Becoming Local: Datuk Kong beliefs in Sarawak, East Malaysia

Article *in* Indonesia and the Malay World · February 2022

DOI: 10.1080/13639811.2022.2018830

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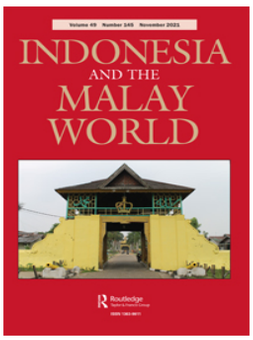

Indonesia and the Malay World

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cimw20

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To cite this article: Elena Gregoria Chai Chin Fern & Monica Janowski (2022): Becoming Local, Indonesia and the Malay World, DOI: 10.1080/13639811.2022.2018830

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2022.2018830

Published online: 04 Feb 2022.

INDONESIA AND THE MALAY WORLD
https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2022.2018830

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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ABSTRACT
Datuk Kong (拿督公) are *shen* (神) – a Chinese term that can be glossed in English as 'deity' or 'spirit' depending on context. They have long been known to be venerated by Chinese in West Malaysia but have not been investigated until now in Sarawak, where they are of increasing importance, or in Kalimantan, where they appear to have been worshipped for much longer. In both West Malaysia and in Borneo Datuk Kong are closely associated with (a) the ethnic groups that were already living in the area before the Chinese arrived and (b) with the local landscape. In this article we explore the ways in which Datuk Kong beliefs have developed in Borneo and how, through the 'respect' (拜) paid to these *shen*, the Chinese have integrated the beliefs that they brought originally from China into a belief system that remains distinctively Chinese but overlaps with the beliefs of ethnic groups with which they co-exist; and embedded this belief system in the local landscape and the spirits inhabiting that landscape.

KEYWORDS
Datuk Kong; Tua Pek Kong; Chinese folk religion; Sarawak; East Malaysia

Introduction

In this article we will present beliefs and practices related to the *shen* (deity/spirit) Datuk Kong (Chinese: 拿督公; Na Tuk Kong[1]) in Sarawak.[2] We relate these to practices and beliefs associated with another *shen*, Tua Pek Kong[3] (大伯公), and also to those related to *shen* Tu Di Kong (拿督公), the soil deity. We argue that these practices and beliefs reflect a process whereby Chinese in Sarawak have responded to the local natural and cosmological environment in a way that has integrated them into that environment.

The material presented here was gathered through fieldwork carried out by one of the authors, Elena Chai. Between 2013 and 2019, Chai carried out fieldwork in Sarawak on Tua Pek Kong temples, including an extensive survey in 2013 (Chai 2014a). Many of these include altars to Datuk Kong. Chai is a Sarawakian Chinese herself and can draw on additional understanding and knowledge based on this. She also carried out fieldwork in West Kalimantan from July to November 2016 as part of a research collaboration with the Beijing Foreign Studies University, with another research visit between

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[1]This is a transliteration of the Mandarin version of the name of this *shen*.
[2]We use the transliteration *Kong* in this article for 公 as this is the one most commonly used in Sarawak. Some publications use the pinyin form, *Gong*.
[3]This is a transliteration of the Hokkien version of the name of this *shen*.

February and April 2017. In Kalimantan she found that there are beliefs and practices associated with *shen* that are parallel to both Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Kong.

Chinese beliefs in Sarawak

The majority of Chinese in Sarawak practice *ming jian xin yang* 民间信仰, which can be glossed as 'folk beliefs' and involves worshipping or praying to *shen* (神). This involves practices referred to as *bai* (拜), which can be glossed as 'paying respect'. *Shen* are spiritual beings that may or may not have once been human.[4] Respect is paid to *shen* in temples that are termed *miao* (廟) *or shen miao* (神廟) ('spirit *miao*'). Although many worshippers at *shen miao* describe themselves as Buddhist,[5] there is a clear distinction between a *miao* or *shen miao* on the one hand and a Buddhist temple on the other, which is called *fuo tang* (佛堂). In a *fuo tang*, Shakyamuni Buddha (释迦牟尼佛) is usually worshipped, together with other Buddhas, such as Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩), also known as Guanyin, a female Buddha referred to in English as the Goddess of Mercy. There are rules and regulations relating to prayers and conduct in a Buddhist temple and it is rare for *shen* to be worshipped.

There are, by contrast, no written or rigid rules governing how one should pray in a *miao*. Devotees learn how to 'pay respect' (*bai*) through observation and guidance from their elders. The usual practice is to *bai* to the God of Heaven (天公) first, before doing so to the other *shen*. Normally, *bai* includes lighting joss sticks, which are waved in front of the *shen*, but it is not uncommon for a devotee to *bai* by simply folding his or her hands together, without presenting joss sticks. The nature of the kneeling and bowing gesture also depends on the devotee. In other words, the act of *bai* in a Chinese *miao* is flexible. Chinese folk religion does not have written prayers, nor are there any rules or guidelines for prayers. A person seeking help from a *shen* will tell the *shen* about herself or himself, with personal details such as his or her name, place of birth, place of residence, and intention. A person who feels like visiting a *miao* can enter in any attire or footwear. He or she can light candles or joss sticks and burn paper money to the *shen* at any time of the day, as long as the *miao* is open. He or she can ask the *shen* for anything – good health, a safe journey, a prosperous business, safe childbirth, a long-lasting marriage, etc. It is usually mundane, everyday requests that are made. If the prayers are answered, the devotee will return to the *miao* to offer gratitude at any time he or she pleases.

Respect is usually paid to more than one *shen* in a *shen miao* in Sarawak. This includes the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy Guanyin, as a subsidiary *shen*. The *shen* that occupies the central position is the main *shen* of the *miao*, and the name of the *miao* usually derives from this *shen*. The altar to this *shen* is in the central position, overlooking the main hall. For example, in Padawan Tua Pek Kong temple[6] the main *shen* is Tua Pek Kong. To the left of Tua Pek Kong is Da Sheng Fuo Zu (大圣佛祖), the Sacred Monkey, and to the

[4]We use the term *shen* to refer to these spiritual beings rather than translating it into English. This is because none of the available terms in English – such as 'deity' or 'spirit' – map fully on to the Chinese concept of *shen*.

[5]In a survey carried out as part of a research project funded by Sino Borneo Chair (UNIMAS) between October 2012 and October 2014, entitled 'Localized Beliefs of Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Kong among the Chinese Community in Sarawak', Chai found that 43.2% of those attending *miao* where the main *shen* venerated was Tua Pek Kong stated that they were Buddhist, and 7.4% saw Buddhism and *bai shen* (拜神), 'paying respect to *shen*', as the same thing.

[6]The official name under which this temple is registered with the World Tua Pek Kong Federation is Kuching Padawan Fook Teck Temple (古晋十哩巴达旺福德庙).

right is Xuan Tian Shang (玄天上帝), the Shen of the North. The number of *shen* depends on the history of the *miao*, and in many instances the number of *shen* has increased over the years. The decision to include a new *shen* is taken by the *miao* committee, after consultation with a spirit medium. There is always an odd number of altars in a *shen miao*.[7]

Datuk Kong (Na Tuk Kong)

Datuk Kong is one of the *shen* to whom respect is paid by Chinese in Sarawak. There are many Datuk Kong, not just one; each is associated with a particular locality. Unlike other *shen*, Datuk Kong have Muslim characteristics. The term Datuk Kong brings together the Malay word *datuk*, meaning 'respected grandfather/older person/leader' and the Chinese word 公, *kong*, meaning 'male of a higher generation/rank'.

In West Malaysia, Datuk Kong are widely respected by Chinese, and historically by Malays too. There have been numerous studies of Datuk Kong beliefs in West Malaysia (see Cheu 1992, 1998; Goh 2005; Chin and Lee 2014; Tan 1983, 2018; Wang et al. 2020). There are Datuk Kong temples in West Malaysia that are hundreds of years old (Wang et al. 2020).

Datuk Kong beliefs and practices in Sarawak have not before been studied and it appears that they are quite recent. Chinese elders told Elena Chai that it is only since the 1980s that respect has been paid to Datuk Kong in Sarawak. Some informants suggested that it was Sarawakian Chinese working in West Malaysia who brought the idea of paying respect to Datuk Kong to Sarawak when they went to work at timber camps there. However, managers at four timber camps in Sarawak interviewed as part of Chai's research in 2016, all of them managing camps that have Datuk Kong altars, denied that this was the case.

In Sarawak, the main context in which Datuk Kong is paid respect is in the context of *miao* where the main *shen* is Tua Pek Kong. They are also paid respect in stand-alone altars located, for example, at the back of shop houses and in timber camps. Some informants suggested that respect was first paid to Datuk Kong in timber camps[8] in remote areas. It seems that when the camps ceased operation the *shen* Datuk Kong were taken to *miao* in town where the main *shen* was Tua Pek Kong. Thus, there is a close association between Datuk Kong and Tua Pek Kong. We will therefore now take a look at Tua Pek Kong temples before returning to Datuk Kong.

Tua Pek Kong in West Malaysia and in Sarawak

Respect is paid to *shen* Tua Pek Kong by the Chinese throughout Malaysia and Indonesia. Tua Pek Kong has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention and there has been much

[7]The Chinese in Sarawak and in general believe that odd numbers are for the spiritual world while even numbers are for the humans.

[8]During fieldwork in January 2016, the author Chai visited four timber logging camps belonging to Samling Timber Corporation in Baram area. Each has a Datuk Kong temple within the camp for which they are responsible. The camp managers were interviewed about the Datuk Kong altars at their camps. None knew much about how the Datuk Kong altars had been erected. However, they did not agree that this is an 'imported' belief from West Malaysia, pointing out that the timber concessions in Sarawak had never been given to West Malaysian companies. Nor were there many workers from the Peninsula, as there were always plenty of local workers available.

speculation as to the nature and origins of this *shen*. Like Datuk Kong, the term Tua Pek Kong incorporates the Chinese term 公, meaning 'male of higher generation/rank', together with 大, meaning 'great' and 伯, meaning 'uncle'. There are many different Tua Pek Kong, each associated with a particular Chinese community. Tua Pek Kong are sometimes said to be significant Chinese leaders from the past. However, they are also associated with the locality in which temples to them are situated, and have jurisdiction over that area. We will return to this point.

According to Huang (1967: 19), the earliest Tua Pek Kong temple in Malaysia was established in the northeast of Penang island, at a place called Tanjung Tokong (海珠屿). The temple there is believed to have been established in 1799, although it may have been there much earlier, since there was a fishing village with Chinese immigrants at that site before Francis Light, the founder of Georgetown on Penang, arrived in 1786. Three Chinese leaders are venerated at this temple: Zhang Li (張理), Qiu Zhao Xiang (丘兆), and Ma Fu Chun (馬福春), all believed to be from the fishing village at that time (ibid.). The Tua Pek Kong in the temple at Tanjung Tokong are known as Zhang Pek Kong (張伯公) or Zhang Tua Pek (張大伯); Qiu Pek Kong (丘伯公); and Ma Pek Kong (馬伯). The story of the Tanjung Tokong Tua Pek Kong is well known and is that most frequently cited by researchers studying Tua Pek Kong in Malaysia.

Including one still under construction in 2021, there are 77 Tua Pek Kong temples in Sarawak (Chai 2014a). Tua Pek Kong occupy a special place in the social history of the Sarawak Chinese. Some Tua Pek Kong are associated with leading gold miners or leaders of Chinese associations (*kongsi*), including a Meizhou Hakka by the name of Luo Fang Bo (羅芳伯) and Liew Shan Phang (劉善邦) from Bau. The latter was a renowned Chinese leader who fought against Rajah Brooke's imposition of taxes and who died in the Bau Rebellion of 1857. However, most Tua Pek Kong in Sarawak are simply known as Tua Pek Kong (Hokkien), Thai Phak Kung (Hakka) or Phak Kung (Hakka), without reference to a specific Chinese leader from the past.

The Chinese came to Sarawak in three main waves, from the late 18th century until the 19th century. The first wave was of Hakka gold miners who fled Dutch rule in West Kalimantan and arrived in Bau and Marup in Sarawak around the 1820s (see Heidhues 2003; Hui 2011). Some of these then moved to nearby areas, where they began to cultivate vegetables and develop land (see also Ward 1954; Tien 1956; Liew 1990). The largest wave of Chinese migration to Sarawak occurred under the second Rajah, Charles Brooke, when the Sadong, Rajang and Baram areas saw an influx of Chinese traders and farmers. The third wave of Chinese migration was of coal miners, who came to Simunjan, the main township on the Sadong River in the mid 1800s (Wallace 1872).

Tua Pek Kong temples dot the banks of every main river in Sarawak and are testament to all of these waves of migration. Many Chinese settled in remote places; as the Brooke Rajahs established peace and order in the huge forested country by curbing piracy and headhunting activities, groups of people from different ethnic groups, especially the Chinese, were encouraged to settle at new frontiers. Tua Pek Kong played an important role in the lives of early Chinese settlers in Sarawak and they continue to be central to Chinese life in Sarawak. In almost every bazaar town in Sarawak there is a Tua Pek Kong temple. These have an important role in bringing together different Chinese language groups. These groups have their own separate temples in many towns, and they pay respect to different central *shen* in their temples. Tua Pek Kong temples,

however, are visited and used by all Chinese, whichever group they belong to. Tua Pek Kong is in some sense a communal ancestor for all Chinese living in a given area.

A Tua Pek Kong temple serves as a place for social gatherings, meetings, and sometimes as a place to settle disputes, by asking Tua Pek Kong to be the judge. In the past these temples were also used as postal addresses for communication purposes. In certain towns, before proper schools were established, they were used as schools. This was the case with the Tua Pek Kong temples in Sibu, Niah and Penakub (Chai 2014b). Many temples also serve as temporary funeral parlours for single people or those who cannot afford a funeral.

Tua Pek Kong: a Chinese *shen* of place

Upon reaching new frontiers in Sarawak, Chinese communities would set up a communal altar for blessing and protection. Many elders told Chai that when the early immigrants reached a new place they erected a simple makeshift altar under a big tree or at a big boulder. The place chosen was usually a location easily viewed and accessed from the place where the community had chosen to build their houses. The *shen* to which respect was paid at such an altar did not have a name, but was simply described as *shen*. The simple altar bore no image and sometimes had only a piece of red paper, sometimes bearing the character 神 (*shen*). If immigrants had brought a censor with them they would put it on the altar. Otherwise they would just place incense sticks on the ground. As life progressed and livelihoods improved, the community would build a bigger and better altar. At this point, or after one or two reconstructions of the former altar, the community would come to a decision to build a temple and at this point they would include another *shen*. This was invariably Tua Pek Kong, who became the focus of the temple. His image was placed on the main altar. The altar to the original *shen* was placed under the main altar and from then on this original *shen* was described as Tu Di Kong (土地公), 'Grandfather Earth'. This deity is also described simply as Tu Shen (土神), 'Earth Shen'.

Tu Di Kong, as the earth *shen*, is a very important *shen* in Chinese belief. Tang Ah Chai (2012), a renowned Malaysian sinologist, has compiled the available literature on both Tua Pek Kong and Tu Di Kong in Malaysia. A variety of other names are also used for Tu Di Kong. These include Wu Fang Wu Tu Long Shen (五方五土龍神), which means 'dragon *shen* of five directions, five lands'; Tu Di Long Shen (土地龍神), which means 'dragon *shen* of land'; Cai Shen Yer (財神爺), which means '*shen* of prosperity'; and Tang Fan Di Zhu Cai Shen Yer (唐番地主財神), which means '*shen* of local prosperity'. The Five Directions (五方) in *feng shui* refers to the four cardinal points of the compass: East (東), South (南), West (西) and North, (北), with the fifth direction being Centre (中). The Five Lands (五土) refers to the five elements in nature: Metal (金), Wood (木), Water (水), Fire (火) and Land or Soil (土). Thus, Tu Di Kong, the Wu Fang Wu Tu Long Shen or 'dragon *shen*', is believed to watch over everything, everywhere. This includes livelihoods and wellbeing in the human world; those who farm, fish, mine or carry out everyday tasks such as cooking are dealing with metal, wood, water, fire and land or soil. It would appear that the earth *shen* is regarded as male; some temples include Tu Di Kong's wife (土地婆).

The relationship between Tua Pek Kong and Tu Di Kong is an intriguing one. Some Tua Pek Kong temples in Sarawak have the characters 福德正神 (Fu De Zheng Shen),

which means 'righteous *shen* of virtue and blessing' and refers to the earth *shen*, Tu Di Kong, inscribed at the temple entrance and at the main altar. This appears to imply a conflation of Tua Pek Kong and Tu Di Kong. Fu De Zheng Shen is regarded as being Tua Pek Kong's alternative, and in some sense 'official' name, and more and more temples in Malaysia are now using this name for Tua Pek Kong.[9] Hsu (1951, 1952) argued that Tua Pek Kong as worshipped in Malaysia is simply Tu Di Kong with a different name. As we have seen, in Tua Pek Kong temples in Sarawak Tua Pek Kong and Tu Di Kong always have separate altars. This could be regarded as reflecting their distinctness from each other; however, the fact that the altar to Tua Pek Kong is above that to Tu Di Kong could also reflect a sense in which Tua Pek Kong is an extension of Tu Di Kong.

Both Tua Pek Kong and Tu Di Kong are associated with the earth and with place. In Sarawak, Tua Pek Kong is regarded as responsible for a wider geographical area than is Tu Di Kong. One informant told Chai that 'Tua Pek Kong is like a Penghulu who takes care of a few areas, while Tu Di Kong is the Kapitan who looks after a particular area.' Tua Pek Kong are sometimes associated, as pointed out above, with a Chinese leader. Tua Pek Kong used to be (Chinese) humans. Tu Di Kong has never been human. One possible way of reading this is that Tua Pek Kong is a human expression of Tu Di Kong.

The notion of 'respect'

We have seen that *shen* are given 'respect' (*bai*). *Bai* is a core virtue among Chinese and is paid both to *shen* and to elders and ancestors. The word *bai* is also coupled with other words: thus, we have *bai fang* (拜访), 'to visit' and *bai jian* (拜见), 'to meet'; and there are many other phrases that include *bai* and imply a sense of respect and humility. The elders whom one must respect are not limited to those related to ego; they include all elders and generic ancestral figures. Respect is also paid to the ancestors during Tomb Sweeping Day, Qing Ming Day (清明节), and at weddings. In the seventh lunar month, respect is also paid to forgotten ancestors who have not received adequate attention and respect from their descendants. During the Hungry Ghost Festival, Zhong Yuan Jie (中元节), communities collect money to conduct mass offerings of food and prayers to the forgotten ancestors. Individual households may also hold a smaller-scale food and prayer offering in their homes.

Fidler (1978: 128) points out, in his seminal work on the Chinese of Kanowit town in Sarawak, based on research conducted in the early 1970s, that the Chinese there do not view the universe as a spiritual bureaucracy, initially created and then organised and operated by a Supreme Being. It is, rather, a constantly changing set of relationships with living and deceased ancestors, in which an individual is embedded, and which he or she has to negotiate. The individual pays respect to all of those who are within that set of relationships.

Thus, respect is paid to *shen* because they are part of the complex (social and well as cosmological) universe in which an individual is embedded. *Shen* are sometimes believed

[9]It seems that the World Tua Pek Kong Federation (世界大伯公節聯誼會) is promoting the use of this name as Tua Pek Kong's 'official' name. More and more temples are undergoing restoration or reconstruction, which also encourages the use of this official name.

to be great heroes or persons who in the past contributed great deeds to the people and on whom the emperors of the ruling kingdom bestowed the title *shen* or *xian*. The Heavenly Emperor or Jade Emperor is also believed to have bestowed the position of *shen* on peasants and officials who sacrificed their lives unselfishly. The great heroes, peasants and officials of the past who have become *shen* are remembered by the living through the gesture of 'respect' (*bai*). It is believed that they will continue to help people as long as requests are submitted with sincere prayers. *Shen* are incorporated into Chinese social structure, as are ancestors of whom the Chinese are proud. Just as it is important to maintain a cordial and respectful relationship with one's ancestors, it is also important to show respect to *shen* who have contributed to the wellbeing of the people.

Each *shen* is believed to possess certain powers, abilities or specialisations. Cui Niang Niang (催生娘娘), often known in English as the 'Goddess of Birth', is prayed to for a smooth and safe childbirth; Wu Gu Xian Shi (五穀仙师), known as the 'Five Grain Deity', for a bountiful harvest; Prince Na Zha (哪吒三太子 Na Zha San Tai Zi) for children to become more well behaved. Datuk Kong is believed to have the power to cure illnesses; and to give lottery numbers.

As we have seen, while a temple is usually dedicated to one main *shen*, there are many other *shen* to whom respect is paid in each Chinese temple. New *shen*, such as Datuk Kong, are easily incorporated into a temple and respect is paid to them. It is always a good idea to pay respect to as many *shen* as possible. The metaphor used by a temple chairman was 'Taking a supplement a day ensures good health. Taking two supplements a day makes for even better health.'

Datuk Kong and Tua Pek Kong

Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Kong are closely associated. While there are stand-alone altars to Datuk Kong set up, for example in logging camps, it is only within temples dedicated to Tua Pek Kong that Datuk Kong is paid respect as a subsidiary *shen*. In research[10] that covered all Tua Pek Kong temples in Sarawak, Chai found that there are Datuk Kong in 35 – in other words, nearly half – of the 77 Tua Pek Kong temples in the state. Of the 35 Tua Pek Kong temples that include Datuk Kong as a *shen*, 24 are found in Kuching Samarahan divisions, four in southern Sarawak and seven in central Sarawak, as shown in Table 1.

Both Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Kong are communal *shen*, who are given respect by all Chinese on the same altars in the same temples. Tua Pek Kong temples are visited by all Chinese, whichever group they belong to. Datuk Kong are only present in Tua Pek Kong temples, and not in temples set up by specific Chinese groups, which are focused on *shen* that are important to those particular groups.[11]

A description of one Tua Pek Kong temple, that in the town of Bau, will give an idea of the development of Tua Pek Kong temples and of the relationship between Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Kong. Bau Tua Pek Kong temple (石隆门水口福德宫) is believed to have been built around 1837, when Hakka miners first arrived from West Kalimantan.

[10]This was carried out within the project referred to in note 2.

[11]For example, Teochew temples have as their central *shen* Xuan Tian Shang Di (玄天上帝), the Upper Lord of the North; Hakka temples have San Shan Guo Wang (三山国王), the Three Mountain Kings Lord; Hokkien temples have Guang Ze Zun Wang (廣澤尊王), also known as Sheng Wang Kong (圣王公), the Lord of Filial Piety.

Table 1. Tua Pek Kong temples in Sarawak with Datuk Kong altars.

Southern Sarawak	Temaga Cina Fock Teck Ci 打马甲福德祠
	Sarayan Fock Teck Ci 砂拉央福德祠
	Perigi Fock Teck Ci 玻璃基福德祠
	Sempadi Tua Pek Kong三巴厘大伯公
Kuching Samarahan area	Santubong Xi Yang Miao山都望西洋廟
	Buntal Fock Teck Zheng Shen Miao文丹福德正神庙
	Sejijak Fock Teck Ci西里益福德祠
	Stampin Baru Lung Yi She Tua Pek Kong龍御寺福德大伯公
	5 Mile Ba Gang Lu Fock Teck Kong五哩八港路碧雲山福德宮
	10th Mile Fock Teck Kong古晋十哩巴达旺福德廟
	17th Mile Siburan Fock Teck Kong古晋十七哩新生村福德宮
	21st Mile Beratok Fock Tek Miao古晋二十一哩来拓村福德廟
	24th Mile Shui Ko Tua Pek Kong 古晋西连老路二十四哩水口大伯公廟
	Pangkalan Ampat Tua Pek Kong Miao安拔梯头大伯公廟
	Musi Fock Teck Kong模西福德宮
	Tondong Fock Teck Ci短廊福德祠
	Bau Shao Tan Gang Lao Di To Tua Pek Kong Ting石隆门烧炭岗老梯头大伯公亭
	Nirvana Fen Tian Jing Tu Fock Tek Kong富贵山庄焚天净土福德宮
	Bau Shui Ko Bo Kong Miao石隆门水口福德宮
	Jambusan Da Bo Kong Kong燕窝山大伯公公
	Bidi Fock Teck Ci北历福德祠
	Krokong Tua Pek Kong道罗港大伯公廟
	Pengkalan Tebang Tua Pek Kong新山水口伯公廟
	Tanjung Apong Fock Teck Kong丹绒亚榜福德宮
	Beliong Fock Teck Kong Miao吻龙福德公廟
	Sambun Tebun Pek Kong Miao山汶伯公廟
	Zhi Zhu Shan Fock Teck Kong蜘蛛善福德宮
	Tebedu Tua Pek Kong & Datuk Kong打必禄大伯公庙兼拿督庙
Central Sarawak	Debak Loong Shan Miao宁木龙山廟
	Saratok Zhen Fock Kong砂拉卓正福宮
	Sarikei Tua Pek Kong Miao泗里奎大伯公廟
	Sibu Yun An Ting诗巫永安亭
	Kanowit Fock An Ting加拿逸福安亭
	Matu Fock Shi Ting峇都福石亭
	Oya San An Kong乌也三安宫

Elders in Bau relate that initially there was only one *shen* to whom respect was paid in the temple – Thai Pak Kung Kung (the Hakka term for Tua Pek Kong). The Chinese in Bau are predominantly Hakka, and therefore the term Thai Pak Kung is more commonly used here than is the term Tua Pek Kong which is Hokkien. As time progressed and livelihoods improved, the original small wooden temple was replaced by a bigger temple and the number of *shen* increased. The temple now includes three *shen* on the main altar in the main hall, with Thai Pak Kung Kung (Tua Pek Kong; 大伯公公) in the middle, Cai Shen Yer (财神爺), '*shen* of prosperity', to his left and San Wang Yer (三王爺), 'Third Prince', to his right. Underneath the altar to Tua Pek Kong and the two subsidiary *shen*, there are altars to the earth *shen*, Tu Di Kong, and the tiger *shen*, Hu Yer (虎爺). Outside the temple there is an altar to the 'God of Heaven', Tian Kong.

Datuk Kong is the latest *shen* to be added to the pantheon of *shen* to whom respect is paid in Bau Tua Pek Kong temple. No one remembers the exact year in which Datuk Kong began to be venerated there. 'The year Datuk Kong came to our temple is not important. What is important is that he protects us and blesses us', said a temple committee member to Chai.

The altar that houses Datuk Kong in the Bau temple is located outside the temple building, but within the temple compound, on the left, facing the temple (see Figures 1 and 2). An altar to Datuk Kong is, in fact, always outside the main temple in Tua

Figure 1. Tua Pek Kong temple in Bau, Sarawak. Photo by Elena Chai, 2013.

Pek Kong temples, as can also be seen in Figures 3 and 4. This relates to the fact that Datuk Kong are not regarded as Chinese, although, like Tua Pek Kong, they are regarded as once having been human.

Datuk Kong as Muslim

While Tua Pek Kong in Sarawak are regarded as straightforwardly Chinese, Datuk Kong in Sarawak have a strong Muslim flavour. In Tua Pek Kong temples, Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Kong have different food preferences and different food offerings are made to them (Chai 2014b), reflecting their identity as Chinese and Muslim Malay respectively. Local fruit, betel nut, curries, *rendang* (meat or chicken in a rich sauce), *ikan salai* (smoked fish), *ikan panggang* (barbecued fish), together with sweetened drinks such as coffee, coca-cola and lychee juice are among the favourite foods of Datuk Kong (ibid.: 30). They also like *rokok gulung* (rolled palm cigarettes) and betel nuts with lime (*kapur*). Some Datuk Kong prefer black coffee with no sugar; others like theirs with sweetened condensed milk. These foods are all Malay foods. Tua Pek Kong, however, likes pork.

The reason given by temple committees for the fact that altars to Datuk Kong are outside the hall is that Tua Pek Kong consumes pork, while Datuk Kong, who is a Muslim, does not take food that is haram. On days of celebration, such as Tua Pek Kong's birthday, Tomb Sweeping Day, the Hungry Ghost Festival etc., one of the compulsory food offerings to Tua Pek Kong is three types of flesh – pork, chicken and fish – that are described as *san sheng* (三生), 'three holy sacrifices'. However, it should be noted

Figure 2. The Datuk Kong altar at the Tua Pek Kong temple in Bau, Sarawak. Photo by Elena Chai, 2013.

that at many Datuk Kong altars alcoholic drinks are served as an offering, despite the fact that this is a trangression against Islamic teaching. Guinness Stout beer and Heineken beer are particularly often served. Thus, halal and haram notions are not entirely relevant to the segregation of 'space' between the two *shen*; and the fully Muslim identity of Datuk Kong perhaps even comes into question.

The Muslim nature of Datuk Kong in Sarawak is expressed in the fact that those temples that do not have a specific date dedicated to Datuk Kong's birthday celebrate it on Hari Raya Aldifitri or Eid al-Fiṭr, the main Muslim holiday at the end of the fasting month. On Hari Raya morning, devotees pay respect and pray to the *shen* by offering white candles, black incense, *kemenyan* (frankincense) and paper money. Datuk Kong's favourite foods are prepared as offerings. There is disagreement as to whether Datuk Kong should *puasa* (fast from dawn to dusk) during the fasting month before Hari Raya Aidifitri. The majority of Datuk Kong do not fast because 'he is a spirit therefore no fasting is required', as Chai was told by temple keepers. Some temples, however, do not present food offerings to Datuk Kong during the fasting month. This is an expression of the fact that there is considerable local variation in the veneration of this *shen*.

The Malay identity of Datuk Kong in Sarawak is expressed in the fact that the structure of Datuk Kong altars tends to resemble that of a traditional Malay house (see Figures 2, 3 and 4). The Datuk Kong altar at the Tua Pek Kong temple in Bau (Figure 2) is made of wood, has a curved roof and is built on stilts. Thus, Datuk Kong altars at Tua Pek Kong temples are clearly distinguished architecturally from the main temple. They are also a

Figure 3. The Datuk Kong altar at the Tua Pek Kong temple in Oya, Sarawak. Photo by Elena Chai, 2013.

different colour from the main temple. The Datuk Kong altar at the Tua Pek Kong temple in Bau is brown; most Datuk Kong altars are yellow or green (see Figures 3 and 4). This distinguishes them clearly from the main Tua Pek Kong temple, which, like all Chinese temples (*miao*), is always red. The staircase to the elevated house that forms a Datuk Kong altar usually has an odd numbers of stairs – five, seven or nine. The use of odd numbers reflects both Chinese and Malay cosmological beliefs.

Non-Malay Datuk Kong

It would appear that Datuk Kong beliefs have been present in insular SE Asia and the Malay peninsula for a very long time, and they have usually been associated, by scholars who have studied them, with Malays and with Islam. Elliott (1955) described the cult of Datuk Kong in Singapore in the 1950s as a Sino-Malay spirit cult. Lee (1983), who made a study of Datuk Kong beliefs in Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur, described these beliefs as a syncretic cult patronised by the Chinese but grounded in Malay Muslim beliefs. However, Lee emphasised the fact that the worshippers are in no sense Muslim converts. Cheu (1992) has written about the way in which Malaysian Chinese in Penang have adapted to local religion and culture through the Datuk Kong cult.

However, not all Datuk Kong are Malay. They may be Indian, Thai or Orang Asli. One of the most important Datuk Kong in West Malaysia, Sak Dato, is Orang Asli (Wang et al. 2020). In West Kalimantan, Chinese have had contact, over the centuries, not

Figure 4. The Datuk Kong altar at the Tua Pek Kong temple in Beliong, Sarawak. Photo by Elena Chai, 2013.

only with Malays but also with local inhabitants belonging to the broad category often described as 'Dayak'. Elena Chai (2018, 2020) found in her recent fieldwork in West Kalimantan that there are beliefs there among Chinese in non-Chinese *shen* that appear to be the same as Datuk Kong, known as Datuk, Dato or Latok. The terms *dato*, *datuk* and *latok* are versions of the Malay term used to address a grandfather or elderly man who is believed to possess certain powers or abilities. These *shen* are not Malay but have Dayak characteristics, and they express social and cosmological beliefs and realities in Kalimantan. While Datuk Kong in West Malaysia are always male, those in Kalimantan may be either male or female – female Datuk/Dato/Latok in Kalimantan include Dato Kembang, Datuk Siti and Latok Putribut. The fact that there are female Datuk/Dato/Latok in Kalimantan may reflect a greater emphasis on female spirits among the Dayak than in Muslim areas. Perhaps most saliently, Datuk/Dato/Latok in Kalimantan are not Muslim. The non-Muslim identity of Datuk/Dato/Latok in Kalimantan is reflected in their food preferences. While Datuk Kong in West Malaysia and Sarawak, who are believed to be Muslim, are given halal food, those in Kalimantan are given food offerings such as pork and distilled spirits. Some like to be feasted with the blood of black dogs or black fowl.

Datuk Kong as *shen* of place

In West Malaysia there is a close association between Datuk Kong and sacred/holy/magical places in the landscape. In the context of Islam, these places are, in West

Malaysia, known as *keramat*. This is a term that is used to refer to people who are regarded as being sacred/holy, who are themselves associated with *keramat* places and are regarded as being Muslim saints. The term *keramat* is a word borrowed from the Arabic (*karāma*) which means 'generosity' or 'high-mindedness'. It was adopted with the advent of Islam, among Malay-speaking peoples in Southeast Asia, to describe places and people that/who are powerful in the sense of having high levels of what can be described as cosmic power or life force, including both living and dead individuals (Winstedt 1924). This is grounded in a cosmology that regards the universe as being pervaded with such a cosmic power/vital force, described as *semangat* in Malay, which is believed to accumulate in certain places and people (Janowski 2020). The worship of *keramat* is associated with early Sufi forms of Islam (Cheu 1992). In this form of Islam, extraordinary individuals with special divine power acquired through religious devotion and piety are worshipped as 'saints' after their death. However, places that are now regarded as *keramat* were already considered potent before the arrival of Islam. Evans (1927: 81–100) describes the incorporation of what appear to be Datuk Kong beliefs that are clearly Islamicised pre-Islamic beliefs in the Malay peninsula in the 1920s.

The term *keramat* is not widely used in Sarawak or in Kalimantan. However, here, as in West Malaysia, there are beliefs that there are certain places in the landscape that hold a lot of cosmic power, which are regarded as inhabited by powerful spirits known in Borneo as *penunggu*. These need to be given respect in order to avoid misfortune and to bring good fortune. In Borneo, not only Muslim Malays but also indigenous peoples and Chinese believe that such places exist in the landscape. As in West Malaysia and parts of Indonesia, these places are often associated with a large stone, a cave or a large tree. In West Malaysia and among Muslims in parts of Indonesia, such places are described as being *keramat*; and megaliths often come to be associated with the graves of Muslim 'saints' (Evans 1927: 81–100; Chambert-Loir and Reid 2002).

Datuk Kong in Sarawak and Datuk/Dato/Latok in Kalimantan are, as in West Malaysia, associated with certain places in the landscape and can be regarded as spirits (*shen*) of place. However, it should be noted that in Sarawak and in Kalimantan, while these spirits are often paid respect at that specific place, they may also be paid respect elsewhere. They are, as we have seen, paid respect within Tua Pek Kong temples in Sarawak. As See Hoon Peow (2014: 197) has pointed out in relation to Datuk Kong in peninsular Malaysia, this distinguishes Datuk Kong as worshipped by the Chinese from spirits of place as worshipped by Malays (and indeed other indigenous groups in the region), which are always worshipped at the spot in the landscape with which they are associated.

In West Malaysia, it is such 'graves' of Muslim saints that are generally the site of Datuk Kong worship; it is the saint that is the Datuk Kong. In Sarawak, however, powerful places in the landscape are not, even among Muslims, associated with Muslim saints; and the worship of Datuk Kong is not associated with the graves of Muslim saints. The Islamic movement is not as intense in Sarawak as it is in West Malaysia and there are more Christians in Sarawak than there are Muslims. Islamic mystical teachings have not been disseminated in Sarawak (Cheu 1992). There are no followers of pious or religious Muslim leaders within the Chinese community, as there are in West Malaysia.

The fact that Datuk Kong/Dato/Datuk/Latok are regarded by Chinese in Sarawak and Kalimantan as *shen* who are inhabitants of particular places is expressed through the fact that they are described using the term *penunggu*, which is used by Iban, Bidayuh and Dayak groups to refer to the spirit inhabitants of a place (Chai 2018: 303). Members of all of these groups believe that humans must be respectful and cautious in their interactions with *penunggu*. *Penunggu* will not, it is believed, cause harm or create disturbances unless their territory is intruded upon, but they are capable of serious harm if they are not respected. In daily interactions, when people go out of their homes, they must be alert to the presence of *penunggu* and pay them respect. This is the case not only in natural places but also in urban areas. Certain corners of residential areas, certain parts of roads (especially if a road is newly built), any big boulder, mountain, river or forest – all are inhabited by *penunggu*.

The need to pay respect to *shen* of place

Informants told Chai that an occasional brush with a *penunggu* is unavoidable, as this is inevitable when human beings enter spaces belonging to these spirits. Therefore many types of precautionary measures are taken against an encounter with *penunggu* and to avoid provoking the anger of *penunggu*, especially in the forest or in a mountainous area. Actions to be avoided include calling out people's names, singing or making loud noises, cooking strong-smelling food, and urinating without asking for permission.

The respect Sarawak Chinese pay to Tu Di Kong, Tua Pek Kong and Datuk Kong can be understood as expressing a need to set up an effective spiritual relationship with the local landscape in which they settled in Southeast Asia – to root themselves not only materially but also spiritually in the local earth. All three are, as we have seen, associated with place; and the distinction between the three *shen* is rather blurred. We have seen that Tua Pek Kong is often conflated with Tu Di Kong, being given the name Fu De Zheng Shen, which also refers to Tu Di Kong. Informants also sometimes conflated Datuk Kong with Tu Di Kong. When asked who Datuk Kong was, members of the Chinese community at Bau Tua Pek Kong temple told Chai: 'He is like a Tu Di Kong who watches over this area.'

Datuk Kong are said by Chinese in Sarawak to be *penunggu*, using the local term for spirit inhabitant of place. As such, they need to be carefully propitiated. *Penunggu* are believed to be disturbed by new construction and they are therefore likely to show themselves occasionally at construction sites as a form of vengeance. As a result, there are road accidents, and victims often witness the momentary appearance of *penunggu* at the time of an accident, and relate this afterwards. When this happens, religious specialists are invited to the site to appease the *penunggu* by offering respect, together with prayers and food offerings. The Chinese are the main ethnic group involved in construction in Sarawak and they always set up Datuk Kong altars in construction areas, implying that the local soil *shen* (Tu Di Kong) is regarded as being the *penunggu* Datuk Kong. Respect paid at this altar is intended to ensure that the relationship between those disturbing the local landscape and the local *penunggu* is good.

The importance of paying respect to the local *shen* of place expressed in the form of Datuk Kong can be seen in a story about something that happened at a construction site in Muara Tebas. Here, work could not progress as planned because the excavator kept

running into trouble. According to the foreman, the excavating machine was a new one but it kept having problems. Some days the engine wouldn't start at all. Other days it would stop halfway, causing all work to come to a standstill. The foreman informed the project manager that something was not right. They went to a local temple and sought the advice and blessing of the *shen* there. Through a medium, they were told that the area in which they were working was 'inhabited' (by a spirit being) and they should ask for permission to work there from the 'inhabitant'. The project manager decided to erect a Datuk Kong altar to seek the blessing of the 'inhabitant' and to guard the area. Here, they offered paper money, incense, candles and food offerings to appease and seek permission from the 'inhabitant'. A Datuk Kong altar was erected instead of a Tu Di Kong altar because the project manager felt that since the area was Malay dominated, the local soil *shen* would be a Datuk Kong. This *shen* would, he thought, provide better control and protection in a Malay setting.

As *shen* of place or *penunggu*, Datuk Kong are also able to bestow prosperity. Owners of businesses often erect Datuk Kong altars in the hope of increasing the prosperity of their businesses. Some restaurants and coffee shops in Sarawak have small altars to Datuk Kong behind the premises (Figure 5). These Datuk Kong are *shen/penunggu* associated with the place where the business has been established, and the respect paid to them is an attempt to propitiate them and ensure prosperity and smooth operation on the part of businesses.

Becoming a *penunggu*/Datuk Kong

Almost all of the Datuk Kong altars in Sarawak, aside from those at the Sebauh Datuk Kong temple (see below), are related to dreams or visions in which individuals meet an old man from the locality who turned out to be a *penunggu* (and therefore also a *shen*). Chai was told many stories about Datuk Kong by temple keepers or devotees that described the appearance of a man with a beard, carrying a *tongkat* (walking stick).

One of the stories that Chai was told was about the origin of the Datuk Kong temple at Tanjung Datuk (Figure 6). The Datuk Kong to whom respect is paid in Tanjung Datuk Kong temple appeared to the temple keeper at the temple's present location. The temple keeper, a man called Ah An (阿安), was fishing by the riverbank when he heard a noise from a bush behind him. He went over to the bush, to find an old man there who said that he was very hungry. Ah An went back to his fishing spot to get some red bean buns he had brought along. He gave these to the man, and the man said 'thank you', and walked away slowly. That very night Ah An, who was then a cook, had a dream about the man he had met. The man smiled at him in the dream. Ah An didn't think much about the incident or the dream. He went on with his usual business, working as a cook. Not long after, he won first prize in a lottery. His luck turned really good and he won a few more lotteries. He then had another dream about the old man. This time the old man said a bit about himself in the dream. He said that he was from a fishing village nearby and that he was a Bidayuh Muslim. He thanked Ah An for being so kind to him. The following day, Ah An gathered a few of his good friends and told them about the dreams and the lottery wins. They decided to go to the spot where Ah An had met the old man. They cleared the area and placed some food offerings there, together with some offerings of incense. Not long after that, one of his friends won the lottery and decided to use part

Figure 5. A Datuk Kong altar behind shop premises in Tabuan Jaya, Kuching, Sarawak. Photo by Elena Chai, 2019.

of his win to erect a small altar to the old man. He believed that his good luck was a blessing from the old Bidayuh man. News of lottery wins and the old man spread around, attracting many to visit the altar. Ah An and his friends never found out the name of the old man, but they decided that he should be considered a Datuk Kong because he was local, and they paid him respect (*bai*) because he was humble and kind. He became a *penunggu/shen*, they believed, because he showed gratitude, not just because he was able to give lottery wins, according to his devotees. Being grateful, according to Ah An and his friends, is a great virtue and the man deserved great respect. Since then, the altar has been transformed into a temple, with crowds of devotees visiting from near and far.

Petrification and becoming a Datuk Kong: the Sebauh temple

While Datuk Kong are usually paid respect in the context of Tua Pek Kong temples or at small stand-alone altars, there is one Datuk Kong temple that is dedicated to three Datuk Kong – Datuk Haji, Datuk Su and Datuk Tuanku. This temple, which is in Sebauh, 120 km from Bintulu, is said to have existed since 1937, when the Chinese first arrived in the area (Figure 7).

The Sebauh temple has an origin myth that describes the process of becoming a Datuk Kong. It reflects local, and indeed Southeast Asia-wide beliefs about petrification and the consequences of laughing at animals (Hose and McDougall 1912; Janowski 2020;

Figure 6. Tanjung Datuk Kong temple in Sejingkat, Kuching, Sarawak. Photo by Elena Chai, 2013.

Janowski and Barton 2012). The myth is a retelling of one also related by local people who already lived in the area before the Chinese arrived. It is said that the island on which the temple is situated is a *sampan* (boat) that capsized and sank with three passengers – good friends who were enjoying a fishing trip one fine day. While waiting for their catch, they were eating *linut* (a local delicacy made from fresh sago flour eaten by the Melanau), and, spotting a dog by the riverbank, one of them threw a clump of the gluey, starchy *linut* to the dog. The animal ate it but had difficulty swallowing the gluey food. The three good friends laughed and made jokes at the expense of the pitiful animal. Not long after that, the sky turned dark with thunder and blazed with lightning. Waves rose high in the river, and with a loud clap of thunder the boat capsized and sank. The three men went down with the boat. A day later an island appeared suddenly from nowhere in the middle of the river. For a while after this, locals would tell of sightings of a mysterious boat emitting faint laughter. Sightings of the boat usually occurred at dawn or dusk. The locals believe that the three men in the boat had been petrified because they laughed at an animal.

Fearing the vengeance of the three men, believed to have become *shen* or *penunggu*, and in the hope of prosperity, a temple was built on the island. Respect is paid to the three petrified men as Datuk Haji, Datuk Su and Datuk Tuanku. The respect paid to these three Datuk relates to widespread beliefs in Southeast Asia about the flow of cosmic power into stone and its concentration there, as a potential source of power for the living (Janowski 2020). Large stones, particularly if their shapes suggest that they were previously living beings, are often venerated as places of power within the

Figure 7. The Datuk Kong temple in Sebauh, Sarawak, which is located on a small island opposite the Sebauh bazaar in Bintulu Division, Sarawak. Photo by Elena Chai, 2013.

wider landscape. *Keramat* places in West Malaysia, often associated with Datuk Kong by Chinese, are often large boulders. Thus, the veneration of the three Datuk at Sebauh reflects the acceptance by immigrant Chinese of local cosmological beliefs relating to the landscape.

Pak Kung in West Kalimantan: becoming incorporated into the local landscape

In West Kalimantan there are many temples in which Pak Kung is the central *shen,* and veneration of Pak Kung is a central part of Chinese religious practice in West Kalimantan. Pak Kung are essentially the same type of *shen* as Tua Pek Kung. Pak Kung, like Tua Pek Kong, are regarded as Chinese, even if they are not always associated with a specific figure from the past. Temples to Pak Kung, like those to Tua Pek Kong in Sarawak, incorporate external altars to Datuk Kong/Datu/Latok.

Tua Pek Kong and Pak Kung have very similar roles socially and in spiritual terms, but there is a major difference between them. Tua Pek Kong are straightforwardly Chinese, whilst Pak Kung are regarded as not only Chinese but also, at the same time, *penunggu* or *shen* of place. Tua Pek Kong are regarded as having overall responsibility and authority over a certain geographical area, but are not described by local Chinese as *penunggu*. As a *penunggu*, Pak Kung appear to have a greater level of assimilation into the local landscape as they not only have authority over an area but they originate in that area. This appears

likely to express a greater sense among the Chinese in Kalimantan than in Sarawak that they have come to belong fully within the local landscape.

Conclusion: Datuk Kong beliefs and settling down in place

Cheu (1992: 400) suggested that belief in Datuk Kong would dwindle over time as society 'progressed', but this is not valid in either Sarawak or Kalimantan. Temple (*miao*) activities thrive, with news and announcements of temple activities featuring in newspapers and social media on a daily basis. Tua Pek Kong temples in Sarawak and their equivalent in Kalimantan, Pak Kung temples, both central to Chinese temple culture, incorporate altars to Datuk Kong in Sarawak and Datuk/Datu/Latok in Kalimantan. It is common to find small altars to Datuk Kong located behind shop houses in Sarawak.

As we have seen, Datuk Kong in Sarawak appear to be both *shen* of place (as local *penunggu* and also, arguably, as they are conflated with the Chinese soil *shen*, Tu Di Kong) and *shen* of humans who have lived in the past. While studies of Datuk Kong until now have associated Datuk Kong mainly with Muslim Malays, this is not the core nature of these *shen*. Chinese temple culture (廟宇文化) expresses and upholds a sense of mutual respect and of belonging to a place, which is extended beyond the Chinese community to others who live in that place – spirits (*shen*) and other humans. Datuk Kong appear to be spirits of place associated with the localities in which the Chinese have settled; and they appear in the form of humans belonging to ethnic groups that predominate in these localities – whether these are Malays, Orang Asli or Dayak. While in West Malaysia Datuk Kong may appear as Muslim 'saints', this does not preclude them also being spirits of place. The distinction between spirit worship and saint worship made by Wang et al. (2020) for West Malaysia is, we would argue, not necessarily valid, at least in Sarawak and Kalimantan – and perhaps not in West Malaysia either. Indeed it may be the very process that allows humans to become conflated with spirits of place that enables those humans to feel that they are one with the landscape, that they belong to that place, are consubstantial with it.

Thus, we would argue that the respect (*bai*) paid to Datuk Kong, Datuk, Dato and Latok in Sarawak and West Kalimantan (and elsewhere) is part of a process, for immigrant Chinese, of settling down, of gradually becoming assimilated into the local material, social and cosmological landscape, a process that other scholars have also pointed to (Chin and Lee 2014). This process incorporates the conflation of humans and spirits of place that we see with Datuk Kong, which arguably embeds humans living in a place in the material and cosmological fabric of the place. This incorporation of the Chinese into the fabric of the landscape has gone further in some places than in others. This can be seen in the difference between the parallel *shen* Tua Pek Kong in Sarawak and Pak Kung in Kalimantan. While, as we have pointed out, there is a sense in which Tua Pek Kong in Sarawak is conflated with the soil *shen*, Tu Di Kong, this is not overtly expressed, and Tua Pek Kong is not described as a *penunggu*. In Sarawak Tua Pek Kong is said to have authority over a geographical area, but as an outsider – a pure Chinese. In Kalimantan, where the Chinese have been settled for much longer than in Sarawak, Pak Kung's authority is vested in the fact that he is not only Chinese but is also a *penunggu* – a spirit inhabitant living in a locality. If this central *shen*, often regarded as a Chinese hero from the past, is, in Kalimantan, regarded as also

being a *penunggu*, this implies that the origin of the Chinese themselves is, at least in some sense, regarded as local. This in turn implies that the Chinese have, in West Kalimantan, gone a long way to becoming part and parcel of the local material, social and cosmological landscape.

Acknowledgements

Elena Chai would like to acknowledge the research grant that she received from Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation (Taiwan) under grant number RG021-P-12 between 2013–2015, which allowed her to begin her research with Chinese temple associations. She is very grateful to Penghulu Soon Choon Hoo and Mr Teo Joo Hung of Sibu Tua Pek Kong temple for their unwavering support over the years. She would also like to acknowledge her debt to her mentor Prof Dr Uchibori Motomitsu for his patience and guidance.

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