

On Women and Chinese Ritual Food Culture in Penang and Singapore*

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Abstract: In Malaysia and Singapore, both ordinary and festival foods broadly distinguish ethnic Chinese from Hindus and from Muslims, who do not eat pork. Within the Chinese population, Buddhists, Daoists, and Christians also express different social and spiritual outlooks in their food practices. Strict Buddhists make only vegetarian offerings, Daoists prepare

* This paper draws on observations made while doing research on Chinese popular religion, Christianity, and Daoism in Singapore and Penang, Malaysia. I conducted ethnographic research with support from Fulbright-Hays (1979-1980), the National Institute of Mental Health (1979-1981), the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (1997-1999), the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (1997-2001; 2003-2007), the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange 蔣經國國際學術交流基金會 (2002-2004), and the University of Alberta (1995, 2002). In 2002 and 2004 I conducted interviews on the topic of food and religion. For insights shared I especially thank Ching Oon Hooi and her mother, Madame Lim Poh Seah, Low Boo Pheng and his mother, Madame Tan Gaik Suan, Mr. and Mrs. Chuang Keng Hee, Tan Eng Hing, and Victor Yue. For their help with the Chinese glossary I owe thanks to Chen Leilei, Chuang Shu-chih 莊淑芝, Lee Su Yin, and Doris and Victor Yue. For an invitation to contribute an article to this special issue and his patience I thank Prof. Daniel Overmyer; I also owe special thanks to Associate Editor Chuang Shu-chih for her assistance and to Stephan Feuchtwang and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

sacrificial offerings of meat, and Chinese Christians, who describe their outlook as modern, do not offer foods of any sort to ancestors or deities. Nonetheless, broad commonalities in Chinese food culture perpetuate a sense of shared identity irrespective of religious affiliation. As food experts in this multi-religious, multi-ethnic setting, women play an important role in the simultaneous reproduction of religious distinction and ethno-cultural unity. Women also sometimes act as agents for change, modifying ritual practices to suit their own taste, values, and sentiments.

Key words: Christianity, Daoism, festivals, food, ethnic identity.

In Penang and Singapore, Chinese who follow popular religious traditions must know how to approach gods, ghosts and ancestors. In periodic events of the festival cycle, they make profuse offerings: incense, oil for lamps, flowers, theatrical performances, and tables laden with platters of meat and seafood, fruits, mounds of breads and sweet cakes, tea and brandy.¹ Stephan Feuchtwang has described this profusion of offerings as “communicative excess,” concluding that the “religious ritual is an enactment of generous hospitality in human relations that is like them but unlike them by its invocation of a responsive and dangerous asymmetry” (Feuchtwang 2007:70).

In these two cities, ethnic Chinese engage in ritual action in multi-religious fields of practice that include Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist temples and monasteries, Protestant and Catholic churches, Muslim mosques and Hindu temples. Leaders of these religions typically offer their followers well-formulated guidelines for belief, worship, and moral behavior. Among their systematic teachings are religious food laws.

Although they have no authoritative handbook to guide them, those who prepare ritual food offering also follow rules. People sometimes hire experts to lead them in performing ritual etiquette at weddings and funerals, and they may seek guidance from temple workers on the placement of offerings. But for minor ritual events they rely on past experience or turn to family and friends for advice. Although food traditions tend to be passed on within families, increasingly local cookbooks, mass media, and personal weblogs on the Internet include recipes for and discussions of festival foods.

Men and women share knowledge about festive and ritual foods, but women often are the family experts on their preparation and offering. They must know and assemble the correct offerings for each ritual and festival event, including foods and special items like sugarcane stalks and paper offerings. Early observers of the Chinese popu-

Throughout this paper I have used popular spelling for the Hokkien, Cantonese, and Malay names for these foods. I have not sought to standardize these according to a single romanization system since they are well established in cookbooks and on the Internet in their popular forms. When I list two Chinese words in parentheses, the first is Southern Min (Hokkien) and the second Mandarin.

1. For studies of Chinese popular religious culture that include discussions of food offerings see Feuchtwang (1974, 2001, 2007), Thompson (1988); Weller (1987); and Wolf (1974). On Chinese religions in Malaysia, see also DeBernardi (2004 and 2006) and Tan (1988).

lation in Penang noted with astonishment that even when Chinese immigrants married local women (who were likely to be Malay, or Thai, or Batak, and consequently to not speak Chinese or know Chinese customs), they expected their wives to look after the ritual practices associated with patrilineal ancestor worship (see DeBernardi 2004:2). Women—as daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law—continue to take on this responsibility.

Although the process of change is not well documented, a review of contemporary practice demonstrates that what contemporary Chinese regard as their traditional ritual and festival food practices has a Southeast Asian flavor. In Malaysia and Singapore, Chinese food culture blended with local food culture, creating the well-known and widely popular style of cooking called *peranakan* or *nyonya* cuisine. Penangites and Singaporeans express pride in this cuisine, which, as Malaysian anthropologist Tan Chee Beng observes, is both Chinese and local (Tan 2007:181).²

We may compare the localization of Chinese cuisine in Southeast Asia, including ritual and festival foods, to processes of linguistic change. Edward Sapir, for example described linguistic change as “drift,” noting that speakers make unconscious minute modifications that eventually lead to the remodelling of a language. In retrospect, we notice the slope of these changes, which often are made to bring about structural symmetry. Sapir suggests that when the ordinary speaker’s sense of what is correct conflicts with grammatical rules, the rules will inevitably give way (Sapir 1921:147–70).

For example, when we compare the form of Hokkien (Southern Min) spoken in Penang with that of Fujian Province, the result of drift is striking: *nyonya* Hokkien combines Hokkien syntax with Malay and English vocabulary, creating a distinctive creole. When we compare the ritual and festival foods of Penang and Singapore with those of Fujian Province, we also find differences. Just as the linguistic

2. In Singapore, Penang, and Melaka, historically themed restaurants offer these unique dishes in settings that evoke *nyonya* heritage and lifestyle (Wong 2007:117–18).

changes were not the product of a grammarian’s rulings, so too changes to ritual and festival foods were made through culinary drift rather than doctrinal fiat.

For many contemporary Penangites and Singaporeans, blended ritual and festival food practices express their cultural identity. But in multi-religious Penang and Singapore, members of the same family often practice different religions. Buddhists reject sacrificial animal offerings³ and Protestant Christians refuse to partake in any foods that have been ritually offered to gods, ghosts or ancestors. Consequently, family members may disagree profoundly about food practices. Women—including Buddhist and Christian women whose relatives follow popular religious practices—often mediate these conflicts, seeking to reconcile conflicting instructions and expectations.⁴

Sometimes women conserve older traditions. For example, when I studied the Hungry Ghosts Festival, a Penang lay Buddhist leader advised me to attend a Buddhist mass for the dead at the Phor Tay Institution, disparaging the traditional Daoist offerings as superstitious. He and his family attended this impressive ritual event, but his wife and one daughter placed offerings and candles for the wandering ghosts on the roadside near their house, just as the other women

3. An entry on the Hungry Ghosts Festival on the “Know Buddhism” website, for example, notes that in the performance of traditional Ghost Festival rites “many animals are slaughtered and a large sum of money spent on burning joss-sticks, candles and joss-papers (called ‘Hell bank notes’).” The author notes that Mahayana Buddhist temples in Malaysia are seeking to teach Malaysian Buddhists the proper manner of transferring merit to their ancestors “without violating religious principles.” See <http://www.knowbuddhism.info/2009/03/hungry-ghosts-festival.html> (accessed January 10, 2010).

4. Many anthropologists have noted that in societies where major world religions like Islam or Buddhist are practiced, local religious culture lends a special flavor and style to those religions. Take, for example, Clifford Geertz’s studies of the layering of Javanese religion (1960) and also the contrast between Islam in Morocco and Indonesia (Geertz 1968, 2005).

in the neighborhood were doing (see DeBernardi 2004:161).⁵

When Chinese convert to Christianity, their leaders—in particular Protestants—may exhort them to give up traditional practices, including the traditional food offerings associated with ancestral veneration. But because ritual and festival food practices are closely linked with memory and identity, other Christians—both theologians and lay people—have questioned the strict labeling of ancestral veneration as idol worship. Others have sought compromises with Chinese tradition, seeking to devise new forms of orthopraxy. Finally, in a contemporary form of culinary ritual drift, some Christians simply use traditional ritual and festival foods in new ways, expressing both Chinese and Christian identities.

Chinese Ritual Food Culture in Singapore and Penang, Malaysia

Throughout China and everywhere that Han Chinese have migrated, people come together to celebrate festival events like the New Year (or Spring Festival), the Hungry Ghosts Festival, and the Mid-Autumn Festival. Although the Western Gregorian calendar now regulates everyday life almost everywhere, including China and Southeast Asia, these festival events follow the traditional lunar calendar.

Two events associated with the ritual veneration of ancestors—Winter Solstice and Qingming 清明—are timed by the solar calendar, coinciding with the shortest day of the year and the fifteenth day from the spring equinox. Some have observed that these dates fall close to those of the Christian winter and spring celebrations—Christmas and Easter—which also occur around the winter solstice and the vernal equinox. Although offerings vary, Chinese celebrate every ritual and festival event with food.

Shang dynasty oracle bone and bronze inscriptions confirm that

5. When one of her grandchildren was ill, his wife also consulted spirit mediums, something that her Buddhist husband and some of her children would not have done.

people offered food and wine to the dead at graveside feasts, seeking the blessings of health, long life and wealth from their ancestral spirits. But the practice of graveside feasting probably began much earlier in China's neolithic age (Nelson 2003:65–69). Even today, as Michael Puett notes, the primary difference between gods, ghosts and ancestors is “found in food—both in the types of food offered and the ways in which it is given” (Puett 2005:75).

Singapore and Penang developed as colonial entrepôts in which members of many ethnic groups lived side-by-side. In addition to the Malay population, early residents included immigrants and sojourners from mainland and island Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Europe, as well as Portuguese and Dutch Eurasians. When the British established a settlement in Penang in 1786, long-resident *nyonya* Chinese from Malacca moved to the new commercial ports. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new waves of migrants came to the Straits Settlements from the coastal region of southeast China, including Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan. Today the Chinese population includes sub-ethnic groups whose boundaries are broadly set by language. Although schools teach Mandarin as the Chinese mother tongue, Chinese still speak what they term dialects, which are varieties of three Chinese regional languages: Southern Min (including Hokkien, Teochiu, and Hainanese), Yue (Cantonese), and Hakka.

Irrespective of religious affiliation or subethnic group, Chinese share ritual and festival practices like the celebration of the Chinese New Year. Nonetheless, members of subethnic groups may mark out social boundaries by timing their ritual events differently and/or using unique ritual foods (Wu 2005; see also Cecelia Tan 2001:128–134). For example, Cantonese and Chaozhou people traditionally eat slightly different versions of a raw fish salad called *yee sang* (*yu sheng* 魚生) on the seventh day of the first lunar month. Since the name of this dish means “raw fish” but also has the punning meaning of “an increase in abundance,” the act of eating raw fish salad symbolizes a wish for prosperity.⁶

6. Although the association with these two subethnic groups persists, today many restaurants in Singapore and Malaysia serve *yu sheng* as a standard

In addition to subethnic diversity, Singapore and Malaysia include *Nyonya* (also known as *Baba* or *Peranakan*) Chinese, who are the descendants of immigrants from Fujian Province who married with local women, and who speak a creolized form of Southern Min (Hokkien) that includes many Malay words. To add one more layer to this complexity, the *Nyonya/Baba* Chinese living in the British-controlled Straits Settlements—Penang, Melaka, and Singapore—in the colonial era often embraced English education, technological innovations, and some aspects of European lifestyle while adhering to their traditional practices.⁷ *Nyonya* Chinese created ritual and festival food practices with a local flavor, using recipes that call for ingredients like coconut milk, pandanas leaves, palm sugar, and turmeric.

Precisely because of their antiquity some festival foods are shared throughout the Chinese cultural world. Take, for example, the mooncakes associated with the Autumn Moon Festival, and *zongzi* 粽子, the wrapped, pyramid-shaped glutinous rice dumplings eaten in the fifth lunar month. Although the form may be identical, people from different regions use different fillings made with locally available ingredients. In Penang, for example, people make a version of *zongzi* that they call *Nyonya Chang* (Mandarin: *zong*) using spices like coriander and *kencur*, a ginger-like root used in Southeast Asian cooking (see Yeap 1990:63).

Especially in Penang, ritual and festive cuisine developed as a blend of traditional Chinese ritual foods and *nyonya* foods. For example, at the one-month anniversary of a child's birth (*moa goay*; *man yue* 滿月), Penangites give packages of foods to friends and family that include dyed red eggs, chicken curry, yellow rice (Malay: *Nasi Kuning*), rice cooked with coconut milk and turmeric, and red tor-

appetizer course at New Year banquets. Indeed, one Singapore Cantonese restaurant claims to have invented Chinese New Year *yu sheng* in 1964. If the owners mean that they introduced this dish to a wider public, then this claim may be valid. <http://taiwahrestaurant.com/> (accessed April 26, 2009). For further detail on *nyonya/baba* culture, see Cheo and Speeden (1988), Chia (1980), and Tan Chee Beng (1988, 2001, 2007).

toises (*ang ku kueb*; *bong gu gao* 紅龜糕). These are molded cakes that consist of a shiny red glutinous rice shell filled with peanut or green bean filling, round for a boy, peach-shaped for a girl. The gift of red eggs is widely popular among Chinese but people identify the other foods given in Penang as *nyonya*, recognizing the Malay flavor of their First Month celebration. In Singapore, by contrast, Hokkien Chinese are more traditional, giving Chinese-style glutinous rice (rather than *Nasi Kuning*), and *ang ku kueb*, sometimes adding half a steamed chicken.⁸



Illustration 1: At the 90th anniversary celebration of the Lorong Koo Chye City God Temple, temple members carrying the god's statue, devotees, and festival performers visited temples and the businesses of sponsors. In preparation, a businessman and his wife placed abundant foods on an altar in front of their hotel, including a whole

8. Victor Yue reports that his mother prepared both of these for his two children. In contemporary Singapore, however, where many people are pressed for time, new parents often order packages from specialist shops, or they may simply buy vouchers so that well-wishers can go to the shop to pick up the cake of their choice.

roasted pig, duck, chicken, crabs, cakes, and fruits. The basket of cakes and individual fruits have labels attached displaying auspicious characters, including *fu* 福 (Southern Min: *bok*, happiness, prosperity), *wang* 旺 (Southern Min: *ong*, prosperous, bright), and *fa* 發 (Southern Min: *buat*, growth). Singapore, 15 December 2007. (Photo: Jean DeBernardi)

Eating Meaning: Ritual and Festival Foods

Before providing a more detailed discussion of Chinese New Year and ancestor worship, I would like to provide a broad overview of Chinese ritual and festival foods. I provide herewith a table summarizing major festival events celebrated in Penang and Singapore, together with some details regarding the special foods associated with these events (see also DeBernardi 2004, 2006; Wong 1967). Indeed, many foods are closely identified with ritual events, including the *nyonya*-style sweet dessert soup eaten on the last day of the Chinese New Year period (1-15), wrapped pyramid-shaped dumplings (5-5), the mass of fresh green sprouts that Cantonese offer the Seven Sisters (7-7), the mooncakes offered on the Mid-Autumn Festival (8-15), and the sweet sticky Year Cake offered to the Kitchen God at the year's end (12-14).

I propose that Chinese use foods as symbols in three major ways. First, foods often symbolize meanings based on their physical qualities, the experiential quality of feeling that philosopher C. S. Peirce called firstness (Peirce 1955:104-05). Second, they symbolize meanings as the consequence of punning word plays. Finally, stories often endow festival events and their associated foods with meaning.

Lunar/solar dates	Festival event	Foods
1-1 to 1-15	Chinese New Year	Reunion dinner; visits to family and friends and "eating meaning"; sweet desserts; stirfried dried cuttlefish

1-9	Celebrated at the Jade Emperor's Pavillion; Hokkien make special offerings to Lord of Heaven	Whole roasted pigs; sweet cakes; sugarcane
1-15	Close of New Year period	<i>Pengat</i> , a Malay-style sweet dessert
2-19	Guanyin's Birthday	Vegetarian diet & offerings
104th day after winter solstice (date variable)	Qingming Festival (visits to graves)	Stirfried dried cuttlefish and salted vegetable and duck soup
4-15	Wesak (or Vesak) Day (Buddha's birthday, a public holiday in Singapore and Malaysia)	Vegetarian diet & offerings
5-5 (<i>Duanwu</i>)	Dragon Boat races; popular day for exorcistic rituals; commemoration of Chu Yuan	Pyramid-shaped wrapped dumplings; offerings to gods and ancestors (vegetarian dumplings offered to Guanyin)
6-19	Guanyin becomes a nun	Vegetarian diet & offerings
Seventh lunar month (<i>Zhongyuan Jie</i>)	Hungry Ghosts Festival	Three Sacrifices; community food offerings; pink-and-white cakes; banquets
7-7	Seven Sisters; Celebrated at the City God Temple	Cantonese make roadside offerings; fresh sprouts, "navel-round" rice balls, chicken
7-14 or 7-15	Hungry Ghosts Festival, celebrated at many locations	Three sacrifices; food offerings in home; roadside offerings to ghosts, including pink-and-white cakes (<i>mor bor kuei</i>)
8-15	Mid-Autumn/Moon Festival	Mooncakes; water caltrop and fruits

9-1 to 9-9 (<i>Chongyang Jie</i>)	Nine Emperor Gods Festival	Vegetarian diet & offerings
9-19	Anniversary of Guanyin's enlightenment	Vegetarian diet & offerings
Winter solstice (<i>dongzhi</i> ; date variable)	Dongzhi	Glutinous rice balls
12-24	Offerings to Kitchen God	Sweet sticky cake

Illustration 2: Foods offerings associated with major festival events in Penang, Malaysia. In Penang and Singapore members of all sub-ethnic groups celebrate these events, but some subethnic groups also make distinctive offerings.



Illustration 3: Women prepare to serve vegetarian dishes to devotees at a small Guanyin Temple at a festival celebrating Guanyin's enlightenment on the 19th day of the 9th lunar month. Ayer Itam, Penang, 8 November 1979. (Photo: Jean DeBernardi)

People often distinguish among different deities with their food offerings. For example, the *nyonya* family with whom I lived offered meat-filled wrapped dumplings (*nyonya chang*; *zongzi* 粽子) to deities (Southern Min: Anggong), house gods, and ancestors on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. But when they prayed to Guanyin they offered wrapped shining yellow glutinous rice dumplings (*kee chang*; *jian zong* 驗粽) and fruits.⁹

Although they may offer the Daoist three sacrifices during the Hungry Ghosts Festival, many Chinese who practice popular religious culture take a vegetarian diet and make vegetarian food offerings on Buddhist festivals like Wesak Day (Buddha's birthday). People also celebrate the Goddess of Mercy's birthday (2-19), the anniversary of her becoming a nun (6-19), and her enlightenment day (9-19) with vegetarian diet and offerings, as they do when they venerate the Nine Emperor Gods, who are considered to be very high, pure gods (9-9).

Although the details do not exactly correspond, Feuchtwang analyzes this kind of difference succinctly for Taiwan:

Food offerings are ordered in two respects. One is according to their readiness for consumption: whether or not cooked, whether or not cut up, whether or not served with chopsticks. The other is according to their purity: whether or not vegetarian, whether or not sweet (=pure), whether or not great care is taken to keep them clean. . . . The gods of heaven are offered the cleanest, purest (often vegetarian), and most valued food on the raised table;

9. The *kee chang* (*jian zong*) dumpling is wrapped like *zongzi* but smaller; it is traditionally made with glutinous rice and *kee*, a dried ash made from durian husks used to prepare an alkaline solution. People eat *kee chang* with palm sugar syrup (Malay: *gula Melaka*). For details on the traditional preparation of *kee chang* see Chia 1980:135.

while meat and other, less valuable foods are placed behind it on a lower table for their retinue of lesser gods. . . . (Feuchtwang 1979:111)

Similarly, in Penang and Singapore people commonly describe ritual foods as pure or impure, and contrast vegetarian offerings to meat sacrifices, and raw meat to cooked. In addition to these dualisms, the physical characteristics of foods—shape, wholeness, sweetness, and color—also convey meaning. Because red is an auspicious color, many ritual foods are red or light red (pink), including red beans, red dates, red bread tortoises, the small pink and white cakes offered to the dead (*mor bor kueh*), and the glutinous rice balls that people offer to ancestors at the Winter Solstice. Shape also signifies: round glutinous rice balls symbolizes the wholeness of the family; long uncut noodles a long life; the large oval breads called “tortoises” also serve as symbols of long life since the tortoise is an emblem of longevity. And as one friend noted, dried cuttlefish—an essential element for ancestor worship—resembles an old man’s white beard; it is offered in a dish whose elements are julienned into fine hairlike threads. Ritual practice, including the practice of ancestor worship, creates links between the names and sensuous qualities of foods and desired social and personal conditions and outcomes.

Shape may even substitute for substance. For example, Stuart E. Thompson describes two Taiwanese Buddhist funerals at which the married-out daughters each provided a mock pig’s head and tail made from flour to fulfill their ritual obligation to the deceased (1988: 96).¹⁰ In Penang and Singapore, Buddhists have borrowed this style of vegetarian cooking from Taiwan, using vegetarian “chicken” and ‘shrimp’ to prepare popular local dishes. At a Buddhist Mass for the Dead performed at the Phor Tay Institution, for example, people

10. Stephan Feuchtwang recalls seeing in Shiding a pig carried as an offering with a single chopstick strapped to it, doubling the offering to two pigs by the pun of the pronunciation of chopsticks (*tu*) with pig (*tu*) in Taiwanese Hokkien.

offered vegetarian satay (Malay) to their spirit guests (see Illustration 4).¹¹



Illustration 4: At Penang’s Phor Tay Institution, vegetarian offerings made during a Buddhist ceremony for the Hungry Ghosts on the 30th day of the seventh lunar month include plates of *satay*, a popular Southeast Asian dish typically made with cubed meats and seafoods that are marinated in spices (including turmeric), threaded on skewers and barbecued. Vegetarian meat substitutes are usually made with soy products and wheat gluten. George Town, Penang, August 1979 (Photograph: Jean DeBernardi)

11. In an analysis of syncretism, I have described it as being in some cases a symbolic expression of amity in which two ritual elements or performances are combined while maintaining their distinct identities. I would regard this use of a vegetarian offering to fulfill a Daoist ritual requirement of a meat sacrifice as an example of syncretic amity (see DeBernardi 2009).

Historical legends and stories attach to some special festival offerings: wrapped dumplings commemorate the tragic death of Chu Yuan 屈原, the loyal minister betrayed at court; mooncakes recall an uprising against the Mongols. An offering of tall stalks of sugarcane as thanksgiving to the Lord of Heaven recalls a miraculous rescue from enemies (see DeBernardi 2004, Chapter 6). Other stories highlight moral messages. For example, Buddhists explained the rituals of seventh lunar month (or Hungry Ghosts Festival) by recounting the story of Mulian and his mother. Mulian was a filial son who sought to make food offerings to his mother's spirit. But because of her selfishness, in hell she was sentenced to punishment and denied the pleasure of consuming those offerings. He prayed to Buddha who intervened, allowing the ghosts to visit earth once a year to receive offerings from the living (see DeBernardi 2004, Chapter 7).¹²

Hokkien describe the practice of sharing meaning-laden foods as "eating meaning" (*ciaq yisu; chi yisi* 吃意思). Word plays and rhymes link the food's name with desired outcomes. For example, Hokkien offer pineapple on their altars since the Hokkien word for pineapple sounds like "prosperity is coming" (*ongtai; wanglei* 旺來). They offer peanuts to guests together with a rhyming couplet as a wish for long life: "Eat peanuts, live a long life" (*ciaq todau, ciao laolao* 吃土豆). They may label food offerings with characters, further highlighting the auspicious message. In Illustration 1, for example, wrapped cakes and fruits display the characters for growth (*fa*), happiness (*fu*), and prosperity (*wang*).

Although some foods—stalks of sugarcane, for example, or pineapple—have meaning because of historical legends or punning word-play, many of the foods offered are chosen for their abstract qualities. Some foods offerings are typical, but because attributes like sweet-

12. People offer a playful explanation for the sticky sweet year cake offered to the Kitchen God at year's end. The Kitchen God is Heaven's protective emissary in the home. They offer him sticky cake so that when he returns to heaven to make his annual report on the family his mouth will be glued shut, preventing him from reporting quarrels in the kitchen to the Lord of Heaven.

ness, purity, and redness are abstract, many foods may symbolize those attributes. Moreover, since food offerings symbolize abundance in their amplitude, people commonly multiply them, adding foods with appropriate qualities.

As a consequence of this flexibility, in Singapore and Penang traditional ritual foods now encompass many Southeast Asian food items. Traditionalists offer citrus fruits and lichis, but also rambutan; they offer sticky glutinous "year cakes," but sometimes add *Kueh Lapis* (Malay) a steamed layer cake with similar qualities. Since women were and are charged with the preparation of ritual and festival foods, no doubt their choices influenced the direction of ritual culinary drift.

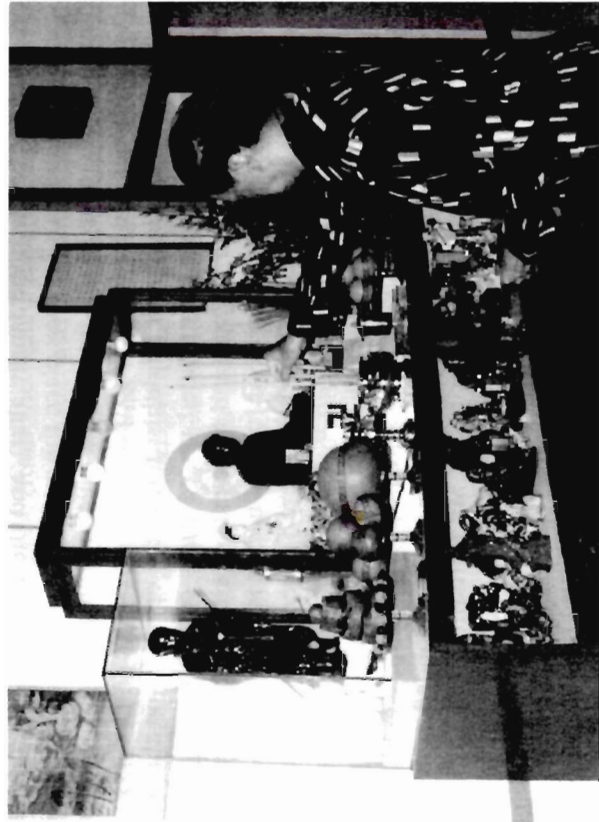


Illustration 5: A Buddhist places incense on the family altar on New Year's Eve. On the left side of the altar is placed stack of three sweet/heaven cakes (*thi*) kueh; tiangao 甜糕) surrounded by red dates and longan and with a mandarin orange on top. They also

offered a 'good family' of citrus fruits. Ayer Itam, Penang, 15 February 1980. (Photo: Jean DeBernardi)

Chinese New Year

The Chinese New Year opens and closes with sweetness. On the first day of the New Year, people offer and share a variety of sweet foods. On the ninth day of the first lunar month they venerate Heaven with sugarcane and sweet cake; they close the event on the fifteenth by offering and sharing a sweet *nyonya* dessert.

On New Year's Eve, the family gathers and makes offerings on household altars. These include small altars to Heaven (a small elevated shrine next to the front door), the God of the Earth (typically on the floor beneath the family altar), and the Kitchen God (on the wall in the kitchen). But they place the greatest profusion of offerings on the family altar in the front room on the house, which contains icons of deities and Buddhas, and (if there are any) ancestral tablets.

In a Penang Hainanese Buddhist home, for example, on the eve of Chinese New Year they placed varied fruits on the family altar, including a mound of longans and four sorts of citrus fruit—pomelo, lime, orange, and mandarin orange, which together, they said, formed a "good family." They also offered three stacked "sweet/heaven cakes" (*thi'* kueh; *tian gao* 甜糕), a traditional Chinese sweet offering made from glutinous rice and sugar that is poured into round banana leaf molds to make offerings. The three cakes were graduated in size, wrapped with bands of red paper, and surrounded with red dates and longan (see Illustration 5). My Hainanese friends also explained that the Mandarin name for "sweet cake" is "year cake" (*nian gao* 年糕), which puns with "years tall," i.e. living until an old age.

But this family also offered *Kueh Lapis*, a Steamed Layer Cake popular throughout Southeast Asia that can be made either with tapioca flour and coconut milk or with flour, butter and eggs (like a European cake). The cake is painstakingly steamed one layer at a time, which allows the cook to create thin layers in contrasting colors, often red and white or red, green and white. The many layers of this

cake signify a wish for upward progress in life.

On New Year's Day, family members made a round of visits to family and friends, where the hosts offered guests a variety of snacks that have symbolic meaning, a practice that as I have discussed above is called eating meaning.¹³ The foods so shared typically include peanuts, representing long life, and oranges, which represents wealth since the name for the fruit is homonymous with the Cantonese word meaning gold. Also typical is a sweet soup (*tong sui*; *tang shui* 糖水), which Penangites make with dried longans, snow fungus, red dates, and ginkgo nuts.

At Chinese New Year Penangites also offer guests a variety of sweet confections called *kueh* in Hokkien, some of which Penangites identify as *nyonya*-style foods. Two popular *kueh* for Chinese New Year are *Kueh Bangkek* (from the Malay, *Bangkit*, meaning 'rising up'), a delicate white sweet made with tapioca or sago flour and coconut milk and pressed in a mold into animal or floral shapes and *Kueh Kapit* [*Kar Peki*], crisp round wafers made from rice flour and coconut milk that are stamped with auspicious words and symbols. These are cooked over fire in a round metal press and folded in fourths or rolled like scrolls while still warm.

Penangites share the practice of offering sweet festive foods like *Kueh Kapit* with Malays and Indonesians, who serve sweet desserts at Eid-ul-Fitr, the Muslim holiday that closes the Ramadan month of fasting.¹⁴ Malays and Indonesians use the same name (often spelled *kueib*) for similar sweets, and many *nyonya kueh* have Malay names.

13. Victor Yue notes that the name *tong sui* derives from Cantonese, and that Hokkien commonly call this dish Longan Tea (*lenggeng teb*; *longyan cha* 龍眼茶).

14. When I lived for three months in highland Sumatra in 1978, I found that the Gayo, who speak a language very similar to Malay, served two popular sweet desserts at Eid-ul-Fitr. One was *lapat*, a small log-shaped sweet wrapped in a piece of banana leaf and made from glutinous rice, palm sugar, and coconut milk, which they gave as gifts; they also made sweet wafer cookies in an iron press that resembled *Kireh Kapit*, which they described as being *asli* (or "original").

Many *kueh* are Southeast Asian in their ingredients, including coconut milk, palm sugar, pandanus leaves for flavoring and its green color, and *bunga telang* or butterfly pea flowers used to color glutinous rice cakes an intense blue.¹⁵ These foods are likely to have been introduced into the repertoire of Penang and Singaporean Chinese ritual festival foods from Malay cuisine.

I further speculate that Chinese and Malays both borrowed at least one of their festival foods from the European repertoire of sweets. *Kueh Kapit*—the crisp wafers shared at Chinese New Year that Malays also enjoy as a festive food—bear a strong family resemblance to the European sweets called wafers, waffles, *gaufrettes* (French) or *pizelles* (Italian). These are all made using iron presses that stamp the wafers with a design; the wafers are then often rolled or folded.

Some of the earliest European wafers had ritual use: although neither sweet nor folded, the round, white, communion wafer, which has been used in the Christian ritual for at least 1,000 years, is created in a press and often stamped with religious symbols. It seems probable that Europeans introduced the method of making wafers with a metal press into Southeast Asian cuisine during the colonial period. For Chinese, the sweetness and round shape of wafers, together with the potential of stamping them with auspicious sym-

15. In the entry on *Kuitib* (alternate spellings: *kueh*, *kue*, or *kway*) in Wikipedia, the anonymous author claims that *kuitib* is a Hokkien word, but a widely-used and authoritative Malay dictionary does not identify *kuitib* as a Hokkien loan word (Coope 1976:148). The author of the Wikipedia entry writes *kuitib* with a character that is pronounced *gao* in Mandarin, and means “cake.” The fact that it may be written undoubtedly lends weight to the perception that this is a Hokkien word. But Hokkien speakers also pronounce the same character as *kob*, which is more closely cognate with the Mandarin *gao* than *kuitib*. There is a family resemblance between Chinese and Southeast Asian sweet cakes, but a far greater profusion of these in Southeast Asia than in China. Consequently, it seems likely Hokkien sojourners and immigrants to Southeast Asia borrowed the word *kuitib* (or *kueh* as Hokkiens often spell it) from Malay.

bols, undoubtedly made them a candidate for festive and ritual use. Once added to festival cuisine, people classed wafers with other sweets, and had no reason to recall their origin.¹⁶

Cakes are not only offered to guests for their auspicious meanings but some are also used as offerings. When Hokkien offer thanksgiving to the Lord of Heaven on the ninth day of the first lunar month, the cakes used for offerings include a mix of traditional and *nyonya* cakes. These include Sweet/Heaven cakes, cakes that rise (*buat kueh*; *fa gao* 發糕), which symbolize growth and prosperity; pink “tortoises” made of bread dough (*mi ku*; *mian gu* 麵龜), shiny red glutinous rice “tortoises” (*ang ku kueh*, *bong gu gao* 紅龜糕); and *bee kob* (*mi guo* 米糕), a sweet sticky rice and coconut milk cake cut into diamonds and used to worship the Lord of Heaven. Whatever their provenance may be, the cakes used as offerings share the properties of sweetness and/or of rising.

Daoists celebrate the ninth day of the first lunar month as the Jade Emperor’s birthday, and many Penangites visit his temple on the eve of that date. On that night, Hokkien Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia also make special thanksgiving offerings to the Lord of Heaven (Thinkong; Tiangong 天公), whom some identify with the Jade Emperor but others with the Emperor of the Dark Heavens. As I have described elsewhere (DeBernardi 2004: 143–48), Hokkien Chinese arrange their offerings on a three-level altar facing the sky in front of their homes or businesses. If the family or business has prospered in the last year, they add one or more roasted pigs.

In Southern Min/Hokkien the word “sweet” (*thi*’, *tian* 甜) puns with “heaven” (*thi*’, *tian* 天). Consequently many offerings to heavenly deities have the attribute of sweetness. For example, Hokkien offer “sweet cake” (*thi*’ *kueh*; Mandarin: *nian gao* 年糕, or year cake)

16. Undoubtedly many foods are borrowed with little historical memory.

There is much debate, for example, about the origin of the English term ketchup, which appears to be a Hokkien term for fish sauce (*koē-chiap*) borrowed into Malay and used to describe thick soy sauce (*kicap*), then taken by the Dutch as *ketjap*, from whence the term was adopted into English.

to the Lord of Heaven and his emissary in the home, the Kirchen God. They also attach tall sugarcane stalks and yellow paper streamers to both sides of the altar, which they explain alludes to an event in their history in which the Lord of Heaven rescued them from invaders by causing a sugarcane field to grow up, allowing them to hide. But people also explain that the Hokkien name for sugarcane—*gambbia* (Mandarin: *ganzhe* 甘蔗)—puns on the word for “thanksgiving”—*kamsia* (Mandarin: *ganxie* 感謝).

In the *nyonya* home where I lived, as the family placed offerings to the Lord of Heaven on the ninth day of the first lunar month, they recited playful Hokkien rhymes: “*pai ang ku, tan hui ku*” which they translated as “offer red tortoise cake and get land”; “*Pai Bee Koh mai loso*” which means “Offer bee koh and don’t talk so much!”; and *Holobu, khi tua chbu*, “[Offer a] bottle gourd, build a big house.”¹⁷

They also offered five sets of fruit and a set of bright pink offerings made of hardened sugar and shaped something like molded candies, which are called the five wild animals (*ko stew; wu sbou* 五獸).¹⁸ They also offered mounds of pink bread tortoises (*ni ku; mian gu*), that they explained was “for family,” and vegetable biscuits (*chai pta*; *cai bing* 菜餅) to the Lord of Heaven’s assistants.

Finally, *nyonya* Penangites close the New Year period on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month by offering *Pengat* (Malay), a sweet *nyonya* dessert soup. *Pengat* contains different colored sweet potatoes and yams cut into diamond shapes, banana, blackeyed beans, palm sugar, pandanas leave, and thick coconut milk. To this mix is added tapioca jelly made into squares and colored red and white. My landlady and her son observed that they “offer (*pai*; *bai* 拜) this to complete the New Year.”¹⁹

17. The Hokkien word for gourd is *holobu*, the last syllable of which (*bu*) puns with a word meaning “prosper” (*bu; fu*), which may explain its popular use as an offering.

18. According to a Singapore spirit medium, these represent the phoenix, lion, pagoda, elephant and dragon.

19. Although they first called this *Bubor Chacha*, which is the name of a popular dessert soup, when they described it in more detail they called it

Funerals and Ancestor Worship

During many of the events of the annual cycle, traditional Chinese make food offerings to their ancestors. When an individual dies, the responsibility falls to their descendants, including daughters and daughters-in-law, to make food offerings to their spirit, beginning with the funeral. According to Hokkien custom, the eldest son looks after most of the important arrangements, but daughters and daughters-in-law also have duties. At the wake, the deceased person’s daughters-in-law have the task of offering him or her their favorite foods. For the funeral, a daughter prepares the “three sacrifices” (*sase; sansheng* 三牲), which includes a pig’s head and tail, fish, and a whole chicken.²⁰ The family continues to make food offerings to the spirits of their deceased ancestors at Chinese New Year, Qingming, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, the Hungry Ghosts Festival, and Winter Solstice. At the Hungry Ghosts Festival, family members (typically women) again prepare the “three sacrifices,” which comprise a whole cooked chicken with the head and feet still on, a slab of roast pork, and two whole fish on a plate.²¹

Pengat. The two dishes are very similar but not identical. *Pengat* is a Malay term describing fruit cooked in coconut milk.

20. I am grateful to Victor Yue for this information, which he elicited in response to a questionnaire that he circulated on this list-serve concerning funeral rituals. For a detailed consideration of funeral food offerings in Taiwan that includes analysis of the ritual role of women and the significance of offering the pig’s head and tail, see Thompson 1988.

21. According to Tan Eng Hing, a Singaporean spirit medium, these three include one that lays eggs, another that gives birth, and a third that lives in water. The first is usually a chicken or a duck (but one does not offer duck to Guangong, the God of War). The second is usually pig although goat could be used. For the third, fish or crabs are most commonly used. If five sacrificial foods are offered, the spirit medium identified these as likely to be duck, chicken, pork, fish and crabs; my landlady’s son listed chicken, pork, fish, whole fried squid, and vermicelli noodles, adding that that sacrifice was a Daoist practice and that Buddhists made no



Illustration 6: During the Hungry Ghosts festival celebrations at the Ayer Itam Market, participants amass offerings to the ghosts on large tables. Here, items offered include a platter with a whole chicken on its back, a small slab of pork, two oranges, a bundle of scallions and cilantro with the roots on (which Thompson proposes represents a long-lasting relationship [1988: 89]), three tea cups and three sets of chopsticks; a bag of pink-and-white *mor bor kueh* on the left; a mound of mandarin oranges; a bottle of oil and a small plate of wrapped dumplings; a mound of pink raised cakes shaped like peaches; a plate of crabs; another plate of oranges; and piles of paper money and paper charms. Ayer Itam, Penang, 13–17 August 1980. (Photo: Jean DeBernardi)

sacrifices. I thank Victor Yue for interviewing Tan Eng Hing to clarify this point. For a discussion of Daoist meat offerings in Taiwan see Haruji Asano (2002).

Illustration 7: Paper tablets and offerings at a Cantonese *kong teik* (*gongde* 功德) ceremony in which Daoist priests perform a ritual to offer paper objects (a bungalow, car, servants, etc.) to the deceased parents. Notice the two pyramid-like structures to the left and right of the paper tablets, which are composed of *mor bor kueh*, an offering used at funerals and during the Hungry Ghosts Festival. Ayer Itam, Penang, 1980. (Photograph: Jean DeBernardi)



At funerals and at the Hungry Ghosts Festival, people also offer pink-and-white *mor bor kueh*, a small breadlike white cake dyed pink on top. Unlike other cakes and breads, *mor bor kueh* are only made for the seventh month and for funerals; they are not offered or eaten at the New Year. When people die, the mourners offer *mor bor kueh* (see Illustration 7), and offer prayers every seven days for seven weeks (*chbit-chbit; qi-qi*). People also offer this cake during the seventh lunar month, placing it on offering tables laden with food, but also on the ground by a road. Consequently this *kueh* is uniquely associated with ancestor worship and the placation of ghosts.

Ancestor worship in Penang also has a Southeast Asian flavor. For *nyonya* families, this means especially *nyonya* foods that blend Southeast Asian and Chinese spices and preparation styles. These include “stirfried dried cuttlefish” (*joo boo char; you yu chao* 魷魚炒) and “salted vegetable and duck soup” (*kiamchbai ak; xiancai yu*

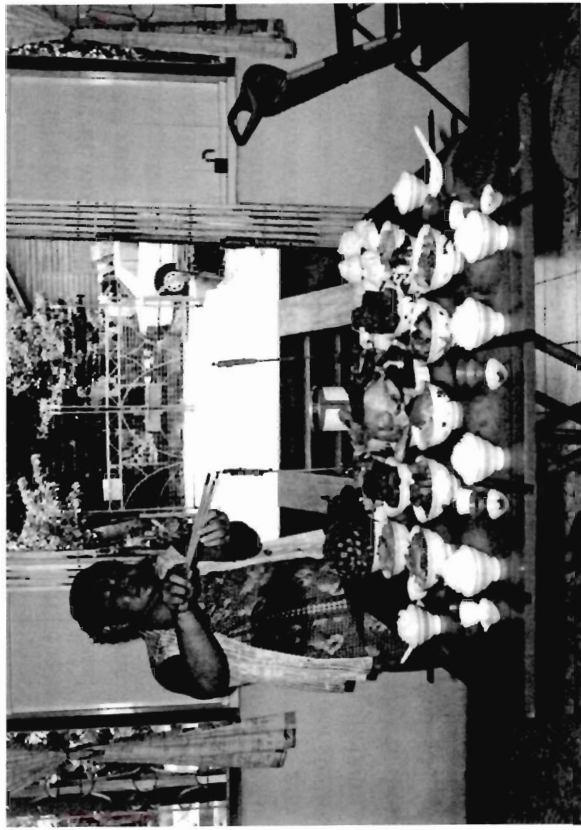
鹹菜鴨。

Joo boo char is a dish made to honor the ancestors, and consists of very finely shredded dried cuttlefish (whose appearance one friend compared to the white hairs in a grandfather's beard), pork, jicama (*bangkuang*), carrot, onion, garlic leaf, and dried mushroom.²² *Kiamchai ak* is a rich, flavorful stew made from salted mushroom greens, roasted duck, pork, nutmeg, tamarind and/or sour plums. Other dishes that my landlady prepared and offered included curry chicken with potato, beancurd wrapped pork sausages (*lorbak*), and pork "spare parts" soup. In an interview, my landlady explained that *joo boo char* was the most important of the dishes, and that it represented respect of the dead. Her son added, "These practices are a part of the culture; the ancestors will look upon you. The ancestors can disturb us or create obstacles." Illustration 8: Madame Tan prepares a table of offerings for ancestors at the midpoint of the seventh lunar month. On this occasion, she sent her husband to his mother's house and made offerings to her own ancestors. These included the three sacrifices, *mor bor kueb*, and a pineapple, which represents a wish for future prosperity. Ayer Itam, Penang, August 1980. (Photograph: Jean DeBernardi)

Although the practices of ancestor worship undoubtedly were designed to undergird the authority of elders and men, these practices also tap into deeply held sentiments. In the course of a visit to my former landlady a few years ago, she reminded me that the ancestor offering that I had observed in 1980 was in fact an offering to HER ancestors, not her husband's, and that he had gone to his mother's house to venerate his ancestors.

In a popular study of *Baba* culture, Cheo Kim Ban and Muriel Speeden also note that some *Nyonya/Baba* Chinese invite their wives' ancestors when they make food offerings in their home:

22. My landlady and her son described the cutting style as *silang*, using a Malay word meaning "crosswise"; and also as "straight" (*tit*; *zhi*). For pictures of these two dishes and other *nyonya* foods, including *ang ku and tbi"* *kueb*, see <http://www.penang-traveltips.com/penang-nyonya-dishes.htm> (accessed May 5, 2009).



The evening before New Year's Eve, the ancestors are invited to come for the next evening's feast. Some modern Babas, in order to save time and money, invite their wives' ancestors as well. This, according to tradition, is wrong because the wives' ancestors will never be admitted by the door gods, as the feast is only for those who belong to the family of the man of the house. A wife's ancestors, it is believed, should go to her eldest brother's house, or the house of whichever son is responsible for the offerings. But the wife of the head of the family can invite her ancestors if she sets up a small altar outside her house and conducts separate prayers. (Cheo and Speeden 1988: 51-52)

A Singaporean friend noted, for example, that because his mother lived with her daughter and son-in-law, who venerated the husband's ancestors in the house, she venerated her own late mother on a table outside. As he explained it, since this house does not belong to the mother's descendant, she would not come into the house to partake of the offerings.

Traditionalists may believe that the door gods would bar the wife's

ancestors from the home, but at the time my landlady seemed confident that her petition to allow her ancestors to enter would be granted. I do not think that she intended to take a stand against the patrilineal emphasis in the Chinese kinship system but she did use the occasion to express her sentimental attachment to her deceased parents with no objection from her husband.

As I have shown in this section, many typical Chinese festival foods in Penang, including some dishes that are typical of ancestor worship, show deep local influence. When Chinese immigrants married Southeast Asian women, then asked them to take responsibility for worshipping their ancestors, they opened the door to the introduction of Southeast Asian food practices. As I speculate above, their ritual and festive foods also include some that Europeans are likely to have brought to the region. Although people are aware of the fact that their ritual and festival foods show traces of local influence, they accept this food culture as being their form of Chinese tradition.

In the next section, I discuss issues that Chinese Christians face as they seek to avoid partaking in any traditional activities that might be construed as idol worship. Fire consumes offerings of incense, paper goods, candles, and lamp oil; flowers remain on the altar until they wilt. But devotees typically first offer foods then share them. Chinese Christians conclude that they must refuse these foods, often to the distress of non-Christian family members.

Especially for recent converts, this change can be very difficult. First, it draws a boundary between Christians and non-Christians within the home. Second, it severs them from past practices and experiences. Because foods are associated with childhood emotions and experiences, this may be very difficult. Chinese Christian women often must decide which practices to retain and which to discard, and they often resist an overly-strict application of the rule.

Chinese Christians and Ancestor Worship

Taiwanese Presbyterian theologian C. S. Song retells an anecdote about anthropologist A. R. R. Radcliffe-Brown. On observing food offerings in North China, Radcliffe-Brown asked his assistant if Chi-

nese really thought that their ancestors could eat these foods and drink the wine? The assistant responded by asking Radcliffe-Brown if the British really believed that when they put flowers on the grave their ancestors would return to smell the flowers?²³ Song retells this story seeking to convince Christians to be more accepting of the Chinese practice of ancestor worship. Why is it acceptable to place flowers on a grave, but not food?

In 2003, the Singapore Catholic diocese affirmed that Catholics may "observe family rites (for example, showing marks of respect to ancestors) so as not to break their ties with their family and relations" and also "participate in social ceremonies (for example, on the occasion of a funeral) so as not to isolate themselves from the community to which they belong."²⁴ Singapore's Liturgy Commission noted that since Vatican II, the Catholic Church had encouraged the inculturation of Christianity in local cultures and cited precedents for Catholic forms of ancestor worship. They proposed that Chinese Catholics commemorate their ancestors in their homes by setting up a tablet with the individual's name together with a crucifix on a table, and that the group make offerings of flowers, food, candles, incense, and wine on All Souls Day, Qingming, and Lunar New Year. Chinese Catholics are not allowed to burn paper money, but they may carry incense at a Daoist funeral ritual.

By contrast, Protestant Christians typically reject any form of so-called idol worship, including ancestral veneration. Traditional Chinese celebrate many points in the lunar year by offering foods on a family or temple altar, then sharing them. If Christians refuse to share these foods, which are laden with moral and symbolic meaning, their relatives may accuse them of being unfilial and disrupting family unity and harmony. Consequently, many Chinese elders believe that

23. Song strongly concludes that Christian theologians have applied the wrong standards to Asian culture (Song 1994:153; for his perspective on ancestor worship also see Song 1979:159-75).

24. Archdiocese of Singapore Liturgy Commission, No. 7 Bulletin, July 2003. <http://www.catholic.org.sg/liturgy/bulletins/7%20-%20Ancestors%20Veneration.htm> (accessed January 14, 2010).

to become a Christian is to "cut oneself off from one's community and culture" (Lee 1986:11).

Allow me to give a few examples of the advice that Christian authors offer to Chinese Christians on which cultural practices associated with the commemoration of the dead they may appropriately follow and which they should distance themselves from (Tan 1978; Tong 1993, 2003; Wong 1994). Many authors adopt a perspective similar to that proposed by Methodist Lucy Tan in *The Christian Answer to Ancestor Worship* (1978), an influential short pamphlet reprinted repeatedly in Singapore. Tan evaluated the practices associated with ancestor worship, concluding that Chinese believe in a two-way merit system in which the living transfer merit to the dead; because of their filial piety, the living ensure that they will be protected from adversity and will enjoy blessings (Tan 1978:2).

Because of the two-way merit system, Tan asserts unequivocally that at festivals like Qingming "the offerings of food, drink, money, flowers, joss-sticks are wrong" (Tan 1978:17). She recommends that Christians visit their family graves and place flowers there as an act of remembrance, but that they do so on a date other than Qingming. Similarly, she observes that although people remember their ancestors during the Hungry Ghosts festival, the underlying meaning of the event is unscriptural, and again advises Christians to remember their dead on a different date.

Singaporean Anglican minister Daniel Tong observes that some congregations encourage their members to participate in Qingming to demonstrate that Christians are filial. But since family members make offerings of food and incense at the grave, he counsels Christians to avoid it, adding that if Christians are present at the tomb but refuse to participate, their relatives might accuse them of lacking filial piety (Tong 1993:38-39).²⁵ Many Chinese Christian leaders concur

25. Another Singaporean Christian has proposed that Christians address the problem by merging Qingming with Easter. Bible-Presbyterian Rev. Daniel Chua Meng Wah notes the parallel meaning of Qingming and Easter: both ritual events are celebrated at the beginning of spring and symbolize death and new life. He proposes "seizing symbols for Christ"

with this advice.

Christian leaders often turn to the Bible for their authority in imposing restrictions on Chinese Christians' participation in the rituals of ancestor worship. For example, Tong cites Corinthians 8 and 10 as his authority when he recommends that Christians seek to separate themselves from participation in all "pagan feasts and worship." He proposes a simple rule: if the food has been offered to idols it should be avoided; no form of ancestor worship is allowed.

But as many Malaysian and Singapore Christian authors have noted, traditional parents may "place food before the ancestral and idol altars for a daily offering, and subsequently serve this food at meals" (Wong 1994:1). Refusing to eat these foods may lead a Christian convert living at home into daily conflict with their non-Christian elders.²⁶

Christianity and Chinese Ritual Food Culture

Although theologians and experts strongly discourage Chinese Christians from participating in any form of ancestor worship, some Christians feel uncomfortable refusing to carry incense at a funeral, or to share food with family members because it has been offered to ancestors. They find one outlet for their doubt and discomfort on the Internet, where they can share their feelings anonymously with other Chinese Christians.

One active Penang Chinese web-logger, for example, employs the Internet to promote the reconciliation of Christianity and ancestor worship. She is Catholic, but Chinese Protestants comment on her

by developing a Chinese Christian Easter festival deploying Chinese opera troupes dramatizing gospel stories. He further urges Christians to pay visits to the graves, not on the traditional Qingming date, but rather on the afternoon of Easter Sunday, where they may venerate they dead with flowers and sing Easter hymns (Chua 1998:96-97).

26. Aware of this, Tong recommends that the Christian convert ask their parents to put aside some food for them so that they need not eat any food that has been offered to the ancestors (Tong 1993:38).

essays, agreeing with her conclusion that the veneration of ancestors is NOT a form of worship but rather an expression of respect and filiality. Some add that Western theologians have gotten it wrong.²⁷

In 2008, for example, this blogger posted a recipe on a Malaysian food and travel web log for the round glutinous rice balls (*tong yuen*; *tang yuan* 湯圓) shared at Chinese Winter Solstice Festival (*tang chek*; *dongzhi* 冬至), which she described as the “Chinese Christmas.” Even though she was Christian, she noted, she still celebrated this festival since it was fun for children to make the brightly colored balls. But she also observed, “Dong Zhi is a very beautiful tradition where family members get together to have a meal. The roundness of the rice balls signifies a wholesome, complete family.” She added that the dessert would keep for a few days, and could be served at Christmas.²⁸

Traditionally the family shares the round rice balls, but also offers them to their ancestors. On the day of the Winter Solstice Festival, the author added a link to her recipe posting to a letter on her personal blog, which is entitled “Faith Journey: Catholic Christian Inner Thoughts.” In that letter, she explained that although she was now Christian, she nonetheless had accompanied her husband and her children to the temple where the ancestral tablets of her mother-in-law and father-in-law were lodged.

Before her conversion to Catholicism, she recalled, “All the meals and tiny details in the netherworld arrangements were my domain.” She still helped her children to make the rice balls and her husband to buy cakes and fruits for offerings. When they arrived at the temple, however, she isolated herself in the outer room and recited silent prayers for her in-laws, leaving them to place the offerings on the

27. See, for example, her illustrated essay “Ancestor Worship and the Understanding of Religious Differences” (posted 14 August 2008). <http://www.chanlilian.net/2008/08/14/ancestors-worship-and-the-understanding-of-religious-differences/> (accessed January 11, 2010).

28. Lilian, “How to make *tang yuan* or *tang yuan* for Winter Solstice 冬至.” Posted on 14 December 2008 <http://www.malaysiabest.net/2008/12/14/> (accessed July 18, 2009).

For Chinese Christians, like Christians everywhere, the ritual calendar is based on the Gregorian calendar and prescribes collective worship on Sunday. The Christian calendar includes major events like Easter and Christmas, but many of the observances associated with these in Europe and North America are not so much Christian as European customs. Chinese Christians are aware, for example, that dyed Easter eggs, the Easter bunny, Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and Christmas cards do not have any Biblical foundation. Aware that many customs associated with Christian holidays are in fact European, many Chinese Christians defend the legitimacy of inculcating Christianity with Chinese culture.

Christians in all regions of the world use food in their breaking of bread ceremony. Although details may vary, they typically share bread (some insist that it must be unleavened) or wafers and wine in a communion service. Christians also widely share food customs, including feasting at Easter and Christmas, and special foods like hot cross buns that are symbolically associated with the crucifixion. But whereas a Yule Log (*Buche de Noel*) or fruitcake may be traditional Christmas foods in France and England, they are not traditional in Asia.

Based on informal observations, I conclude that like the Christian woman who used *tangyuan* for a Christmas dessert, other Chinese Christians celebrate Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter with Asian festival foods. One Penang Christian family that I am familiar with follows local tradition in cooking two dishes associated with ancestor worship—stirfried dried cuttlefish and salted vegetable and duck soup—for family reunion meals. They would not, of course, under any circumstances have *offered* these dishes to their ancestors.³⁰ On birthdays, they also cooked traditional birthday noodles,

29. Lilian, “The Winter Solstice Where I Spent in a Temple.” Posted on 21 December 2008. <http://www.christian-journey.com/the-winter-solstice-where-i-spent-in-a-temple/> (accessed July 18, 2009).

30. Although the Western birthday cake seems to have become popular throughout urban Asia, I would be surprised to learn of a Singaporean or

which are long, uncut noodles that symbolize longevity, and gave pink bread tortises (*mi ku*; *mian gu*), which also represent a wish for long life.³¹ At Qingming they visited family graves, but only offered flowers.

Many Christians have concluded that some festival foods have a significance that is primarily historical and cultural, which makes sharing them on the festival date an acceptable practice for Christians. For example, in *A Biblical Approach to Chinese Traditions and Beliefs*, Tong notes that Chinese eat the wrapped dumplings associated with the 5-5 Festival to commemorate Chu Yuan, the loyal minister who drowned after betrayal at court. He observes that the mooncake is associated with the moon goddess but also with historical events allegedly associated with the plotting of the overthrow of the Manchus [some say the Mongols], and recommends that Christians focus on the patriotic meaning (Tong 2003; also see DeBernardi 2004, Chapter 6).

Fortified by these studies, some Singaporean Christians now employ gifts of festival foods as an evangelistic tool. For example, one Christian leader has urged church members to proselytize in Singapore's so-called heartland, whose residents are predominantly Chinese speaking and who adhere to Chinese religious and cultural traditions. These Christians make gifts to non-Christians of red packets and mandarin oranges during the Chinese New Year period, and of mooncakes during the mid-Autumn Moon Festival. They do these acts of kindness (as they term them) to emphasize that someone can be a Christian without giving up their Chinese identity (Chua 2004: 63-64).³²

Protestant Christians do not make use of festival foods as extensively as Daoists and Buddhists, and at no time do they make food

Malaysian Christian roasting a turkey for Christmas or making reindeer-shaped Christmas cookies with a cookie press.

31. At a wedding of church members, the bride and groom followed the custom of having a tea ceremony for family at their wedding.

32. For a more detailed analysis of evangelistic strategies popular in Singapore, see DeBernardi 2008a and 2008b.

offerings. But Chinese Christians do share some festival and ritual foods within careful limits. As I discuss above, in Singapore some Chinese Christians have concluded that foods that have auspicious meanings or are linked to historical narratives are permissible gifts at the appropriate junctures in the lunar calendar. In sharing festive foods that have meaning, Chinese Christians assert their commonality with non-Christian Chinese, and also defend themselves against the charge that they have rejected their culture.

Conclusion

When Chinese endow ritual foods with symbolic meaning, they transform taste into a vehicle for cultural memory that "disseminates and reproduces a consciousness of unity, particularity, and a sense of belonging among the members of a group" (Assmann 2006:38). The memory and anticipation of foods shared at successive festival events ties the present to past and future. At the same time, festival foods are complex in their symbolism: *Nyonya* dumplings are both Chinese and local; mooncakes may recall the moon goddess for some, and Chinese rebels for others.

As Penang festival foods attest, earlier generations of women who were called on to perform Chinese rites adapted these practices to their own food culture. As a consequence of their innovations, traditional foods now include a rich array of sweet *nonya* cakes, turmeric rice, and chicken curry. Although they may look to experts for guidance in Daoist or Buddhist or Christian orthopraxy, undoubtedly women have made creative revisions to Chinese food culture and religious orthopraxy to suit their own sentiments, values and taste.

Indeed the topic of Chinese festival foods offers unique insight into those sentiments, values, and tastes. When Chinese share festival foods, they share a wish for good fortune, good health, long life, and a good death. Rising cakes express a desire for growth and progress; raw fish a wish for surplus and abundance. Chinese thank their gods for prosperity and placate ghosts with feasts, seeking to avert malicious threats from discontented spirits. They remember the recent dead more personally with offerings that include local favorites like

Curry Kapitan and *nyonya* cakes. Sharing food creates and expresses social bonds, including the enduring bond between the living and the dead (Sutton 2001).

Chinese festivals shape a social experience of time in a rhythm of gathering and dispersion (see DeBernardi 1992, 2004; Stafford 2000). When people offer and share festival and ritual foods, they experience that temporal rhythm through the colors, flavors, and textures of a rich array of foods, including roasted meats, sweet cakes, savory dumplings, rice balls, bread tortoises, un-cut noodles, fruits, nuts, and other symbolic delicacies. In giving mandarin oranges at the New Year and mooncakes in the autumn, Chinese Christians share that seasonal rhythm and sensuous experience with non-Christian Chinese. But when they refuse other symbolic foods—in particular the offerings associated with ancestor worship—they affirm the religious and social boundary that divides them.

Religious leaders may promulgate formal guidelines for ritual food practices, but often it falls to lay people, including women, to interpret and implement these guidelines in their lives. In popular religious practice, the form and content of ritual and festival foods defines a civilizational style that is far broader than local communities and also links Chinese to a deep historical patterns. Daoist offerings to the dead, for example, continue practices that have been performed for millennia (see Nelson 2003; Puett 2005). But Chinese ritual and festival food also have deep roots in local history and society. I have sought to demonstrate that Chinese women in Penang, Malaysia and Singapore have significantly influenced the style and content of ritual and festival foods historically and continue to do so in the face of conflicting prescriptions, values, and sentiments.

Glossary

Pinyin followed by the Southern Min [Hokkien] word in parentheses, English meaning, and characters. Malay terms used in Hokkien are given below without character equivalents.

- Angkong [Hokkien], gods [no character equivalent in Mandarin]
Baba [Malay], a Straits-born Chinese.
bangkaung or *bengkuang* [Malay], jicama, an edible root resembling a turnip.
Bubor Chacha [Malay], sweet dessert made with coconut milk.
cai bing (*chai pian*) 菜餅, vegetarian biscuits.
chi yisi (*ciaq yisu*) 吃意思, literally to “eat meaning,” the practice of consuming foods for their symbolic values.
 Chongyang jie 重陽節, the ninth day of the ninth lunar month; the “double yang” festival.
 Duanwu jie 端午節, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, or Dragon Boat Festival.
dongzhi (*tang chek*) 冬至, winter solstice.
duqi yuan (*tochbai yi*) 肚臍圓, “navel-round” rice balls used to venerate the Seven Sisters.
fa (*buat*) 發, to rise, grow.
fa gao (*buat kueb*) 發糕, cakes that rise, symbolising a wish for growth and prosperity.
 Fodan (Hut Tan) 佛誕, Buddha’s birthday, Wesak Day.
fu (*bock*) 福, prosperity.
ganzbe (*kamchia*) 甘蔗, sugarcane, puns with “thanks” (*ganxie* 感謝).
gula Melaka [Malay], palm sugar.
bonggu gao (*ang ku kueb*) 紅龜糕, red tortoise cakes made with glutinous rice.
bongtau gao (*ang thoe kueb*) 紅桃糕, red peach cake.
bongdou tang (*ang thao thng*) 紅豆湯, sweet red bean soup usually taken as a dessert.
bongzao (*angcbo*) 紅棗, red dates.
jian zong (*kee chang*) 鹹粽, alkaline glutinous rice dumplings used

as vegetarian offerings.
kueh or *kuib* [Malay], sweet confections, often written in Chinese as 糕.
kueh Bangkek or *Kueh Bangkit* [Malay], delicate tapioca or sago flour cake made in a mold.
Kueh Kapit [Kar Pek] [Malay], crisp wafers made in a round metal mold, sometimes called "Love Letters."
Kueh Pulut [Malay], sweet sticky rice cakes.
longyan cha (*lenggeng teb*) 龍眼茶, sweet "tea" made with dried longans.
man yue (*moa goay*) 滿月, full month [after the birth of a child].
mi guo (*bee koh*) 米糕, glutinous rice and coconut milk cake cut in a diamond shape 米糕.
nian gu (*mi ku*) 麵龜, red bread "tortoise."
mor bor kueh, pink-and-white bread-like cakes used as an offering at funerals and during the seventh lunar month. Mandarin equivalent unknown; possibly derived from the Malay word *mohon* meaning "to beg, take one's leave, or ask humbly."
nasi kunyit [Malay], rice cooked with coconut milk and turmeric.
nian gao [Mandarin] 年糕, sweet cake made from rice flower as offering to the Kitchen God; see also *tian gao* 甜糕.
nyonya [Javanese, Malay, and Portuguese³³], a respectful address term for a foreign married woman; a term used to refer to creolized Malay/Chinese culture in Indonesia and Malaysia, including cuisines.
bai (*pai*) 拜, to venerate or worship.
Pengat [Malay], fruit cooked in coconut milk and sugar; used as an offering on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month.
Peranakan [Malay], descendant; a term applied to the Straits Chinese.
Pudu gong (Poto Kong) 普渡公, King of Hell.
Qi Niangma (Chhit Niuma) 七娘媽, Seven Sisters.

33. I take this etymology from the Singapore *Peranakan* Association website (Lee n.d.). (http://www.peranakan.org.sg/Resources/baba_nonya.pdf accessed January 30, 2010).

Qingming (Chheng Beng) 清明, Pure Brightness (5th solar term) festival near spring solstice; visits to the grave.
rou zong (*bak chang*) 肉粽, pyramid-shaped glutinous rice dumpling usually wrapped in bamboo leaves; See also *zongzi* 粽子.
sansheng (*sase*) 三牲, three sacrifices.
Shigong (Saikong) 師公, Daoist priest.
shiuwa yewan (*chap gob mei*) 十五夜晚, fifteenth night of the first lunar month.
tang shui (Cantonese: *tong sui*) 糖水, sweet soup. A popular variety is made with longan, snow fungus, red dates, and ginkgo seed; see also *longyan cha*.
tang yuan (*tang yen* or *tong yuen*) 湯圓, round glutinous rice balls in sweet syrup.
tian gao (*thi*" *kueh*) 甜糕, sweet cake; heavenly cake.
Tiangong (Thinkong) 天公, Lord of Heaven.
wang (*ong*) 旺, prosperous, bright.
wanglai; *buangit* (both pronounced *onglat*) 旺來; 鳳梨, prosperity is coming; pineapple.
xiancai ya (*kiamchhai ak*) 鹹菜鴨, salted vegetable duck soup.
you yu chao (*joo boo char*) 魷魚炒, stirfried dried squid.
yu sbeng (Cantonese: *yee sang*) 魚生, raw fish salad, considered to be typically Cantonese and Chaozhou.
yue bing (*goay pian*) 月餅, mooncakes.
Zaojun (Chau Kun) 灶君, Kitchen God.
Zaoshen (Chau Sin) 灶神, Kitchen God.
Zhongyuan jie 中元節, Central Festival; the Hungry Ghosts Festival.
zong (*chang*) 粽, dumpling wrapped in leaves.
zongzi 粽子, [Mandarin] pyramid-shaped glutinous rice dumpling, usually wrapped in bamboo leaves 粽子; Hokkien: *bak chang* (*rou zong*) 肉粽.

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談檳城、馬來西亞和新加坡婦女 與華人節慶飲食

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摘要：在馬來西亞和新加坡，由於印度教徒和穆斯林不食豬肉，所以無論從日常飲食還是節慶食物都很容易將華人與他們區分開來。在華人範圍內，佛教、道教和基督教徒不同的社會價值觀和宗教觀也通過飲食表現出來。虔誠的佛教徒在節慶時只提供素食，道教徒則準備供奉神靈的肉類，而華人基督徒認為他們持有現代價值觀，因此不為祖先或神靈供奉食物。儘管宗教信仰不同，華人在飲食方面的共性讓他們享有共同的文化身分。婦女在這種多宗教、多民族的環境中主理飲食，一方面起到彰顯宗教差異的重要作用，另一方面也在促進民族文化聯合層面發揮不可低估的作用。她們還常常變換用於節慶場合的飲食，或為了適應自己的口味，或使其符合自己的價值觀，亦或為了滿足自己的精神需要。因此，婦女在文化變革方面的作用也不容忽視。

關鍵詞：基督教，道教節慶，飲食，民族身分。