

Kaori Fushiki
Ryoko Sakurada *Editors*

Anthropology through the Experience of the Physical Body

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Editors

Kaori Fushiki
Department of Humanities
Taisho University
Toshima City, Tokyo, Japan

Ryoko Sakurada
Department of Modern Communication
Ikuei Junior College
Takasaki, Gunma, Japan

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Chapter 3

A Body Out of Place: Pollution and Pregnancy of Hakka Chinese in Sarawak, Malaysia



Elena Gregoria Chai

Abstract This chapter examines the concept of pollution in relation to pregnancy among Hakka Chinese women in contemporary Sarawak, Malaysia. In the study of rites of passage, there is a well-established argument that powerful forces exist within women throughout their lifetimes as they enter different phases and transition between social roles. In many societies, at the onset of pregnancy, a woman is believed to be ‘polluted’ as pregnancy has placed her physiologically and socially in an abnormal position. Hers is a divergent body, a body out of place. Based on extended fieldwork in the resettlement village of Tabidu, the discussion presented here examines the ‘dangerous force’ of pregnancy, a belief that persists among Hakka Chinese. It draws attention to a particular form of pollution at a stage in which a woman’s body is regarded as being anomalous. When pregnant, a woman becomes socially vulnerable because the success or failure of childbirth determines the outcome of lineage continuity. The polluting state of a pregnant woman is called *tai du mat* (大肚抹) and its effects are felt across a broad behavioural range, from the failure to perform normal household chores to affecting children to cry incessantly. The foetus in a womb is believed to have a soul entity, termed *toi shin* (胎神). A pregnant woman is obliged to follow strict rules of prohibitions for the period of pregnancy until a month after birth, and other close kin are also under specific constraints. The discussion demonstrates that the belief and practices associated with pollution are a cultural construct which is symbolic and best understood in specific social contexts.

Keywords Malaysia · Sarawak · Hakka Chinese · Pollution · Pregnancy · Foetus soul

E.G. Chai (✉)

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, Malaysia

e-mail: gelena@unimas.my

3.1 Introduction: Powerful Female Forces

In my previous work on Hakka brides, I researched the forceful *sat* 煞 or power that a bride possesses (Chai 2013). She carries a powerful force from the moment she is transferred from her home to her husband's home. This transfer connotes a liminal phase whereby the bride goes through a passage or a stage during which she neither belongs to her father's lineage nor her husband's. The force that is with her could inflict danger upon those who glance at her during this transitional period. The transfer reaches its climax when the bride steps over a fire pot to cross the threshold of the groom's family. Anyone who glances at her at this time will be *mat to* 抹到 (polluted).¹ The person might experience 'soul loss' (*shi hun* 失魂), resulting in the body behaving in an unusual manner. They might experience fever, fidgeting, migraines or physical ailments. Similarly, the presence or even the glance of a pregnant woman can yield the same outcome. This chapter is an ethnographic account of the powerful force of pregnant women, similar to the force of Hakka brides.

Powerful forces exist within women throughout their lifetimes as they enter different phases and transition between social roles (Gennep 1960). At the onset of pregnancy, a woman is believed to be polluted as pregnancy has placed her physiologically and socially in an abnormal position. Hers is a divergent body, a body out of place. This chapter examines the dangerous 'force' of pregnancy, a belief that persists among the Hakka Chinese in present-day Sarawak, Malaysia. Written as an ethnographic study, this analysis provides a contemporary view into the beliefs of the Hakka, and encourages a comparative study with other Chinese communities. Rather than synthesising a new discovery or reviewing a concept within the studies of Chinese cultures, the discussion documents various phenomena related to pregnancy and pollution which I witnessed in a Hakka community in a village called Tabidu.² Tabidu started as a resettlement village and is situated about 38 km from Kuching, the capital of Sarawak.

3.2 Theories of Pollution and Pregnancy

Topics of pollution and menstrual taboos have garnered a lot of attention in ethnographic reports and have been the subject of worldwide anthropological research. According to Emily M. Ahern (1975), women in Chinese society are considered ritually unclean and dangerously powerful. They are therefore barred from certain

¹ All vernacular terms, unless otherwise indicated in parentheses or footnotes, are written in romanised forms according to the Hakka pronunciation and based on *A Chinese-English dictionary: Hakka-Dialect, as spoken in Kwang-Tung province* (MacIver 1905).

² The field data used were collected from December 2005 to June 2006, and from November 2006 to April 2008. The field research was made possible by a fundamental research grant provided by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. For background information on Tabidu, see Cai Jingfen (2013).

activities as this would cause harm to others. In *Purity and danger* (1966), Mary Douglas proposes that the cultural coding of a substance as a pollutant is a shared perception of that substance as anomalous to a general symbolic, cultural order. Pollutants are coded as ‘dirt’, ‘matter out of place’. In Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb’s introduction to *Blood magic: The anthropology of menstruation* (1998), cultural values and the meaning of menstruation from nine cultures are defined using theoretical approaches to the study of gender and the symbolism of the body. However, the topic of pollution, and in particular relating to pregnancy, is less highlighted.

Arnold van Gennep (1960) views pregnancy, in the context of rites of passage, as a transitional period. In other framings, pregnant women inhabit a liminal stage, and ‘that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as “polluting” and “dangerous”’ (Douglas 1966, cited in Turner 1969: 109). Victor Turner (1967: 7) further reiterates that liminality is dangerous as it comprises a realm of pure possibility. The stage of pregnancy renders a woman socially vulnerable: she is at a critical stage whereby if she succeeds in giving birth then she has carried on the family line. One may argue that in a patrilineal society, the birth of a girl usually does not present continuity of lineage. However, any form of childbirth, even if it is a girl, proves that she is capable of bearing more children in the future and hence capable of preserving the lineage. Should she fail to bear a child at all, she might be regarded as a threat to the family’s lineage.

According to Turner’s liminality theory, a pregnant woman is in a state of limbo where she is neither here nor there. At this stage, she has been detached from her old status and is yet to be attached to a new one. To pass through the stage of being pregnant (a form of anomaly and vulnerability) to a normal state, there are prohibitions that she must observe. These are prohibitions that the people around her must also help safeguard. Social relationships play an important role in ensuring that others do not get in her way and vice versa. Her movements are limited so that social or other situations are unlikely to go wrong, thus preserving the normal order.

3.3 Pollutants in Local Contexts

Pollution is also a topic of concern for people in Tabidu, who refer to dirty elements as *la sap* 垃圾 (dirt). Other descriptions are *la sap ti fong* 垃圾地方 (dirty place), *la sap fong kien* 垃圾房間 (dirty room) and *la sap shin* 垃圾身 (dirty body). However, there are two meanings to the phrase *la sap shin*: one refers to being physically dirty, the other refers to being polluted. For example, a woman who is menstruating is said to have *la sap*. She may thus excuse herself from praying inside a temple by saying that she is having *la sap*. The proper phrase is ‘*loi la sap*’ 来垃圾 (dirt is coming). Alternatively, she could say that she is having *la sap shin*. Menstruating women are actually not prohibited from praying in temples, though they are normally told not to hold the joss sticks and rather just clasp their hands when praying.

A man can also be termed as having *la sap shin* when he is living under the same roof as a female family member who is in confinement. That family member can be his wife, sister or other relatives. As long as both he and the woman in confinement live in the same house, he is considered to be physically polluted by extension. Those who are physically polluted in this sense are prohibited from attending any auspicious events such as weddings or birthdays. Moreover, although they are not strictly restrained from attending processions of deities, they are not allowed to come into contact with the statues of the deities—this includes touching or holding the sedan chair. Performing the ritual of walking on fire is also not advisable as it is believed that this ritual can only be successfully performed by individuals who possess a clean and pure body, and so those polluted will surely get hurt.

The villagers in Tabidu refer to supernatural entities, usually called *kui* 鬼 (ghosts), as *la sap tung-si* 垃圾東西 (dirty substance or dirty thing). The villagers actually prefer to use the term *la sap tung-si* most of the time as the phrase is not too direct, hence less likely to attract any other wandering spirit which might have overheard its name being called. During *kui nyet* 鬼月, the month of the Hungry Ghost Festival which occurs in the seventh lunar month, the villagers believe that the gates of hell open and the human world is consequently filled with wandering spirits. So they refrain from saying ‘*kui*’ or ‘*la sap tung-si*’ and instead say ‘*ho hyun ti*’ 好兄弟 (good brothers). During this month, extra precaution is taken so that one does not become polluted. People refrain from staying out very late or organising special events such as gatherings, birthday celebrations and so on because such events will attract the *ho hyun ti*. Other actions such as speaking boastfully about oneself, complaining or scolding—anything associated with loud or boisterous situations—will also garner the attention of the *ho hyun ti*. If a person unfortunately attracts such unnecessary attention, they might experience unusual things such as seeing the *ho hyun ti* while driving at night, having incessant nightmares or feeling physical discomfort such as chills and shivers at certain hours of the day. These conditions suggest that the person has encountered dirt or *la sap tung-si*. In order to counter the dirt, that person must visit a temple and perform prayers to seek the help of a deity. Additionally, the person should also obtain some talismans from the temple or consult a spirit medium to ascertain the cause of the conditions. In almost all cases, the spirit medium will prescribe a talisman that is to be half-burned before it is dipped into a glass of drinking water, which is then consumed to cleanse the body.

3.4 Pregnancy Pollution in Tabidu

Equally worrisome among the Tabidu villagers is the pollution from a pregnant woman called *tai du mat* 大肚抹 (pregnancy pollution). This pollution can cause little children to have nightmares and cry incessantly at night; it can make adults feel physical discomfort such as unexplained chills or migraines; and it can lead to actions being unsuccessful, for example botched carpentry work or damaged pastries such as *fat pan* 發板 (steam cakes) failing to rise.

So, as a precaution, children wear amulets such as a *si mu pai* 四目牌 (four eyes pendant) to counter *tai du mat*. Such amulets are believed to possess the power to repel the two pairs of eyes of the pregnant mother and the foetus. Further, during the preparation phase of making steam cakes—a day before preparing the raw mixture which is left overnight for fermentation—a red string is obtained from a temple and tied around the bucket or container with the mixture. This is believed to be able to ward off the pollution of pregnant women.

Why are pregnant woman seen as polluted? It is believed that the foetus in the womb has a soul entity. Almost all the Tabidu villagers would affirm this by saying it is called *toi shin* 胎神 (foetus soul). A few informants even asserted that when a family member passes away, they will be reincarnated into the family after a few generations. To explain this, it must be noted that all relationships of a particular person have a red string tied from the past to the present. The red string is non-detachable. Therefore a *toi shin* could be an ancestor from the past.

Sometimes, the *toi shin* becomes mischievous in the sense that it likes to play just like other children. At times it might be in a good mood, and at any time it might throw a tantrum. An informant once said that *toi shin* are like any child who likes to play, especially with other small children, and a favourite game is hide-and-seek. Despite this, it never wanders too far from its mother's womb. That is why furniture is not moved from their usual placements when there is a pregnancy within the family, for fear that this might hurt the playful *toi shin*. Once hurt, the growth of the foetus might be disrupted or the mother might have difficulty during delivery.

The following scenarios were witnessed in Tabidu and are presented here to contextualise the elements of a fear of pregnancy in a local setting. The scenarios are presented first, followed by an explanation and analysis.

3.5 Scenario 1: Seeking Help for a Crying Toddler

For a few nights, a young toddler in Tabidu would wake up and cry. This caused the mother and grandmother to be wary so they visited a spirit medium to seek help. The following conversation was recorded mid-afternoon on 16 May 2005 at a Kwang Yin (Guanyin) 觀音 (Goddess of Mercy) altar in Tabidu, when a spirit medium was in a trance. The woman and her mother-in-law approached the spirit medium for consultation.

MOTHER-IN-LAW My grandson sleeps until the middle of the night and then wakes up crying. We would like to ask what is the matter?

The spirit medium mumbled something in a fuzzy voice. The assistant, who is the son of the spirit medium in his early twenties, helped to translate and said that the grandson has become frightened.

The spirit medium gestured for his assistant to bring forward the talisman, red chop and brush, and proceeded to write on the talisman. He drank from a cup with a small bundle of leaves, then splashed the written talisman with the water that was held in his mouth.

The assistant then passed the talisman to the mother.

The women were careful not to make any noise while waiting for the spirit medium to leave his trance.

Both women looked at the assistant who was taking off the red apron that the spirit medium was wearing. The assistant gave the women a nod, indicating that it was now all right to consult the spirit medium.

MOTHER-IN-LAW Uncle, the Niang Niang 娘娘 [deity] said my grandson was frightened. Don't know what he got 'polluted' *mat to*?

SPIRIT MEDIUM Did he go somewhere? Did he fall down?

Both women discussed quietly among themselves and before they could answer the spirit medium said, 'Take the talisman. Burn and drink it'.

A week later, the crying and nightmares of the young son had ceased and he began to sleep soundlessly. The young son had drunk the talisman water and was wearing a silver necklace with a 'four eyes' pendant.

The following is an analysis that is presented according to the views of the villagers and author, which may differ from beliefs elsewhere or analyses by other researchers on a similar topic. The analysis here is based on a local contextualised explanation.

In Tabidu, mothers or grandmothers become suspicious of children crying for no apparent reasons, behaving abnormally or losing their appetite for a period of time; these are all generally described as manifestations of 'soul loss'. Such behaviours are clearly different from the symptoms of being sick, such as fever, vomiting, diarrhoea and so on, that warrant a doctor's consultation immediately. The scenario above of a child crying incessantly is quite typical, overheard or encountered almost every day in the village.

In such cases, the most reliable deity to seek for help is Kwang Yin Niang Niang 觀音娘娘 (Goddess of Mercy). This deity is believed to be compassionate, especially towards children, and the deity's help is also sought by women who want to conceive or have a smooth delivery. Niang Niang, as the villagers call her, is regarded as a deity who is helpful in matters related to procreation, which is closely related to a woman's life.

Although the most respected deity of the village is Thai Pak Kung 大伯公 (God of Prosperity), Niang Niang is closer at heart to the lives of women there. The help of Thai Pak Kung is sought in matters concerning general well-being, thus rendering the deity as the guardian of the village community. Thai Pak Kung mostly presides over development matters, such as whether a new road should be built or not, or whether old shops should be renovated or left intact, and so on.

In the scenario above, when the spirit medium told the grandmother that the child had been frightened, she reacted by speculating that the child had suffered some form of pollution. She said that her grandson had been *mat to*. In this situation, the source of pollution is largely believed to be *tai du mat*. As a countermeasure, the child wore a 'four eyes' pendant, an amulet to ward off pregnancy pollution.

3.6 Scenario 2: Steam Cake Is Polluted

Below is an excerpt of a casual conversation one evening in May 2007. The conversation was with two elderly female villagers to review the polluting nature of *tai du mat* in the process of cake steaming.

- FEMALE 1 Daughter, have you heard of pregnant woman ‘*mat*’?
- AUTHOR Yes. I have heard of it many times.
- FEMALE 1 No joke about this *mat*. If inflicted, the consequences can be troublesome.
- FEMALE 2 Yes, that’s why a lot of people do not want pregnant women to be around when they are doing things.
- AUTHOR Doing what things, aunt?
- FEMALE 2 Like steaming cakes ... if they are around, surely the cakes will not rise. The whole thing will go to the rubbish bin.
- AUTHOR Oh, how come?
- FEMALE 1 Once I was steaming *fat pan*, my next-door neighbour’s [pregnant] daughter-in-law came to return something that her mother-in-law had borrowed. She went through the back door and walked straight to the kitchen. The cake ... finished.
- AUTHOR Did she touch the cake? How did it happen?
- FEMALE 2 No need to touch. She only needs to look, then *mat to*.
- FEMALE 1 Yes, she wasn’t even near the stove. She just came in and returned the borrowed things. I have never failed making *fat pan* in my life. Only that time. So, never say don’t believe in this *mat*.
- FEMALE 2 The *sat* force they carry around is big. That’s why if sometimes small children became disobedient after they meet with a pregnant woman, they will have bad dreams or fall sick easily.
- AUTHOR Why is the *sat* force so powerful?
- FEMALE 2 Not sure why. Maybe it is still a soul, waiting to reincarnate. Not a human yet.
- FEMALE 1 Yes, it can wander here and there, nearby the mother. That’s why we say, when someone is pregnant, better not to move furniture in the house. Who knows it might hurt the foetus soul.
- AUTHOR Yes, I have heard of this. What about the wearing of pendants with ‘four eyes’? It is for protection from the *sat*?
- FEMALE 2 Yes, normally for small children. Because their souls are still tender, they are vulnerable to *sat*.
- FEMALE 1 My grandchildren also wear colour strings. Their grandfather got it from a procession in Engkilili.³
- AUTHOR What about adults? How can adults protect themselves?
- FEMALE 1 You can bring around a piece of talisman in your pocket. We never know when there is *sat* or dirty things [*la sap tung-sī*], right? [She then went into her room and took out a folded *phu* 符 (talisman) in a small transparent plastic bag.] I carry this whenever I go out. Sometimes I pin it on my shirt if I go to the farm.

³ A small town located 250 km away.

FEMALE 2 I also do the same. But I am forgetful, so I always forget to bring. But if I feel strange, I will just pluck some *mat tshau* 抹草 and take a bath with it.⁴

The *sat* or powerful force possessed by a pregnant woman is similar to the force possessed by a bride on her wedding day, when she is believed to own a powerful and malignant force known as *sin nyong sat* 新娘煞 or the bride's force (Chai 2009). When a bride leaves her house to go to the groom's house, an umbrella must be used to shield her from Thien Kung 天公 (God of Heaven). The powerful force of a bride is believed to be so strong that she is capable of offending the mightiest deity.

There is a popular saying among the villagers which connotes the mighty force of brides: 'Yi ket fun yi tsui thai, le sa to kiang yi' 佢結婚佢最大, 誰都驚佢 (The bride is most powerful on her wedding day, everyone fears her). The height of her power is when she is about to cross the threshold of the groom's house. No one is allowed to look at her crossing except for the groom and the female escort who is sent to fetch her. A *fo lu* 火爐 (fire pot) is placed at the threshold and the bride has to cross over it (Fig. 3.2).⁵ It is believed that the fire rids the evil spirit that is attracted to her force.



Fig. 3.1 *Mat tshau* 抹草 (*Anisomeles indica*) used ceremonially for warding off evil spirits. Source Elena Gregoria Chai

⁴ The scientific name for *mat tshau* is *Anisomeles indica* (Fig. 3.1). It is widely used among the Hakka communities in Sarawak. Observations of other major Hakka communities in Sarawak (such as in Bau, Asajaya, Serian, Engkilili and Miri) confirm that it is used for cleansing purposes and to ward off evil spirits. A bundle of stalks of *mat tshau* is dipped into a bowl or a bucket of water, depending on the size of the crowd. The person holding the bowl or bucket will then take the stalks and sprinkle the water towards the crowd. In a trance, the spirit medium drinks the water dipped with *mat tshau*. It is believed to be purifying. On many occasions, the author has seen small stalks of *mat tshau* kept in baby cots and hung on baby swing chairs.

⁵ Sometimes, instead of using a pot, a talisman and paper money are burned directly and placed on the threshold.



Fig. 3.2 A Hakka bride crossing the threshold of the groom's family house, stepping over a fire pot (*fo lu* 火爐). Source Elena Gregoria Chai

Turner (1969) writes on the power and danger of the bride so that she should always keep her eyes averted, because if she were to look at someone they might be struck blind. As Turner suggests (Turner 1969: 109), individuals who do not fit into well-structured positions, even temporarily, are regarded as ‘dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions’. To the Hakka community, such people are considered polluted or *mat to*. The pollution is also contagious, meaning that if a man is *mat to* by the bride’s malignant force or *sin nyong sat* he may also pass on the pollution to other members of the family when he returns home, with young children being the most vulnerable.

The duration of the effects of the forces possessed by a bride and a pregnant woman is different. The *sin nyong sat* is only present during the transfer of the bride from her house to the groom’s and it ends after the ritual of ancestral worship. Ceremonies related to ancestors are usually performed almost immediately after the bride’s arrival at the groom’s house, typically not more than three hours later. However, *tai du sat* lasts much longer—up to 10 months including the gestation period. The force is diminished or goes into closure when the woman has delivered. After delivery, the mother and the baby are confined inside a room of their home for a month, a period known as *zho nyet* 坐月. During this period, the force of *tai du sat* disappears but the pollution takes on another form. A woman in confinement is said to have *la sap shin* (dirty body). Her family members or those in the same house are also believed to have *la sap shin* and will avoid attending auspicious events, such as weddings and birthdays. The pollutants that they inflict are not specific but general. If the villagers believe that they are polluted with dirt from the woman in confinement, they will avoid any of such gatherings.

3.7 Scenario 3: Polluting the Deities

During the Thai Pak Kung procession,⁶ deities are paraded around Tabidu. The *kim shin* 金身 (statues of deities) are removed from their normal place at temple altars and placed onto sedan chairs for the procession parade. According to local beliefs, the presence of deities at the procession will cleanse the area of evil spirits and provide blessings to the neighbourhood as they travel around the village. To parade the deities, the *kim shin* are strapped onto sedan chairs with strips of red cloth. One sedan chair accommodates one deity, and more sedan chairs will be used if there are more deities to be paraded. During the transfer from the altar at the temple to the sedan chair extra precautions are taken to ward off any possibility of pollution. This is a very important step that ought to be highlighted. Before any designated devotees are allowed to handle the statue, they must first observe a cleansing ritual by washing their hands in a bucket filled with water and some *mat tshau* leaves and then wiping their face with a towel dipped in the bucket (Fig. 3.3).

⁶ A deity worshipped mainly in Sarawak. There are 78 temples in Sarawak devoted to this deity (Cai 2014).



Fig. 3.3 Buckets with *mat tshau* used in a Hakka cleansing ritual. *Source* Elena Gregoria Chai

As noted above, a pregnant woman has *tai du mat* while a woman in confinement has *la sap shin*. A man whose wife is pregnant is considered to be in a polluted condition during the period of pregnancy. Even after delivery, she remains in a similar polluting stage during the confinement period. Not only is her husband affected, but all the people living in the same house with a pregnant woman or a woman in confinement. The deities being transferred from altars to the sedan chairs are also considered to be in stages of transition and are therefore vulnerable. Any form of pollution is malignant to the deities. A spirit medium once said, ‘If the deities are not transferred properly, they will be angry and will not stay’. This implies that the deities will no longer want to stay in the temples erected for them. The temples will thus lose their *ling* 靈 (efficacy).

3.8 Conclusion: Powerful and Dangerous Forces

The Hakka community in Sarawak believes that a pregnant woman has a powerful and dangerous force. Her liminal status is dangerous as it comprises the realm of pure possibility, as denoted by Turner (1967). She is expected to help the family to carry on the lineage by producing children, especially male offspring. However, if she fails to bear a single child at all she is a threat to the lineage. In order to pass

through the stage of anomaly and vulnerability of being pregnant, she herself and the people around her must safeguard certain prohibitions. Her movements are limited because of the perceived force she owns. Social relationships play a pertinent role in ensuring situations do not go wrong and no one gets into her way, and vice versa so that the normal social order is being preserved.

According to the Hakka villagers, a pregnant woman's force is by no means an advantage nor can it be controlled. The polluting substance, though slowly depleting, remains in her for a month after childbirth. Only after the month-long confinement period does she revert to her normal 'unpolluted' state. In the last stage of being a polluting agent, she is again under rules of prohibition. People around her, especially immediate family members, are also under prohibitions. They share the polluting substance with the new mother through the last stage of incorporation into the normal social order.

Through the belief in *mat to*, we can see the connection of a person to the lives of the people within the group. Such a belief in pollution is a cultural construction which is symbolic and contextualised. Beliefs and taboos must be examined in the social setting in which they are found. The concept of 'things out of place' or 'bodies out of place' must be contextualised from the place to which they belong.

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Elena Gregoria Chai is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. She is an anthropologist by training. Her present research examines the interrelatedness of tangible and intangible heritage, heritage assessment of the Punan community in Sarawak, cultural heritage management plans and community empowerment in disaster management. She is the author of *Brides are still brides as they were? Rituals and women in a Hakka community in Sarawak, Malaysia* (2013, in Chinese), *Collection of Sarawak Tua Pek Kong temple layouts* (2014, in Chinese) and *Of temple and Tatung tradition in Singkawang* (2017).