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**Interethnic Relations and Shared Cultural Idioms:
A Case Study of the *Xiu Gu Gu* Festival
in Mainland China and Overseas**

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Bernard Formoso

INTRODUCTION

The theoretical point I want to address in this paper relates to issues involving ethnicity, and concerns more precisely the *modus operandi* of interethnic relationships. According to the instrumentalist theories of ethnicity, formulated in the 1970s by N. Glazer & D. Moynihan (1975) and A. Cohen (1970), ethnicity is constituted by the social and cultural resources that people mobilize to support their political and economic interests in a context of inter-group competition. From this perspective, ethnic groups are instrumental groups artificially created and maintained for their pragmatic usefulness. As for the cultural practices used as emblems of membership, they are supposed to be chosen rationally, depending on their relative effectiveness for the collective promotion of shared goals that individuals acting alone would fail to achieve.

Against this utilitarian and individualistic view of the processes at work we can argue, first, that the ends pursued by the interacting groups are not necessarily competing. Second, in real life the acts and choices of the people are rarely as rational as postulated by the instrumentalists, and ethnicity is not simply the result of the converging interests of individuals. Furthermore, group members are far from able to control the image they give of themselves, thus opening the door to stereotypes and misunderstandings in how they are viewed by outsiders.

For their part, the transactionalists, and notably F. Barth (1969: 13-16), conceive ethnicity as a process of categorical ascription which classifies people according to their assumed origin. Such a process is validated by the implementation of socially effective signs of incorporation and exclusion, which dichotomize insiders from outsiders. While this approach shifts the emphasis from political to cognitive issues, and convincingly parts with notions of cultures as bounded entities, it however neglects the role that the norms, ideas and values transmitted within the group may play in structuring interethnic relation. In such a view, the roots of

ethnicity are not in the cultural content associated with ethnic identities but rather in the fact of their dichotomization, through the construction of social boundaries. Consequently, the focus is less on the intercultural dialectical process at work than on its social and cognitive outcomes.

It is precisely better understanding of this dialectical process that I want to advocate here. In my view, we can go deeper into the analysis of the interaction between ethnic groups by considering that the dichotomization between insiders and outsiders often rests on *idioms of shared meanings* which may or may not be the result of the process of mutual acculturation. Against the instrumentalists who tend to limit the scope of their studies to the in-groups' objectives and factors of mobilization, we can argue that it is precisely on the basis of these idioms of shared meanings that interacting groups may sometimes concurrently attempt to achieve the same ends. Such an approach is partly influenced by theories of social constructionism¹, since its general purpose is to understand how groups construct meaning and codified behaviours on the basis of the ideational possibilities offered by their socio-cultural milieu. But in contrast with these theories, the milieu taken into account transcends ethnic boundaries to encompass the contexts of inter-group relations, considered as an inevitable dimension of social life, and the focus is less on the individual or collective choices made on the basis of the in-group resources, than on the way they compromise with otherness to produce effective symbols of identity.

By using the word "idiom", in reference to language, I do not mean that the groups in contact should share the same syntax, grammar and vocabulary to phrase their interaction. I just want to underline that some of the symbols, concepts and practices employed by both sides and structuring the exchange need to be akin enough for them to make sense of their respective views and to motivate either their cooperation or competition. Such idioms rarely erode the interacting groups' identities. This is because the shared meanings usually combine with distinctive ideas in the interpretative process, thus paving the way for possible complementarities in action, but also for ethnocentric stereotypes and one-sided symbolic manipulations which give the leading part to each partner in the relation, and maintain or

¹ See among others Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Hacking, 1975; Hobsbawm and Rangers, 1983; Barth, 1993; Castells, 2004.

even reinforce their social boundaries. In other words, they form a common sense platform for diverging understandings.

To support the argument, I shall analyze here the *xiu gu gu* (修孤骨 - “refining of the orphaned bones”), a festival that the Teochiu people of Chaozhou, in the northeast of Guangdong province in China, perform periodically. Between 1993 and 2005, I had the occasion to attend several celebrations of this festival in China and overseas. After describing the festival, its historical background and purpose, I shall analyze its adaptations to the Thai and Malay contexts.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PRACTICE IN CHINA

According to a folk theory, this practice was devised during the 12th century, under the Song Dynasty, by a Buddhist monk, named Song Da-Feng (宋大峰) who settled in Chaoyang County (Chaozhou). Legendary accounts about this monk present him as a miracle-maker who used his magical powers to relieve the local folk from periodic disasters.² He is portrayed in Chaozhou as a local Bodhisattva and after his death, his followers made of his hermitage a Buddhist hall for good deeds, or *shan tang*, which developed charitable activities, including *xiu gu gu*. This charitable body, called Bao De Shang Tang (報德善堂- *shan tang* for the recompense of virtue) is considered as the mother temple of most of the 350 halls for good deeds operating today in the Chaozhou area (they numbered more than 500 before 1949). The legend specifically concerning the practice of *xiu gu gu* relates its creation to a plague which caused thousands of deaths in Shantou. It is said that by devising it Song Da-Feng intended to protect the living from epidemics by burying the corpses, and to offer the

² According to his hagiography, Song Da-Feng was born around 1039. Having passed his mandarin examination, he was appointed governor of a district in Zhejiang, but gave up the position because the corruption of the imperial bureaucracy disgusted him. He then chose to become a Buddhist monk in the neighbouring province of Fujian. Afterwards, he settled in the ruins of an old monastery located on a hill, in the present Chaozhou district of Chaoyang. He rebuilt the monastery and became famous by employing compassion to rescue the needy. He offered free medical treatment for the people, donated coffins and sponsored funerals for those who passed away in poverty. He also raised funds to build a stone bridge at the mouth of a local river whose floods were devastating. According to legend, Song Da-Feng wrote to notify the Gods of the Water of the project and to seek their blessing. They then interrupted the flood tide for seven days, the time needed to complete the work. He passed away when he was 88 years old (1127?), but nobody found his remains. His grave, located in Heping, is said to contain only one of his shoes.

orphan dead an adoptive family, through reintegrating them into the category of normal dead by means of the festival and continuous devotions.

Although in contemporary Chaozhou most *xiu gu gu* activities are organized by *shan tang*, some of them are performed independently of this institutional framework, either by village communities or lineage associations. More fundamentally, the festival seems to be the adaptation to humanitarian concern of the practice of secondary burial which was traditionally widespread in Guangdong, Fujian and the South of Taiwan³. Even though my informants deny the practice of private secondary burials among the Teochiu, the basic goals they pursue by performing the *xiu gu gu* are similar to those put forward by Timothy Tsu in discussing the south of Taiwan, namely purification of the remains, revival of the purified bones, and definition of the geomantic property of the grave (Tsu, 2000:2). As other motivations, in the specific case of the Buddhist cult communities, we can invoke compassion as a mark of piety and the correlative acquisition of good deeds. The humanitarian concern which possibly motivated its creation can be interpreted with reference to the situation of Chaozhou. Surrounded by ranges of mountains, this remote area was, and is still today one of the poorest and most populated part of Guangdong province. Consequently, the cyclical epidemics and starvations which affected the southeast of China for centuries were locally amplified. Informants also suggest the coastal location of Chaozhou as a factor. According to them, a significant part of the unclaimed bodies processed through the ritual were victims of typhoons and shipwrecks.

The main requirement to organize a *xiu gu gu* is, of course, to have gathered an amount of unclaimed remains large enough to justify either the building of a new collective grave or the opening of a old one. Fresh corpses are left to decay from seven to ten years in temporary graves (*zhuang gu chang*, 装骨场 – « place where bones are stored »), but over the last decade the share which such corpses constitute in the stock of orphaned bones has decreased

³ See Lin Xun-Sheng (1955: 25-42); M. Freedman (1971: 118-123); E. Ahern (1973: 163-219), J.L. Watson (1982), S.J. Thompson (1988), or T. Hsu (2000: 1-22). J.L. Watson (1993: 90-91) notes that in China the secondary burial complex is limited to the Southern Han peoples (Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien...). According to him: “*There can be little doubt that the custom is historically linked to close interactions with the non-Han (or more precisely pre-Han) cultures of the region. The pattern of burial and reburial, which plays on the distinction between flesh and bones, is found throughout the highlands of Southeast Asia and extends down the Peninsula into Borneo and New Guinea. Somehow, during the long history of sinicization in South China, indigenous burial practices appear to have been transformed and incorporated into the local versions of Han culture.*”

significantly. Nowadays, local police almost systematically take into charge the unidentified dead for identification and forensic evidence. Moreover, Chinese citizens are increasingly compelled by the authorities to incinerate their dead. As a consequence, the remains collected are mainly old bones and skeletons which are either discovered accidentally,⁴ for example in building sites, or are located in private graves which must be shifted from the farm land they occupy to other places. Such resettlements, motivated by the related processes of overpopulation, urbanization and agricultural intensification, saw a peak during the Maoist collectivisation period. At that time, the local Communists proved to be pragmatic by relying mainly on the *xiu gu gu* tradition to smoothly manage this sensitive issue: the scattered remains were put into collective graves under the supervision of Song Da-Feng or other deities. This is why, despite the ban on *shan tang* activities enforced in the 1950s, the ritual was preserved, even during the Cultural Revolution.⁵

The first sequence of the festival consists of the participants digging out the corpses from their temporary graves and bringing them to their final burial place by way of a procession headed by a statue of Song Da-Feng carried on a palanquin. Next, the bones are washed with water drawn from a natural place chosen by the gods, and are left to dry by the sun. Afterwards, they are put into jars allegorically called *hua jin* (花金- blossoming gold) to express how auspicious should be the transfer of the dead to the other world and the prospective rebirth. The skull is placed on the top of the whole set of remains, facing the front

⁴ The number of bones gathered through this mode is far from insignificant. To take a few examples, Bao De Shan Tang, the oldest Teochiu benevolent hall worshipping Song Da-Feng, collected in the 1990s, more than 20,000 bones by prospecting on the construction site of an industrial plant in Heping (Chaoyang), while during the same period it offered temporary graves to 180 fresh corpses (*ke shi*, “guest bodies” - 客户). On its part, the Haimen branch of Bao De Shan Tang, buried more than 14,000 bones exhumed from building sites, while Cheng De Shan She (诚德善社) of Shantou, at the request of the authorities, took away and buried in the early 1990s more than 1000 skeletons from the site of what is now Shantou University. (Lin Jun-Cong, 1998: 546, 569, 597).

⁵ Such a pragmatic attitude may be interpreted with reference to the political centrality of funeral practices in pre-modern and contemporary China. The Teochiu materials confirm, somehow, the statement made by J.L. Watson about late imperial China that: “*The exclusion of burial rites from the roster of the prescribed death rituals can thus be seen as an implicit concession to ethnic and regional sensitivities*”. He adds that: “*This may well have been the consequence of a conscious policy by imperial officials and educated elites, given that any attempt to control burial practices would have been disastrously expensive, and impossible to enforce*” (1993: 91). Although Communists of the 1950s and 1960s often proved to be more dogmatic, they rapidly faced a sound resistance, especially in rural areas, prompting them to flexibility in the application of the Beijing diktats. More recently, the legal enforcement of incinerating dead gave rise to the same local adjustments. It is notably the case in Chaozhou, where the temporary burying of unclaimed fresh corpses in prospect of *xiu gu gu*, is widely tolerated, some counties or districts going as far as to supply local *shan tang* with unclaimed bodies from other provinces or corpses of individuals sentenced to death.

of the grave. The corpse is supposed to be sitting curled up in the container, thus evoking a foetal position. The *xiu gu gu* device perfectly illustrates the universal pattern analyzed by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966), according to which pollution and disorder are coextensive ideas. Thus, the purification of the bones through their cleaning combines with a layout of the jars respecting the basic principles of a well-ordered sociocosm. The group grave, which can contain in some cases thousands of dead persons, is conceived of as a house,⁶ with a central hall called a *hui yi ting* (会议厅 – « meeting room »), two lateral bedrooms (*fang* – 房), and two bathrooms, one for each gender. While the skeletons identified as male are arranged in rows on the left half of the grave, those seen as female are put on the right side. When the pots are so numerous that they need to be put one above another, on several levels, the grave is called a “pagoda grave” (*fen ta zhong* - 坟塔塚).

Song Da-Feng or other deities who supervise the different steps of the ritual through the channel of mediums performing *wu ji*,⁷ not only define the proper geomantic setting of the grave, its size, and the gender of the dead, but they also appoint among them a king, a queen and a court of six ministers whose function is to rule the whole cohort. The jars of these leaders occupy the front row of the grave. The ability of the king to enact decrees and laws is symbolized by an inkpot put into his jar, together with the usual items accompanying the dead, namely gold paper, paper on which there is printed furniture, clothes and valuables (*gu yi zhi* – 孤衣纸), and a Buddhist sutra called “toward another world” (*wang sheng zhou* – 往生咒). It must be specified here that the restless ghost’s salvation is not strictly related to the finding of part or the totality of his remains. While the bones are important because they provide the

⁶ But while the house of the living is believed to be dominated by the *yang* principle and is called accordingly *yang zhai ju* (阳宅局), the house of the dead is called a *yin zhai ju* (阴宅局), certainly because its purpose is to serve as symbolic flesh to the bones, thus creating a new balance between life principles needed for an auspicious destiny in the otherworld, and in prospect of further rebirth.

⁷ *Wu ji* (武乩 – «spirit-writing of the warrior») is, alongside *wen ji* (文乩 – «spirit-writing of the scholar»), one of the two main types of *fu ji* (扶乩 – *ji* spirit-writing). *Fu ji* is a technique of spirit-writing where two mediums hold a forked branch to write oracles or charms, to point to a place or to cure a patient through application of the divine stylus on painful parts of his/her body. The forked branch symbolizes the *luan*-bird, a mythical bird believed to be the privileged conveyor of heavenly gods. The mediums are a pair because they express the *yin/yang* complementarity as well as the heaven/earth spiritual encounter. The medium who holds one arm of the fork with his right hand, but stands on the left side while facing the altar, is considered as the *yang* and “heaven’s hand” (天手 – *tian shou*). His fellow medium, who holds the other arm of the fork with his left hand, and stands on the right side, serves as an assistant and embodies the *yin* aspect. For its part, the warrior/scholar opposition represents two basic and complementary attributes of imperial power. Whereas *wen ji* consists mainly in the gentle writing of moral poetry, *wu ji* is usually rugged, since the mediums fight against malevolent spirits they try to subdue.

matter for the dead purification to be done, the main aim of the festival is nevertheless the transfer to the otherworld of the *ling hun* (灵魂), the spiritual component of the person. Thus, besides the works of exhumation, mediums go over the seashore, crossroads and nearby countryside to locate wandering souls and to attract them to the grave by means of sutra recitations and paper offerings burnt on the spot.

To conclude this brief description of the festival as it is performed nowadays in Chaozhou, I want to come back to the contribution of Mary Douglas concerning anomalous categories. The orphaned bones manipulated during the festival are anomalous dead and because of this status, following the ideas developed by the British anthropologist, they are perceived as possessing power and danger. In this context, the main aim of the festival is to neutralize the danger they embody by integrating them into the category of the normal dead. In so doing, their power is domesticated to become benevolent.

THE ADAPTATION TO THE THAI CONTEXT

Before analyzing the adaptation of the festival to the Thai context and the idiom of shared meanings which underlies it, there is a need to briefly describe the local situation of the Chinese minority in Thailand. The social integration of the Chinese in Thailand is commonly presented as a model of success in the Southeast Asian context. The acquisition of Thai citizenship by the immigrants or their descendants, and a high rate of intermarriage are interpreted as positive responses on the part of the Chinese to the policies of assimilation of the Thai nationalists who ruled the country from the early 1930s to the late 1960s. Although the Chinese are in control of the economy and are increasingly pervading the political sphere, their hegemony does not seem to create the interethnic tensions and resentment observed in other countries of Southeast Asia, since the Thai tend not to display equally strong motivations for capitalist entrepreneurship. W. Skinner (1954: 113) and R. Coughlin (1960: 197) suggest that this relative lack of interest is due to the influence of Theravada Buddhism which emphasizes the accumulation of merits and the spiritual development of the individual, rather than the acquisition of wealth. Furthermore, the doctrine of karma encourages the Thai to be tolerant of the material success of others, such achievement being considered as a sign of destiny. Intermarriage, and also the fact that generations of Chinese have been educated in Thai as a result of the policy of assimilation, and that they employ a large part of the native

manpower, lead most Chinese to be quite familiar with the Thai culture, habits and relational norms. In the religious sphere, such intimacy is enhanced by the fact that the two populations share a basic set of Buddhist ideas and values. Although the reverse is not true, Chinese and Thai-Chinese are active supporters of the local Buddhist institutions. If few of them accept to be ordained as monks, they however make important donations to monasteries in return for lucky charms, amulets and other protective or divinatory devices. To the same ends, they involve themselves significantly in the cult of *phi*, the Thai spirits which control the invisible dimension of the world.

If we now turn back to the *xiu gu gu* and to its local adaptation, the institution was introduced into Thailand at the beginning of the 20th century by the local branch of Bao De Shan Tang, the first Buddhist Hall for good deeds to have been created in Chaozhou. The association had informally started its charitable activities as early as 1897, but the top leaders of the local Chinese community who managed it were looking for royal patronage before opening it officially. King Chulalongkorn agreed to give his patronage, but under two conditions: that the charitable activities of the association benefit without ethnic debarment the whole population of the kingdom, and that the *ngan kep sop rayat*⁸ that Bao De Shan Tang intended to organize respected Thai customs concerning the unfortunate dead. The custom that the king was referring to is linked to the Thai belief that unfortunate dead are those whose destiny on earth is shortened by bad karma. Before being properly processed through cremation these dead must make repentance on earth during at least three years, which correspond to the Buddhist Triple Gem, namely Buddha, *dharma* (the teaching of Buddha) and *sangha* (the monastic community in charge of propagating the truth). Accordingly, they are buried, preferably in the vicinity of Thai monasteries which serve as protective umbrellas against their malevolent power. In practice, the feeling of fear that these bad dead arouse among the Thai, especially among the poor and less educated, entails in most cases their desertion. They remain buried forever; their souls being consequently condemned to haunt endlessly some carefully avoided places of the human world.

Following the royal requirements, Bao De Shan Tang quickly modified the *xiu gu gu* in a way I shall describe later, and performed its first festival in 1910, as part of the ceremonies

⁸ The Thai compound created by the king to name this new and alien custom is close in meaning to the Chinese expression, since it can be translated by: “festival to collect the corpses without parents”.

marking its official opening. If most of the 100 bodies ritually processed for the occasion were those of Chinese coolies, on the following occasions the share of Chinese bodies decreased progressively to the point that from the end of the Second World War onwards most of the orphaned bones processed were those of Thai persons. The statement applies both to Bao De Shan Tang, which between 1910 and 1999 cremated more than 153,000 bodies, and to the other *shan tang* operating in Thailand. In a national context where the people originating from Chaozhou constitute about 70% of the Chinese community, the *shan tang* and *shan tang*-like organizations have spread widely in Thai territory, especially from the 1960s onwards, thanks to the spectacular economic growth of the country. Nowadays more than 150 Teochiu *shan tang* or affiliated associations perform their own *xiu gu gu* in Thailand, once every seven to ten years.

Several reasons may be put forward to explain why most orphaned bones taken into charge are Thai. The weakening of the patrilineal ideology among overseas Chinese is one of them; especially in Thailand, where most lineage associations have either disappeared or have lost a large part of their influence. In this context, it is admitted that a daughter or other parent may worship the ancestor instead of a failing son. Orphaned dead have therefore almost totally disappeared among these overseas Chinese. The second and main reason lies in the idiom of shared meanings that I shall explore later, as well as in the Teochiu efforts to adapt the festival to the Thai requirements. The third and last reason is the usual combination of *xiu gu gu* with other charitable activities which give the *shan tang* the opportunity to collect corpses. Most of the dead bodies these associations gather are indeed not brought to their premises, but come from direct or indirect prospecting by their teams of volunteers. Thus, a majority of the halls for good deeds operating in Thailand have teams of rescuers who assist police and fire-fighters in case of disasters, such as floods, fires, landslides, plane crashes, or train derailments. For example, their rescuers intervened massively in Phuket Island after the Tsunami of December 2004. The most dynamic of them also manage 24 hours emergency squads whose ambulances rescue victims of traffic accident in close connection with police and hospitals. In addition, it is admitted that they also appropriate unclaimed bodies and those abandoned by families. Another good way to get skeletons on a large scale is to engage in prospecting in places near the Buddhist monasteries where Tai untimely dead are buried. In return for permission to take away the remains, the *shan tang* usually make generous donations to the monasteries.

If we now turn to the *xiu gu gu* as it is performed in Thailand, the first sequences of the festival are similar to what can be observed in Chaozhou. Under the supervision of Song Da-Feng or other gods communicating through the channel of mediums, the remains are dug out and washed with pure water. To purify efficiently the dead bones from the pollution attached to them, the participants to the ritual must be pure themselves. Accordingly, they eat vegetarian food, drink water purified by gods, refrain from sexual intercourse, and should theoretically dress in white clothes. Menstruating women are prohibited from attending the festival. The bone gatherers also wear charms to protect themselves against the danger of handling this category of dead. After the cleaning, the bones are arranged in rows to be dried by the sun.

Most symbolical aspects concerning the hierarchical and gender arranging of the refined bones have been maintained in Thailand. During the whole ritual process, the skeletons identified as male and female are clearly separated. A king and a queen are also appointed by gods. Certainly under the influence of the Thai, their skull is covered with golden sheets of paper. Another adaptation to the Thai context is the fact that the dead identified as monks are draped with a monastic saffron gown and put aside. For their part, the mummified bodies have a special status, especially when they are embryos or bodies of young children. In the latter case, the mummies are called in Teochiu ‘golden boys’ (金童 – *jin tong*) or ‘jade girls’ (玉女 – *yu nü*) according to their gender. The epithets ‘gold’ and ‘jade’ are usually applied in China to young associates of deities. In the present case, they express both the decay-resistance of these dead and the high value conferred on them. It is believed that these dead have resisted the process of decay because of an exceptional imbalance in favour of their *yang* aspect. Consequently the mummies are believed to have turned into very powerful spirits. In Chaozhou, their jars are set at the back of that of the king, whereas in the Thai context they are put on the top of the pyres, just behind the skulls of the rulers.

The main change introduced in Thailand is that: the skeletons are not set into jars, but are piled up according to their gender into two large chimney pyres called, by means of Buddhist metaphors “treasure pagoda” (宝塔- *bao ta*) for male, and “lotus lake” (蓮花池 – *lian hua chi*) for female. These chimneys may be seen as big collective jars because the bones are laid inside so that they form a single mega-corpse, with the bones of the feet and legs at the bottom, those of the trunk and arms occupying the intermediate position and the skulls arranged to form a pyramid at the top. Through such a device, the symbolism of a well-

ordered social body is preserved, though in a vertical rather than a horizontal way. Two local adjustments however characterize the device. An umbrella, which is the symbol of the king in Thailand, overhangs the skulls of the rulers, and if the remains of a monk have been identified, they are set at the apex, in order to represent the overwhelming spiritual power of the Buddha. Lastly, on the night preceding the cremation, mediums go to places of allegedly frequent violent death - such as crossroads, jails or military fields – and determine the number of wandering souls haunting them. The same number of paper offerings is burnt on these spots to make the spirits rally the cohort of dead to be sent to the other world.

Indicative of the organizers' desire to give evidence of acculturation, local representatives of the state and of the Thai Buddhist clergy, together with daily newspaper and TV reporters are invited to attend the cremation. Afterwards, the ashes are left to cool for three days, following the Thai custom. Finally, devotees put the ashes into white bags whose name, *bao na* (宝拿 – « treasure hold ») perfectly expresses the prospect for wealth related to the manipulation of the dead bones. A procession headed by a statue of Song Da-Feng carries these bags to the *shan tang* graveyard. There, they are stored in the collective grave that the association maintains for the remains from successive *xiu gu gu*. Following the symbolism in use in Chaozhou, the grave is identified with a house and comprises a vault for each gender, but without lateral bathrooms, certainly because the transformation of bones into ashes has made the bathrooms useless. Like in China, the bags containing the ashes of the rulers and of the mummies, which have been previously identified by mediums, occupy the front stage in the grave. Let us add that the final arrangement of the remains into a grave respects the Chinese tradition without infringing radically the local requirements, since the Thai bury part of the ashes and put the rest into an urn stored within the Buddhist temple's compound.

AN IDIOM OF SHARED MEANINGS

The adaptation of the festival to the Thai context having been briefly described, its interpretation and the idiom of shared meanings proposed above require further elaboration. First, it must be said that for both populations bad death is of special concern as a major source of disorder and danger. The mythology of both folk traditions emphasizes the malevolent ghosts of human origin who haunt the world and threaten the whole society. Against this threat the strategy that the Teochiu and the Thai develop is also quite similar.

According to the traditional tripartite pattern of the *rites of passage* (Van Gennep, 1909), they confine these dead during a liminal period into specific places where radiates the protective power of Buddhist institutions, namely the Thai monasteries or the *shan tang*, before reintegrating them ritually into the community of the normal dead. In contemporary Thailand however, because of the reluctance of most Thai to achieve the last step of the process, and because of the acculturation of the *xiu gu gu* imposed by Rama V, the Teochiu became progressively the main performers of a customized version of the Thai ritual. Interestingly, they often refer to the terms of this idiom of shared ideas and practices when they ask the Thai monasteries for permission to gather bones. Expressed roughly, the argument is then: “We are both Buddhist, we both share the same concern for these fearsome ghosts, we can reintegrate them into the cycle of reincarnation according to the Thai custom, so let us do the job for you!”. In Bangkok, some abbots have admitted this kind of argument so much so that they encourage their parishioners to directly send their untimely dead to the Chinese charitable organizations.

This set of common ideas and practices, or idiom of shared meanings, combines in turn with distinct but complementary conceptions which enhance rather than weaken the interethnic cooperation. Among them, the most significant are those concerning the essence of bad death. For the Thai, the bad dead are persons whose destiny on earth was shortened by untimely death, violent or otherwise, because of bad karma. For the Chinese, the unfortunate dead are those who failed to have sons to worship them. In other words, while the Thai think in terms of individual fate by reference to the doctrine of *karma* that Theravada Buddhism emphasizes, the Chinese favour position in the social structure and emphasize the Confucian values of filial piety. Thanks to the prosperity achieved by most Chinese in Thailand and because of the weakening of the patrilineal ideology overseas, the Teochiu have very few of their own orphaned dead to manage. To perform the festival they therefore depend on the Thai who readily abandon their untimely dead. Secondly, the feelings that the unfortunate dead arouse among the Chinese and the Thai are not the same. For the former, these feelings are ambivalent. The orphaned bones generate fear, resentment and compassion, because they are believed to leave unexhausted a part of the person’s vitality, to be some sort of repayment for a debt of life incurred by the parents during a previous life, and to be a waste of vitality that these parents have expended in raising the deceased. Among these sentiments, compassion prevails, especially within the Song Da-Feng cult community. For the Thai, on the contrary, the untimely dead arouse an unambiguous feeling of fear and also a sentiment of shame

because his bad karma sullies the honour of his parents, suspected to be bad Buddhists. It is certainly why the latter are so prompt to dissociate themselves from such dead and to abandon their remains to outsiders. Another difference between the two groups lies in the handling of bones. If the Thai believe that such handling may result in protective power, the belief only applies to the remains of forest Buddhist *arahants* whose ashes and bone splinters are mixed with clay to produce very efficient amulets (cf. Tambiah, 1984). On their hand, the Chinese think that whatever the status and origin of the dead, the proper ritual manipulation of their bones allows those who do it to take on the *yang* property that these bones embody (cf. Watson, 1984). In this respect, and to borrow a formula of K. Dean (1993: 14), the *xiu gu gu* implements a ‘Taoist alchemy of the society’, since part of its *raison d`être* is to convert into positive energy (happiness, wealth, longevity) a negative one (emanating from the restless ghosts), through the manipulation and transformation of dead bones.

The set of different or common ideas which underlies this interethnic cooperation gives rise to ambiguous images of the other from both sides. On the one hand, because of their apparent concern for the salvation of Thai dead, the Teochiu give evidence of their identification with the national community, of their philanthropy and of their desire to rid the country of the malevolent spirits who haunt it. But on the other hand, by displaying sympathy toward fearsome ghosts, they arouse suspicion and confirm their uncivilised nature in the mind of the Thai. In return, the Teochiu think exactly the same of the natives. They feel contempt for the latter that abandon their bad dead and saturate the landscape with malevolent ghosts. Whereas the Thai believe to take advantage of the interaction by getting rid of their bad dead at the lowest cost and by letting the Chinese carry out this dirty work, the Chinese are conversely convinced of their own superiority. This feeling is based on the idea that their community plays a key role in the regeneration and control of sociocosmic forces, and that they are taking advantage of local resources. Thus, while the economic hegemony of the Chinese gives them patronage over a large part of the local population, they seem to extend this relationship to the religious sphere by patronizing part of the Thai dead. Just as their prosperity depends on Thai manpower, so they try ritually to augment their prosperity by taking over, manipulating and geomantically setting the ashes of the Thai unfortunate dead. Finally, rather than bringing together the Thai and the Chinese, this interethnic cooperation enhances the prejudices they apply to each other and strengthens their social and cultural boundaries.

The common sense platform which made possible the adaptation of the *xiu gu gu* to the Thai cultural context combines several aspects. The first one is the adhesion of both Teochiu and Thai to a basic set of Buddhist values, ideas and symbols, whatever the doctrinal differences otherwise existing between Mahayana and Theravada traditions. Although not equally emphasized, the concepts of *karma*, *nirvana*, reincarnation, and good deeds (versus misdeeds) are familiar to the two peoples, and so are the ideals of compassion and of renunciation respectively embodied by the mythical figures of the *bodhisattva* and of the *arahant*. It should be noted here that Song Da-Feng perfectly conflates those two ideal-types, since he is said to have withdrawn from a position in the imperial bureaucracy to live as a wandering ascetic while generously providing charity to the needy. Although Song Da-feng is too minor and Chaozhou located too far away to be known by the Thai, the two populations have nevertheless in common the worship of prominent figures of the Buddhist pantheon (Buddha, Maitreya, Maugdalyayana...). Last but not least, they also come close by relying on Buddhist institutions to contain the malevolent power of anomalous dead and to transfer them ritually to the otherworld.

The second aspect to be mentioned stems in distinct-but-fitting ideational elements which appear to be as important as the shared ones to cement the interethnic cooperation. Thus, the Teochiu were all the more predisposed to “adopt” the Thai untimely dead in that they partly correspond to their own “orphaned bones”, the probability being high for young people to have died without any descendants to worship them. Furthermore, the unrestrained dread that the untimely dead triggers among the Thai was a very favourable precondition for their desertion in favour of overseas Teochiu who, in return, had to search beyond their own ethnic community for orphaned dead they believe to be valuable “resources”.

The last dimension of the idiom of shared meanings and “resources” to be considered in the case of the *xiu gu gu* has to do with its political economy overseas. Whereas the elements examined so far pertain to cultural features developed separately by the two populations and are part of long-lasting religious structures, this third aspect concerns the interethnic relationship and the ensuing process of acculturation. It is closely related to political issues because the spur to the Teochiu immigrants to adapt this very typical festival came initially from the native elites. In this respect, the requirements enunciated by the king – the apex figure of the Thai political order – had a direct and decisive effect in the reshaping of the festival. We also need to consider the personality of Rama V: a unanimously respected and

highly authoritative monarch who was furthermore considered as a “friend of the Chinese”. The firm policy of assimilation that the successive nationalist governments pursued after the death of Chulalongkorn was also a great inducement by urging the Teochiu to provide ostentatious signs of social integration by means of the festival. Indirectly, the implementation of this policy for decades led the Chinese and the Thai to be more familiar with the values, ways of thinking, relational norms and institutions of each other, thus making easier the acceptance of this “strange custom” by the natives.

Despite the acculturative pressure exerted by the Thai host society, the semiotic structure and goals of the festival remain unchanged. Although the dead are now cremated, this step doesn't prevent the devotees to absorb beforehand the bones' properties through their manipulation, nor it is an impediment to the storage of the remains (in this case the ashes) into collective graves whose layout respects the Chinese categories of a well-ordered sociocosm. The only difference is that, in Thailand, the bones are cleaned for the one and only time prior to their incineration, whereas in Chaozhou periodical re-openings of graves may lead to successive manipulations and cleanings of the same remains. More generally, the symbolical consequences of the transformation of bones into ashes should not be overemphasized, particularly given the contemporary funeral practices of the Chinese. In several countries of Asia, including the People's Republic of China, Singapore and Malaysia, regulations and eventually law enforcement measures compel them to incinerate their dead. Such a change does not seem to affect ancestor worship as long as the descendants may keep the box or the urn containing the dead remains in a shrine.

EPILOGUE: THE MALAY CASE

The fact that in Thailand the acculturation of the *xiu gu gu* has only entailed minor changes to the Chaozhou ritual device should not lead however to underestimate the impact of external factors in more agonistic contexts of interaction. The marginal and minimalist adaptation of the *xiu gu gu* to the Muslim environment of Malaysia is all the more enlightening in this respect. The Malaysian Teochiu but a small minority of them living in the fishing town of Kuala Kurau (in the north of Perak state) gave up performing the ritual locally. The stubbornness of these people to perform the festival whatever the ambient conditions may be explained by the fact that Kuala Kurau is one of those few towns of Malaysia where the Hua Qiao, mostly Teochiu in this case, form a majority of the population. Moreover, among them

the people originating from Huilai County dominate, this rural and costal area being the main place of Chaozhou where *xiu gu gu* are performed nowadays. It also needs to be said that in this town of about 65,000 inhabitants, seven Teochiu *shan tang* and affiliated organizations were providing charity in 2003. Despite these very specific and favourable conditions, the devotees perform a minimal and spiritual version of the festival consisting of catching the souls of wandering ghost through mediums' prospecting in the town and nearby natural areas. These orphaned souls are then confined to small jars hermetically closed by means of lids and charms, and are temporarily stored into a specific room of the *shan tang*. Their transfer to the otherworld occurs during the seventh lunar month, as part of the Universal Salvation Festival (*Pu du* – 普度), a Buddhist calendar event whose general purpose is to display compassion toward poor people and hungry ghosts.

Several reasons may be put forward to explain the inability of the Malaysian Teochiu to celebrate the *xiu gu gu* on a larger scale and in a fuller form. The fact that they count for only 12% of the Chinese living in the country is one of them (Purcell, 1965: 224). In the present case, however, internal demography is of secondary importance when compared to interethnic issues. A long and harsh competition for the control of the national economy between Chinese immigrants and Malay “sons of the soil” (*Bumiputra*), and the native fear of being outnumbered by aliens led to decades of interethnic tensions, punctuated by overt conflict, during and after British colonial rule. In 1971, the Malaysian government, through its New Economic Policy (NEP) tried to shift the balance of power in favour of the *Bumiputra* by implementing steps of positive discrimination.⁹ In return, it tolerated the creation of schools, clinics and other welfare services managed by “Chinese for Chinese”. This policy was pursuing in another way the special provisions for ethnic customs that the British colonial power had instituted during the 19th century (Hall, 1986: 546, 549). One of its effects was to reinforce the trend to mutual segregation ensuing from interethnic tensions; hence a low rate of intermarriages, a turning inward by both communities, and interactions reduced, more generally, to a minimum.

In this context, interethnic cooperation in hosting the *xiu gu gu* was unlikely to happen. Another impediment, closely related to the NEP, was a regulation severely restricting the

⁹ For instance, 80% of the positions in the police, army, and civil administration would henceforth be reserved to *Bumiputra*, and these latter would have privileged access to public health and welfare services (De Koninck, 1994: 170).

foundation of non-Muslim temples and shrines. The local *shan tang* had therefore no option but to register as welfare associations, resulting in it being impossible for them to display too overtly signs of religious activity outside their own premises. Last but not least, the reluctance of the Malay Muslims to let their bodies, either living or dead, be manipulated by non-Muslims was another hindrance to the extensive search of skeletons and bones characterizing the festival.

If an idiom of shared meanings draws together Hua Qiao and Malay natives, it lies in their common motivations for trade and commerce and, therefore applies solely in the economic sphere. In the early age of commerce the vast maritime space separating India from China was the main locus of this interethnic competition whose prize was control over regional sea trade. Under British colonial rule the massive inflow of Chinese coolies in Malaya saw the confrontation take a new turn, becoming more localized, direct and conflict-ridden. Indeed, Malay elites interpreted this inflow as a crushing defeat by their secular Chinese competitors, a failure all the more bitterly felt as it was seemingly coupled with an insidious attempt by the Chinese to conquer the Malay heartland. Hence there was a defensive reaction, political, cultural and religious repercussions of which stiffened the interethnic boundaries, despite a context of social proximity theoretically favourable to acculturation. In other words, the economic idiom of shared meanings between Chinese and Malay, because of the harsh competition it entailed, hindered the process of acculturation and therefore impeded the joint building of common sense platforms for other aspects of the cultural activity.

The comparison of the Thai and Malay national contexts concerning the adaptation of this Teochiu festival raises more general questions about the dynamics of interethnic relationships. An important issue concerns, for instance, the way processes of competition and of cooperation may coexist and combine. Are the two patterns of interaction totally antinomic? Does a harsh economic rivalry always hinder the development of forms of partnership in other domains? Although the contrastive situation of the Chinese communities in Thailand and Malaysia suggests a strong correlation between the features of economic interaction and the general terms of the cross-cultural relationship, religious ideologies appear also to have great impact and so do demographic ratios and national policies. Accordingly, a comprehensive and careful treatment of the question necessarily implies that several variables, more or less correlated, be taken into account. Between the two extreme benchmarks that are the agonistic competition and symbiotic cooperation, a wide range of intermediary forms are

likely to exist, whose specific features need to be explored through case studies. My assumption is that the analytical framework used in this article provides relevant concepts and categories to carry out such explorations. It not only shifts the focus from the ethnic boundaries to the intercultural processes of their production, but also attempt to grasp how the socio-cultural structures of the groups in contact fit together, by analysing these idioms of shared meanings which constitute the very medium of the interethnic relationship. A clear distinction between pre-existing structures and the ongoing process of acculturation is part of this analysis, and so is the identification of the aspects which stem either from cultural predispositions or political action (agency).

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GLOSSARY OF CHINESE AND TEOCHIU TERMS

<i>Bao De Shang Tang</i>	Teo. <i>Po Tek Xiang Teng</i>	報德善堂	<i>shan tang</i> for the recompense of virtue
<i>bao na</i>	Teo. <i>bo na</i>	宝拿	“treasure hold” – bags containing the ashes
<i>bao ta</i>	Teo. <i>bo tah</i>	宝塔	“treasure pagoda” – male furnace
<i>fang</i>	Teo. <i>Bang</i>	房	“room”, lateral rooms of the collective grave
<i>fen ta zhong</i>	Teo. <i>pung tah tong</i>	坟塔塚	“pagoda grave”
<i>fu ji</i>	Teo. <i>hu ki</i>	扶乩	<i>ji</i> spirit-writing
<i>gu yi zhi</i>	Teo. <i>kou i zhi</i>	孤衣纸	paper-offerings put into the grave
<i>hua jin</i>	Teo. <i>huê kim</i>	花金	“blossoming gold”, metaphor for the jars
<i>hui yi ting</i>	Teo. <i>huê ngi tian</i>	会议厅	“meeting room”, central place of the grave
<i>jin tong</i>	Teo. <i>kim tong</i>	金童	“golden boys”, mummies
<i>ke shi</i>	Teo. <i>kêh shi</i> ;	客尸	“guest bodies”, corpses put into temporary graves
<i>lian hua chi</i>	Teo. <i>loi hua ti</i> ;	莲花池	“lotus flower lake”, furnace for female
<i>ling hun</i>	Teo. <i>lêng hung</i>	灵魂	“the soul”
<i>Pu du</i>	Teo. <i>Pou dou</i>	普度	Universal salvation festival
<i>shan tang</i>	Teo. <i>xiang teng</i>	善堂	halls for good deeds
Song Da-Feng	Teo. Tai Hong-Kong	宋大峰	
<i>tian shou</i>	Teo. <i>tiang cu</i>	天手	“celestial hand”, medium
<i>xiu gu gu</i>	Teo. <i>xiu kou ku</i>	修孤骨	“repairing of the orphaned bones”
<i>yang zhai ju</i>	Teo. <i>iang têh gêg</i>	阳宅局	“ <i>yang</i> house”, house for the living
<i>yin zhai ju</i>	Teo. <i>im têh gêg</i>	阴宅局	“ <i>yin</i> house”, house for the dead
<i>wang sheng zhou</i>	Teo. <i>uang sên ziu</i>	往生咒	Buddhist sutra
<i>wen ji</i>	Teo. <i>bhung ki</i>	文乩	“spirit-writing of the scholar”
<i>wu ji</i>	Teo. <i>bhu ki</i>	武乩	“spirit-writing of the warrior”
<i>yu nü</i>	Teo. <i>yêk nüng</i>	玉女	“jade girls” – mummies
<i>zhuang gu chang</i>	Teo. <i>zuang ku chang</i>	装骨场	“place where bones are stored”

Figure 1: Statues of Song Da Feng, Chaoyang
(photo by the author)



Figure 2: Mediums Operating in Front of a Grave, Huilai
(photo by the author)



Figure 3: Human Remains in a Jar, Chaoyang
(photo by the author)



Figure 4: The Ordering of the Jars into a Grave, Nan Ao Island
(photo by the author)



Figure 5: The Cleaning of Skulls, Roeit, Thailand
(photo by the author)



Figure 6: Display of Skulls, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand
(photo by the author)



Figure 7: The Chimney Pyres, Udon Thani, Thailand
(photo by the author)

