Ancestor Power: Marriage Rituals of a Hakka Community in Sarawak, Malaysia

Elena Gregoria CHAI Chin Fern*

Abstract

This paper discusses marriage rituals in a Hakka community in a resettlement village in Sarawak, Malaysia. Modernity has changed the lifestyles of the villagers. They have access to improved infrastructure, greater exposure to the mass media, higher education attainment and increased social mobility especially amongst the young people working outside the village. Despite the social changes due to modernization, marriage rituals have remained traditional in form.

The study will examine the reasons behind the continuance of such rituals and my hypothesis is that the villagers still uphold a worldview that marriage does not only involve themselves (the living), but also the supernatural beings in the other world (their dead ancestors). The legitimacy of the union in marriage is acknowledged after the blessings of the ancestors have been sought. Although on the surface, ancestor worship is an expression obligation, they actually connote the eternal alliance between the dead and the living. As suggested by Turner (1974: 57), ritual does not act just as “social glue” that holds the community together or put social order into place. I thus examine further the symbolic representation of ancestor worship in marriage rituals. I use the term “emulating process” to describe how the future is moulded to gratify the past because one will become a past in the future. It is performed to ensure that the family lineage is carried on, as has been past down by their ancestors.

Key words: ancestor worship, marriage rituals, Hakka.

Introduction

Ancestor worship forms part of the culture that has been practised in Chinese societies and has been one of the central institutions of the Chinese regardless of time and space. Although a common form of ritual among ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, ancestor worship is a neglected area of research and often regarded as a simple continuation of the Chinese system (Clarke, 2000:273). Practised in many ceremonies by different dialect groups, the significance of ancestor worship has never been clearly understood and deciphered.

* Dr. Elena Gregoria CHAI Chin Fern is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University Malaysia Sarawak. E-mail: gelena@fss.unimas.my
This study relates the role of ancestor worship in marriage rites so as to put it in a better perspective. The Chinese are more familiar with ancestor worship as it is practised during major traditional ceremonies connected with the departed such as Ching Ming (Tomb Sweeping) Festival and the Hungry Ghosts Festival. Ancestor worship and its relevance to felicitous occasions such as marriage is recognized but hardly given serious thought, let alone studied. By means of a study on a Hakka community and their marriage rituals conducted in a small village-town in Sarawak, known as Tabidu¹ in the paper, the purpose is to investigate the reasons behind the incorporation of ancestor worship into marriage rituals and the significance and importance of the practice to the wellbeing of the bride and her family as well as the community as a whole.

The Village Setting

The Hakka people of Tabidu were resettled in this village during the 1960s under a campaign to contain communist threats known as Operation Hammer. Historically, communism was a national security problem and groups of Chinese settlers were blamed for propagating such movements. Hence, they were re-located into centralized settlements, one of them being Tabidu, where the people live in an enclosed setting, although movements were not entirely prohibited (Porritt, 2001: 43). The threats were eventually overcome in the 1980s. Being vegetable farmers and livestock keepers, the people of Tabidu have since become the main pioneers of large-scale vegetable farming in the Kuching-Samarahan Division. The community of Hakka embraces a syncretic “Chinese religion” which incorporates elements of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism as well as ancestor worship (Tong and Kong, 2000: 41).

In 2006, the population of Tabidu was around 2,500 people living in 485 households (DSS, 2007). Families of Hakka origin account for about 97 per cent of the population. Most of the males and females in the 18 to 45 age groups, probably numbering 1,200, have moved out of the village to work in Singapore, Brunei, Kuala Lumpur or in foreign countries.² Wherever they may be, they maintain a strong identity of their village of origin as most would return to Tabidu after working abroad and to perform important events of their life such as marriage.

How the people who originated here identify Tabidu as their home may be traced to their common upbringing in a close community. Close relationships were developed in the past because of various factors. They were once exposed to the risks of communist insurgency during which everyone came under the watchful eyes of the authorities. They had remained united to counter the bad publicity associated with them as well as the threats of the insurgents. These threats having been removed, many among the younger generation have left to work overseas. Their parents continue to live in the village while their wandering sons
strive to save up before returning to the village to try their luck in small businesses. Most have found foreign places of work to be lacking in the social environment. Life in Singapore, for instance, one of the preferred places of work, is seen as stressful, where the people are less than friendly and overly materialistic, and where the cost of living is excessive. It is a place only to earn money and to maintain in constant contact with their families in the village. They work among many whom they have known since their childhood and some were relatives and neighbours. This clustering is the result of the diffusion of information on employment prospects by word of mouth from early batches of workers from the village. The scenario is different in other cities such as Kuching where the services from work agencies rather than inter-personal relationships and acquaintances are relied upon.

Where conditions permit, these sojourners return to Tabidu at least once a year during the Chinese New Year, which is the first day of the lunar calendar year during which the atmosphere in the village turns lively. Families are reunited on the eve of the new year, to gather at the reunion dinner. Additionally, many may make another trip home during the Ching Ming Festival. This is a day of obligation to pay respects to departed ancestors, and is a family matter taken seriously as a form of filial piety and a day of remembrance for the departed.

**A Local Definition of Ancestors**

Freedman (1957:71) mentioned that two persons of the same surname from one localized lineage in China can be assumed to have a common descent that could be traced if genealogical records were available. These ancient ancestors can be defined as those who continued the lineage through the generations and who could be traced through the lineage registry book called zu pu (族谱). At the apex of the lineage is a recognized founding father. The village residents remember the more recent ancestors who were buried in the local cemetery and pay their respect to them during major festive occasions. Ancestor “worship” is performed on Ching Ming Festival to pay their respect to the dead, and on the Hungry Ghost period on the Seventh Moon to pay respect to wandering ghosts. On both occasions, prayers are offered at the cemetery where deceased family members are buried. The local cemetery, situated 4km from the village, was established before Tabidu village came into being in 1963. It is learned that the oldest grave dates back 150 years.

Freedman (1970:166) stated that in principle, domestic ancestor worship works on a cycle in which the youngest living generation offers prayers to their ancestors four generations before. This practice is consistent with the Chinese abstraction that the core of agnatic kinship is formed by those related within the patrilineal system of “five mourning grades” or Wu Fu