



Title	Reconstructing Religion : An Anthropological Study on the Development of Dejiao Organization in Contemporary Malaysia
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Citation	東アジア文化交渉研究 = Journal of East Asian Cultural Interaction Studies, 5: 39-51
Issue Date	2012-02-01
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10112/6115">http://hdl.handle.net/10112/6115</a>
Rights	
Type	Article
Textversion	

# Reconstructing Religion: An Anthropological Study on the Development of *Dejiao* Organization in Contemporary Malaysia

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This paper examines the development and the formation of the *Dejiao* organization. *Dejiao* originated as a spirit-writing cult in 1939 in the Teochew region of South China. *Dejiao* is largely a *Teochew* phenomenon with a close link to *Teochew* religious culture and *Teochew* businessmen. By the end of World War II, *Teochew* businessmen had begun spreading *Dejiao* to areas of Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. Since then, it has continued to expand, and today *Dejiao* has developed into large Religious organizations. The organization in Malaysia boasts the largest number of adherents.

The main activities and the characteristics of the various *Dejiao* organizations remain the same. They carry out planchette divination and charitable activities, at the same time, *Dejiao* organizations also act the role as Chinese mutual aid society. This paper will analyze the development of *Dejiao* in Malaysia, focusing on the environment of the migrant society and the characteristics of its members. It will examine how the businessmen, as well as other members, have shaped the *Teochew* religious culture into a religious organization and how they have affected the formation of the character of *Dejiao*.

Keywords: *Dejiao* organization, *Teochew* businessmen, planchette divination,  
charitable activities

## Introduction

In contemporary Malaysia, while the policy of religious pluralism and tolerance has continued, the conjunction of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia dichotomizes the religious arena into a Muslim and non-Muslim field. Islam is regarded as a central component of Malay ethnicity, as well as of Malaysian national identity. This has resulted in the state's promotion and the political manipulation to make religion as a political ideology and an obligatory institution. In the non-Muslim field, while the connection between ethnic identity and religious affiliation is less rigid, non-Malays have developed strong consciousness toward their original ethnic religions and emphasized the sense to make religion as vehicles of ethnic expression. This awareness can be understood in part as a response to the state's religious policies (Ackerman and Lee 1988, Debernardi 1994, 2004).

For Malaysian Chinese, Chinese popular religion has close links to ethnic identity and acts as a means for

ethnic expression. The deities and the rituals of Chinese popular religion are associated with myth-histories and cultural histories of the Chinese. Further more, deities, like Guandi and Mazu, are regarded as the reflections of the traditional values and good virtues, the practice of popular religion thus is permeated with historical and cultural allusions and has deep link to ethnic identity.

Then popular religion is an open arena: the ritual cycles of popular religion act the role to organize ethnic union and enhance the solidarity. Although the Chinese are associated with various religions, Chinese popular religion is an inclusive space. Members of congregational religions, such as Buddhism or Christianity can also participate in the events of the ritual cycle, including temple fairs. The Hungry Ghosts Festival, for example, is one of the most collective ritual events in the Chinese community, celebrated during the seventh lunar month in every part of the Chinese residential area, which is mobilized by community participation. People who may have different religions gathered at the ritual with an undefined sense of solidarity, as well as with the objective to raise funds for Chinese education and other community projects<sup>1)</sup>. In this regard, Debernardi has indicated that Chinese popular religion has complementary functions and forms a totality (Debernardi 1994, p.121)<sup>2)</sup>. Additionally, popular religion is practiced by the Chinese in their everyday life, praying to deities like Guandi at home, or making offerings to ancestors despite one's official religion. In this sense, popular religion serves as a cultural link for the Chinese with various inclinations: it builds ethnic awareness and strengthens Chinese cultural identity.

Besides the cultural and ethnic meaning, popular religion holds many significant social functions from the colonial era to the present. The Chinese temple, such as Kong Hok Palace in Penang served as a community tribunal and council, organized the community life during the time of British colonial rule (Debernardi 2004, p.10). Today temples and other popular religious institutions still play an active role in providing organizational frameworks, carrying out charitable activities, and making social space for the Chinese leaders to gain their reputation and social honor. Thus we can see that popular religious institutions have developed multi-faceted characters in which the cultural and social meaning occupies a significant part.

However, many researchers described Chinese popular religious practice as “fragmentary” in contrast with congregational religions (Yang 1961, p.20-21). That can be considered due to popular religion rarely has an institutional form.

In this paper, I would like to examine the development of Dejiao organization, which shares the same foundation with popular religion, but has developed a systematic institution. Dejiao originated in 1939 in the Teochew area in South China where it started as a spirit-writing cult. Dejiao is closely linked to Teochew

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1) In Penang the Hungry Ghosts Festival is coordinated by a central committee from 1970th to draw the collective community power for carrying out community projects. They have successfully raised funds for the construction of a hospital named “Nan-hua Yiyuan” and the Chinese Town Hall in 1970th. The long-term and formal project is to raise fund for Chinese School in Penang every year which lasts until today (Su 1999).

2) The Chinese festival cycle and temple fairs can be seen the only place to absorb the biggest range of participation of people who may belong to various social class and has different educational background, either a Chinese educated one or an English educated one. In this regard, popular religion can be considered the most effective means for community mobilization.

businessmen and is deeply associated with Teochew religious culture. By the end of World War II, Teochew businessmen began to spread Dejjiao to Southeast Asia. Since then, it has continued to expand and today Dejjiao has become one of the biggest Chinese Religious organizations in Malaysia.

The distinct feature for Dejjiao is that it became a religious organization only after its spread to Southeast Asia. Before that Dejjiao existed as diffused religious practice like other popular religious cults<sup>3)</sup>. In 1957 the first united general society of Dejjiao called the “Nanyang Moral Uplifting General Society,” was founded with nine organizations, located in Singapore and in today’s Malaysia. From that point, the unified style of ritual and worship as well as altars, came into existence, and that provided the standard for the latter-established Dejjiao organization (Tan 1984, p.24). Thus, we can say that the organizational development of Dejjiao is a Southeast Asian phenomenon which can be considered as a link to the social and cultural conditions of the local country in conjunction with the demands of certain class of Chinese people.

Today in Malaysia, Dejjiao has developed more than 100 organizations. The Dejjiao organization can be treated as a religious organization, or a charitable body, or even a community center. The main activities performed by Dejjiao organizations in Malaysia are planchette divination and charitable activities, as well as some recreational and cultural activities open to the greater community. This puzzled current state of Dejjiao has been shaped by the individual members, as well as by the environment of the migrant society. The Teochew businessmen, who are the main supporters of Dejjiao, organized the Teochew religious culture and beliefs based on their knowledge and ideas in accordance with their distinctive social and cultural demands.

The purpose of the present article is to take a closer look at the way in which Dejjiao organization has evolved by examining the factors related to the formation of the organization of Dejjiao and the process of the character creation of Dejjiao. Ultimately this study will trace the development of Dejjiao as the creation of the migrant Chinese business sector, examining the ground and the process of their movements.

### **The Dejjiao organization in Malaysia**

Dejjiao literally means the “Teaching of Virtue”; *de* is a concept that encompasses all virtues and good deeds, *jiao* is a religious indicator. Dejjiao is also referred to as “Dejjiao Hui” which means Dejjiao organization, in English it appears as “Moral Uplifting Society”.

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3) Before 1949 more than 20 Dejjiao associations were founded in Teochiu(or ChaoZhou) region. The establishment of Dejjiao association was through the planchette revelation. For example, Ma Guide who was later became an influential person for Dejjiao occasionally visited Zi Xiang Ge, the first Dejjiao association in 1940, where he was instructed to form an association in Chaoyang district through the planchette divination. Then in 1942 the second association named ZiQingGe was founded by Ma and his friends (Tan 1984, pp.15-16). There wasn’t united general society to supervise all the Dejjiao associations in China nor was there any specific mention of Dejjiao as a religion or a religious organization. The purpose of Dejjiao association at that time was in accordance with the situation of the war to provide medical services and other charities to people as well as to preach virtues. It is only after the spreading of Dejjiao to Southeast Asian areas, the united Dejjiao society was established.

In Malaysia many Dejjiao organizations are located in the west coast states of peninsula Malaysia where large Chinese populations exist. For example, there are 29 Dejjiao organizations in Perak, 16 in Johore, 10 in Penang and near 10 in Kedah<sup>4)</sup>. Two united Dejjiao societies exist to promote solidarity and to co-ordinate activities between the Dejjiao organizations located all around the country. One is named “United Moral Uplifting Society Malaysia”, and the other is named “Federation of Moral Uplifting Societies”<sup>5)</sup>. Almost all of the Dejjiao organizations belong to either of these two general societies. While the former one has dominant influence comprising more than 120 members, the latter one remains a small society with only 9 members. Indeed besides the registered Dejjiao organizations, there are many which are not registered. Thus, the total number of the organizations is said to be more than 200 in contemporary Malaysia<sup>6)</sup>.

Many Dejjiao organizations are located in urban area, and a few are located in rural regions. They provide religious and other community services to members and even non-members at local region, so Dejjiao organizations have the appearance both of religious organizations as well as Chinese voluntary associations. This also engendered a distinct character for Dejjiao from other traditional or new religious organizations, such as the former Yiguan Dao (All-Pervading Unity), Zhenkongjiao, Hongwanzihui, as well as the latter Foguangshan, Ciji in contemporary Malaysia. Before comparing Dejjiao with other Chinese-based religious organizations, let us look at the feature of the organization and the activities of Dejjiao.

Dejjiao is on equal par with other Chinese associations in some ways. For example, the physical structure as well as the environment of most Dejjiao organizations are rather different from other Chinese religious sects, but similar to the general Chinese associations.

Each Dejjiao organization maintains a structure similar to other registered societies. There is an executive committee which is comprised of a President, General Secretary, Secretary, Treasurer and other posts. There is no priest or full-time religious specialist in Dejjiao organizations. Alternatively the President together with a few appointed committee members act as leaders in religious ceremonies. The distinctive feature for membership is that Dejjiao’s membership system is quite open. There is no particular regulation for becoming a member, and it is open to all people irrespective of ethnic origin. In practice, most members are Chinese, especially the Teochew people. In many cases, people become members of Dejjiao organizations by invitation and through introduction of their friends and relatives who belong to Dejjiao. As part of the formal proceedings, before one person becomes a member, his or her application has to be approved by the executive committee.

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4) This is the statistics of the United Moral Uplifting Society Malaysia. See *Bulletin of the United Moral Uplifting Society Malaysia*, No.34, 2004. While the number of Dejjiao organization is continuing to increase.

5) The former one is derived from Nanyang Moral Uplifting General Society which was founded in 1957 in Singapore, then in 1972 the Malaysian organizations detached from the General Society and formed as the United Moral Uplifting Society Malaysia. The latter one was formed in 1967 which has other original roots. These two United Societies are while in rivalry regarding the practice of the planchette divination.

6) I was told of it by a leader of the United Moral Uplifting Society Malaysia. I also have visited some registered Dejjiao organizations while they are not members of any united Dejjiao societies mentioned above.

In the Dejjiao pantheon, many popular Chinese deities are worshipped. Guandi, a deity who is regarded as the Emperor God of Heaven, is believed to be the founder of Dejjiao. At the same time, Confucius, Buddha, Laozi, Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammad, founders of five major religions, are also regarded as deities; they are seen as having preached the message of *de*(virtue) in their own respective ways.

The basic doctrine, or Prayer Text, is Dejjiao Xindian, which was proclaimed by the deities of Dejjiao in 1942 in the Teochew region through planchette is comprised of only Chinese characters. It is recited in all congregations and in most organizations it is recited in Teochew dialect which shows the link of the Teochew religious culture<sup>7)</sup>. Apart from the doctrine, there are ten virtues and eight rules which Dejjiao followers should observe. The ten virtues are essentially Confucian virtues, like filial piety and brotherly love, loyalty and faithfulness etc. The eight rules for the members to avoid are derived from the traditional Chinese moral: do not cheat, do not be hypocritical, do not be greedy etc. These rules are largely recognized as moral regulations which do not have the compulsory force.

Apart from usual worship, the most important ritual performed by most Dejjiao organizations is Fuji, traditional Chinese planchette divination. Fuji is a kind of intellectual divination through the use of a Y-shaped willow stick. Two specialists hold the stick, and then the deities are invoked to cause the stick to move and write characters on fine sand in a wooden tray. Many deities of Dejjiao, like Jigong Huofo and Lvzu are regularly “reveal” messages during planchette sessions<sup>8)</sup>. In recent years, however, Fuji has caused many controversies regarding the reliability of the message of the deities. Thus, a number of Dejjiao organizations have ceased practicing it. Some organizations do not have planchette mediums, and so are not able to hold planchette sessions.

At the planchette ritual, devotees may put forward questions to the deities about their daily affairs, personal problems, and health. Whenever necessary, Chinese medical prescriptions are given and charms are written down and supplied to devotees. Many people said they joined the Dejjiao organization after witnessing planchette sessions, or after their illnesses had been healed through planchette revelations.

For the leaders, planchette revelations also mean authority and legitimacy. In some Dejjiao organizations the posts of the executive committee are assigned through planchette divination, while in other places, the selected candidate for executive committee should be recognized by the gods through planchette. It is also through planchette revelation that the leaders of most Dejjiao organizations obtain legitimacy to implement their plans, such as establishing a new Dejjiao organization.

The most important social function of the Dejjiao organization is to do charity. Most Dejjiao organizations provide free Chinese medical services for all Malaysians irrespective of ethnic origin. They also make financial

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7) In some Dejjiao organizations where the members are mostly non-Teochew Chinese or because of other reasons, the Prayer Text is recited in Hokkien or Mandarin. For example, in Zi Yun Ge Mandarin has been used from 1999 followed the instruction of deities through planchette to harmonize all the members who are from various dialect groups. Nevertheless the use of Teochew language is dominant in all organizations.

8) There are a number of prominent deities in Dejjiao besides Guandi and the five founders of world religions. Jigong Huofo and Lvzu may be considered the more important.

contributions to the old, the sick, the victims of fires as well as of other accidents and disasters, which have gained a good reputation for Dejjiao. Many Dejjiao organizations also award scholarships to the children of members and even of non-members. A number of organizations even provide kindergarten classes, and some bigger organizations have good facilities and organize cultural activities and health classes for their members<sup>9)</sup>.

From the above description, we can find that the Dejjiao organization has highly secular color. It functions as a charitable body and even as a community center to provide mutual assistance as well as various cultural and recreational activities. There is no strict religious regulation for the members while the authority of deities represented through planchette ritual is the centripetal force to unify all the members. Because the deities are regarded as the representation of virtues and good deeds, thus we can say Dejjiao is organized based on the belief of traditional Chinese virtues and ethic.

The multi-aspect and the “amorphous” nature of Dejjiao rather differ from other Chinese based religious organizations. The traditional Chinese Popular religious organization like Yiguan Dao (All-Pervading Unity), Zhenkongjiao, Hongwanzhui which were founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, have systematic ethical and spiritual bases and the followers learn religious teachings from religious specialists. At the same time, there are strict creeds and regulations for the members to observe and practice. Today, because of a lack of successors of the religious specialists, Zhenkongjiao and Hongwanzhui are less active and the members have been on the decrease since the 1970s. Yiguan Dao is using approaches from the organization in Taiwan to further develop the organization, with a focus on attracting college students to become members and to enhance the intellectual development. Today in Malaysia Yiguan Dao is the only one among traditional Chinese religious organizations which is thriving. Dejjiao as the local growing religious organization is also prospering but its path of development is unique in contrast to other religious organizations given its multi-social functions and activities as well as its less strict religious regulations and openness.

Today in contemporary Malaysia, the Dejjiao organization is continuing to expand. They constructed networks under the united Dejjiao society and are visiting each other on some occasions such as the anniversary of the establishment of the organization, the ceremony of the rebuilding of the building of Dejjiao Hui. Usually they are providing mutual-financial assistance upon some big events and through that to deepen their relationship each other<sup>10)</sup>.

### **The leadership of merchants and the Chinese Community, Dejjiao organizations**

The foregoing description shows that the Dejjiao organization exists in the Chinese Community to fulfill the needs of the Chinese people, especially those of Chinese businessmen. Before analyze how has this tendency

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9) For example, some Dejjiao organizations have badminton, folk-dancing, and Qigong classes. There are some members who came to Dejjiao only for participating the cultural and recreational activities carried in Dejjiao organization.

10) The mutual-financial assistance provided among the Dejjiao organizations in many cases is a transnational one.

arisen, we need to take a close look at the social structure of Chinese Community, the feature of the leading social class, their political inclination and social concerns as well as the general condition of the Chinese Community. These factors have close link to the development of Dejiao, or we can see that built the ground for Dejiao to expand in its current way.

As the distinct feather of the social structure of Chinese Community the merchants act as the leader in Chinese Community. That is a traditional trend which has been formed during the process of the formation of the migrant society.

From the 19th century onwards, large numbers of Chinese immigrants began to enter the Straits Settlements and later the British Malaya, as a result of voluntary migration as well as forced migration. At the same time, dialect and kinship organizations were formed to provide mutual help and to develop a group cohesion<sup>11)</sup>. With the expansion of the migrant community and the rise of various Chinese associations, new leadership emerged, that is the merchant class which became community leaders and played a far more influential role than they did in China.

The general profile of the class hierarchy of the Chinese society was formed in the nineteenth century followed that were some modifications in the new century. The merchant class (shang) still occupied the top social stratum, followed in descending order by the educated elite (shih), and the worker (kung) (Yen 2000 p.29-30). The merchant class can be subdivided into two groups: capitalists and general merchants. Despite their deferent social influence, both of them have assumed the leadership in various Chinese associations. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry which were established at most regions of Malay in early twentieth typically represent the leadership of the merchant class, that is it acted as the top leader of Chinese community and played significant political role besides its commercial functions. Apart from that, from Chinese Town Hall in every state to various dialect and kinship organizations, as well as in Popular religious organizations, the merchants are holding the leadership given their wealth and social influence. This also built a tradition for the Chinese Community.

This flow engendered as the purpose of migration of Chinese largely related to economic factors; the predominance of commercial interests overrode any other interests (Wang 1996 p.4-5; Yen 2000), in this context, the success on business is highly social concerned and wealth is the important factor to earn high social status and the prestige. The businessmen who are financially affluent and socially powerful are usually elected as leaders of various associations, and that has been formulated as a social convention until today.

For the businessmen who show the tendency to be committed to the community activities and tend to assume the social leaders related to their social orientation and their political attitude. Toplay has indicated that in HongKong society the charitable works have moral and religious meaning, at same time it also assume as the

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11) It is in the early twentieth, most of the major dialect organizations representing the Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, and Hainanese were established, which played the role of strengthen the unity of the geographically based dialect groups (Yen 2000 p.28-29).

means to obtain prestige. Associations then are a major mechanism for their members to turn wealth into status (Toplay 1969, p.182-183,213). In Malaysia this principle works in the same way. The businessmen are using the associations as a means to gain prestige through giving generously to charity and devoting to a number of social activities organized there.

Otherwise in Malaysia the political situation has enhanced this tendency of the businessmen. It is a significant phenomenon in Malaysia that many Chinese associations include dialect and kinship organizations, as well as religious organizations intend not to be involved in political activities. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry which predominantly represents the interests of the capitalist Chinese has the political position of pro-government, that reflect the conservative stance of the capitalist Chinese towards politics. It means that they don't want to clash with the Malay hegemony and Malay state directly. This attitude is widely shared by the general merchants. In general, the merchants avoid to participate in politics but seek to own an alternative social theater to gain high social reputation and to raise their social status. The best place for them is the Chinese associations where they can give a good account of themselves and became prominent in the society by their social welfare contributions.

Under the leadership of the businessmen, Chinese associations are carrying out various community services according to the needs of Chinese Community under the situation that the "Malay first" policies and the unbalanced administration in this country have made the Chinese should settle many problems by themselves. Indeed in Chinese community, not only the associations but also the religious organizations are assuming a role to support Chinese education and cultural affairs, as well as to carry out charitable activities which are of high social needs.

Especially many Popular religious organizations named *miao* or *shentan* which are providing social and recreational activities for members, fund-raising for the school, and charitable activities for the community. They are in this way developed close link to everyday life of people.

The way of the development of Dejjiao can be situated in this social background and social context. Dejjiao was constructed by businessmen with the desire to fulfill their religious and social needs. It is influenced by the inclination of the adherents as well as the social condition of the Chinese community, Dejjiao has evolved its current way of the multiple directions.

The leader of Dejjiao is normally businessmen, most of whom are entrepreneur who is influential in town, furthermore they are mostly also leaders of the Chinese community. Most of them also hold important positions in various associations, school committees and even certain temples.

The motive of the businessmen to become leaders of Dejjiao is almost as same as that of the general Chinese associations despite the belief of deities is other important factor which I would discuss at the next chapter. That means they can gain social honor and take advantages from acting as leaders of Dejjiao. Firstly, the charitable image of Dejjiao has important meaning to the leaders, they can get the social respect and, indeed many of the Dejjiao leaders got the honourable title of "Datuk" directly due to their background of Dejjiao and the social contribution they have made there. To expand the business link and know more business acquaintance through

Dejjiao organization are the other socio-economic advantages. Concurrently, it is because of the financial support of the businessmen that the prosperity of the Dejjiao organization is being ensured.

Besides the principle of the leadership, the management system and activities of Dejjiao also shares same feature with general Chinese associations. Under the leadership of businessmen, Dejjiao organization is not only engaged in religious activities, but also has the tendency to fulfill the social and cultural needs of their members and the whole Chinese community. Let us look at the Articles of the Dejjiao organization, ZiYunGe of Penang:

The objects of the Association shall be to serve with respect the great virtue and merits and the good sayings and behaviour of the various Reverential Immortals of the Buddhist Sects, to aim sincerely in doing good deeds and to promote friendship for the purpose of mutual assistance and contributions towards all charitable works and social welfare, but shall not participate in political activities.

This is the objects written down in the constitution of ZiYunGe, which is more or less same with other Dejjiao organization. While the phrase “various Reverential Immortals of the Buddhist Sects” is not an accurate translation of the Chinese meaning which actually refer to all the deities of Dejjiao. Additionally, the phrase written in the News Letter of ZiYunGe demonstrated more clearly the character of Dejjiao.

The Society is committed to the promotion of charitable works, social welfare and education for all members of the community regardless of race, creeds or religions (ZiYunGe, 15 May 2004).

The Society under the present leadership of the Board of Directors, continues to make further progress in moral cultivation and community services (ZiYunGe, 9 Sep 2004).

From the indication we can have the perception that Dejjiao organization identified itself as a Chinese volunteer society to a large extent. This tendency is being intensified after 80s as to practice commitment on cultural activities and education became new directions for Dejjiao members. In 80s after the New Economic Policy has been launched, tendency towards ethnic hegemony which includes to promote Bahasa Malaysia as the only language and to develop the national culture with a Malay core are strongly reinforced, that made Chinese feel themselves increasingly marginalized in a variety of domains, at same time their language and culture are continually under a huge threat. As a response to this situation, Chinese minority has intensified their sense to express their concerns upon Chinese education and culture, many of the Chinese associations began to take action in promoting educational and cultural activities. Many of the Dejjiao organizations like other Chinese associations have started to set Women section and Youth section to organize cultural and recreational activities as well as the educational events under the auspice with Chinese schools in local region to show their support.

“United Moral Uplifting Society Malaysia” which acts as the headquarters of Dejjiao organization of Malaysia, declared that to support the Chinese education of Chinese Schools and College is the big goal of the Society in 90s. As one project towards that goal, they donated 50,000 Ringits as the Building Fund to NanFang

College which is the Freedom College where Mandarin used as one of the medium for the Chinese population<sup>12)</sup>.

Dejiao was in this way developed new activities to fulfill the needs of its members and the whole community. From the forgoing description we can know that besides religious center, charitable body, now many Dejiao organizations have got the new face of cultural and recreational center in Chinese community, from that they can absorb multiple participants and make the character of Dejiao to a more inclusive one. In ZiYunGe for example, the Women section organized a female choir which attracted many lay people to participate in. While the Youth section set up the speech class and are organizing Youth Karaoke Singing Contest occasionally for members. Overall Dejiao organization is carrying out activities flexibly to bring benefits to its members and it is in this way, Dejiao earned the support of the people and continued the expansion of its organization.

As mentioned above, the Dejiao organization, besides providing the planchette divination services, also provide charitable and cultural opportunities and services to local community. Thus Dejiao has cultivated a multi-faceted character as an open system which absorbs multiple participants and objectives.

The competition for the leading positions in the executive committee can be very intense, in fact, important considerations in electing leaders, especially the top-rank, include the wealth and the amount of money prospective leaders have donated or are willing to donate. This principle works in the same way with the general Chinese associations.

In Dejiao organization, As wealth and reputation are still important criteria of success in Chinese society, Dejiao organization, like other Chinese associations, creates places where the businessmen can be known for being generous and for assuming leadership.

### **The practice of the businessmen**

Chinese businessmen continue to dominate most of the Chinese voluntary associations, which understandably are more effective in catering to the class interests of Chinese businessmen. This is still a prominent feature of the politics of Chinese associations in Malaysia. In this respect, we can say Dejiao serves as one stage for the Chinese businessmen to gain their reputation and high social status.

Besides that, they have opportunity to gain further profit. The businessmen who join and support Dejiao organization do have some direct or indirect socio-economic advantages. They are gaining business contacts through Dejiao activities. The links between businessmen are promoted by Dejiao organization, and the members of Dejiao can become business acquaintances who can co-operate and even help each other in business enterprises.

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12) The former included exporters and importers, property owners, shipowners, bankers etc. who were financially affluent and with great social power, some have huge political influence. The latter consisted of shopkeepers, general traders, and small plantation or factory owners who were economically well off but commanded less influence and respect in society (Yen 2000 p.30).

To take a close look at the construction of the Dejjiao organization, we can find there are two major hierarchies in Dejjiao organization, one level is the leadership, and the other is the general public. As mentioned above, the leader class is normally composed of businessmen, most of whom are entrepreneur. The public class consists of owners, salaried workers, housewives and the retired as well as intellectual, who are engaged in the documentary work in the Dejjiao organization. In many cases, the intellectual work is usually occupied by the retired teachers of Chinese schools.

At the individual level, the motivation to become a member of the Dejjiao organization varies. Usually people have different purposes to gain entry to Dejjiao. Let us look at the case of Ziyunge of Penang and analyze the practice of the members there.

Ziyunge is one of the biggest Dejjiao organizations in Malaysia which was founded in 1954. There are 1,600 registered members in Ziyunge, but the active members are about 100. There are two hierarchies in Ziyunge like the normal case of most Dejjiao organizations. The leader class is composed of influential businessmen in Georgetown, who occupied the hegemony inside the organization to make the decision of the activities as well as shape the character of the organization. The motivation of the general members to participate in Ziyunge converges on the divination services from the god, charity activities and various cultural activities provided, and to construct and expand the cycle of friends.

The practices of the leadership of the Dejjiao organization reflect the essential character of Dejjiao. Let us take a close look at the case of Mr.Z who was a former president and now serves as the honorary advisor of Ziyunge.

Z is an entrepreneur who holds many important positions in various associations such as the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and the Penang Chinese Assembly Hall. The motivation of Z to become a member of Dejjiao at the beginning in 1970s was to do charity. After that Z continued to make donations and later he was able to obtain the highest post in Ziyunge. Contributions made by Z to Ziyunge include routine donations for the medical fund and welfare fund, and at the time of the reconstruction of Ziyunge in 1999, Z donated 500,000RM. In recent years, as instructed by the god, Z is engaged in establishing new Dejjiao organizations such as in Brunei and Indonesia.

In accordance with the donation and services Z had dedicated to Ziyunge, he gained a lot of profit which he had also aimed to get. Z assumed the presidency of Ziyunge from 1999 to 2006, that has brought many advantages to him such as the high social status and good reputation which is favorable for his business. In fact, he had aimed to obtain the post of the president of the United Dejjiao Society Malaysia, but failed in a power struggle inside the Dejjiao organizations. At the practical level, Z has donated electric products of his company to Dejjiao organizations which act as advertising for his company. In general, through participating in Ziyunge, Z gained social status and reputation. At the same time, he also expanded his circle of friends and connection which has had a direct or indirect positive effect upon his business.

Like Z, other leaders in Ziyunge have the same tendency to pursue pragmatic interests. Concurrently, it is also a cause of weakness in the intellectual development of Dejjiao. Most of the leaders in the Dejjiao organization

are less concerned with the teaching of Dejjiao than the performing rituals. This attitude and their practice played a crucial role in shaping the character of contemporary Dejjiao.

However, we can see some changes in the leaders in recent years. In the case of Z, there have been some changes to him during the process of his participation to Ziyunge these years. At first, from learning the message given by the gods through planchette, Z changed his perception upon the objective of Dejjiao that it is not just to do charity but should cultivate himself to get out from the transmigration. He dedicated himself to studying the doctrine and the planchette scripts as well as become devoted to missionary activities. As Z said, these changes occurred to him in the process of the study of the God's message, which told him of the objective of life and he was greatly enlightened to know what he should do from now.

From the foregoing description we can see the close connection between the Chinese businessmen and the Dejjiao organization. The activities of Dejjiao are just in accordance with the needs of the businessmen to practice their belief and to perform their social activities. However, in recent years, some members showed the tendency to improve their understandings regarding the dogma as well as the spiritual teaching. Some are even engaged in cultivation. But in fact, these changes haven't brought the fundamental transformation to Dejjiao as the conventional behavior and disposition of the members seem to be rather firm.

## Conclusion

In the Malaysian Chinese community, the expressed need for the education, cultural preservation, and charitable activity is rather high. To carry out various activities to fulfill the needs of the people, the medium is indispensable.

At the same time, mutual assistance as well as the need to enhance solidarity remain necessary among every dialect group and the whole community. Besides various dialectal and lineage associations, Chinese guilds, the religious organizations also have the role to promote the community union and provide social and cultural services. It is in this context, Dejjiao began its way of development as an organizational religious association. The Teochew businessmen who are the main supporters of Dejjiao have organized the belief of traditional Chinese deities and Teochew religious culture to an institutional form in accordance to their religious, cultural and social demands. Thus the multi-characteristics of Dejjiao have been generated gradually in this way.

We can also say that Dejjiao organization is just providing the ethos to the entrepreneurs of small or mid-sized farms by its open system and the plain teachings, those are the main reason of the expansion of Dejjiao in Malaysia and other countries in Southeast Asia. Concurrently, the pragmatic interests as well as the mental inclination of the Chinese businessmen are always reflected in the activities of the Dejjiao organization. It is in this way that the character of Dejjiao has been solidified.

We can conclude that Dejjiao is a creation born from the dynamism of the interaction between the situation of the migrant society and the practice of the Chinese businessmen. In other words, we can say Dejjiao is just the lifestyle of the businessmen. They are creating their own religion by using their own knowledge of the tradition,

as well as by adapting it to their lives and their pragmatic needs.

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