

# Genesis of the Xian Shiye Cult in Malaysia

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## Abstract

This is a study of the genesis of a local Chinese religious cult in Malaysia. The Xian Shiye cult arose from the veneration of Sheng Ming Li, a Chinese leader in early Sungei Ujong. Based on the myths about the birth, death and related incidents as well as the historical facts about the person, the deification process began almost immediately after he was killed in 1861. Tracing the formation and diffusion of the cult thus provides an opportunity for research on Chinese folk religion in the local context. This study will examine the Xian Shiye cult in the context of the tradition of Chinese religious practices. After a brief mention of the nature of Chinese beliefs, attention will focus on the life of Sheng Ming Li in China and Sungei Ujong. The mythological and cultural bases of deification are next discussed, followed by an examination of the diffusion of the cult and a conclusion on its cultural significance.

**Key words:** Xian Shiye cult, deification, Chinese folk beliefs

## Introduction

In the world of beliefs and religions, those of the Chinese people defy simple definition. In the early population censuses of Malaya, census supervisors failed to devise a breakdown of the beliefs of the Chinese in the same manner as they did with Christianity. The Chinese were classified as Christians, Muslims, and followers of “Other Religions”. A.M. Pountney, superintendent of the 1911 census of the Federated Malay States, famously wrote that, while most of the Chinese mentioned “Confucianism” in the entry for religion, “the only worship which could, however, be properly entitled the national religion of China is ‘ancestral worship’” (Pountney, 1911: 57). Yet the religious beliefs of the Chinese go beyond the worship of ancestors which is a domestic ritual performed in individual households and confined only to family and clan members.

Nevertheless, to study the beliefs of the Chinese is like venturing into a fuzzy territory

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of “religious persuasions and forms of worship ... that are of a nature essentially different from the beliefs to which the term religion is commonly applied in western parlance, and there are no generally understood specific names for these persuasions” (Vlieland, 1932: 87). Other than adherence to Islam, Christianity or atheism, the majority of the Chinese believe in Buddhism, Taoism, ancestral worship, and folk beliefs, or in an eclectic form that features elements from these beliefs.

The Chinese have traditionally practised different religious cults. Each of these has its own set of practices and beliefs adhered to by followers in the worship of essentially local deities. These deities may be historical figures, elements of the natural environment, and other objects real or imaginary. Religious cults share certain characteristics. There is often an element of the “magical” which defies logical explanation, such as the special circumstances surrounding the births, deaths or the lives and services of certain persons. These are looked upon as out of the ordinary or have been beneficial to the people and thus inspire awe and reverence. Whether superstitious or pragmatic, the Chinese would rather believe in these miraculous phenomena than to deny their existence. The rationale is that one does not lose anything in believing these phenomena but may pay a price for rejecting their existence. The rise of a cult may be spontaneous and prompted by a desire to remember one or more acknowledged community or folk “heroes”. This is the case of the cult of Xian Shiye in Peninsular Malaysia which began with the deification of a Chinese leader during the pioneering period a century and a half ago.

This study attempts to decipher the genesis of the Xian Shiye (仙师爷 or Sage Counsellor) cult that emerged among Chinese immigrants in certain Malay States from the 1860s. Its central figure of worship is Sheng Ming Li (盛明利, 1823-1861, hereafter referred to as Sheng) who was consecrated as Xian Shiye. Sheng was a Hakka from Huizhou (惠州 or Fui Chiu in Hakka) and had migrated initially, to Melaka in 1851, and soon after to Sungei Ujong which now forms part of the state of Negeri Sembilan.<sup>1</sup> He emerged as the leader of the Chinese community and was made a Chinese Capitan but met a violent death in 1861. He became a figure for veneration almost immediately upon his death and was consecrated in a temple dedicated to his worship.

The worship of Xian Shiye has become a part of the “mythology” of the Chinese community in Malaysia. Mythologies are about the deeds of gods (龚鹏程/Gong Pengcheng, 1983). All fictional depictions may be defined as mythology and it is not necessarily based on the ancient past. A story or part of it that encapsulates some elements of the human or superhuman spirit may constitute a mythology. Like their ancient counterparts, contemporary societies too have created their own mythologies. Indeed, societies of all ages have not only invented their own mythologies but also altered them to emphasize specific meanings and significance. Seen in this context, the term “mythology” is compatible with the birth of the myths surrounding historical figures in the local context.

We will examine the events and rationale that led to the consecration of the person as an

icon for public worship especially by the Hakkas. Following a brief account of the nature of Chinese beliefs, the events of Sheng's birth and death that bear witness to his "extraordinary" qualities will be examined. This is followed by a discussion on the deification process with special reference to mythological and cultural considerations. A review of the diffusion of the Xian Shiye temples takes up the next section, followed by some remarks on the cultural significance of the cult.

### **The Nature of Chinese Beliefs**

The Chinese people keep an open mind in what and who they worship. The ancient *Book of Rites* describes in detail religious ceremonies during which sacrifices were offered to Heaven, the Earth, the Sun, the Moon, the seasons, the mountains and forests, and all natural phenomena that were regarded as living spirits (姜义华/Jiang Yi Hua, 2001: 636). The insignificance of humans and the power of nature gave rise to the realization that man and nature were inseparable. Their link with all that surrounded them was through a system of veneration and beliefs. With time, these beliefs extended to the worship of leaders of tribes and groups who were seen to have contributed significantly to the benefit of the people. The early forms of worship developed into a belief system comprising a large number of gods and deities of diverse origins. The worship was performed for various purposes: to honour and remember past leaders and heroes, to maintain continuity with the past, to seek protection and spiritual fulfillment and many others.

The Chinese are pantheistic and tend to create their own deities and gods. According to the *Book of Rites*, sacrifices were offered to those who deserved such honour. These were persons who had given good laws to the people, laboured to the death in the discharge of their duties, strengthened the state by their toil, boldly and successfully met great calamities, and who had warded off great evils (姜义华/Jiang Yi Hua, 2001: 640). With the birth of Taoism and other indigenous beliefs as well as the introduction of Buddhism, the early forms of worship eventually evolved into an eclectic system of beliefs comprising deities from Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religions that encompass the world of spirits, guardian and domestic gods, folk heroes, ancestors, wealth and many more.

The pantheon of Chinese gods and deities was transplanted overseas by immigrants who began to settle in parts of Southeast Asia and else where beginning from the late eighteenth century. The combination of different beliefs, some tracing their roots in antiquity, has endured to constitute what may be known today as folk or household religion practised both in temples and at home. The Chinese in Malaysia have also inherited the tradition of ancestral worship when they left their villages in south China.

Religion answers the many needs of the worshippers. In a study to uncover the reasons behind religious practices Clarence B. Day (1947), in a field study in Zhejiang province in southeast China between 1924 and 1940, revealed different values that sustained the devotion

of the worshippers. These values that were looked upon as beneficial to the worshippers and their families fall into six categories. These are the protection of life and property; adjusting to the forces of the natural environment; peace and harmony of family life; attainment of success in life; salvation of the soul; and the accumulation of merits and virtue for a place in heaven in the afterlife. These values summarize the general benefits that devotees hope to attain in their religious worship both in traditional Chinese society and particularly among those who migrated and settled down in foreign territories.

As in their ancestral villages in China, the emerging Chinese communities in Malaya kept alive the cultural fetish for religious syncretism. They practised a system of worship comprising deities from China and new ones brought into existence locally. The deities were installed in temples for which the Chinese spared no efforts in erecting wherever they have settled down to make a living (see Purcell, 1965). A few local deities were created based on the exploits and memories of historical figures of Chinese pioneers who personified admirable qualities and whose worship could bring forth blessings and spiritual protection. At the same time, also incorporated into the pantheon of deities were the local tutelary guardians of territorial affairs.

Today, a host of Chinese religious cults have appeared in Malaysia and each has its own set of faithful, often overlapping, congregations of followers. Many Chinese worship common gods such as Guan Ying or the Goddess of Mercy or Kuandi (关帝 or Emperor Kuan) to whom many traders pay homage as the epitome of loyalty and righteousness.<sup>2</sup> Different crafts and trade tend to have their own patron gods, and the major dialect groups have their own deities and cult practices introduced from China. The pantheon of the Hokkiens consists of 12 individual or multiple deities including such popular ones as Mazu (妈祖), the Cantonese pay homage to five sets of deities, the Hakkas four, the Teochews three, and the Hainanese four, of which the most celebrated is Tian Hou (天后) (see 石沧金/ Shi Cangjin, 2014: 175-231).

Migrant Chinese communities were ingenious in adding new deities to those transplanted from their ancestral villages. The practice of elevating individual persons to the status of a deity with specific titles was common in the pioneering period of Chinese settlement overseas. The deification of historical figures is a common mode adopted by local Chinese communities to preserve the collective memory of their life in the new environment as well as for subsequent transmission down the generations. Among the earliest to be deified was Admiral Zheng He who made seven voyages to the “South Seas” in the early fifteenth century. The worship of Zheng He began in 1795 with the establishment of the Poh San temple (宝山亭) in Melaka. This was followed by the San Poh temple in Kuching 1873, and subsequently in Terengganu and Penang (see Kong, 2000; 苏庆华/Soo Khin Wah, 2004). That Zheng He became a venerated deity was partly the result of the mythology that arose from the “marvels of romance” surrounding his performance of miracles to save his countrymen from the perils of their travels in unknown lands (Purcell, 1965: 39).

The deification of local figures was not uncommon among pioneer communities. Among

the more popularly known deities include the Da Bogong (大伯公 or Tuk/Toh Pekong in Hokkien). Early Chinese settlers in other parts of Southeast Asia showed a similar tendency to deify their departed leaders. In West Kalimantan, Lo Fong-Pak, the founder of the Langfang Kongsí, was worshipped after his death in 1793 as a “protective deity”. The people in the Kongsí believed that their welfare depended on his protection and he was worshipped as a show of respect. He was worshipped on feast days and the anniversaries of his birth and death.

The earliest one was in Penang, reputed to be dedicated to the worship of the three Chinese who lived in the island in the 1740s. The temple, erected in 1799 by the local Chinese community, was to commemorate their pioneering spirit (黄尧/Huang Yao, 1966: 42). Not much is known of the lives of the trio and the erection of a temple in their memory was more in keeping with the urge for a deity to ensure protection from diseases and dangers in the humid tropics.

The Da Bogong may have evolved from the tutelary deity or Tudi Shen (土地神) of China, known locally as Datuk Pekong (拿督伯公) or simply Datuk Kong (拿督公). “Pekong” is a Chinese kinship term for “grand uncle” whereas the Malay word “Datoh” or “Toh” is an honorific for a respected elder and has the same sound as “big” or “grand” in Chinese. Thus, to christen this early deity as “Datuk Pekong” or simply “Tuk Pekong” was a sign of the localization of beliefs in keeping with the popular worship of the local “territorial” deity. However, the “Tuk Pekong” may symbolize the pioneering spirit in general rather than the deification of a particular person (Purcell, 1965: 39).

In Sabah, the Hakka community of Sabah has its own Da Bogong temples. The first was built in Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu) in 1912, and rebuilt in Putatan in 1987. Two more were established in Tawau in 1952 and Tenom in 1953 (张德来/Zhang Delai, 2002: 146-147). In Sarawak there are 65 Da Bogong temples distributed throughout the state (吴诗兴/Ngu See Hing, 2014: 122-123). The term is also used by the Dutch for any Chinese deity or spiritual being (see T’ien, 1997: 173).

More recent in time and much nearer by is the worship of Xian Shiye. The narrative is rather different from those of other deities, not least because of its recent origin. The diffusion of the belief in this deity is the product of early and contemporary Chinese society in the Malay States in their need for spiritual fulfilment and the perpetuation of a collective memory of a pioneer and community leader. The genesis of the Xian Shiye story is supported by extant records and documentary evidence in the forms of the personal belongings of Sheng, his descendants and their recorded oral history, his tomb as well as the decision to establish the Xian Shiye Temple. Consequently, tracing the process by which Sheng was deified poses few difficulties and presents an excellent case study in the manner in which a historical figure was transformed into a permanent icon of worship from the 1860s.

## **The Life of Sheng Ming Li**

Sheng Ming Li was also known as Shin Kap and Shin On (Letessier, 1893: 535; Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 15). He was born in 1823 in Huizhou county, Guangdong province, and died in 1861 at the age of 38. He spent the first 28 years of his life in Huizhou and later in Xin'an county (新安县) and the last ten in Sungei Ujong in the Malay Peninsula.

### **Life in China**

According to popular belief, Sheng attended a traditional village school at the age of seven and was known for his intelligence and as a child prodigy much admired by his classmates and teachers. At age 15, he took up martial arts and studied ethics and history. He soon earned a reputation as a young man who excelled in learning and the martial arts and was looked upon as a role model in the village.

In the dying days of the Qing dynasty, China was plagued by massive corruption and bureaucratic incompetence. Internal instability and rampant banditry were compounded by the incursion of various Western powers keen on carving out their respective spheres of influence in China. The ravages of banditry were so alarming that the Sheng family migrated and settled down in Xin'an. While this shift sheltered the family from banditry, it also ended Sheng's education. He was then forced to work as an apprentice in a trading company and thus embarked on a career in business.

By 1851, Sheng had accumulated more than ten years of experience in the world of commerce. Being ambitious, he saw little future working as a hired hand. He therefore resolved to migrate to Southeast Asia, then popularly known as "Nanyang" to the Chinese, to try his luck. On 1 August of the same year, he boarded a junk and sailed to Melaka.

### **Life in Sungei Ujong**

Upon his arrival in Melaka, he was soon blessed with an encounter with Chen Yu Fa, a well-known local businessman and proprietor of Hong Fa Company. Chen found Sheng a humble and talented young man and hired him as an assistant manager. He was entrusted with responsibilities to manage the employer's grocery and tin-trading businesses. With his prior knowledge and experience in business, he helped to open up many business opportunities for his employer.

Renowned for its rich tin resources, the Malay Peninsula in the nineteenth century was touted as the right place to invest in mining as a quick path to wealth. Hong Fa Company was then engaged in the purchase, transport and trade in tin but not in mining itself. In the days of primitive river transport, the conveyance of tin ore was time-consuming and yielded meager profits compared with those derived from mining. In order to reap profits at source, Chen Yu Fa decided to embark on his own mining venture. He then dispatched Sheng to Sungei Ujong, now forming the greater part of Negeri Sembilan, to establish an enterprise called Ming Fa Company to engage in tin mining. The enterprise prospered under Sheng's astute guidance



and leadership. It was at this time that Yap Ah Loy (叶亚来, 1837-1885, hereafter known as Ah Loy), a fresh arrival from the tin mining district of Lukut, was introduced to him. Ah Loy was a Hakka from Huizhou district of Guangdong and Sheng's junior by 14 years. He was to emerge later as a leading pioneer and one of the founding fathers of modern Kuala Lumpur.

Sheng quickly built up a reputation for his entrepreneurial flair. Known as a person of upright moral character, he also won the admiration of other ethnic groups. He was described as an exceedingly brave and outstanding leader and was respectfully referred to as a "Capitan" by the local Chinese community and whose contributions were also appropriately acknowledged by the authorities. The term "Capitan" was a title conferred on the leader of the Chinese and charged with duties to deal with certain affairs of the community (Letessier, 1893; Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 15; 温故知/Wen Gu Zhi, 1988: 31).<sup>3</sup>

Tin mining in the Malay Peninsula has a long history and tin was reported as an item of commerce from the ninth century (Sadka, 1968: 18). By 1790, the Dutch noticed that the Chinese were the principal miners in Perak and Selangor (Wong, 1965: 17). About 400 Chinese were engaged in tin mining and trading in Perak in the nineteenth century and there were 200 Chinese working under a "China Captain" in the Lukut mines in 1815 (Anderson, 1824: 187 and 202). The discovery of rich tin deposits in the Larut district of northern Perak in the 1840s attracted large inflows of Chinese.

It was the thriving tin industry that induced the massive influx of Chinese immigrants to Malaya from the 1850s. The industry soon emerged as the economic lifeline of Malaya. It was also a time when all mining proprietors and operators, whether Chinese or Malays, had to rely on their followers to defend their rights and interests. Intense competition for mining rights often gave rise to disputes and conflicts that led to bloodshed and loss of life. One of the earliest incidents of such conflicts took place in Sungei Ujong in early 1860 between two local Malay chiefs over the ownership of the tin produced by the Chinese miners and on the rights to collect taxes. The Chinese were divided into two groups to back their respective Malay chiefs. Sheng and his largely Huizhou Hakka followers supported the Datoh Klana. One of Sheng's *panglima* (head fighter) was Liu Ngim Kong, another Huizhou Hakka, and who used to extend his hospitality to Ah Loy during his visits to Sungei Ujong from Lukut. Ah Loy later became Liu Ngim Kong's assistant panglima in the Sungei Ujong clashes (Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 15).

In the fighting that broke out in 1860, Sheng's group was defeated on 26 August. Outnumbered by his adversaries, Sheng was separated from his men and escaped into the forest. He was subsequently found and killed by his enemies. Ah Loy was injured but managed to retreat to Lukut where he was saved by some local residents. Upon hearing the bad news of the demise of Sheng, Ah Loy led the victim's wife and son and a retinue to the site to recover his body. They then escorted the body to Melaka for burial. As Sheng's head was severed and could not be traced, a wooden head was made instead, as mandated by tradition, before burying him in Bukit Simuka outside Melaka town (Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 15; 温

故知/Wen Gu Zhi, 1988: 263-264). The inscription on Sheng's tombstone indicated that he had a son and two daughters. His son made his way to Mantin where he lived in disguise as an ox-cart handler to raise a family. His descendants of six generations have since remained in this small town.

### Deification of Sheng Ming Li

Knowledge of the episodes of Sheng's life and death, his leadership and moral strength has become part of the convenient wisdom of the Xian Shiye cult and meticulously recorded in official temple publications (see 吉隆坡仙四师爷庙/Kuala Lumpur Xian Si Shiye Temple, 2009). Events leading to the death of Sheng seemed to have satisfied the traditional conditions that justify the offer of sacrifices. Sheng died as the leader and Capitan of the Chinese community of largely Hakka miners. Although they were then worshipping deities introduced from their ancestral villages, they still harboured a sense of insecurity and spiritual void. The worship of the Capitan would plug this void as he was their leader and who had mediated the community's disputes, fought for their rights, and spoke up for the interests the community. He had sacrificed his life in the service to his community. The "divine" manifestations of his spirit inspired a general belief that it had the power to communicate with local deities and to assure a sense of security of the community.

Two elements constitute the core cultural dynamics that motivate the Chinese in Sungei Ujong and Selangor to initiate a process that eventually led to the crystallization of facts and fiction concerning the life of an individual into an icon of worship. These consist of the supernatural and cultural. The cultural element refers to the need for social cohesion and religious belief in keeping with the desire of early immigrant Chinese communities.

Sheng Ming Li was probably the first to be deified by the Chinese community in the Malay States. The deification process was rather unique in its intention and construction and was initiated almost immediately upon his death in 1861. Christened Xian Shiye, Sheng was conferred a religious status that was more revered than that of a Tuk Pekong. But like the Tuk Pekong, the deification of Sheng was another model in the localization of religious beliefs constructed from actual and mythical episodes of his life.

According to an 1893 account, the remains of Sheng that were buried in the Melaka cemetery "were revered on days set apart by custom". The worship of Sheng thus began in Melaka itself:

"Now it happened that at one of these ceremonies the dead man's spirit entered into a man and spoke with his mouth, saying that he ought no longer to be called 'Captain' but Si Sen Ta (from Sen wise, and Si four or fourth, and Ta a title of honour, while Sen Ta if applied in a spirit corresponds to the Malay world *Kramat*) for that the Thai Sen Ta (the great *Kramat*) had invited him to share his glory" (Lestessier, 1893: 535).



The 1893 account further stated that:

“After the miraculous manifestation of the spirit of Captain Shin On incense was burnt in his honour in the pagodas, the new god was adored under the name of Sen Ta” (Lestessier, 1893: 536).

The term “Sen Ta” is obviously a reference to *Xian* (仙). The concept of xian is based on the ancient belief in *Shen Xian* (神仙). They are believed to be “apotheosized genii or ‘immortal’ spirits who have left the earth for the Three Islands of the Blessed --- the Taoist paradise” (Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 22). This belief is derived from Taoist cults and has become part of Chinese mythology. The Shen Xian are attributed with superhuman powers and capable of busting evil forces. From the temple in Melaka had come reports that testified to the “extraordinary power of this deified Captain”. Such were the powers of the “Captain” that:

“During the time of the war he was constantly consulted, and his answers were always found to be true, both as regards his prophesies and the counsels which he gave, and it was he who in a dream revived the courage of Yap Ah Loi during the rebellion of the Ka Tu In. Sick people who follow his prescriptions are almost always cured, traders who invoke him make their fortune, gamblers will not risk the fruit of their toil without having invoked him, and even abandoned women come to ask good luck from this great spirit” (Letessier, 1893: 536).

It is probably because of the deity’s power in dispensing counsels and advice to satisfy the prayers and demands of different worshippers for different purposes that it is worshipped as a Shiye (师爷) or counsellor and empowered as a xian. This could most probably be the reason for the deity to be christened Xian Shiye.

## **The Mythological Basis of Deification**

### ***Sheng Ming Li’s Birth and Death***

The myths surrounding Sheng’s birth and death were probably frequently enriched in contents to enhance the sense of awe in the deification of the person. Traditionally, the deification of mortals was followed, rather than preceded by, attempts to embellish their lives with extraordinary attributes. Hence, to garb the lives and deeds of great men in mystical terms was a way of winning over the hearts of followers.

Among the defining symbolisms that added to the “godliness” of the deceased were signs interpreted to be good omens at the time of birth or death and that were interpreted as bringing blessings and prosperity to the people. Popular accounts of Sheng’s birth often referred to an auspicious brightness radiating from his ancestral house for several nights (温故知/Wen Gu Zhi, 1988: 206). The villagers saw this as the birth of an extraordinary person who would bring prosperity to the village. On his death, Sheng had oozed out blood

that was white rather than red in colour (Letessier, 1893: 535). It was also reported that the body was wrapped in a dazzling brightness that sent his assailants scuttling in fear.

In traditional parlance, the connotation of an “auspicious light” is generally associated with the birth of great men. Chinese legends are rich in tales relating to the mythical births of extraordinary persons. Examples include the births of Hou Ji (后稷), the God of Agriculture and the ancestor of the people of the Zhou kingdom, and emperors such as Gaozu and Taizu, the respective founders of the Han and Song dynasties (王孝廉/Wang Xiao Lian, 2006: 28). Although these tales cannot withstand logical explanation and might have been amended down the generations, it is nevertheless a pattern that is frequently repeated throughout the ages. Sheng’s birth and death were seen to accord with miraculous signs and omens associated with the lives of great men in Chinese history and to justify his elevation to the stature of a deity. It is through this form of myth creation that provides the framework to mount the spirit of Sheng on the altar of a “Xian” as a benevolent deity.

### ***The Apparition***

Another element in the myth surrounding the death of Sheng was the manifestation of his apparition. It is believed that Sheng was killed in a place called Rahang, a pioneer settlement situated outside the capital of Sungei Ujong in present day Seremban. Tales of sightings of Sheng’s apparition soon circulated among the people of this village.

A documented source referred to the sighting of the apparition of Sheng on two occasions in 1861. A farmer’s son had witnessed the apparition of an old man plucking peas in the farm that was situated outside what is now Seremban town. This incident was repeated the following day. Convinced that the old man was hiding nearby, the farmer cleared away the bushes for a better view of his farm. It was then that he tumbled upon a stone tablet upon which were inscribed some faint but recognizable characters. It suddenly dawned upon him that the apparition was the manifestation of Xian Shiye. He thereupon moved the stone tablet to a temple called Qian Gu Miao (千古庙) in Rahang so that its spirit could be worshipped by all (温故知/Wen Gu Zhi, 1988: 32-33).

Although the report did not explain clearly the writing on the stone tablet, it did allude to a Xian Shiye whose powers were derived from a “living” (生) spirit. The character “living” could have been mistakenly written for “new” (新). Hence, in 1861 when Sheng met his death, to look upon the stone tablet for Xian Shiye as a “new” deity accords with logic. It is generally understood that the Qian Gu Miao was devoted to the worship of homeless spirits of Chinese who had lost their lives in a foreign land (温故知/Wen Gu Zhi, 1988: 32-33).

### ***Yap Ah Loy’s Dreams***

The name of Yap Ah Loy is intimately associated with that of Sheng who was his erstwhile benefactor and mentor. When the rival groups in the Sungei Ujong conflict resolved their differences and restored peace, the vacant Chinese Capitan position was

filled by Yap Ah Shak, the erstwhile follower of Sheng and a leading trader and gambling revenue farmer. He acted in this capacity temporarily and felt that Ah Loy, who was still in Lukut, was the better man for the position. Ah Loy was thus appointed the new Capitan. Meanwhile, Liu Ngim Kong had migrated to Kuala Lumpur in 1861, where tin mining was transforming the town into a fast-emerging economic centre of Selangor. There he became the head fighter of Hiu Siew, the earliest trader to arrive at the mining settlement and who later became the first Capitan China of Kuala Lumpur. Upon Hiu Siew's death, Liu Ngim Kong took over the Capitancy. He in turn sent for Ah Loy who gave up the Capitancy of Sungei Ujong and left for the greater promise of Kuala Lumpur in 1862. As the able lieutenant of Liu Ngim Kong as well as on his own, Ah Loy prospered and by 1868, succeeded Liu as the Capitan China.<sup>4</sup> His early years in Kuala Lumpur was a baptism of fire as he was thrown into the midst of the Selangor civil war that raged between 1867 and 1873, and emerged subsequently as the leading spirit in the development of Kuala Lumpur (see Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983; Gullick, 1998).

The reported appearance of Sheng, already deified as Xian Shiye, in Ah Loy's dreams was in connection with the civil war in Selangor. The dreams related to warnings to Ah Loy of impending attacks. He then prepared his counter-offensive and made offerings to Xian Shiye for protection. His army succeeded in scuttling his enemies. When he learned of a counter-attack, he beat a hasty retreat to base to seek the counsel of Xian Shiye. Again in his dream, Ah Loy was instructed to exorcize the sorcery of his enemies by means of the blood of black dogs. He then launched an immediate attack by his joss-stick carrying troop and succeeded in subduing the enemies. Much was attributed to the power of Xian Shiye in his wise counsel on war to Ah Loy who eventually succeeded in restoring order in Kuala Lumpur (温故知/Wen Gu Zhi, 1988: 208-209).

That it was Ah Loy who dreamed of Sheng would appear more creditable than anyone else. Ah Loy was then the leader of the Chinese community in Kuala Lumpur and the commander of a major faction in the civil war. The counsel of the Xian Shiye in matters of war would be a psychological boost to the morale of Ah Loy's army. Ah Loy's final victory confirmed the omnipotence of Xian Shiye and served to popularize the belief in the deity.

### **The Cultural Basis of Deification**

The emergence of Xian Shiye worship was more than prompted by real and strange events. It was the collective response of a community to a common cultural behaviour of worshipping the worthy and to forge social cohesion.

In south China, the Hakkas were late-comers and looked upon as "guest people". Encroaching into the densely-settled areas of Guangdong and Fujian provinces where arable land was scarce, their presence was resisted by local inhabitants. The history of Hakka migration is an epic encounter with hardships and toils in hostile environments as they eked out a living in the narrow valleys of mountains and streams. Consequently, this

had moulded a Hakka consciousness of community cohesion to defend against external threats. They lived in clustered groups and developed a natural instinct for mutual help and self-identity in the face of adversity (曾逸昌/Zeng Yichang, 2003: 27).

In the unopened territories of Sungei Ujong and Selangor in the mid-nineteenth century, small clusters of Hakkas had to co-exist not only with local Malay settlers but also among themselves. Whether in Sungei Ujong, the Kuala Lumpur area in Selangor or the Larut area of Perak, it was the Hakkas who pioneered the development of tin mining and turned it into a revenue-spinning enterprise (see Wong, 1965). But power struggle among Malay chiefs and rival Hakka groups were rife. Large-scale inter-group clashes had ensued at immense costs to life and property and social stability. The need for social cohesion in the formative stage of the male-dominated Chinese community in these territories was an urgent prerequisite to stable development. Over and above the social structure that was built on secret societies and the “institution” of the Chinese Capitan, the need for spiritual fulfillment was a foremost consideration. For the Huizhou Hakkas in particular, the extraordinary tales about Sheng after his death made him into a ready candidate for common reverence. To consolidate the social cohesion of the Hakkas, the erection of temples dedicated to the worship of Xian Shiye was a natural development to promote group consciousness and solidarity among the incipient community struggling to survive in an alien environment. Given the fact that Sheng was a Huizhou Hakka, it was this community, labouring under the harsh conditions of the mines, that identified with this cult. The temple could act as a symbol of social solidarity that nurtured a shared dialect identity.

The account of Letessier (1893: 536) mentions that a certain Tu Lien introduced the worship of “Sen Ta” into Kuala Lumpur and a temple was raised by the exertions of Ah Loy. The town was then inhabited largely by Hakka tin miners. The earliest mines had opened a few years earlier in 1857 and the export of tin was first made only in 1859 (Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 18). It was in 1864 that Ah Loy carried part of Sheng’s ashes from the Qian Gu temple in Seremban to consecrate the new Xian Shiye Temple in Kuala Lumpur. Ah Loy obviously performed this solemn ceremony knowing full well of its social significance. As the leader of the Huizhou Hakkas and Hai Shan Society (海山会), both of which counted Sheng as a member, he desired to glorify the veneration of Sheng in an attempt to strengthen the position of the Hai Shan society and the unity of the Hakkas.

Ah Loy and his Hakka compatriots appealed to dialect affinity and consciousness in the attempt to glorify the worship of Sheng as Xian Shiye. This was the most direct and effective means to promote the unity and power of the Hakka immigrants to safeguard their lives and properties and to commit themselves to the development of the new settlement. From the perspective of the Huizhou Hakkas and Hai Shan Society, Sheng was seen as an epitome of moral uprightness and righteousness that were held in high esteem and which further justified the cultural *raison d’état* and the social impact of the deification process.

The temple was sited in what is now the busy downtown centre of Kuala Lumpur and the first to be built in the settlement. After peace was restored in Kuala Lumpur, the temple was rebuilt in 1875 under the supervision of Ah Loy and has since become an iconic symbol of the city's Chinese community. It was then that the name of the new temple was amended to read Xian Si Shiye Temple (仙四师爷宫).

Another cultural ingredient in the deification of Sheng was the community need for religious practice and spiritual contentment. Like other immigrant communities from China, the Hakkas in early Sungei Ujong and Selangor faced a life of hard work and frugal living in an unfamiliar territory. Mainly male dominated, the majority of the early immigrants had to combat the drudgery of loneliness and spiritual emptiness. These depressing thoughts were keenly felt especially at times of illness and setbacks. The need for domestic comfort and spiritual fulfillment as essential props to overcome the spiritual void would call for formal places of worship.

### **Diffusion of Xian Shiye Worship**

From its original Qian Gu Temple in Seremban, the worship of Xian Shiye has spread to many other localities across five states. There are now up to 24 temples in which Xian Shiye is worshipped, generally together with Si Shiye and other related deities. Diffusion of the cult was a reflection of the tradition of worshipping men who were seen to have the power to confer benefits to the community. The founding of temples was in itself a highly esteemed act that would be rewarded by the blessings of the deities. It would also win the praise of the community and would bring honour to the founder(s) (李业霖/Lee Yip Lim, 1997: 148).

Half a century after the death of Sheng in 1861, 17 temples were established in various towns in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Melaka, and Pahang, with another seven for which the date of establishment has yet to be confirmed. Although known under a variety of names, their core deity is Xian Shiye. During this period, nine temples, the original one in Rasah, seven in Selangor (Kuala Lumpur, established in 1869; Sikamat, 1869; Rawang, 1869; Semenyih, 1880; Sungei Tekali, Ulu Langat, 1890; Serendah, 1897; and Kalumpang, 1902) and one in Seremban (Sikamat, 1869) were christened Xian Si Shiye Temple; four as Xian Shiye Temple (Kajang, 1870; Sungai Besi, 1901; Mentakab; and Parit Jawa, 1872); four were identified with the character “three” (三), two associated with the name of Shiye (Kuala Pilah and Pertang), one with that of “blessed sage” (Titi, 1892), and the fourth with “multiple sages” (Seremban). Two other temples were known as Guangfu (广福宫) (Cheng, 1890; Bentong, 1902), one each called Si Xian Tang (泗仙堂) (Ulu Klang), Tian De Gong (天德宫) (Melaka, 1884), and the Stone Datuk Temple (石拿督庙) (Broga, 1904). In the case of Bentong, the deities were installed in the pre-existing Guangfu temple (see 吉隆坡仙四师爷庙/Kuala Lumpur Xian Si Shiye Temple, 2009: 76).

Xian Si Shiye is the collective term for Xian Shiye and Si Shiye (四师爷). However, another Shiye called San Shiye (the Third Counsellor) is also worshipped in three of these temples. The identity of Si Shiye or the Fourth Counsellor has since become a matter of dispute. One source refers to Zhong Lai (钟来), reputedly the advisor of Yap Ah Loy (温故知/Wen Gu Zhi, 1988: 14). This is also acknowledged in a publication of the Kuala Lumpur Xian Si Shiye Temple (see 吉隆坡仙四师爷庙/Kuala Lumpur Xian Si Shiye Temple, 2009: 96-97). Little is known of Zhong Lai except that he was a trusted friend of Ah Loy and had lost his life during the Selangor civil war. A source (李业霖/Lee Yip Lim, 1997) argues that it was unlikely that Zhong Lai be elevated as the equal of Sheng. He was a subordinate of Ah Loy and, having been killed before peace was restored in Kuala Lumpur, there was nothing of the aura of greatness in him to deserve elevation to become a deity. Instead, Lee argues the case for Ah Sze (亚四) as the real identity of Si Shiye. Ah Sze's real name was Yap Ah Si (叶亚四), the character *si* indicating his status as the fourth child of the family. He and Hiu Siew were the first traders to arrive in Kuala Lumpur in anticipation of business prospects in the budding mining settlement in nearby Ampang. They were joint owners of a mine in Lukut and had come in response to the suggestion of Sutan Puasa, the Mandeling trader in Ampang, to whom they had supplied goods. As Kuala Lumpur grew, Hiu Siew was made its first Capitan China. It was he who had sent for Liu Ngim Kong in 1861 to become his head panglima and who assumed the Capitancy after Hiu Siew's death a few months later (Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 19-20). Yap Ah Si expanded his business to Kanching just north of Kuala Lumpur and became the first miner in the locality. He soon became a man of great influence and reportedly the wealthiest trader in Selangor. Before Liu Ngim Kong passed away, Yap Ah Si was offered but declined the Capitancy and recommended Ah Loy instead (Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 27-28). It is clear that this was a breakthrough for Ah Loy and he owed it to the munificence of Yap Ah Si for his elevation to the leadership of the Chinese community. Hence when Yap Ah Si was murdered in 1869 by Ah Loy's adversaries as he attempted to leave Kanching, Ah Loy was bent on avenging his death (Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 34-35). In 1881, Ah Loy presented to the Xian Si Shiye temple a plaque which recorded the gratitude from "follower/pupil Yap De Loi", De Loi being the formal name of Ah Loy. As Zhong Lai was Ah Loy's subordinate, this plaque could only be meant for his mentor Yap Ah Si (李业霖/Lee Yip Lim, 1997: 152).

Apart from Xian Si Shiye, other deities also feature in a secondary role. These include Kuan Yin the Goddess of Mercy, Huang Lao Xian Shi (黄老仙师), Tan Gong Xian Sheng (谭公仙圣), the Stone Datuk and others. In the Kuala Lumpur temple, the central hall consists of three sections. The central altar is devoted to Xian Shiye, the left altar to that of Si Shiye Yap Sze, and the right altar to Emperor Huaguang (华光大帝), Tan Gongye (谭公爷) and, since 1938, that of Yap Ah Loy himself (石沧金/Shi Cangjin, 2014: 233).

Based on the field study of Lee Kim Sin, 24 Shiye temples have been identified in the



states of Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of Xian Si Shiye Temples in Peninsular Malaysia, 2014

No.	Name of Temple	Year	Location	Deities Worshipped
1*	Qian Gu Temple (千古庙)	1861	Seremban (Rasah), Negeri Sembilan	Si Shiye and Goddess of Mercy Kuan Yin
2*	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	1864	Kuala Lumpur (formerly in Selangor)	Xian Si Shiye and Xian San Shiye
3*	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	1869	Seremban, Sikamat, Negeri Sembilan (formerly Sungei Ujong)	Si Shiye
4*	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	1869	Rawang, Ulu Selangor, Selangor	Xian Shiye
5*	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	1870	Kajang, Ulu Langat, Selangor (originally located in Rekoh, shifted to Kajang in 1875 and rebuilt in 1897)	Xian Si Shiye and San Shiye
6	Shiye Temple (师爷宫)	1872	Parit Jawa, Muar, Johor	Si Shiye
7*	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	1880	Semenyih, Ulu Langat, Selangor	Xian Si Shiye and San Shiye
8	Tian De Temple (天德宫)	1884	Melaka (Hang Jebat Road)	Xian Shiye and Zhu Sheng Goddess (注生娘娘)
9*	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	1890	Sungei Tekali, Ulu Langat, Selangor	Shifted from Bukit Arang, Hulu Langat
10*	Guang Fu Temple or He Sheng Temple (广福庙/和胜宫)	1890	Cheng, Melaka	Si Shiye, Huang Lao Xian Shi (黄老仙师), Tan Gong Xian Sheng (谭公仙圣) <sup>5</sup>
11	Fu Sheng Temple (福圣宫)	1892	Titi, Negeri Sembilan	Si Shiye, Xian Shiye, and the birthday of deities on the 3 <sup>rd</sup> day of 7 <sup>th</sup> Moon
12*	Yue Shan Old Temple (岳山古庙)	1895	Kuala Kubu Baru, Ulu Selangor, Selangor	Xian Shiye
13*	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	1896	Serendah, Ulu Selangor, Selangor	Xian Si Shiye
14	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	1901	Sungei Besi, Kuala Lumpur	Shifted from the Serdang area, Hulu Langat district

No.	Name of Temple	Year	Location	Deities Worshipped
15*	Long Bang Old Temple (龙邦古庙)	1902	Kalumpang, Ulu Selangor, Selangor	Xian Shiye
16*	Guang Fu Temple (广福宫)	1902	Bentong, Pahang (temple first erected in 1880)	Xian Shiye
17	Stone Datuk Temple (石拿督庙)	1904	Broga, Negeri Sembilan	Xian Shiye and Stone Datuk
18	Lie Sheng Temple (列圣宫)	1897	Seremban (Tham Yam Road), Negeri Sembilan	San Shiye, Si Shiye, Tan Gong, and another deity
19	Three Sages Temple (三圣宫)	Na	Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan	Si Shiye and temple founder Loke Yew
20	Xian Shiye Temple (仙师爷宫)	Na	Mentakab, Pahang	Xian Shiye
21	San Shiye Temple (三师爷宫)	Na	Seremban (Tham Yam Road), Negeri Sembilan	Pending investigation to confirm authenticity of temple
22	San Duo Temple (三多庙)	Na	Melaka	Stone tablet of temple identifies a list of donors from Lukut including Sheng Ming Li
23	Si Xian Chamber (泗仙堂)	Na	Hulu Klang, Kuala Lumpur	Xian Si Shiye
24	Three Sages Temple (三圣宫)	Na	Pertang, Negeri Sembilan	Pending investigation to confirm authenticity of temple

\* List of 12 commonly known Xian Shiye temples

Sources: 温故知/Wen Gu Zhi, 1988; Lee Kim Sin (field investigations 2014)

Of the 12 commonly known Xian Shiye temples, all except one located in Melaka are found in heavily Hakka-settled localities. Not surprisingly, the temples are clustered in the inland districts of Selangor rather than in Negeri Sembilan where Sheng left his mark and met his death. The temple in Kuala Lumpur became the religious centre of the town and an annual procession was held during the festival of the Shiye. Substantial sums were lavished on the procession and attracted widespread support when participating clan organizations competed to make contributions to demonstrate their wealth (Middlebrook and Gullick, 1983: 22). In 1893, the procession took an hour and a half to pass the Selangor Club (Gullick, 2007: 538).

Temples are also found in Melaka, Muar (Johor) and Bentong (Pahang). Although

tin mining has faded from the scene, the Hakka communities have remained. In Melaka, the origin of the temple is most probably associated with the fact that it was the base from which Sheng began to carve out his career. One of the temples in Melaka and that in Bentong bear a similar name of “Guang Fu” to serve the dialect communities from the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian.

The temple in Bentong was reportedly established in 1880 as a crude thatch structure and rebuilt between 1891 and 1898. Bentong was then accessible only from across the mountainous backbone from Selangor. When the township was struck by an epidemic in 1901, Loke Yew “invited” the spirits from the Xian Si Shiye Temple of Kuala Lumpur and installed them in the temple to whom an instant congregation of believers offered their prayers. The spirits were “entertained” with traditional Chinese opera performance. The appeased deity seemed to have subdued the deadly epidemic. In a mark of gratitude, Loke Yew took the lead to rebuild the temple (see 陆兆邦, not dated: 63-64). Loke Yew was one of the richest tin miners in the Malay States and had obtained a concession for mining in the district in 1895. He had also partnered the colonial government to construct the path from Tras to Bentong. Through his mining and other business enterprises in Bentong, he was very much identified with the founding and development of the town.

Field investigations by Lee Kim Sin have confirmed that tucked away in many other places are possibly another 12 temples devoted to or associated with the worship of Xian Shiye. Located in Parit Jawa in the district of Muar, Johor, is an old temple from 1872 devoted to the worship of Si Shiye. In the old and busy Chinese quarters of Melaka is the Tian De Temple, established in 1884, for the worship of Xian Shiye and a goddess. In the village of Titi in inland Negeri Sembilan and a settlement pioneered by the Hakka from the 1890s (see Siaw, 1983), the Fu Sheng Temple was erected in 1892 for the worship of Xian Shiye. Kuala Lumpur boasts of a second Shiye Temple besides the early one sited in the city centre. This temple was built in 1901 in Sungei Besi just outside the city to replace an earlier temple that was sited farther south in the Serdang township. There are five other Shiye temples of uncertain age. Two of these are located in Seremban, and one each in Kuala Pilah (Negeri Sembilan), Melaka and Mentakab (Pahang).

Today, most of these temples are well-supervised and maintained by their respective management committees. The temple in Kuala Lumpur is under the good care of a board of trustees comprising representatives from major dialect groups. The Huizhou Hakka and Cantonese communities are represented with three appointees each, while the Hakka sub-groups of Dapu and Jiaying as well as the Hokkien, Teochew, Kwangsai, and Hainanese communities by one each (see 吉隆坡仙四师爷庙/Kuala Lumpur Xian Si Shiye Temple, 2009: 84).

### Cultural Significance of the Xian Shiye Cult

There are numerous Chinese religious cults in Malaysia. Those that are indigenous to Malaysia are few in number. Other than the Da Bogong cult for the worship deities specific to local areas, that of Xian Shiye seems impressive for its comparatively large number of temples dispersed in the towns of several states. They were often the first temple to be founded in the towns that were emerging during the initial phase of pioneer development. The Xian Shiye often served as the guardian deity of the towns and the earliest source of by which settlers sought spiritual solace and a sense of belonging.

From its initial association with the Hakkas, the cult has gained adherents from all dialect groups and is looked upon as a Chinese cultural heritage. They form an important element in the mosaic of Chinese folk religions that in turn enriches the diversity of Malaysian culture. The temples are centres where worship and religious rituals are performed on festive days or on the birthdays of the various residential deities.

The cultural significance of the cult is due in no small way to the fact that the temple perpetuates the memory of the first Chinese Capitan in Sungei Ujong and therefore provides a historical link to the early days of pioneering of their forefathers. Each temple bears a record of the history of the settlement of the local Chinese inhabitants. Recorded history is an essential element in ethnic identity. The Chinese community has laboured in recent years to assemble historical documents to testify to their efforts and contributions to development. The Xian Shiye cult is thus more than a belief system but also a symbol of the Chinese partnership in the nation-building process (see Voon, 2007 and 2008; 文平强/Voon Phin Keong, 许德发/Khor Teik Huat, 2009).

Today these century-old temples are historical monuments in their own right. They often occupy busy downtown locations and display distinctly traditional Chinese temple architectural styles. The history of these temples is older or co-extensive with that of the towns where they are found. While many old commercial structures have vanished from the landscape, these temples have withstood the test of time to serve as a witness to the pioneering spirit of the founding of the towns. Significantly, as religious structures and the shared heritage of the community, the temples will continue as cultural fortresses in the midst of relentless modernization. At the same time, some managements have acquired landed properties to create sources of income in support of their temples as well as to serve society. The Kuala Lumpur temple lists 17 commercial addresses under its ownership in the city centre (see 吉隆坡仙四师爷庙/Kuala Lumpur Xian Si Shiye Temple, 2009: 122-123).

It is realized that the historical, religious and architectural wealth of these temples may also enrich the tourism resources of the country. The Xian Shiye temples, together with other religious institutions, are places of attraction for both local and foreign visitors. Efforts to publicize and basic write-ups about these temples will add further to their

potentials as attractive tourist sites. A walking tour map of Kuala Lumpur now features the temple as a cultural site.

The managements of the major Xian Shiye temples have not taken the existence of the cult for granted. They have marched with the times and have infused new roles for the temples. One of these roles relates to the support of education and charitable organizations. Between 1967 and 2009, the Kuala Lumpur temple has offered 6,018 scholarships worth RM6.2 million, of which the four independent Chinese secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur received 42.7 per cent of the total, the universities 37.9 per cent, and the colleges 15.4 per cent (吉隆坡仙四师爷庙/Kuala Lumpur Xian Si Shiye Temple, 2009: 125). Records of its charitable work date back to 1915 with contributions to schools, hospitals, old folks' homes, relief work and a variety of causes.

### Conclusion

Religion is practised for its comforting power on the mind and spirit. Deeply-ingrained in the daily life of the people, religious worship has indeed become part of the cultural tradition of many Chinese. This tradition would not be undermined by the departure from one's ancestral village. Instead, the urge to preserve it might become even more urgent than before, especially in newly-settled places where appropriate places of worship were absent. This may explain why temples were among the first structures to be put up in these areas.

Chinese communities have been ingenious in the creation of local deities and cults to satisfy their spiritual needs. The primary deities of these cults were posthumous consecration of ordinary historical persons. In view of the vagueness of historical events surrounding such figures, facts and fiction become intertwined over time to spawn myths that eventually lead to eventual veneration. The elevation of Sheng as local Chinese temple god is indeed a reflection of the unique historical background and social circumstances of his time. Although the details pertaining to the myths of Sheng are not as comprehensive as those of other myths, the deification process does provide an excellent case study on folk or household religion. Indeed, the true value of the Xian Shiye cult is its role in the understanding of Malaysian Chinese folk beliefs.

Sheng Ming Li was among the earliest persons to be deified by the Chinese community in Malaya. This process of veneration had begun spontaneously, aided, after Sheng's death, by tales extolling the extraordinary events surrounding his birth and death. In death, too, reports of miracles performed by the spirit of the person would circulate to add support to its potency. All these were viewed in awe and looked upon as the qualities of an extraordinary person. The people would have been particularly receptive of the "xian" attributes of Sheng who had been their Capitan. However, this linkage alone would not be sufficient to explain the deification process. Something special was required to mount this process on a more convincing framework. This was provided by the moral uprightness of Sheng and his love

for others, his strong sense of justice, kindness and generosity as well as his service for the common good. Sacrificing his life in fighting for the interests of his followers won him high praise and admiration.

The role of Yap Ah Loy cannot be under-estimated in the growth and spread of the worship of Xian Shiye. The 1860s was a testing time for the new mining settlement of Kuala Lumpur amidst the gathering “war clouds” stirred up by the rivalry between joint Malay and Chinese factions. As a leading figure among the Chinese, Ah Loy gave full play to the charismatic appeal of Xian Shiye as an inspiration to his followers and compatriots. The Xian Shiye cult had initially answered the religious needs of the fresh community of Chinese miners among the close-knit Huizhou Hakkas who desired protection and blessings to lead a peaceful life in an alien environment.

Chinese cults, unlike formal religions, are belief systems that are devoid of formal membership or initiation rituals. Worshipping is open to all and no formal religious structure has evolved or been imposed. The rise of the Xian Shiye cult conforms to the general path in the genesis and diffusion of the worship of deities whether in China or Malaysia. A person of wide acclaim, and a recognized community, folk “hero” who possessed superior moral values and who had rendered valuable service to the community, would seem to have the appropriate status worthy of public admiration and veneration.

Following the lead of the Sungei Ujong and Kuala Lumpur Hakka communities, emerging communities in many other localities felt similar needs for the worship and protection of Xian Shiye as their territorial deity. The cult soon spread among the local Chinese community as the temples with their primary and secondary deities offered solace and protection and dispense with wise counsel to worshippers. Like other religious cults, the Xian Shiye cult is essentially localized and its diffusion is regional rather than national. Despite its appeal to the Hakka communities, the cult has hardly penetrated into the heavily Hakka-dominated mining areas in the state of Perak.

That the Xian Shiye cult has been able to sustain itself since its birth a century and a half ago testifies to its vigour and viability. Despite its spatial restriction in certain towns in five states and the Federal Territory in Peninsular Malaysia, it bears witness to openness of the Chinese to beliefs that reward them with inner peace and the safety of their families. It is one of many religious cults that has nurtured its own set of faithful followers. The existing 24 temples in which Xian Shiye is the main or secondary deity will ensure that the cult will continue to feature as an important branch of religious beliefs of the Chinese for generations to come.

## Notes

- 1 Sungei Ujong occupied what is now the Seremban district in the state of Negeri Sembilan. It came into prominence with the beginning of tin mining in the late 1850s in the locality of Rasah which later became part of Seremban town. Today, Seremban is still known as



- “Fu Rong” (芙蓉 or Fu Yong in Cantonese) and is transliterated from the word “Ujong”. Fu Rong is the name of the cottonrose hibiscus or the lotus. Sungei Ujong came under British protection in 1874 and became the core of the confederation of Negeri Sembilan.
- 2 Kuandi refers to Kuan Yu (关羽, died 280), the sworn brother of Liu Bei (刘备) and Zhang Fei (张飞) of the Three Kingdoms period (c. 208-280) after the fall of the Han dynasty. Intensely loyal to Liu Bei, who later became the emperor of the Shu Kingdom, Kuan Yu is worshipped for his courage and loyalty, righteousness, uprightness and other moral values.
  - 3 In a note by Charles Letessier in the 16 June 1893 issue of the *Selangor Journal*, it is noted that Datoh Klana Sinding, the Malay Chief of North District of Sungei Ujong, gave Sheng the title of “Capitan” (see Gullick, 2007: 535).
  - 4 An 1893 entry in the *Selangor Journal* contains the following passage (Gullick, 2007: 528):
 

Captain Liu (Ngim Kong), feeling his end was drawing near, thus spoke to the Sultan: “This country will shortly need a headman; if a Captain is not appointed I fear there will be fighting.” The Sultan answered: “Your words are true. I make Ah Si (Yap Sze) Captain.” Ah Si answered: “I cannot accept, Yap Ah Loi is a fit man.” Captain Liu supported this...and Yap Ah Loi was then appointed Captain.
  - 5 Tan Gong (谭公) was a Hakka from Huiyang county of Guangdong province and lived in the Yuan dynasty. He was a Taoist whose religious ideas were derived from the philosophy of Zhuang Zi. After his death, he was worshipped as a local deity by the people in the Huizhou area. In Malaysia, the worship of Tan Gong was introduced by Hakka tin miners and several temples erected in his name, some more than 100 years ago, are seen in villages on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur as well as in Seremban and Ipoh, all former centres of tin mining, and also in Sabah where the Hakka forms the dominant Chinese community. Tan Gong is also worshipped as a secondary deity in various other temples in the country (See 石沧金/Shi Cangjin, 2014: 215).

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