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Tan Ah Choon, the Tangki King

by Margaret Chan and Victor Yue¹

IN MEMORIUM

Tan Ah Choon (陈亚春) the Singapore “King of Spirit-Mediums”
1928 - 2010

On 27 January 2010 Tan Ah Choon died at the age of 82. Born in the year of the dragon (1928), Tan was the most respected spirit-medium among his peers. He became a tangki (童乩 tongji ‘child diviner’ or Chinese spirit-medium²) just before the 1950s, and by the 1960s was regarded as the wisest, most powerful spirit-medium in the Singapore tangki community so that he was nicknamed “Tangki Ong” (童乩王), the “Tangki King”.



¹ Victor Yue is the founder and moderator of Taoism-Singapore, an email forum dedicated to the discussions on Chinese temple culture and Taoist heritage in Singapore. Information for this article draws from an interview with Tan Ah Choon conducted by Victor Yue, C. W. Chan and Aaron Choo on 15 August 2009. All photographs in the report were used with the kind permission of the late Mr Tan and his family. Margaret Chan is Practice Asst. Professor Theatre and Performance Studies, in the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University. This article also appears on Margaret Chan’s personal homepage on the Singapore Management University website http://www.mysmu.edu/staff/margarechan/documents/10_Tangki%20King.pdf

² The spirit-medium is also known as *kitong* (乩童 jitong), but this is a more recent innovation which follows the Mandarin. Right up to and into the 1990s the word tangki was used to mean spirit-medium in the Hokkien community of Singapore, so that this term is used in this article. There are mistaken beliefs that the term kitong is more polite, or that the kitong is the medium before possession, and when in a trance, the kitong is a tangki, but essentially the terms tangki or kitong mean the same thing and translate to, “divining child,” for all spirit-mediums are spiritual children whatever their human age. The spirit power lies in the state of being a spiritual child (see Margaret Chan, *Ritual is Theatre, Theatre is Ritual: Tangki Spirit Medium Worship* (2006, Singapore: SMU and SNP References), pp. 57-60).

Mr Tan was "caught"³ by deities to become a spirit medium when he was aged about 21 years. This was just after the Second World War, but Tan's family appeared to have done well enough for that time. The Tan family lived in Si Kar Teng (四脚亭 Si Jiao Ting literally "Four-legged Pavilion" named for the four-pillared pavilions built to provide shelter in the cemetery that once occupied this area) where Jalan Membina is now. The family home was a wooden hut with an attap (nipa-leaf thatch) roof, but it was big as far as village huts of that time went; there was room to spare, and three rooms were let out to tenants.

As a boy, Tan was not keen on studies. He would not do his schoolwork, and the teachers would take a cane to his palms. That did not make him like schooling any better, and so he just gave up studying altogether. As a boy he hawked *kueh tutu* (steamed flour cakes filled with grated coconut or ground peanuts). He would walk from Si Kar Teng all the way to Gu Chia Chwee (牛车水 Niu Che Shui, Chinatown, named for the bullock drawn water carts that used to ply this area), a distance of about three kilometres, to sell his cakes. Along the way, he often encountered thugs who would demand protection money from him. When Tan could not give them any, they would take his basket of food and tip the contents onto the road.

When he was old enough, Tan got himself a driving license and began driving a pa hong chia (霸王车 ba wang che, pirate or unlicensed taxi), shuttling between Si Kar Teng and Tua Po (大坡 Da Po, the city centre). He then graduated to driving buses (the well-known Hock Lee (福利 Fu Li) Buses of the 1960s, and then he became a fire-engine-driver!



³ Tangki's are "caught" by deities and saints, that is one cannot choose to be a tangki, the gods choose their mediums, see Chan, 2006: 92-95.

By this time, Tan had become a spirit medium. He lived the typical “double life” of a tangki⁴; by day he worked as a driver, by night he ministered to the people.

Tan told of how he became a medium. When he was about 21 he dreamt that Tiong Tan (中坛元帅 Zhong Tan Yuan Shuai) came to him and said, "I want to use your body as my medium ". In his dream, Tan had readily agreed to take on the task. Tan knew that he had to make good on this promise when he began to vomit every time he ate. So he went to the Hui Hian Beo (飞玄庙 Fei Xuan Miao temple) in Bukit Ho Swee to consult the temple keeper, Huei-Pek (辉伯 Hui Bo). Huei guided Tan to learn how to allow his body to be used as the vessel of a god⁵.

After the historical fire of Bukit Ho Swee in 1961, Tan moved to Kallang Airport and then Macau Tiong (马交冢 Ma Jiao Zhong), the Cantonese cemetery off Outram Road, between Havelock and Tiong Bahru roads, near the grave of Singapore philanthropist Tan Tock Seng. Here he saw devotees who came to the HDB (Housing and Development Board) flat he rented in Block 10. At 30, Tan was summoned by Siong De Kong (上帝公 Shang Di Gong, also known as Xuan Tian Shang Di 玄天上帝) to be his medium. From then on, the principal deity that Tan served was Siong De Kong.

As a tangki, Tan conducted consultations in two ways; in trance as Siong De Kong incarnate, and as the medium who channeled the spirit of Siong De Kong into a palanquin. Tan’s palanquin is large and heavy⁶ and needed four people to carry it.

⁴ Tangki worship is a folk practice that is loosely organised within the Zhengyi ritualistic tradition. Tangkis like Zhengyi priests are non-institutionalised. They are *huoju* (火居) that is ‘hearth-dwelling,’ meaning that they live and work within the community like ordinary folk. Outside their religious duties, they hold regular jobs, marry and have families. The *huoju* tradition follows on the notion of gods coming from the people and rising among them, an aspect of people power, see Chan, 2006: 21).

⁵ For information on tangki “training” see Chan, 2006: 92-95.

⁶ Victor Yue says that it is possibly the largest and heaviest palanquin he has ever seen.



In the interview, Tan recalled the case of an Indian girl who was aged around 16 years. When he first saw her, she slid down the stairs like a snake. Apparently, the girl went to Lin Shan Tan (麟山亭 Lin Shan Ting) temple to Siong De Kong at Leng Kee (麟记 Lin Ji) road (the temple is still there). She encountered a snake the temple compound (in those days there were apparently many snakes in that area). She used a stick to kill the snake and the "spirit" of the snake went into her. Tan consulted the possessed palanquin. The chair gave the girl a few hard knocks. Tan then had a paper talisman burnt, and had the ashes mixed into some water. The girl was given this blessed water to drink when the snake spirit left her body and she recovered.



During his heydays in the 1960s, Tan was the most respected spirit-medium in the

Singapore tangki community so that he was nicknamed “Tangki Ong” (童乱王), the “King of Spirit-Mediums.” He was the most sought-after “piercer”, the person charged to drive long skewers and rods into the bodies of tangkis. He said when the mediums went into trance, he would ask them what they wished “to carry” on their bodies. Apparently, in those days, the tangkis would sit up to allow the rods to be pierced vertically into their backs. Tan would stand on a chair and with the help of two others he would drive the rods into the tangki’s flesh. Tan and his helpers, would brace themselves, and on an agreed signal, the three would push the rod in in one clean drive. These days, the piercing is done with the mediums lying on their stomachs and the rods driven in to lie on a slant against the torso. In Tan’s days the mediums would have five rods (representing the Celestial armies of the Five Directions) pierced into their bodies; two upon the chest, two at the back and one through the tongue.

When in a trance, Tan himself would have a *sa-hoon* (三分 san fen, three hoon⁷) thick skewer driven through both sides cheeks. These days, normally, only one cheek is pierced. Increasing the burden upon the wounds in his cheeks, Tan hung two small joss censers⁸ at the end of the long skewer.

⁷ At this time in Singapore, the British Imperial System of measurement was used and the hoon (literally ‘division mark’) represented one-tenth of a British inch.

⁸ The censor is an important symbol of spirit authority.



At the funeral of Mr Tan on Sunday 31 Jan 2010 his cortege was led by a car with a red banner over it. This indicated that Tan was a ho mia lang (好命人 hao ming ren, man of good fortune) who had lived a full and happy life past the age of 80 years.



The car with a red banner at the head of Tangki Choon's funeral. Photo: Victor Yue.