium temple in Singapore, the paper is intended as a contribution towards the broader discourse of the future of the visual image in the digital age of anthropology.

## Reflexivity, proxemics and kinesics: reproducing visual media in anthropology

Margaret Mead (1973 / 2003) has argued that it is an ethical responsibility of anthropology as a discipline to preserve records of disappearing irreproducible behaviours noting that “departments of anthropology continue to send out fieldworkers with no equipment beyond a pencil and a notebook” (Mead 1973 / 2003: 4). In this digital age of highly mobile technology, while capturing these ‘irreproducible behaviours’ in visual media has become both increasingly unobtrusive and inexpensive, images frequently remain in researchers archives as their reproduction in academic writing is perceived to make their inclusion somehow less academic (Pink 2001). This paper however argues that the capturing and reproduction of visual media may contribute to hypothesis building and further data analysis, as well as to the preservation and dissemination of Mead's ‘irreproducible behaviours’, and is illustrated in context of a temple's anniversary ritual celebrations in Singapore.

Mead's preservation of knowledge for knowledge's sake begs the question of what constitutes an anthropological photograph, and in which contexts? Edwards sug-

gests that “An anthropological photograph is any photograph from which an anthropologist could gain useful, meaningful visual information” (Edwards 1992:13 in Pink 2013: 73-74), though in fairness, I would argue that the subtleties, complexities and multifaceted nature of Chinese temple rituals render most fieldwork photographs ‘anthropological’ by this definition. Unlike a researcher whose anthropological gaze is inevitably selective, the lens captures data impartially, and if used to systematically, provides an essential tool to collect accurate visual data overlooked by subjective observation. As Collier and Collier have noted, “We see what we want to see, as we want to perceive it. Learning to see with visual accuracy, to see culture in all its complex detail is therefore a challenge to the fieldworker whose training is literary rather than visual” (Collier & Collier 1986: 5). After all, a camera is an instrument of ultimate selectivity and unbiased all-inclusiveness, and the data produced is uncorrupted over time, allowing both the fieldworker and final reader time to speculate, theorise and construct further enquiries long after the ritual event has ended. Luc Pauwels takes this line further, arguing that visual essays provide a valuable opportunity for readers “to independently explore source materials and to probe the intentions of the author – in some cases even to go beyond even these in examining the author’s implicit choices of imagery and voice” (Pauwels 2003: 141).

While this is a valid point, I argue that the value of the visual essay and anthropological photograph is further reaching. While photographic data may prove valuable in artefact oriented anthropology where a small detail may alter the meaning, function, authenticity or legitimacy of an object, it is equally valuable in the area of interpersonal relationships as a form of non-verbal research where a telling sideways glance or assemblage of actors around a ritual object may reveal the complex dimensions of temple hierarchies and social structure. ‘Proxemics’, how social actors order and transfer themselves in and through space (Hall: 1959) provides information revealing social relationships such as an individual’s status and membership of a temple’s inner and outer circles, which, in context of Singapore’s temple landscape are revealing of what are uncomfortable topics for open conversation. Proxemics also illustrate the ownership and control of sacred objects, a role which actors drift in and out of depending on the nature of the ritual. Simultaneously, ‘kinesics’, the significance of bodily expressions including an actor’s gestures and postures (Bird-whistell: 1970), while throwing light on social relationships, provides a tool to analyse the processes of trance possession central to all ritual in this temple environment. Describing the physiological transformations of a medium entering a state of trance possession is no substitute for seeing it, observing the medium’s facial expressions

and physical characteristics contort in the transformation from human medium into perceived deity incarnate (Elliott 1955, Chan 2006). Photographs however capture and reveal the differences in non-verbal characteristics of the mediums both in and out of trance possession, and while channelling deities with varying physical and psychological attributes.

The following visual essay details chronologically the rituals performed to celebrate the temple's thirtieth anniversary, after which, the discussion will turn to decoding visual data, ethics and reciprocation, and the variable meanings and significance given to an image according to context.

Distinct from the linear time that unfolds in secularism, ritual time, as exemplified by commemorative rituals is often cyclical, and by drawing on cyclical time, temporalities are created in ritual that structure secular life in a linear dimension. I have therefore chosen chronological organization as a form of systematized observation to illustrate the temporal nature of individual rituals as a process performed to achieve a specific end, and the process by which the ends provide new beginnings for the coming year. As Sangren (2007) has noted, "A more genuinely 'anthropological' reflexivity would require broadening the enquiry to include the social processes of anthropological knowledge production, including the informal and offstage conversations". The subjective presentation of the narrative with visual media recorded and reproduced at different times also reflects a progression of reflexivity, which, I contend, like ritual, is a process with a start, development and specific end, the photographs embodying the 'offstage conversations' of the actors involved, and their selection and captioning representing the offstage conversations between the researcher and themselves. Therefore, reflecting my own thoughts, posing rhetorical questions or putting words into the mouths of the main actors, the photo captions are intended to be thought provoking, prompting readers to probe the emic understandings of deific efficacy, of social hierarchies and the researcher's own selective bias and reflexivity which the images implicitly or explicitly portray.

## Notes on the photographs

To ensure that the human actors reacted minimally to the presence of a camera, about two thousand eight hundred photos were taken, and where possible, a long zoom lens was used. The photographs were taken on three cameras with 'live view' so that they could be shot without obviously bringing the camera to the eye. One

camera sported a one inch sensor making it small and inconspicuous, the second a micro four-thirds sensor to take advantage of a 150-300mm equivalent lens to shoot from a distance, and the last with larger APSC sensor with a 48mm equivalent F1.4 lens to capture moving subjects in low light.

Of the thirty-two photographs reproduced in this paper, none were posed for, the intention being to show the subject's spontaneous and uninhibited behaviour in ritual space. Twenty-three of the images include people, six (*images 4, 7, 15, 17, 18 and 20*) reproduced for the sake of illustrating how the objects they are holding are used.

Six images (*images 1 and 31, 23 and 28, 26 and 29*) are in fact pairs, illustrating the movement or change in state of ritual objects as they are 'sent off', inviting the reader to ponder the cosmologies that lend support to the rituals. For instance, *image 1* shows the Generals of the Five Directions with their horses, and the horses being well fed. Then, in *image 31*, the horses are waiting to be 'sent off' by immolation to deity realms, begging the question of what the deities ride for the rest of the year. *Images 23 and 28* are concerned with the housing of ancestors that visit the temple during the celebrations and of their 'sending off' at the festival's conclusion. The process of summoning, housing and returning them to the spiritual realms raises issues including which part of their soul (see Harrell 1972) has been visiting the temple if they have already reincarnated, and how long their individual identity including food preferences remain after death (see Harrell 1979). As illustrated in *image 26 and 29*, large quantities of money and food are sent off with them. While simply stating that there is a belief that ancestors require food and money in the afterlife does in fact summarise the emic interpretation of events, *image 29* graphically detailing bowls of food and cans of sugary drinks and Guinness melting into the flames provides a visual cue encouraging the reader to ponder the paradox of why spirits need food to sustain them in the absence of a physical belly, and how post-mortal shopping is rationalized by participants.

The temple is located in an industrial block, and focussing attention on essential ritual objects including incense, flags and candles, seven images (*images 6, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 25*) show the construction of an external ritual space in what is essentially a communal car park. Two of these photographs (*images 6 & 12*) are of key interest as along with four others (*images 5, 8, 9 and 20*) they show how closely *tang-ki*<sup>1</sup> spirit mediums and Taoist priests work alongside each other in rituals. This is somewhat

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1 *Tang-ki* is a Hokkien term meaning spirit medium. Mandarin and Hokkien terms will be Romanised in Hanyu Pinyin, and a full list can be found in the appendix.



of an anomaly as in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, while priests and *tang-ki* may perform rituals at a single temple or event, they do so separately as orthodox Taoism does not officially recognize the legitimacy of spirit possession.

## The Temple of Mysterious Virtue: a visual essay

The Temple of Mysterious Virtue is broadly representative of successful Chinese spirit medium (*tang-ki*) temples in Singapore that have outgrown the confines of Housing Development Board (HDB) apartments and relocated to larger premises in cheaper industrial areas. Reflecting a trend instigated by Singapore's HDB of relocating citizens "in public housing neighbourhoods with representations of Malay, Chinese and Indian residents that were reflective of the ethnic mix at the national level [...] 77 per cent Chinese residents, 15 per cent Malays, 7 per cent Indian" (Teo et al 2004: 99), this temple caters to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community. Located high above the sprawling metropolis in west Singapore, Chinese, Malay and Hindu deities are worshipped and Chinese and Hindu deities are consulted by their devotees through their spirit mediums.



**Image 1:** Be sure our steeds are well fed!

The first morning was devoted to inviting the Generals of the Five Directions to watch over and guard all ritual proceedings, a ritual invitation which included feeding their horses and which was performed daily. Reflecting the pragmatic nature of Chinese vernacular religion, the generals serve the temple they are housed in, and obey the temple's *tang-ki* whose authority is legitimated by the Jade Emperor in a ritual performed at one of two Jade Emperor

temples in the country. In Singapore, a *tang-ki* may only practice after receiving permission from the Jade Emperor, acquiescence ascertained by the casting of divination blocks (*bue*). *Bue* are two crescent shaped convex wooden blocks which may land either flat or convex sides facing up. When one convex side faces up and the other down, it signifies a 'yes' answer, the probability of receiving a positive answer

being 50%. However, this tradition of petitioning the Jade Emperor is absent in both Malaysia and Taiwan, and has become increasingly important in Singapore with the increasing popularity of the Underworld deities Tua Ya Pek and Di Ya Pek who are often described by *tang-ki* as half deity – half ghost, and whose rank as Underworld enforcers would otherwise be insufficient to master Heavenly generals. The Five Generals are the Jade Emperor's nephew Er Lang Shen representing west; Lei Gong the God of Thunder representing east; Marshal Kang representing south; Zhao Gong Ming the Military God of Wealth representing north; and as overall commander, Prince Nezha who holds the title of Marshal of the Central Altar - Zhongtan Yuan-shuai representing the central camp. These are the principal commanders of the Heavenly armies, and individually, each holds a high rank in the Taoist pantheon. Therefore, even though as a group they are subordinate to the residing *tang-ki*, each general was invited individually with the respect commanded by their rank. *Bue* were then thrown to make sure that each had arrived, and then again to make sure that they were satisfied with the food and drink offered to them. Joss money was also burned for them to distribute to their spirit armies.

However, the main ritual activity on the first day was to invite the Jade Emperor to the celebrations, and to achieve this successfully, *tang-ki* and a Taoist priest worked together, each undertaking different ritual functions. This cooperation between the folk and orthodox traditions is indicative of Singapore's contemporary religious landscape. In Taiwan for example, while orthodox priests perform rituals in folk Taoist temples, they do not, as a rule, perform a ritual together with a spirit medium in a trance state channelling (trancing)<sup>2</sup> a deity.



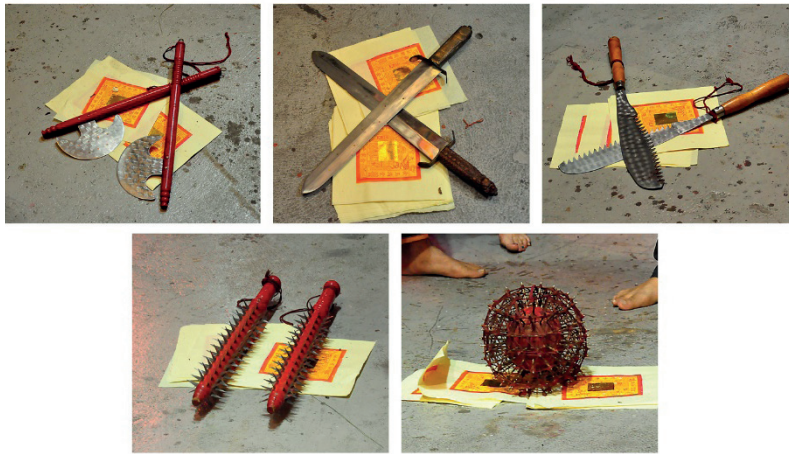
**Image 2:** Untangling efficacy from entertainment

There were some preliminary ritual entertainments for devotees and temple members to watch including lion dances and a dragon dance while more serious though less spectacular rituals were being performed elsewhere. Inside the temple, four *tang-ki* went into trance, two visiting *tang-ki* and the two temple owners. The male *tang-ki* tranced Jigong, Lotus Flower San

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2 Singaporean English used to describe channeling a deity in a trance state.

Taizi, the Iron Axe Marshal Tiefu Yuanshuai and Lin Fu Wang Ye, and the female *tang-ki*, Guan Yin.



**Image 3:** Blood brothers

*tang-ki* self-flagellated with the them, their intent being to draw blood with which to daub ritual objects. The weapons used included two axes, two Dragon Tiger Swords, two machetes with a serrated edge and a cudgel with 108 protruding spikes both



**Image 4:** Why is no one watching?

Once in trance, what resembled a theatre of pain was constructed running from the consultation table at the temple's centre to the external altar to the Jade emperor. A selection of ritual weapons were laid on the floor on joss money, and in turn, each of the male

referred to as a 'shark', and a nail ball consisting of 108 nails protruding from a wooden sphere. It is generally believed that the blood of a possessed *tang-ki* carries the blessings of the deity channelled, blessings which are transferred into the material objects. Chan (2006) claims that a *tang-ki's* blood doubles the potency of a talisman or charm by charging it with yang energy

to overwhelm yin negativity, while Stafford (1995) associates the power of the blood with the reproductive power of women through childbirth. Whichever the case, it is not uncommon for temple members to carry a sash which, when blood is let, is eagerly presented to the *tang-ki* to have its power fortified. I asked the *tang-ki* why such spectacle was required for the relatively small amount of blood required for the event, and he replied that it is natural to "display what one cherishes" and that the gift of blood was to "present a treasure" to the deity's devotees. Some objects would



be given to devotees, others had been paid for in advance, and some would be sold in the action that follows such festivals in Singapore to raise money for the temple. The most numerous objects were banners and lanterns with the temple's name which devotees would hang over their front doors for a year to bring the blessings of the temple's deities in to their homes.

Image five illustrates the familiarity between the orthodox priest and the *tang-ki* who was trancing Jigong. The photo was taken earlier in the day and they were in fact discussing the order of the day's rituals. As an employee, the priest deferred to the *tang-ki*'s decisions, and in return, the *tang-ki* made clear to devotees that the



**Image 5:** "Trust me! I've got it covered!"

priest was essential and important in the ritual arena. In the rare instances where the priest felt he could not participate as required in a ritual that had been invented by the temple and conflicted with orthodox practice, he would instead chant a scripture of blessings for the benefit of devotees. Therefore, unknown to participants, on these occasions, two unconnected rituals were being performed simultaneously – the intended ritual by the *tang-ki* accompanied by orthodox liturgical chants.



**Image 6:** Summoning the Jade Emperor

While the *tang-ki* were letting blood, outside at a separate altar, the priest had been chanting a scripture of inviting for the Jade Emperor, the Wu Dan Zhou from the Zhengyi Taoist sect. The words of the scripture would mingle with the abundant incense smoke and be carried

upwards towards Heaven, and the red candles on the altar would light the deity's way to the altar. After each *tang-ki* had finished marking sacred objects, they moved outside to observe the priest's rituals. This gave me the chance to talk with them and establish their relationship with the temple. As it turned out, each *tang-ki* had their own temple, the ritual connection between them being an extension of membership of the same triad brotherhood, the Bamboo United Society. Since the breakdown of pre-urbanization ritual networks based on village or clan name associations, friendships forged during national service, in secret societies or at temple banquets have all functioned as new forms of temple networking in Singapore. This has created an environment whereby mutual participation by *tang-ki* in each other's rituals has become the norm.

As the evening wore on, more rituals were performed by the priest including 'opening the eyes' of new statues bought by devotees. This is usually done by the *tang-ki*



**Image 7:** Opening the eyes – dominating the spirit

*ki* in trance at the Temple of Mysterious Virtue, but they relinquished the duty on this occasion. While the end result is that the statues become spiritually efficacious sacred objects, there are significant differences between the folk and orthodox belief systems and rituals. While the orthodox system considers statues as aids for contemplation, a means

to pay respects to the deity and as a way of communicating with them, the emic belief of practitioners is that a deity statue with its 'eyes opened' becomes a receptacle for the deity whereby the deity can be brought directly into one's home or temple. Whilst a *tang-ki* has the authority of the possessing deity to 'open a statue's eyes', the priest, through liturgical invocations, attains the assistance of Heaven deities that he calls upon. In both cases, dissolved cinnabar is used with a small brush, and dots are placed on the top of the statues head, its eyes, ears, neck, shoulders, heart, hands, legs, knees and feet, as well as on any weapon or other articles the deity is holding. In the orthodox tradition, the vital organs are also 'dotted', and the priest uses a mirror to reflect light onto the deity statue to make its efficacy stronger. During the process,

the Chinese character *ling* meaning ‘spirit’ is drawn on the mirror along with a secret talisman which the priest informed me was “to bring wealth, and to destroy malicious spirits with the mirror’s light”.



**Image 8:** The gods who never say “no”

Returning to the ritual invitation to the Jade Emperor, after much incense had been lit, joss paper burned, scriptures recited and offerings made, once again using *bue*, the Jade emperor was asked whether he had accepted the invitation. When throwing *bue*, statistically the probability of receiving a ‘yes’ answer increases with each attempt from 50% to 75% with two casts, 87.5% in three and 93.75% in four. After four consecutive ‘no’ answers, Jigong stood up and encouraged everyone to pay respects to the Jade Emperor guaranteeing that if they prayed hard enough, he would agree to come. He jokingly picked up a baby and put its hands together and held it up and good humouredly cajoled the crowd into joining in. The *bue* were thrown again, and sure enough, the Jade Emperor acquiesced. However, he wasn’t to stay long. I was informed by the priest that traditionally people invited the Jade Emperor at 11am, and sent him off the same afternoon after reporting their activities to him, but that local customs have changed and nowadays he is invited at night and sent off the next afternoon. I suggested that this may be because in the religious calendar the day begins at 11PM or due to the fact that most devotees are busy in the daytime, but was then informed by the temple’s *tang-ki* that it was their intention to pray to him at first light, “at 5:45 in the morning we need to pray to him so that what we say to him he can hear. He is there to witness the first day of the event and then other deities can act as witness”.

The primary ritual on the second day was therefore sending off the Jade Emperor, though individual consultations, healing, purification, and luck changing rituals were performed by the *tang-ki* throughout the day. I queried why the lesser ranked Generals of the Five Directions were invited every day and the Jade Emperor only for a single day, and it was explained that the Jade Emperor had far too many responsibilities to be present for the whole five days, the important thing



being that all planned activities had been reported to him and acknowledged in advance.

The sending off ritual was spectacular and involved several priests and *tang-ki*, and numerous food offerings. These included five fruits representing the five elements



**Image 9:** Maximising the potential of visual records as tools of documentation and inquiry



**Image 10:** Size matters

and five directions, and a pig's head and tail – the latter necessary to signify that it was in fact a whole pig, the remainder of the animal being offered to the Generals of the Five Directions and then eaten by devotees to bring them blessings. Following the same procedure as the night before, once it was

ascertained that the Jade Emperor was satisfied with the proceedings, his altar which had been set up outside the temple was dismantled, then transported to public incineration bins along the main road to be 'sent off' in flames back to the heavenly realms. Of key interest is that the altar included a palace constructed of cardboard which was richly decorated with figures of deities and shrouded with sugar cane. Previously such palaces would have been absent, but with increasing wealth, festivals in Singapore have become increasingly elaborate, and to 'gain face' i.e., 'to keep up with the



**Image 11:** Prosperity come

neighbours', palaces and other combustible paraphernalia have become progressively larger. The priest expressed this succinctly, "this is not related to Taoism; this is about abundance". Only one item was spared the flames, an image of a god of wealth Qilin Caisi placed on a stack of

joss money which, from the *tang-ki*'s perspective, meant that wealth would continue to flow in to the temple with the Jade Emperor's blessing in the coming year. The inclusion of sugar cane is a Hokkien tradition based on numerous versions of a story in which imperial Chinese or Japanese soldiers came to massacre villages in Hokkien speaking areas, and villagers escaped by hiding in sugar cane fields. A more recent example from Singapore is that of Hokkien speaking civilians escaping death in the first few weeks of the Japanese occupation of Singapore in February 1942 by hiding in sugar cane fields that they had planted. An alternate explanation is based on homonyms whereby the Hokkien word for sugar cane is 'gam jia' (甘蔗) which sounds similar to gratitude, 'gam xia' (感謝). Other examples of homonyms being the basis for the creation of symbolic objects include altar offerings such as apples 'pingguo' (蘋果) as in Mandarin the first syllable sounds the same as 'ping'an' (平安) meaning 'peace'; bananas, as both banana (香蕉) and 'gold beckon' (金招) in Hokkien are pronounced 'gim jio'; pineapple (鳳梨) as the Hokkien is pronounced the same as 'prosperity come' 'ong lai' (旺來), and oranges as in Hokkien the first syllable 'gel' (橘) from 'gela' (橘子) sounds the same as the first syllable from the Hokkien word for 'auspicious' 'dai gel' (大吉).

The highlight of day three was the ceremonial crossing of a *ping'an* bridge, a bridge crossing that removes negative energies from one's mind, body and soul, changes one's luck for the better, and brings blessings from deities. Lacking ritual space inside the temple, the Temple of Mysterious Virtue set up its *ping'an* bridge in the parking lot immediately outside the temple under the auspices of a black flag referred to in Hokkien as the 'orh leng' representing the Lord of the Dark heavens Xuantian Shangdi, and the flags for the external camps of the Generals of the Five directions.





**Image 12:** Temple hierarchies and the creation of ritual space

Candles and incense were lit at eight points marking each of the primary compass points and thus corresponding to the eight sides of the *bagua*, each set of incense and candles invoking the protection of a deity: Heaven,

Earth, the Lord of the Southern Dipper, the Lord of the Northern Dipper, North, South, East and West as well as the Eight Taoist Immortals. Alongside each set were offerings of tea as a sign of respect to the deity, oranges representing auspiciousness and joss money to pay for the deity's services as their work is contractual and they do not work for free. Beneath the bridge was a bowl of scented water symbolising a river and an oil lamp was placed inside, not representing fire, but instead symbolic of the moon reflecting light onto the river. The five-coloured cloth on the bridge represents the Generals of the Five Directions, and also the five elements that are believed to constitute the



**Image 13:** Multiple uses of fire in ritual

Taoist universe, air, earth, fire, wood and metal. The *ping'an* rituals were shared with the priest performing the opening and closing rituals while two *tang-ki* guarded the entrance and exit. Temple members prepared the ritual space, and the temple's primary *tang-ki* who was trancing Jigong coordinating the ritual activity.

The first deities to be invited by the priest were three boundary guards charged with securing the area, followed by the Generals of the Five Directions to prevent malevolent spirits from approaching the bridge. The Bridge General Qiao Qian Jiangjun was then invited to an altar set up facing the bridge's exit, and finally the

tutelary deity Tudi Gong was invited. As each deity was summoned, he held a corresponding flag in his left hand to write a ‘*qi*’ talisman in the air, while with his right he wielded a snake headed whip which was cracked five times for each deity. Each time the knotted cord broke the sound barrier, it produced a sound reminiscent of a thunder clap, a sound associated with the deity Lei Gong who in popular mythology produced thunder with a drum and mallet to kill demons and those who misused Taoist magic. It is this sound and not the whip itself that wards off malevolent spirits and black magic. Finally, the red buns on the bridge, each representing obstacles that individual’s face in life were removed with the tip of the priest’s sword, thus symbolically removing these obstacles from the lives of devotees who would later follow him over the bridge.

There was a buzz of excitement as devotees gathered themselves into groups based on their Chinese zodiac birth year, each of which would cross in turn, but first, led by Jigong, temple members crossed the bridge. The entrance to the bridge is called the Dragon Gate where negative energies are removed and the exit the Tiger Gate



**Image 15:** The power invested in flags

**Image 14:**  
The paradoxical nature of fate

where negative energies are prevented from following, and crossing, perhaps due to expectation, produces a feeling of elation. At the entrance stood the *tang-ki* trancing Lotus Flower San Taizi, his job being to prevent any spirit entities from following the



last person to cross in each group. At the exit stood Zhongtan Yuanshuai who, in his role as the military commander of the Armies of the Five Directions held spiritual dominium over the bridge. As each participant passed, he touched them lightly on the head with his flag before exiting the Tiger Gate. In Taoism, deity power '*ling*' is transmitted through flags, and as the blessing was bestowed, it felt as if an electrically charged cool breeze (*qi*) was passing through one's body starting at one's head and exiting into the floor through one's feet. After crossing, each participant paid respects at the altar of the Bridge General who, in the folk tradition, is believed to help clear obstacles from devotee's paths.



**Image 16:** My proxy self

Non-members were each given three incense sticks, joss money, and either a male or female effigy called a *guiren* to carry across the bridge. *Guiren* are perceived as a substitute body that will both absorb bad fortune and trick malevolent spirits into thinking that the effigy is the individual, so that if a spirit had been following a person for reasons

of their own, they would be incinerated along with the effigy and joss paper at the end of the ritual. Prior to opening the bridge to the public, the priest carried thirteen *guiren* across the bridge. He explained that "men have less misfortune than women as women have the additional hazard of childbirth. As we were changing luck for twelve months, I carried six male and seven female, one for each month, plus one for the danger associated with giving birth".

After all twelve animal signs had crossed, led by the Taoist priest and temple members, everyone crossed for a second time carrying eleven incense sticks which were then taken into the temple to pay respects at the eleven censers dedicated to different deities in the temple. In order these include Xuantian Shangdi represented by the *orh leng*; the Jade Emperor; Shancai Tongzi and other Heavenly deities (the main censer); the One Thousand Armed Guan Yin; the Generals of the Five Directions; the year god Tai Sui; the Underworld pantheon, most prominent of which are the City God Chenghuang, Tua Ya Pek and Di Ya Pek; the Hindu deity Ganesh; the Malay Datuk Gong; the Tiger God representing wealth, and lastly two dogs guarding the Heavenly and Underworld altars.



**Image 17:** Ritual completion - cleansing the 'qi'



**Image 18:** Private car park: wandering spirits not welcome



**Image 19:** Heavenly wisdom

After offering incense, each devotee was given a cleansing 'rub' with their joss money by Jigong. The variety of money used was referred to as changing luck money *gai yun qian*, and the rub was intended to cleanse each individual's aura. This concluded the *ping'an* bridge ritual.

Meanwhile, outside, the Taoist priest dismantled the *ping'an* bridge with a sword whose blade was inlaid with stones representing the stars of the Big Dipper. After the ritual items had been removed and the deities informed to return to the temple, the bridge was lifted a foot in the air and dropped, the sudden crash breaking the link between the human and spirit worlds.

The remainder of the evening was dominated by two events. First, temple members began to prepare for the penultimate day's *chao du* rituals for their ancestors, and inside the temple, consultations with Guan Yin as tranced through her medium began. As she gave out words of wisdom and advice, most devotees became very moved, some even to tears.

For most participants, the *chao du* ceremony for ancestors was the most important element of the five-day event.

For those with recently deceased rela-

tives, it represented a way of making sure that they made a speedy passage through the Underworld to their next incarnation, and for others, a way of showing respect to their ancestors and of gaining extra blessings from them in return for offerings. While initial preparations were being made for the *chao du* on the fifth day, rituals



were held on day four for the younger generations to help them focus on their school work and to pass their exams.



**Image 20:** The next generation

a gold casket in the shape of ancient Chinese money representing the Money Gods of the Five Directions *Wu Lu Caishen*, and some imitation graduation scrolls. All the objects were ‘dotted’ by Jigong thus ‘opening their eyes’ so that deities could work through them, and three coins with square holes also referred to as *wu lu caishen* were added by Jigong. Each object was then picked up by the priest and circulated three times over incense smoke while reciting a scripture. The students (or their parents in their absence) knelt before Jigong and had the hat placed on their heads symbolizing successful graduation, and the children were given encouragement to work hard. As dictated by the contractual nature of the belief system, all of the items bar the casket were then burned as offerings to Kui Xing.

Overseen by the Underworld deity Di Ya Pek as tranced through his medium, ritual activity continued throughout the day. Di Ya Pek’s mood is usually sombre, but on this occasion, he was as convivial and celebratory as I have ever seen him. In the photo to the right he can be seen blessing large sacks of rice which would be divided along with other essentials to be distributed to the elderly from the poorest families in west Singapore.

Both the Taoist priest and Jigong participated in this ritual, the active agency though being the god of exams, Kui Xing. Each family had a tray of ritual objects including black paper graduation hats, red paper hats called *guan mao* which would have been worn by high ranking officials in ancient China, paper robes, joss money,



**Image 21:** Life and death

There had been a Chinese opera and puppet performances playing for the first three days, and his next task was to ritually dismantle their stage, removing the talisman placed there to protect the performers who it is believed may become possessed



**Image 22:** Deity – human relations. Understanding the interrelationships between actors in rituals



**Image 23:** You will always be gendered to me

*chao du* offerings. The buildings were segregated with males and females each being allotted one floor, and at the end of the houses there were washrooms for all the spirits to use. As with food offerings, incantations to multiply their size in the spirit world were employed meaning that there was no correlation between the size of the actual paper building and the accommodation allotted for the use of ancestors and wandering spirits.

The fifth morning was spent filling the tables with offerings to ancestors while at a separate altar, three priests chanted scriptures allowing for the post-mortem forgiveness of sins. The tables for offerings were set up immediately in front of a tent dedicated to Underworld deities, logic dictating that Underworld deities were best positioned to speed up processes happening in the Underworld. Their tent, as is usual

by the deities or historic characters that they or their puppets portray. In common with dismantling the *ping'an* bridge, the talisman attached to it were burned, the deities they represented sent back to the temple, and then the stage was lifted and allowed to crash on the floor.

Di Ya Pek then dedicated the remainder of the day to drinking with temple members, happily pouring Martel Cordon Bleu down their throats. Outside the temple, the preparations for the *chao du* continued, houses for both ancestors and wandering spirits were set up outside the temple entrance for the spirits to stay in overnight while awaiting the



**Image 24:** Worship me now, torture you later

in Singapore, was lit by black lights as Underworld deities are not accustomed to sunlight, and it contained statues of the primary Underworld deities as well as amusements for them including mah-jong, cards, alcohol and gambling chips. On the main altar were placed Bao Gong who is associated with judgement, Chenghuang the City God,

and from the Buddhist pantheon the bodhisattva Dizangwang Pusa who renounced enlightenment until the Underworld has been emptied of souls. Placed along the two remaining closed sides of the tent were the twenty-four helpers of Chenghuang whose job is to record the deeds of every individual so that correct punishments can be inflicted in the afterlife.

Meanwhile, inside the temple there was an unusual ritual taking place. In front of the altar table there was a trough of dried mixed beans similar to those used to feed the horses belonging to the Generals of the Five Directions. These particular beans though had been blessed by 'The Boss' (the highest ranked deity tranced by the spirit medium) Xuantian Shangdi, by the Taoist priests and finally by Di Ya Pek. They were clearly highly prized as they represented wealth in all its manifestations: mental, spiritual and material. Di Ya Pek sat in his throne, and the longest serving members of the temple approached him holding in their hands a small pouch of pink paper which Di Ya Pek filled from the store in the trough. The pouches were then carefully wrapped in plastic bags to stop any 'wealth' being lost. Di Ya pek then called me to the front and announced that I would be his representative, and leaned back in his throne and watched while each temple member approached me, bowed, and held out their pouches which, much to their delight, I generously filled. Once this ritual was over, Di Ya Pek returned to the Underworld to be replaced by Sai Ya Pek, an Underworld deity associated with filial piety who would oversee the *chao du* ritual.

Attention then moved outside and to the job of filling the tables of offerings. Each ancestor was offered food and money, and so that they could find their individual offerings, their names were added on yellow talisman held in place between layers of joss money. Incense was then lit in each object to attract the attention of the ances-





**Image 25:** Orthodox Taoism in the vernacular arena

forming the *chao du* ritual in front of the Underworld tent to which they replied that it went unnoticed as their full attention “heart and soul” were focussed on acquiring merits to assist the ancestors in discarnate realms. For the wandering spirits, that



**Image 26:** Rice is life, even in death

tors so that they could receive their offerings. While this provided the primary visual focus, the important rituals were those performed by the Taoist priests petitioning the Jade Emperor to bestow forgiveness and blessings upon the ancestors. As orthodox Taoism does not call upon the Underworld deities in rituals nor represent them in anthropomorphic form in temples, I inquired how they felt about per-

forming the *chao du* ritual in front of the Underworld tent to which they replied that it went unnoticed as their full attention “heart and soul” were focussed on acquiring merits to assist the ancestors in discarnate realms. For the wandering spirits, that is, ghosts who do not have descendants to make them offerings, scriptures of salvation and repentance were left open on the table for them to read. Once again, the ritual was ended when *bue* confirmed that both the ancestors and Jade Emperor were satisfied with the proceedings, and that the offerings had

been accepted.



**Image 27:** Gods, ghosts and ancestors

The paper buildings which had housed the spirits overnight were then loaded onto trucks along with several tonnes of joss money, and much to my sur-



prise, several tables of actual food and drinks. These were all then transported to the main road by truck and placed in incinerators for a grand ‘sending off’. According to the *tang-ki*, the ancestral spirits remain in the houses and return to other realms when the burning takes place, the earlier rituals preparing them to leave the mortal realm. In Singapore, fires are only permitted in government sanctioned locations, in this instance, large cages placed along the road next to the building where the temple is housed. Overseen by both the Taoist priest and Sai Ya Pek, *bue* were thrown again and after a ‘yes’ ascertained, the contents of the incinerators lit with incense and joss money. As the fire took hold, the priest rang a bell and uttered words of blessing while onlookers prayed for the benefit of their ancestors. Within a minute, the house used by the ancestors caught alight, and I stayed by the fire for perhaps twenty minutes watching the flames as they engulfed the food offerings.



**Image 28:** A Chinese potlatch?



**Image 29:** Forever hungry. ‘Sending off’, provides the catalyst for the transformation process enabling material offerings “to go beyond the confines of the living world ... replicas in the state of becoming” (Scott 2007: 20)

About 1:30am on January 1<sup>st</sup> the flames died down and everyone returned to the temple.

The final day of celebrations was focussed on the annual banquet which functions both to raise money for the coming year through auctioning sacred objects, and as a means of networking as many of the banquet tables had been booked by other spirit medium temples. The banquet was held in a car park in front of the building where the temple is housed, and about one thousand people attended. Looking back to the first photo in this ethnography, that of the Generals of the Five Directions, for the auction, the clothes being worn by the deity statues were removed and each

placed on a large pile of joss money, and along with the corresponding small hand painted talisman, sold individually for in excess of one thousand Singapore dollars each.

The most important ritual object sold at each banquet is the Urn of Prosperity. As a material object, it is an ordinary temple censor, but as a ritual object, it takes on



**Image 30:** Taking the gods home

a powerful significance. First, it is a miniature replica of the main censor in the temple; second, the urn has been ritually sanctified by the temple's deity, and third, it has been used to pray to the temple's deities by devotees, so it is considered in every way a replica of

the main urn in the original temple. For the winning bidder, it represents that they are inviting this particular temple's deities to their house as a guest for one year, and are therefore praying directly to them in their home or business. It also represents prosperity, as when you invite a deity home, the deity will bring you good luck financially, and prosperity in all its other guises. The winning bidder for the Urn of Prosperity only gets to keep it until the following auction, and therefore it has to be returned to the temple after one year for re-auction. It can only be kept permanently by a family or business if they win the auction three years consecutively. Therefore, if a bidder has won the auction for this prestigious object for two consecutive years, they will bid exorbitant amounts to win for the third time so that the Urn of Prosperity becomes their own property. Both temple auctions and Urns of Prosperity which provide the major income for the majority of Singapore's smaller temples are absent from Taiwan's and Malaysia's folk Taoist landscapes. The urn sold at this banquet for 10,888 Singapore dollars, 888 being an auspicious number, which is roughly 7,200 Euros.

Following the banquet, temple members returned upstairs to the temple to dismantle any remaining decoration, to replace previously hidden ritual objects in new secret places, and to put the deity statues back on the main altar. Once completed, the final ritual act of the anniversary celebration was the 'sending off' of payment to the Generals of the Five Directions and their steeds. For all the 'sending off's', yellow talisman drawn by Xuantian Shangdi were attached to the incinerators to

authorise the burning. As such, from the emic perspective, deities themselves provide the legitimization for ritual activities through the *tang-ki* simultaneously legitimizing the power of the *tang-ki* to their followers.



**Image 31:** Elsewhere in the Chinese cultural universe



**Image 32:** Ritual and industrial space – A migrant worker looks on.

And thus, in a spectacular blaze of fire, that the week's ritual celebrations came to a successful end.



## Discussion: Context and subjectivity: Decoding visual information

I propose that providing contextual visual information creates an arena in which the micro-actions of the social actors may be better analysed. Decoding figure five for example, the knowing look given by the orthodox priest to the *tang-ki* / temple owner initially, to the uninitiated, sheds light on the power relationships between them. Both emic and etic interpretations may be considered here, where, taking the former as that of the initiated practitioner, the *tang-ki* is deity incarnate, and the priest merely a religious specialist. The image itself may thus prompt the researcher and reader to question perceived cosmologies and ritual hierarchies as perceived from orthodox Taoism towards the folk *tang-ki* tradition, and vice versa. I will return to consider the broader tactical and analytical values of this photograph in the discussion.

Beyond providing contextual visual information, Collier and Collier (1986) suggest that decoding images bridges the divide between the visual, which, in academia is associated with initiative, creative and inherent knowledge, and the spoken which is more often related to factual or objective data. The potential of methodical visual research is thus to provide a tool to amalgamate these distinctive areas of intelligence, allowing us to see beyond the cultural division between visual and textual records. In bridging this gap, “The photography of social actions leads us into a rich area of non-verbal research [...] for in them is reflected complex dimensions of social structure, cultural identity, interpersonal relationships, and physiological expression” (Collier & Collier 1986: 77), and the potential of visual media as instruments of fieldwork and documentation and can be maximised.

However, as Pink (2013) argues, the meaning and significance of any photo is dependent on when it is looked at, in what context and by whom. A photograph’s meaning therefore depends on context and subjective interpretation, and changes in meaning will be proportional to the broader distribution and readership of the written article in which the visual image is embedded. To show the reader how the actors perceive and understand the multifaceted strands of, and interrelationships between actors in rituals “We need to (a) find ways to record field data and (b) direct outsiders’ attention to appreciate insiders’ understandings” (Marion & Crowder 2013: 34), processes which may be achieved through the inclusion of visual media. Interpretation is thus inherent within illustration, the image’s meanings resonating subjectively depending on the viewer. Many of the images are therefore not merely research data, they may also be photographs of someone’s deity, friend, temple, husband, wife, devotee, temple, priest, possession and so forth. The manifold perspectives of an

image's subject invest them with the power to elicit reactions not only from readers, but from interlocutors during fieldwork, thus rendering the visual image a research tool. Taking on differing significance dependent on time, place and viewer during the ethnographic process, the images and reactions to the images may variously provide unexpected insights, inspirations for further research, the formulation of new research questions, data on which to base interview questions, and legitimization in the eyes of interviewees. I have signposted these processes in the ethnography through creative captioning allowing the reader insights into my own speculations when first reviewing the photographs.

Douglas Harper (2001), in *Changing Works: visions of a lost agriculture*, similarly employed captioning to extend the meaning of his images. Inspired by Bateson and Mead's (1942) Balinese character, he argued that this transforms images into statements, "Visual phrases that elaborate verbal arguments" (Harper 2003: 262) and thus, while illustrating an ethnography, become distinct from mere illustration. Harper (2003) argues that researchers may support subtle arguments by linking their theoretical arguments with the composition of their images, and with this in mind, I have employed the visual essay to bring attention to a fascinating, seldom explored and rapidly changing religious landscape to literally illustrate the theoretical concern of the paper, namely, the value of visual media throughout the ethnographic and analytical process in the study of ritual culture.

To this end, I have employed an experimental approach to captioning not only to prompt the reader to question their own understandings of the ritual landscape, but to illustrate the far subtler analytical processes that occur in the field as visual clues ordinarily lost in the blink of an eye are preserved and revisited in the processes of editing, selecting, and reviewing visual media, often revealing peripheral information causing research in tangential yet interlinked directions. The effect of examining images in this manner is a reflexivity based on an expanding understanding of the micro-clues within the ritual landscape based on unspoken nuances and visual cues, micro-clues prompting self-probing questions such as 'why does this fascinate me' and 'what am I not understanding here'? Reflecting on one's answers, I have found, reveals previously yet researched prospective actors and ritual spaces to investigate, and prompts interview questions framed that otherwise would have remained unvoiced.

For instance, image seven 'Opening the eyes – dominating the spirit' led me to question the perceived legitimizing agency of the priest versus the *tang-ki*, as well as the power relations between deities and devotees in this religious culture. Why, for

instance, was the priest performing this ritual when the deity Jigong was also present through his *tang-ki*? It may be speculated that the participation of the orthodox priest provided a veneer of official recognition to a temple constructed in an industrial space, or that I, the researcher, perceived deific efficacy being overridden by state sponsored Taoism as a legitimizing factor. Curiosity piqued, I asked the statue's owner who explained that he had requested the priest, as this made the ritual 'more official'. Official, officialdom, state sponsorship, state control, nation state, nationalism – a religious landscape where state sanctioning and intervention have become the norm to "Ensure that nationalism and nationhood are intrinsic values woven into cultural and community discourse" (Gomes 2009: 37), and a prompt to further investigate the effects of legislation on the ritual landscape. But what of spiritual domination? For me, the 'opening eyes' ritual raises cosmological issues concerning the limitations of a deity's omnipotence and begs the questions of what prevents a deity from entering their statue without human intervention, and why, in the absence of a willing *tang-ki*, is the deity spirit perceived to need a stylized portal to enter the human world (*images 1, 1 and 24*). More perplexing still, why a deity spirit enjoying the benefits of Heaven want to reside in an immobile statue, unless, once called, they had no choice. The historian Valerie Hansen noted that "People and gods were mutually dependent. As men needed protection and miracles, deities needed people to acknowledge and reward them" (Hansen 1987: 53), but image 8, '*The gods who never say "no"*' suggests that while a religious cosmology has evolved around deity's ability to intervene in human affairs, it has also provisioned humans the power of control over them (Hansen 1990, Chan 2012), especially so in ritual.

Stressing the centrality and complexity of social meaning that can be read from material objects, and reflecting my own interest in artefact oriented anthropology, eight of the images contain no actors, illustrating that social inferences may be drawn from the inclusion or composition of material objects in ritual. In several of the images, while social actors are in the frame, they play in linguistic terms the 'passive voice' in relation to the material objects they come into contact with. For instance, the status of rice can be guessed at from image twenty-two as Di Ya Pek blesses each sack before its distribution to the poor. Where the rice is for the dead as in images image twenty-four and twenty-five, the key benefactors are the ancestors for whom the food is meant. In both images, the bowls of rice contain the largest and highest number of incense sticks, incense being a medium of communication between the living and post-mortal realms. If among the Ifa diviners of Cuba, 'powder is power' (Holbraad 2007), and among the Pongo of Cameroon 'corn is man' (Haggard 1915),

then among the southern Chinese it could be said that ‘rice’, a product traditionally associated with basic survival in a rural society, ‘is life’. While the anthropology of food is not strictly on my research menu, these images led to further research into the symbolism and homonyms associated with ritual food offerings, and the photographs provided invaluable prompts in later interviews.

### Giving something back: The tactical and analytical value of fieldwork photography

Returning to image five “*Trust me! I’ve got it covered!*”, when interviewing the priest, the *tang-ki*, and the deity Jigong as channelled through his medium, it was used as a prompt to explore interpersonal relationships, relative cosmologies and practical social hierarchies. In context of Singapore’s highly regulated and monitored religious landscape, such topics may be awkward to broach. However, as the psychologist Albert Mehrabian (1968) has suggested, up to 55% of a verbal message’s impact is received by a listener in a non-verbal mode. When the entire message is conveyed in a non-verbal mode, a sideways glance, a smile and the relative proximity of actors becomes all telling, and while joking about the image itself, this was reflected in the openness of the interviewees when discussing these topics. Similarly, *Image 12: Temple hierarchies and the creation of ritual space* provided visual cues for multiple lines of questioning. Why was the *tang-ki* following the priest and the priest not following the deity as channelled through his medium? How do religious hierarchies differ in and out of ritual, and between different kinds of rituals? What was the purpose of the flags belonging to the Generals of the Five Directions, and how do they conduct efficacy when not wielded by a religious specialist? Who were the bystanders in blue, what was their purpose, and how does their presence relate to inter-temple networking? Why was this ritual taking place outside the temple in a car park, and how to explain the relationship between the material objects and the sacralisation of an external sacred ritual space?

In many cases then, the principles of image selection were based on significant moments revealing details that may otherwise have been missed, as well as to record chronologically the main ritual events. Captured in the background of *Image 20: The next generation*, is a very small girl wearing the temple’s black and green ‘drummers’ uniform holding a disproportionately large camera that belongs to the tem-

ple. It speaks of trust and shared responsibility, of all-inclusiveness, and illustrates the necessity of self-perpetuation through participation in a religious landscape overshadowed by the consumerist secular meritocracy that Singapore has become. There is an intimacy in the inclusiveness which is well illustrated in *Image 22: Deity – human relations. Understanding the interrelationships between actors in rituals* that words alone fail to convey. Beyond raising questions concerning traditional morality and spirituality, the description of Di Ya Pek dedicating the evening to drinking with temple members cannot encapsulate the closeness and affection that exists between the deity and temple members, nor the casual nature of deity-devotee relationships.

These photographs were also taken with the intention of ‘giving something back’, a reciprocity discussed in *Doing visual ethnography* (Pink 2013) where the author acknowledges the ethical need to give something back to those who have collaborated with a researcher’s project. Presenting this as an ethical dilemma of inequalities that is exploitative from the outset, she suggests that “By focusing on collaboration and the idea of creating something together, agency becomes shared between the researcher and participant. Rather than the researcher being the active party who both extracts data and gives something else back, in this model, both researcher and participant invest in, and are rewarded by, the project” (Pink 2013: 65). While in complete agreement as an ideal equilibrium to aim for, this kind of collaboration may not be in accordance with the agenda of those researched. In researching spirit possession in ritual, short of becoming a *tang-ki* oneself – a feat I attempted on two occasions, the researcher, at least in a comparative sense, is never and can never be an equally involved or active party. The *tang-ki* is deity incarnate, and the authority invested in a Taoist priest through ritual knowledge neither be compensated for by academic authority nor noble intent. In lieu of this level of creative ritual collaboration, reciprocity is nonetheless appreciated as the researcher can be, in a transitory fashion, an active member of the community researched. Therefore, at the closing banquet, I presented a bound album of the week’s events to the temple as a keepsake, and distributed several hundred of the most characterful portraits to appreciative temple members.



## Conclusion

Photography is inherent to my own fieldwork, first in documenting the subtleties, the unexpected and the inexplicable in rituals, and then as a tool to elicit information in interviews, through editing and selection, as a valuable means of reciprocity in the field, and lastly to run with a field-work methodology of following efficacy through material objects to focus on the heart of each ritual. While this paper is not an artefact oriented anthropology, the camera lens focussed my attention on the movement of efficacy through material objects in ritual, thus highlighting the essence of the vernacular belief system, without which, the material culture built up around the cosmology would crumble.

Returning then to kinesics, proxemics and reflexivity - decoding, as shown, is a multi-layered process, which, while dependent of context, time, knowledge and individual, provides a further model for analysis beyond the written word. It is a form of analytical translation that sublimates the disjunction of visual from written data, the academic legitimization of which will allow visual, social cultural anthropologists to maximise the potential of visual data in a step towards a total documentation of any subject researched.

Almost half a century ago, Margaret Mead aired her concerns regarding the preservation of disappearing traditions through visual data. "We must, I believe, clearly and unequivocally recognize that because these are disappearing types of behaviour, we need to preserve them in forms that not only will permit the descendants to repossess their cultural heritage (and, indeed, will permit present generations to incorporate it into their emerging styles), but that will also give our understanding of human history and human potentialities a reliable, reproducible, realizable corpus" (Mead 1973 in Hockings 2003: 8-9). Whilst in the digital era there are a plethora of online visual resources, where photographs, videos and streamed media of live ritual events are proliferated on social media, it is unfortunately the nature of the same social media to be fickle - last week's events seldom revisited and soon becoming yesterday's news. Thankfully, the same is not true of academic publications which may referenced by scholars for generations.

Singapore has been, and is continuing to go through successive decades of government engineered social change rendering Charles Stewart's poignant observation that "culture is not a coherent structure which is successfully transmitted across generations, but rather the outcome, at any particular moment, of historical and social processes" (Stewart 2004: 274) especially applicable to vernacular religion in Sin-

gapore. Processes of religious change have been occurring in the past half-century with increasing rapidity to keep pace with an acceleration in consumerism, modernity and urban renewal. Due to the pace of religious development, I would suggest that the concept of ‘transmitting culture across generations’ is more applicable to orthodox traditions, but in the vernacular *tang-ki* tradition, processes of change and adaptation that may take generations in another location or era, have happened in Singapore’s wider religious landscape in approximately two decades. The appearance of Underworld deity cults, temples constructed in industrial spaces and temple networks based on ambiguous social relationships between *tang-ki* are recent developments which may, in reaction to Singapore’s rapidly changing socio-political environment, be superseded by new cults sporting a fresh take on material culture and ritual space. Even in the seven years that I have been researching at the Temple of Mysterious Virtue, I have noticed many changes, not only in the invention of new rituals and additional deities channelled through the *tang-ki*, but even within the re-enactment of rituals performed in previous years.

While written analyses of ritual events and social relationships can stand the test of time, the material reality experienced by the actors becomes lost in time without images to document and preserve situation specific elements of the ritual culture. Reproducing such visual data in academia needs, I argue, to be increasingly encouraged within the anthropological community to address Margaret Mead’s lament on disappearing traditions and the lack of visual media as complete documentation when she asked “Why? What went wrong?” (Mead 1973 in Hockings 2003: 5).

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## Chinese and Hokkien

(M) Indicates a word origin is Mandarin.

(H) Indicates a word origin is Hokkien.

Bagua (M) – 八卦

Bue (H) – 筊

Chao Du (M) – 超渡

Chenghuang (M) – 城隍

Datuk Gong (M) – 拿督公

Di Ya Pek (H) – 二爷伯

Dizangwang Pusa (M) – 地藏王菩萨

Eight Taoist Immortals – (M) – 八仙

Er Lang Shen (M) – 二郎神

Gai yun qian (M) – 改运钱

Generals of the Five Directions – (M) – 五方大将 Wu Fang Dajiang

Guan mao (M) – 官帽

Guan Yin (M) – 观音

Guiren (M) – 贵人

Jade Emperor – (M) – 玉皇

Jigong (M) – 济公

Kui Xing (M) – 魁星

Lei Gong (M) – 雷公

Lin Fu Wang Ye (M) – 林府王爷

Ling (M) – 灵

Lord of the Southern Dipper – (M) – Nandou Xinzun 南斗星君

Lord of the Northern Dipper – (M) – Beidou Xinzun 北斗星君

Marshal Kang (M) – 康元帅

Nezha (M) – 哪吒  
Orh leng (H) – 黑令  
Ping'an (M) – 平安  
Qi (M) – 气  
Qilin Caishen (M) – 麒麟财神  
Qiao Qian Jiangjun (M) – 桥迁将军  
Sai Ya Pek (H) – 三爷伯  
San Taizi (M) – 三太子  
Shancai Tongzi (M) – 善才童子  
Tang-ki (H) – 童乩  
Tua Ya Pek (H) – 大爷伯  
Tiefu Yuanshuai (M) – 铁斧元帅  
Tudi Gong (M) – 土地公  
Xuantian Shangdi (M) – 玄天上帝  
Wu Lu Caishen (M) – 五路财神  
Wu Dan Zhou (M) – 吴丹洲  
Zhao Gong Ming (M) - 赵公明  
Zhengyi (M) – 正一  
Zhongtan Yuanshuai (M) - 中坛元帅

