



新加坡国立大学中文系

Department of Chinese Studies, NUS

The Lim Chong Yah and Distinguished Leaders in Asian Studies (DLAS) Seminar

by

Professor Kenneth Dean

Department of East Asian Studies, McGill University

Lim Chong Yah Professor, Department of Chinese Studies and ARI, NUS

Ritual Revolutions: Tracing Transnational Trust Networks from The Inscriptions of Singapore's Chinese Temples

Chair : Associate Professor Robbie Goh
(Vice Dean, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences)
Date : 12 August 2011, Friday
Time : 2.00 pm - 4.00 pm
Venue : LT12

Abstract

The inscriptions on stone, wood, and metal found in Singapore's Chinese temples reveal a complex range of transnational interactions that have evolved over time. Early inscriptions record the establishment within Singapore of separate dialect-based enclaves organized around temples, native place associations and surname group halls. These institutions were centered on the worship of gods whose incense had been carried to Singapore. Multiple "division of incense" networks emanating from founding temples of local god cults based in the distinct dialect/culture regions of Southeast China can be traced in the first fifty years of Singapore history. Many of these networks already had connections to other parts of Southeast Asia, especially Malacca. These inter-Southeast Asian networks proliferated during the late 19th century, even as new institutional forms were developed locally to link multiple networks together. Although revolutionary concerns and the rise of commercial networks led the way in the first half of the 20th century, transnational networks based on shared native-place, shared god cults, and shared beliefs and rituals contributed to a paradoxical pattern of increasing localization within expanding globalization. The establishment of the Peoples' Republic and the attacks on local religion as a basis for local autonomy had profound repercussions on the transnational temple networks. Many new temples were established in Singapore during the 1950s and 60s, committed to preserving the worship of gods whose fate within China seemed perilous. However, this was also the period of the establishment of the independent Singapore state, and the implementation of the Master Plan of urban planning, leading to the establishment of the HDBs. Land-use pressures resulted in the widespread forced movement of temples around Singapore, a process that continues to the present day. The rise of the United Chinese Temple is one result of these processes. Many factors led to census results showing a rapid drop in self-proclaimed commitment to "Taoist" beliefs (and institutions?). The reversal of CCP policy on religious freedom in China in the 1980s created a new opening, to which many Overseas Chinese active within temple networks responded. Many temples re-established their ties with founding temples in Southeast China, providing vital economic assistance to rebuild these sacred sites and to revitalize the networks involved. Considerable ritual knowledge as well as ritual innovation was passed back (and eventually forth) within these networks. This lecture explores the question of whether these renewed flows within long established temple networks provide local temples and their communities with additional relevance and meaning. The underlying question concerns the role of rituals dedicated to local gods within transnational networks. To what extent are these ritual forms potential vectors of change, and arenas for the negotiation of the forces of modernity?

About the speaker



Prof. Kenneth Dean is Lim Chong Yah Professor in the Department of Chinese Studies and ARI at NUS. He is James McGill Professor and Drs. Richard Charles and Esther Yewpick Lee Chair of Chinese Cultural Studies in the Department of East Asian Studies of McGill University. Prof. Dean is the author of several books on Daoism and Chinese popular religion, including *Ritual Alliances of the Putian Plains: Vol. 1: Historical Introduction to the Return of the Gods, Vol. 2: A survey of village temples and ritual activities*, Leiden: Brill, 2010 (with Zheng Zhenman); *Epigraphical Materials on the History of Religion in Fujian: The Quanzhou region*, 3 vols., Fuzhou: 2004 (with Zheng Zhenman); *Lord of the Three in One: The spread of a cult in Southeast China*, Princeton: 1998; *Epigraphical Materials on the History of Religion in Fujian: The Xinghua region*; Fuzhou 1995 (with Zheng Zhenman); *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*, Princeton 1993; and *First and Last Emperors: The Absolute State and the Body of the Despot* (with Brian Massumi), Autonomedia, New York. 1992. He recently directed *Bored in Heaven: a film about ritual sensation* (2010), an 80 minute documentary film on ritual celebrations around Chinese New Years in Putian, Fujian, China. His current research concerns transnational trust and temple networks linking Singapore Chinese temples to Southeast China and Southeast Asia. As part of this project, he is conducting a survey of 800 Chinese temples in Singapore. He plans to publish a collection of stone inscriptions from these temples with NUS Press next year.

~~ All are welcome ! ~~