



BECOMING LOCAL

Datuk Kong beliefs in Sarawak, East Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

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

Introduction

In this article we will present beliefs and practices related to the *shen* (deity/spirit) Datuk Kong (Chinese: 拿督公; Na Tuk Kong¹) in Sarawak.² We relate these to practices and beliefs associated with another *shen*, Tua Pek Kong³ (大伯公), and also to those related to *shen* Tu Di Kong (拿督公), the soil deity. We argue that these practices and beliefs reflect a process whereby Chinese in Sarawak have responded to the local natural and cosmological environment in a way that has integrated them into that environment.

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

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¹This is a transliteration of the Mandarin version of the name of this *shen*.

²We use the transliteration *Kong* in this article for 公 as this is the one most commonly used in Sarawak. Some publications use the pinyin form, *Gong*.

³This is a transliteration of the Hokkien version of the name of this *shen*.