



Interrogating  
the Notion of  
“Cult” as a  
Social Formation  
in Asian Religions

21-22 October 2021  
Online via Zoom



In popular culture the word ‘cult’ is usually used in a derogatory sense to denote an exclusive and secretive new religious movement (Galanter, 1999; Schaler, 2015). However, the terms ‘cult’, ‘temple cult’ and ‘deity cult’ have an entirely different usage in religious studies, referring to popular followings of temples, deities, gurus, teachings or practices which are not necessarily secretive and often enter into mainstream religious practice. Studies of these types of cults range in historical period and geographic location and come from multiple disciplinary traditions: not only religious studies, but also anthropology, sociology, history, Asian studies and literary studies. Whether referring to the 16th century development of Confucian cults (Murray, 2009), the role of obscure Bengali cults in contributing to religious literature (Dasgupta, 1946), arguing for the centrality of ancestral cults in Chinese society (Ahern, 1973), describing the spread of the cult of Guangze Zunwang from China to Southeast Asia (Chia, 2013), or the current rise in village guardian cults in Northern Vietnam (Hung, 2016), these studies each identify one unit of analysis as the “cult”.

However, are each of these conceptualizations of ‘cult’ referring to the same social-cultural configuration? What, in fact, is a temple/deity cult in the context of Asian religious traditions? And how does membership in a temple/deity cult contribute to people’s sense of self and sense of belonging in the world?

This workshop will bring together a diverse group of scholars who are at the forefront of researching temple/deity cults in Asia, both historic and contemporary, in order to theorize this prominent form of socio-religious grouping.

For this workshop, we seek papers framed around the following questions:

1. How is a temple/deity cult defined in specific religious contexts?
2. What are the bonds of affiliation that come to constitute a temple/deity cult? How are they sustained and how do they change over time?
3. How is a temple/deity cult similar or different from other forms of religious and secular association (for example, “secret societies” and brotherhoods, foundations, rotating credit groups, clubs, alumni associations, mutual aid societies, martial arts groups, dance troupes, etc.)?
4. How is membership in a temple/deity cult determined?
5. How is the development of the temple/deity cult influenced by:
  - National and local contexts
  - Transnational connections and networks
  - Laws and regulations governing religious affiliation and practice
  - Specificities related to the temple or deity
  - Literary canons, myths, and oral traditions
  - Other social structures and their membership systems

The English term “cult” is both vague and ambiguous, yet commonly used to represent social formations, ritual communities and religious configurations that are expressed through different terms in local languages in practice. Cult, therefore, is an etic category used to describe social phenomenon which have their own emic understandings and terms. Various used to describe a movement, a following, a lineage, a sect, an order, a clan, a guru-disciple relationship, or other kinds of communities of devotees, the term “cult” is a catch-all term used to categorise both loosely institutionalized and fluid formations of religious practice. In order to unpack this term it is essential to look at the history of its use in religious studies, and scrutinize case studies of religious groupings identified as “cults”.

The term cult also tends to imply an internal unity or homogeneity. But how accurate is that implication in the context of the lived experiences and practices of members of temple/deity cults in Asian religious groupings. For example, do people who worship the same deity necessarily consider themselves part of a temple/deity cult? Why or why not? How and how not? For this workshop, we seek papers that can provide evidence of the activities, behaviours, or initiations that would come to constitute cult status? What canons, physical structures or artefacts would provide evidence? Would it be useful to create a typology in order to understand the varieties of traditions, and the processes of formation, transformation and dissolution of temple/deity cults?

## PROGRAM AT-A-GLANCE

DATE	TIME (SINGAPORE TIME)	PANEL SESSION
21 Oct 2021 (Thu)	09:00 – 10:40	Welcome Remarks & Panel 1
	11:00 – 12:30	Panel 2
	14:00 – 15:10	Panel 3
	16:00 – 17:30	Panel 4
22 Oct 2021 (Fri)	09:00 – 10:30	Panel 5
	15:00 – 16:30	Panel 6
	16:45 – 17:30	Concluding Remarks

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## 21 OCTOBER 2021 • THURSDAY

09:00 – 09:10	<b>WELCOME REMARKS</b> <a href="#">Kenneth Dean</a>   <i>National University of Singapore</i> <a href="#">Emily Hertzman</a>   <i>National University of Singapore</i>
09:10 – 10:40	<b>PANEL 1</b> <i>Chairperson</i>   <a href="#">Emily Hertzman</a>   <i>National University of Singapore</i>
09:10	On Asian Cults and Do-it-yourself Religions: The Case of Adrian Lim <a href="#">Jean DeBernardi</a>   <i>University of Alberta, Canada</i>
09:30	God Theater in Fujian, God of Karate in Okinawa: The Cleansing of Tiandu Yuanshuai for the Consecration of a New Martial Arts Cult <a href="#">Eduardo González de la Fuente</a>   <i>Center for Asian and African Studies – El Colegio de Mexico</i>
09:50	Wiwin’s Temple: Palm Oil, Land Grab and Cultural Strategies in Eastern Sumatra <a href="#">Kwee Hui Kian</a>   <i>National University of Singapore</i>
09:10	<b>QUESTIONS &amp; ANSWERS</b>
10:40	<b>END OF SESSION</b>

11:00 – 12:30	<b>PANEL 2</b> <i>Chairperson</i>   <a href="#">Kenneth Dean</a>   <i>National University of Singapore</i>
11:00	Institutionalization of the Maitreya Cult: The Example of Maitreya Great Tao <a href="#">Edward A. Irons</a>   <i>Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion</i>
11:20	The Cult of Healing the Dead: <i>Lingji</i> Soul Healing Festivals in Taiwan <a href="#">Fabian Graham</a>   <i>National University of Singapore</i>
11:40	Between the Esoteric and the Mainstream: ‘Spirit-Medium-Centric Temple Communities’ and ‘Practices of Distinction’ <a href="#">Emily Hertzman</a>   <i>National University of Singapore</i>
12:00	<b>QUESTIONS &amp; ANSWERS</b>
12:30	<b>END OF SESSION</b>

<b>14:00 – 15:10</b>	<b>PANEL 3</b>
	<i>Chairperson   <a href="#">Hongxuan Lin</a>   National University of Singapore</i>
14:00	Iconocracy: The Sovereign Statues of Huanghua <a href="#">David A. Palmer</a>   University of Hong Kong <a href="#">Martin M.H. Tse</a>   University of Hong Kong
14:20	How Does the Chinese State “Do Popular Religion”? The Cult of Baosheng Dadi, Chinese Nation, and the Politico-religious Ritual in Southeast China <a href="#">Ray Qu</a>   University of Virginia, USA
14:40	<b>QUESTIONS &amp; ANSWERS</b>
<b>15:10</b>	<b>END OF SESSION</b>

<b>16:00 – 17:30</b>	<b>PANEL 4</b>
	<i>Chairperson   <a href="#">Ningning Chen</a>   National University of Singapore</i>
16:00	Dead, Spirit, Saints: Ancestor Cult in Contemporary Buddhist Java <a href="#">Roberto Rizzo</a>   University of Milan, Italy
16:20	Re-reading Matrilocality through the Ancestral Pakam Cult in Thailand’s Lower Northeast <a href="#">Benjamin Baumann</a>   Heidelberg University, Germany
16:40	What Constitute Temple Cults? <a href="#">Adam Yuet Chau</a>   University of Cambridge, UK
17:00	<b>QUESTIONS &amp; ANSWERS</b>
<b>17:30</b>	<b>END OF SESSION</b>

## 22 OCTOBER 2021 • FRIDAY

<b>09:00 – 10:30</b>	<b>PANEL 5</b>
	<i>Chairperson   <a href="#">Jack Meng-Tat Chia</a>   National University of Singapore</i>
09:00	Cults, Colonialism, and Vocabulary in the Study of Chinese Religions <a href="#">Daniel M. Murray</a>   Memorial University, Canada
09:20	From Local to Tutelary: Cultic Strategies of Managing Numinous Power ( <i>linh</i> 靈) in Pre-modern Vietnamese Popular Religion <a href="#">Cuong T. Mai</a>   Appalachian State University, USA
09:40	Thai Religion and the Viability of the Concept ‘Cult’ <a href="#">Matthew A. Kosuta</a>   Independent Scholar
10:00	<b>QUESTIONS &amp; ANSWERS</b>
<b>10:30</b>	<b>END OF SESSION</b>

<b>15:00 – 16:30</b>	<b>PANEL 6</b>
	<i>Chairperson   <a href="#">Indira Arumugam</a>   National University of Singapore</i>
15:00	Fire Remains Fire: Emotions and Aspirations in the Hindu Fire Walking Ritual in La Réunion <a href="#">Natalie Lang</a>   University of Erfurt, Germany
15:20	The Nath-Jagannath Complex: Mirroring Equivalence of ‘Cultic’ and ‘Mainstream’ Divine Bodies in Orissa’s Devotional Landscape <a href="#">Sukanya Sarbadhikary</a>   Presidency University Kolkata, India
15:40	From Occult to Obscure Religious Cult: Problems at the Margins of Indology <a href="#">Keith Edward Cantú</a>   Jagiellonian University, Poland
16:00	<b>QUESTIONS &amp; ANSWERS</b>
<b>16:30</b>	<b>END OF SESSION</b>

<b>16:45 – 17:30</b>	<b>CONCLUDING REMARKS</b>
	<a href="#">Kenneth Dean</a>   National University of Singapore <a href="#">Emily Hertzman</a>   National University of Singapore
<b>17:30</b>	<b>END OF SESSION</b>

## On Asian Cults and Do-it-yourself Religions: The Case of Adrian Lim

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In the modern scholarship on Asian religions the term 'cult' is used to describe many sorts of religious and devotional groups, including those led by spirit mediums. But because the term has acquired negative connotations, many Western scholars now avoid it, using instead the term "new religious movement" as neutral way to describe peripheral religious groups. But this term implies a scale and degree of organization that rarely exists, and I propose instead to call these groups do-it-yourself religions. Do-it-yourself religions may be composed of religious materials with deep historical roots, but are typically small-scale and largely invisible unless they come into conflict with others.

In this paper, I draw on mass media reports and court documents to examine the case of Singaporean Adrian Lim, whom the media identified as a spirit medium and cult leader. The Singapore High Court convicted Lim, together with his wife and mistress, of murder and executed them 1988. Lim's spiritual practice epitomized the do-it-yourself religion: he was a former Catholic who claimed as his masters a Malay bomoh, a Hindu Kali-worshipper, and a Chinese spirit medium who taught him Thai sex magic. In addition, he read a book about Tantra and Kali worship that influenced his mediumistic practice, and dispensed Western psychiatric drugs and electric shock treatment. The paper will focus on Lim's use of a religious 'anti-language' to justify a counter-morality constructed in opposition to conventional norms, developing an idiosyncratic ideology to justify actions that the larger society (both practitioners of mainstream religions and the legal system) deemed to be antisocial.

**Jean DeBernardi** received her training as a cultural anthropologist at Stanford, Oxford, and the University of Chicago and has been teaching at the University of Alberta since 1991. She has done ethnographic research on Chinese popular religion in Malaysia and Singapore, evangelical Christianity in Singapore, and religious and cultural pilgrimage to the Daoist temple complex at Wudang Mountain, China. She has published two books on Chinese religion in Penang: *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community* (Stanford University Press, 2004; reprinted by NUS Press in 2009 as *Penang: Rites of Belonging in a Malaysian Chinese Community*, and *The Way that Live in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia* (Stanford, 2006; reprinted in 2009 by NUS Press). She has also conducted research on Christianity in Singapore and Malaysia, and in 2020 published *Christian Circulations: Global Christianity and the Local Church in Penang and Singapore, 1819-2000* (NUS Press). She is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *Wudang Mountain and the Modernization of Daoism* based on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted between 2002 and 2009 in China and Singapore. Her most recent research project explores contemporary tea culture in China, and she plans to continue that research in Singapore in the future.

## God Theater in Fujian, God of Karate in Okinawa: The Cleansing of Tiandu Yuanshuai for the Consecration of a New Martial Arts Cult

**Eduardo GONZÁLEZ DE LA FUENTE**

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During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, several Daoist deities arrived at present-day Okinawa from the Fujian region. Among them was Tiandu yuanshuai, also known as Marshal Tian, God of Theater and protector of villages, who was also worshipped by local martial militias and schools. Fujianese martial arts influenced greatly karate, originated in Okinawa during the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and today one of the most famous martial arts worldwide. Since the end of the Second World War, Tian has been gradually evolving into the “guardian deity” or “patron saint” of karate. However, this adoption entails a profound re-scripture of the Marshal character that screens most of the Chinese religious folklore, particularly his exorcistic nature and esoteric Taoist abilities. In this sense, Tian, demon incantator and heavenly jester, is re-counted in Okinawa above all as a martial and sober deity, simple called *busaganashi* (lit. “Great Boddhisattva”).

I argue that such abridged narrative –beginning by erasing the god’s name- establishes a new mythology and function serving the socioreligious needs of the karate community, which lacks its own martial god. This proposal will examine the complex historical and cultural process of transmuting the iconography (depictions, attributes, postures) and redefining the cult (legends, rites, meanings) of Tiandu yuanshuai in the self-perceived (semi)secular context of contemporary karate. This includes worshipping carved figurines of the Marshal as embodiments of karate masters, displaying drawings in museums, books, and webpages, or even officially consecrating a golden statue of Tian in a Shinto shrine to attract martial arts tourists to Japan. Yet the cultural origins and symbolisms of Marshal Tian in China remain widely unknown in the world of karate. Paradoxically, clouding the actual knowledge about Tian introduces a suggestive patina of mystery and alluring martial secrets for millions of karateka largely organized in styles, associations, societies, schools, and clubs bonded in transnational networks.

**Eduardo González de la Fuente** is visiting researcher at The Center for Asian and African Studies at El Colegio de México, and member of the GREGAL Research Group at the Department of Translation and Interpretation and East Asian Studies at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. His work examines the cultural history of East Asian martial arts, particularly Okinawan karate, and his research lines cover from historical sociology to popular and visual cultures. In 2018 he was a visiting researcher at the University of the Ryukyus, where he will return in 2021 as a Japan Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow. In 2019 he presented his work on the influence of Fujianese deities in Okinawan karate culture at the *Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies (WCAAS)*. Among his publications: “From Olympic Sport to UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage: Okinawa Karate between Local, National and International Identities in Contemporary Japan” in *Traditional Martial Arts as Intangible Cultural Heritage*, UNESCO-ICHCAP (2020).



**Wiwin’s Temple:  
Palm Oil, Land Grab and Cultural Strategies in Eastern Sumatra**

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In the past twenty years, as Wiwin takes on the helm of her family’s palm oil plantations and business establishment, she also expends great energies and monies in propagating the Three-Teaching Religion, centring on the faith in the Mystical Lady of the Nine Heavens. This paper argues that, aside from her deep, personal devotion towards the goddess, Wiwin is conjuring religiosity as the soft infrastructure of the family business securitescapes. In specific terms, she seeks to generate and disseminate the semiology and narrative of her family as the harbingers of the state-recognized Three-Teaching Religion and deep patriotism towards Indonesia to safeguard their palm oil plantations and enterprises. These efforts are boosted by the family firms’ membership in business associations lobbying for the resource industry at the national level and their engagement of teams of lawyers and media specialists to fend off the contestation of non-governmental organizations and disgruntled villagers at the provincial and district levels. In particular, Wiwin also deploys hard security infrastructure—the Indonesian military out for private hire—to protect the family plantation business as a last resort. The paper also argues that, against the top-down and bottom-up approaches advanced by experts of critical and vernacular security studies, Wiwin’s endeavours represent a kind of middling securitization that partially adapts and subverts the state definitions.

**Kwee Hui Kian** is Associate Professor at the Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore. She has done archival and field research on the history and political economy of Southeast Asia from the sixteenth century to the present. Her research and publication focus on the themes of capitalism, colonialism and Chinese migration and entrepreneurship and the case studies are drawn from Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia.

## Institutionalization of the Maitreya Cult: The Example of Maitreya Great Tao

**Edward A. IRONS**

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Evidence of ritualistic worship of Maitreya in the Kushan Empire can be traced back to the 4th century BCE. Over time Maitreya’s depiction as either bodhisattva or Buddha of the future resonated through every corner of the Buddhist world. In some form, Maitreya remains a major figure in Buddhist art and worship in all Buddhist cultures.

This paper focuses on a particular sideline/chapter in Maitreya’s long development, Maitreya worship in Ancient Mother cults and in particular in Yiguandao. The paper argues that popular cultic worship of Maitreya has been absorbed into contemporary institutionalized religion through a process of domestication. Today Maitreya is first among many of the deities in the Yiguandao pantheon. This domestication has meant a revision of the figure’s revolutionary potential. Instead of being centered in the idea of a returning savior, Yiguandao’s message of salvation is packaged as a process of initiation and good deeds.

The specific example to be explored is Maitreya’s role in the new religion of Maitreya Great Tao 彌勒大道. Maitreya Great Tao was formally established in Taiwan in 2000. But its roots lay in schism within a major sector of Yiguandao after the death of Sun Suzhen, generally considered to be one of the co-founders of Yiguandao. Today Maitreya Great Tao’s branding and identity centers around the image of Maitreya. The proposed study will focus on key questions: How is cultic belief/practice defined when it is embedded in a new religion? How do worshippers and members experience Maitreya? To what extent is this an extension of pre-existing Yiguandao practice and theology? What innovations have been introduced concerning Maitreya’s cultic role? And how did the any reformulation of Maitreya’s role fit in with the move to establish Maitreya Great Tao as a new religion?

**Edward A. Irons** is a leadership consultant and researcher specializing in Chinese new religions. He founded and directs the Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion, a small, independent center for academic research. He received his PhD in religious studies from GTU in 2000.

## The Cult of Healing the Dead: *Lingji* Soul Healing Festivals in Taiwan

**Fabian GRAHAM**

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Popularized soon after Taiwan’s stock market crash, and further promoted by increasingly tense cross-Strait relations since the advent of democracy, *lingji* is a home-grown form religious expression in Taiwan based around the worship on The Queen Mother of the West, Wang Mu Niang-niang. Employing elaborate and often spontaneous ritual practices and an inventive material culture, the mutual bonds of affiliation involve practitioners alleviating their fears of a deteriorating economy, natural disasters, and of the perceived threat of cross-Strait violence by healing the souls of the dead at large-scale *lingji* festivals.

At a temple level, the tradition has also seen the rise of secondary micro-cults, each based around a charismatic guru / teacher figure. As the *lingji* tradition lacks a single unified teaching or governing body, each guru / teacher preaches their own unique interpretation of cosmology variously encompassing a broad spectrum of beliefs from aliens as deities to the souls of the dead causing natural calamities in the present material world. All manner of beliefs, ritual practices and material culture are mutually accepted within the wider *lingji* community.

Most festivals are held with the dual aims of first curing and then promoting the souls of specific groups of significant individuals invited to each festival with the intention of restoring present-day political and ecological stability through the ritual process. This paper will therefore provide ethnographic examples of *lingji* ritual practices, and analyse how these establish a foundation for a cohesive religious tradition based around individual micro-cults with shared spiritual and political goals.

**Fabian Charles Graham** joined the Religion and Globalisation cluster as a Research Fellow in December 2018. He holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from SOAS in London, and two master’s degrees, one in ‘Taiwan Studies’ from National Chengchi University in Taipei and the second in ‘Social Anthropological Analysis’ from the University of Cambridge. Working closely with *lingji* masters and *tang-ki* spirit mediums, and adopting a participatory approach to fieldwork where possible, his research interests include the anthropology of Chinese religion; spirit possession; temple ritual and material culture; the invention, inversion and reinterpretation of tradition; visual anthropology; and new ethnographic, narrational and analytical approaches to the study of religious phenomena.

**Between the Esoteric and the Mainstream:  
‘Spirit-Medium-Centric Temple Communities’ and ‘Practices of Distinction’**

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The revival of Chinese Religion in post-Suharto Indonesia has led to a proliferation and popularization of new temple “cults”. These religious formations have several characteristics which make them resemble other forms of temple or deity cults, such as leadership by charismatic spirit-mediums, the worship of certain key deities, and specific bodily comportment technics and rituals. Other aspects are less common and include the use of familial metaphors of temple members being the children and grandchildren of a deity, a process of transnational return to China and sacred reactivation of deity statues, widespread incorporation of local Datuk (Hakka. *latok*) spirits, shrines, and possession rituals and the emergence of deity-driven philanthropic activities. The question of what it means to be a member within these new groups, and what beliefs, assumptions, and practices membership is based on, is being complicated by this new set of improvisations. In this paper, I explain some of the unique context in which these changes are taking place and draw on the case of Fab Zhu Kung (Man. 法主公 Fǎ Zhǔ Gōng) temple in order to suggest the emergence of new social and religious possibilities for people memberships and identities. I provisionally use the term ‘spirit-medium centric temple communities’ to describe these groups and I put forward the notion of “practices of distinction’ to show how these groups are currently differentiating themselves.

**Emily Hertzman** is a sociocultural anthropologist whose research focuses on mobilities, identities, religious practices, and politics. She received her PhD in Anthropology from the University of Toronto (2016) and her MA (2006) and BA (2001) from the University of British Columbia. Her theoretical and empirical research is centered around understanding how peoples’ concepts of home and belonging are transformed under broader shifting social conditions, including mobility, democratization, transnationalism, economic restructuring, and liberalization, as well as religious encounters and personal identity construction processes. Her doctoral research analyzed the major cultural scripts underpinning widespread migration of Hakka-speaking Chinese Indonesians from West Kalimantan, Indonesia, to other parts of Asia. She is currently a Research Fellow in the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster.

## Iconocracy: The Sovereign Statues of Huanghua

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This paper will draw on fieldwork on a ritual tradition in rural Guangdong to bring studies of Chinese deity cults into engagement with political philosophy and with anthropological theories of human-object assemblages. We will attempt to theorize a political regime of self-government ("iconocracy") in which sovereignty is vested in wooden statues and images (gods who are "kings" and "generals") that are themselves enshrined, activated, paraded and manipulated by representative assemblies and technical experts, and that frame community decisions, negotiations and resource allocation. After sketching the basic structure in the locality of the Huanghua field case, we will consider the articulations between such "polities" at the horizontal level (translocal networks of interpenetrating sovereignties) and at the vertical level (between local, regional and imperial sovereignties). The logic of articulations between this type of regime and the contemporary socialist regime and market economy will also be examined. Finally, we will interrogate to what extent iconocracy exists in other statuary cultures, and discuss the implications for theorizing the political power of assemblages of images, objects and people in contemporary society.

**David A. Palmer** (PhD, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris) is a Professor of anthropology jointly appointed by the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Department of Sociology of the University of Hong Kong. His award-winning books include *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Religion in China* (Columbia University Press), *The Religious Question in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, co-authored with V. Goossaert) and *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality* (University of Chicago Press, co-authored with E. Siegler). His latest forthcoming book (in Chinese), co-authored with Martin Tse, is *Civil Buddhism, Martial Daoism: A Ritual Tradition in South China*. His articles have been published in *Current Anthropology*, *American Anthropologist* and the *Journal of Asian Studies*, among others. His current research projects focus on Yao Daoist ritual on the China-Laos-Vietnam borderlands, and on the religious entanglements of the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Martin M.H. Tse** is a PhD candidate recently admitted by the Hong Kong Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong. He has been a Research Assistant and Assistant Lecturer at the Institute for the past several years, during which he co-authored the forthcoming Chinese book manuscript *Civil Buddhism, Martial Daoism: A Ritual Tradition in South China*. For his doctoral research, he is investigating the Daoist ritual manuscripts among the Lanten Yao people in northwestern Laos. He is co-author with Chip Colwell and David A. Palmer of the article "Guanyin's Limbo: Icons as Demi-Persons and Dividuating Objects," *American Anthropologist* 121:4 (2019).



## How Does the Chinese State “Do Popular Religion”? The Cult of Baosheng Dadi, Chinese Nation, and the Politico-religious Ritual in Southeast China

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The cult of Baosheng Dadi (The Great Emperor Who Protects Life) originated in the southern Fujian region of southeast China in the Song dynasty, and over the centuries spread inland in Fujian and outwards to Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Networks of affiliated temples, established through division of incense, maintained contact with the “mother temples” (*zumiao*) through return-presentation of incense. The imbrication of the political and the sacred in an annual festival in Xiamen raises theoretical and empirical questions concerning the ramifications for local religious praxis of growing translocal/transnational interactions between Taiwanese and Southeast Asian religious actors, their mainland counterparts, and the Chinese state. Drawing on data collected from longitudinal fieldwork (2008-2017), this article examines the “Baosheng Dadi Cultural Festival,” an annual event characterized by reinvented politico-religious rituals that include elements reminiscent of official cults in imperial China. It probes the techniques and the sociopolitical context that enable rituals that the state once disparaged as “feudal superstitions” that threaten national cohesion to become new material and symbolic resources for nation-making in the reform era. I argue that the modernizing Chinese state has refashioned elements of the cult of Baosheng Dadi into a political apparatus for constructing the Chinese nation as an imagined community. The unity of the Chinese nation is not only imagined but also materialized by two “key worshipers”—respectively the leader of an influential Taipei temple and another from the Eastern Temple in Xiamen. A temporary gathering of a few thousand temple representatives worshipping the same deity constitutes a “temporary ritual community” that exerts a hegemonic influence over event organizers and instills a sense of the sacred in the political rituals. Operating within fields contested on many dimensions, the politico-religious rituals are facilitated by two major factors at play: the interpretive ambiguity of rituals and the guests’ respect for the sponsoring host’s orchestration of the ritual arrangements (*kesui zhubian*).

**Ray Qu** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia. His research interests include anthropology of religion (Chinese popular religion), state and religion, anthropology of hope, health and well-being, spiritual healing, uncertainty and precarity, care, personhood, and China. He conducted multi-sited fieldwork in southern Fujian, Taiwan, and Singapore over a total of eighteen months between 2008 and 2017, with a special focus on the Eastern Temple in Xiamen. His present research project— an ethnography of the hope that arises from a form of religious service called “incense seeing,” develops from his earlier work on temple-based popular religion. His recent publications include, “The Quest for a Good Life: Incense Seeing and the Porous and Dividual Hoping Person in North China.” *American Anthropologist* (forthcoming, 2021); “Popular Religion Temples in Fujian, Southeast China: The Politics of State Intervention, 1990s–2010s.” *Modern China* 1-31, 2020 (DOI: 10.1177/0097700419899038), and “Identity Politics in State-Sponsored Youth Camps for Chinese Overseas.” *China Information* 31(2):233-251 (2017).

**Dead, Spirit, Saints:  
Ancestor Cult in Contemporary Buddhist Java**

**Roberto RIZZO**

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The paper investigates the contemporary practice of ancestor cult among Javanese Buddhists and the way it intersects with narratives of ethnocultural revival as well as the surge of Theravada Buddhism. I propose that the revitalisation of the cult in rural Central Java is driven by dynamics of internal mobility and manifested in novel ways through the distinct history of Buddhism in the region.

The religious lifeworld of rural Java that was perceived as not conforming to the official subscriptions to state-mandated “world religions” has been long identified with the belief and the ritual performances in respect to nonhuman presences. Scholars have gone as far as defining the whole spectrum of Javanese rural religiosity as “communities of spirits”. Although such presences might be figured ontologically in different ways, a common substratum seems to be some notion of ancestry, through the Javanese-Melayu tropes of *leluhur* and *nenek moyang*.

Following the much-debated decentralisation program of post-Suharto Indonesia, Java, like many other provinces across the archipelago, has experienced an increase in discourses of ethnic revitalisation and cultural authenticity. While the narrational repositories for these forms of social subject formation have been variously located (from orthodox Islam to the classical culture of the Javanese courts), in a context like the religiously plural countryside of Temanggung, the cultural revival has involved the revitalisation of communal ritual practices centred around ancestor cults.

In this contribution, I outline, ethnographically, the formation of new inter-religious “communities of spirits” through the resuscitation of local rituals of ancestors worship, and the parallel establishment of ancestor cults for the purpose of canonising the specific history of Buddhism in the area. The notion of cult is therefore problematised as a self-contained, univocal category and discussed as a discursive field, mobilised for different ends and in continuity with the wider domain of religion.

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## Re-reading Matrilocality through the Ancestral Pakam Cult in Thailand’s Lower Northeast

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The analytic concept ‘matrilocality’ looks back at a turbulent history in Anthropology. Mostly employed in Afro-Caribbean contexts to describe situations in which women as mothers are structurally, culturally and affectively central to the organization of social life, the concept was first embraced by feminist scholars only to become criticized as a heteronormative misconception by a later generation of critical anthropologists. Despite the ongoing controversy surrounding the concept in Anthropology, it was rarely utilized as a heuristic device to approach Southeast Asian social formations, in which women traditionally played important roles in the organization of social life. This is also true for Thailand, where a whole generation of Anthropologists used to frame local spirit mediumship and possession cults in terms of matrilineality and matrilocality. The concept ‘matrilocality’ was, however, rarely employed to classify the organizational logic of these societies. Notwithstanding this influential tradition in Northern Thai ethnography, questions for the structural place of women in local spirits cults and their relevance for the organization of social life are rarely addressed in contemporary anthropological texts. This paper seeks to reverse this trend by emphasizing the matrilocality organization of a localized ancestral cult in a predominantly Khmer-speaking province in Thailand’s lower Northeast. Based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural village in Buriram Province, the paper will detail a matrilineally transmitted ancestral cult, in which local matrilineages are reproduced through the veneration of their elephant hunting ancestors. Although women are still the central nodes of these emplaced cults and female lay spirit mediums act as the main ritual officiants, the socio-economic transformations of local lifeworlds also affect the place of cis women in these cults, as more and more trans women become actively involved as professional spirit mediums. Will this transformation of the pakam cult also affect the matrilocality organization of village life?

**Benjamin Baumann** is an assistant professor and coordinator of the MA programme 'Anthropology' at Heidelberg University's Institute of Anthropology. He studied Anthropology and Southeast Asian Studies and holds a PhD in Southeast Asian Studies from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. His ethnographic work examines rural lifeworlds, socio-cultural identities, and local language games in Thailand's lower Northeast, focusing on how the ghostly structures the imagination and reproduction of social collectives and communal sentiments of belonging.

## What Constitute Temple Cults?

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This paper will examine the overall constituting elements of temple cults in the Chinese context, with a particular focus on temples in agrarian contexts (note: ‘agrarian’ is not equivalent to ‘rural’). These constituting elements include a complex configuration of the following: a deity (more often a cluster/network of deities); a statue (with many possible forms); an altar or temple (again with multiple possible forms); temple inscriptions (as ‘text acts’); processional paraphernalia; legends and miracles (often having the temporal span of hundreds of years); festivals (often networked in a cluster of festivals); a reputation (it’s a understatement to say that a deity lives by his or her reputation!); a spirit medium (sometimes none); a temple association (most often a loosely organised cohort of local activists); a locale (a *terroir*, which includes the topography, climate, flora and fauna, inhabitants, road networks, architecture, socio-political climate, etc.); a follower base (local as well as translocal); a local literati base (at least mobilisable if not formally affiliated); a broader configuration of temple cults (it’s impossible to have only one temple cult); a broader religious ecology of spirits, powers and institutions; etc. With these elements and their mutual relationships in mind, we can then ask how temple cults are reproduced and how they change over time, especially when faced with the challenge of broad-scaled societal transformations (such as shifting political economy, urbanisation, technological advancements, globalisation, etc.).

**Adam Yuet Chau** is Reader in the Anthropology of China teaching in the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford University Press 2006) and *Religion in China: Ties That Bind* (Polity 2019), and editor of *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation* (Routledge 2011). He is currently coordinating a group project *Chinese Religious Culture in 100 Objects*, which will have 100 entries written by one hundred plus contributors. He is interested in developing better ways of conceptualising Chinese religious culture. One of his outreach ambitions is to stop people from asking the question ‘How many religions are there in China?’ Book projects in progress include the idiom of hosting (*zuozhu*) and forms of powerful writing (‘text acts’) in Chinese political and religious culture; the rise of the ‘religion sphere’ (*zongjiaojie*) in modern China; modalities of doing religion; and ‘cherishing lettered paper’ (*xizizhi*).

## Cults, Colonialism, and Vocabulary in the Study of Chinese Religions

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The term ‘cult’ is commonly used in the study of Chinese religions as a catch-all term for followers of specific deities. Although this usage is intended to be neutral, in popular usage, the study of religion more broadly, and even the discourse of the Chinese Communist Party, the term has very different implications. While the origins of the term are not derogative, in the mid-nineteenth century it reemerged with a new meaning that was tied to European imperial conquest to mark religious practices as “ancient” or “primitive.” A clear decision was made for the term to designate non-Christian practices of non-Europeans as inferior. More recently, in popular usage it refers to minority religious practices perceived as harmful or extreme, indeed, this is the usage that the Chinese Communist Party have drawn on for their translation of outlawed religious practices known as ‘evil cults’ (*xiejiao* 邪教). Thus, to speak with more clarity to the wider scholarly community and to the public, different terminology should be considered.

This paper presents three potential alternatives to “cult” by drawing on translations of Chinese terms that have been used by temple organizations, as well as in academic and political discourse in China: belief (*xinyang* 信仰), fellowship (*lianyi* 联谊), and incense group (*jingxiangtuan* 敬香团). Drawing on recent material used by temples in Southern Fujian to describe themselves to the state and wider public, it considers the applicability of each term, as well as their limits and comprehensibility to a wider scholarly audience. In doing so, it attempts to move away from using “cult” as the standard term used to describe these groups.

**Daniel M. Murray** is an instructor in the Department of Religious Studies at Memorial University and an incoming postdoctoral fellow in the Society for the Liberal Arts at the Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech). He received his PhD in East Asian Studies from McGill University in 2020. His research focuses on urbanization and religion in modern China and his publications have appeared in *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, *the Journal of Daoist Studies*, and *Religion Compass*.



## From Local to Tutelary: Cultic Strategies of Managing Numinous Power (*linh* 靈) in Pre-modern Vietnamese Popular Religion

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Two extant fourteenth-century texts composed in Literary Sinitic have received close scrutiny from historians of Vietnam, namely the *Compendium on Mystic Numina of the Viet Realm* (*Việt điện u linh tập* 越甸幽靈集) and *Gleanings of the Uncanny from South of the Peaks* (*Lĩnh Nam chích quái* 嶺南摭怪). These two texts roughly fit into the genre of “records of the strange” (*zhiguai* 志怪); they are collections of brief narrative accounts of local deities and sacred places. Scholars have noted that these texts were composed by elite writers for an elite audience; their contents supported state religion. In this paper I argue that, despite their elite provenance, these two sources nevertheless can shed light on premodern Vietnamese popular religion, specifically non-elite religious practices coalescing around local spirit cults. In this paper I will conduct close readings of these two compilations, focusing on accounts of the founding of local cults to local deities. Read in a certain way, these narratives suggest that local communities in fact played active and important roles in establishing localized cults to various types of numinous powers (*linh* 靈) rooted in the landscape, before these localized spirits would be co-opted by the state as tutelary deities through official investiture (*phong thần* 封神). The texts show that localized cults initially served as simple sites for the ritual management of numinous powers that had erupted spontaneously out of the land, mountains, rivers, seas, or graves of dead humans. As these localized cults gained more clients, they came to serve as religious anchors for larger social groups, their worship thus becoming collective, regularized, and mandatory. The spirits of the once localized cults then attained the status of tutelary deities (*phúc thần* 福神 or *thành hoàng* 城隍), and eventually became the object of state interest. Moreover, this paper urges scholars to apply practice theory, theories of sacrifice as social exchange, and theories which see popular religion as fields of ritual competition—all recent trends that have enriched the scholarly study of the religious cults of the ancient Mediterranean. In short, this paper aims to read through elite propaganda to reveal the shared religious logic that guided how, in premodern Vietnam, some localized cults to local numinous powers that were of interest to a few could be transformed into social cults of tutelary deities that would become compelling to many.

**Cuong T. Mai** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, USA. His research interests encompass the history of interactions between Buddhism and popular religion in China and Vietnam, with a special focus on mortuary rites and cultural conceptions of death, the dead, and the afterlife. His publications include, “How Not to Become a Ghost: Tales of Female Suicide Martyrs in Sixteenth-Century Vietnamese Transmission of Marvels (*truyện kỳ*)” (*The Routledge Handbook on Death and the Afterlife*, 2018); “The Guanyin Fertility Cult in Late Imperial China: Repertoires across Domains in the Practice of Popular Religion,” (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 2019); and “The Karma of Love: Buddhist Discourse in Confucian and Daoist Voices in Vietnamese Tales of the Marvellous and Strange,” (*Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, forthcoming 2021).

## Thai Religion and the Viability of the Concept ‘Cult’

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This paper takes the concept of cult as outlined in the Asia Research Institute workshop call for papers and applies it to Thai religion in order to highlight elements of Thai religious belief and practice, to identify possible cognate words in Thai language, and to assess its usefulness as an analytical category in the Thai context. In my own work on Thai religion I have not used the term cult, but rather use the term ‘worship’ – “the worship of King Naresuan” – to represent Thai expressions of ritual acts: *wai* (pay respect), *būchā* (sacrifice, worship), *būang sūang* (worship, appease), etc. The paper will present an overview of the use of cult, or lack thereof, in current research on Thai religion (worship of Buddha, monks, kings – living and deceased, revered monks, Rahu, local deities and spirits). Reference will be made to the extensive use of cult in studies of Greek and Roman religion. Anticipating possible outcomes: in Thai religion there is rarely, if ever, formal membership in ritual practice and worship is fluid with individual Thais free to move between “cults”. Worship is a simple generalized pattern with minor variations to suit particular deities, kings, spirits, etc. While one can certainly say the “cult of King Naresuan”, the fluidity of Thai religions strains the parameters of the notion of ‘cult’ as a social formation in Thailand.

**Matthew Kosuta** is an Independent Scholar who he received a PhD in *sciences des religions* from the Université du Québec à Montréal. In September 2021, he completed fifteen years at the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Thailand where he left as an Associate Professor. At the College of Religious Studies, he was a key member in establishing the international MA & PhD programs. He held the positions of Director of the International MA and PhD programs concurrently for four years and was director of the PhD program for a further three years. He was also the Vice Dean for International Relations and Academics for a period of six years. Matthew specializes in Thai Religion; Theravada Buddhism; astrology and divination in Thailand and Theravada Southeast Asia; and works extensively on religion and war. He is a former Senior Fellow at the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

## Fire Remains Fire: Emotions and Aspirations in the Hindu Fire Walking Ritual in La Réunion

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‘Fire remains fire’ is a sentence often expressed by fire walking Hindus in the French overseas department La Réunion. The sentence can refer to the fear or respect of the fire that every firewalker has every year no matter how often s/he has successfully completed this ritual, and to the perceived high efficacy of the ritual compared to other Hindu rituals. The ritual of fire walking is part of a South Indian goddess cult centered around Draupadi, called Pandialé in La Réunion, and embedded in mythological stories of the Mahabharata. Fire walking is a popular Hindu festival in La Réunion, both in the sense that it can be categorized as ‘popular’ form of Hinduism as compared to more Brahminical forms of Hinduism, and in the sense that the festival attracts many participants and spectators, even featuring in the island’s tourism newsletters. Why is fire walking so important to Hindus in La Réunion? What constitutes the attraction of fire walking in a French society? This paper unpacks how the sensory and mythological aspects of this deity cult cater to Reunionese Hindus’ aspirations for well-being, social status, and pride. It examines how participants distinguish this cult from others, and how the fire walking fits into their biographies and everyday lives. The paper is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, which included the methods of participant observation and open, narrative, biographical interviews.

**Natalie Lang** is an Associated Junior Fellow at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, University of Erfurt. She was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Religion and Globalisation Cluster and the Asian Urbanisms Cluster at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore (NUS), from 2019-2021. She is also affiliated to the Centre d’études et de recherches sur l’Inde, l’Asie du Sud et sa diaspora Université du Québec à Montréal (CERIAS-UQAM). Her doctoral thesis in anthropology, which she wrote at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS), University of Göttingen, received the Frobenius Research Award. Her book *Religion and Pride: Hindus in Search of Recognition in La Réunion* appeared with Berghahn Books in 2021. She is the co-editor of the research blog *CoronAsur: Religion and Covid-19*, and member of the editorial board at the peer-reviewed journal *Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Südasienforschung* (Interdisciplinary Journal of South Asia Research). Natalie Lang holds an MA in Migration and Diaspora Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and a BA in South Asian Studies from the University of Heidelberg.

## The Nath-Jagannath Complex: Mirroring Equivalence of ‘Cultic’ and ‘Mainstream’ Divine Bodies in Orissa’s Devotional Landscape

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South Asian religiosities effectively complicate binaric imaginations of ‘mainstream’ sacralities as publicly practiced and knowable, and ‘cultic’ practices as obscure, and based on guru-disciple transmission of disciplines. In this, there are also active cultures of *bhakti* or devotion-based public temple deity-worship traditions sharing deep connections with *yogic* and *tantric*, or more esoteric cultivations of the spiritual body learnt in guru-based sects; although *bhakti* and *yoga/tantra* too have mostly been posited as opposed religious modalities. In this paper, I study one such unwritten about relationship, between the Hindu deity, Jagannath, and cult of Nath *yogis*, in Orissa’s syncretic landscape. Jagannath’s famous temple-abode in Puri is the site of centuries-old traditions of ostentatious and public devotional rituals, and the deity embodies Vishnuite ideals of sedentary householder-based worship routines. However, Jagannath’s persona, although overarchingly of a *bhakti* temperament, has also been intensely influenced by *tantric* (goddess-cults), *yogic* (Shiva-worship), and even Buddhist claims. Similarly, Nath, who embody complex negotiations between their householder and solitary *yogi* identities, have a complex genealogy interlacing tantric Buddhism, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shakta tantra, and their rigorous body-disciplines require long periods of training with gurus. Based on fieldwork in some rural Orissan Nath ashrams, and among religious specialists in Puri, I explore undiscovered and rich archives of Nath myths, oral lores, mantras, and combined with critical readings of texts dedicated to Jagannath’s deity-form in Puri and the Nath *yogic* body, I argue that there are significant overlaps in the imaginations of the ‘cultic’ esoteric yogic-corporeality, ‘mainstream’ deity-body, and his devotional pilgrimage topography. The myths, popular tales, and texts, employ several etic conceptions to posit the sameness of Jagannath and Nath—god’s and *yogi*/devotee’s corporeality—as essentially buzzing with the same cosmic vibrational murmur. Ostensibly opposed devotional and *yogic* sensibilities, a ritually opulent and sedentary temple-cult, and essentially monist sacrality of a guru-cult, thus actively interpenetrate, and the myths precisely allude to these prolific liminal possibilities, by talking about the Nath practitioner as always facing Jagannath “at the temple-doorstep”, and declaring their equivalence.

**Sukanya Sarbadhikary** works at the interface of the anthropology of religion, anthropology of embodiment, religious studies, and philosophy. She tries to locate the body, senses, intuition, experience, imagination, and sacrality, in the interstices of everyday lives and strong philosophical traditions. In her first work, she did an intensive ethnography among different kinds of Bengal-Vaishnavas, focusing on diverse experiences of religious place and sensory apprehensions of divine affect. Her first book, *The Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism* (University of California Press) was published in 2015. She is also passionately interested in aesthetics and music, and their relations with sacred embodiment. She is currently working on a range of devotional instruments, communities involved in their making, playing, listening, meditating, and associated traditions of sonic metaphysics in Bengal.

## From Occult to Obscure Religious Cult: Problems at the Margins of Indology

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This paper addresses two main phenomena associated with “cults” in modern South Asia following the advent of British colonial rule. First, it treats the ways in which some Indian yogis and authors self-adopted the label “occultism” in the nineteenth century to describe their work and teachings on yoga, perhaps not considering the “cultic” implications of such a label outside of South Asia. Second, it considers how the social formations of some modern contemporary sects that today are not typically viewed as “cultic” did exhibit the features of “cults,” rightly or wrongly, according to twentieth-century academics such as Shashibhusan Das Gupta in his antiquated but classic study *Obscure Religious Cults*. Building on the author’s ethnographic and textual engagement with South Asian sources, the final part of the paper considers how Indology today as a field often neglects to consider the implications of “cult”-like formations at the margins of South Asian religion and proposes a careful reevaluation of the concept as salient to contemporary academic discourse.

**Keith Edward Cantú** currently holds the post of Assistant Professor in the position of “Post-doc/Research Associate” at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. He received his doctoral degree in Religious Studies (South Asian religions) at the University of California, Santa Barbara. From 2014 to 2017 he co-edited 'City of Mirrors: Songs of Lālan Sāi', a volume of nineteenth-century Bengali songs that were translated by Carol Salomon. His dissertation, entitled “Sri Sabhapati Swami and the ‘Translocalization’ of Śivarājyoga,” examined the Tamil, pan-Indian, and international reception of Sabhapati’s system of yoga, which spans multiple linguistic and cultural worlds, including Theosophy, Thelema via the works of Aleister Crowley, and the works of other modern occultists interested in yoga. He is also the author of several articles and chapters, including “Islamic Esotericism in the Bengali Bāul Songs of Lālan Fakir,” a translation of the “Eighth Instruction” of a Sanskrit alchemical text called the Rasāyanakhaṇḍa about the alchemical wonders of Śrīśailam, and “Sri Sabhapati Swami: The Forgotten Yogi of Western Esotericism.”



## ABOUT THE CHAIRPERSONS

**Emily HERTZMAN** is a sociocultural anthropologist whose research focuses on mobilities, identities, religious practices, and politics. She received her PhD in Anthropology from the University of Toronto (2016) and her MA (2006) and BA (2001) from the University of British Columbia. Her theoretical and empirical research is centered around understanding how peoples’ concepts of home and belonging are transformed under broader shifting social conditions, including mobility, democratization, transnationalism, economic restructuring, and liberalization, as well as religious encounters and personal identity construction processes. Her doctoral research analyzed the major cultural scripts underpinning widespread migration of Hakka-speaking Chinese Indonesians from West Kalimantan, Indonesia, to other parts of Asia. She is currently a Research Fellow in the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster.

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**Hongxuan LIN** is a postdoctoral fellow in the Religion and Globalization cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore for 2021. In 2022, he will be a visiting fellow at the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asian Studies Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science. He received his PhD in History from the University of Washington in 2020, with a dissertation titled "Ummah Yet Proletariat: Islam and Marxism in the Netherlands East Indies and Indonesia, 1915 - 1959." His work has been published in *Southeast Asian Studies*, *Studia Islamika*, and *Positions: Asia Critique*. He has also contributed to the ANU Southeast Asian studies blog, *New Mandala*.

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