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Live Streaming and Digital Stages for the Hungry Ghosts and Deities

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Abstract: Many Chinese temples in Singapore provide live streaming of *getai* (English: a stage for songs) during the Hungry Ghost Month as well as deities' birthday celebrations and spirit possessions—a recent phenomenon. For instance, Sheng Hong Temple launched its own app in 2018, as part of a digital turn that culminated in a series of live streaming events during the temple's 100-year anniversary celebrations. Deities' visits to the temple from mainland China and Taiwan were also live-streamed, a feature that was already a part of the Taichung Mazu Festival in Taiwan. Initially streamed on RINGS.TV, an app available on Android and Apple iOS, live videos of *getai* performances can now be found on the more sustainable platform of Facebook Live. These videos are hosted on Facebook Pages, such as “Singapore Getai Supporter” (which is listed as a “secret” group), “Singapore Getai Fans Page”, “Lixin Fan Page”, and “LEX-S Watch Live Channel”. These pages are mainly initiated and supported by LEX(S) Entertainment Productions, one of the largest entertainment companies running and organising *getai* performances in Singapore. This paper critically examines this digital turn and the use of digital technology, where both deities and spirits are made available to digital transmissions, performing to the digital camera in ways that alter the performative aspects of religious festivals and processions. In direct ways, the performance stage extends to the digital platform, where *getai* hosts, singers, and spirit mediums have become increasingly conscious that they now have a virtual presence that exceeds the live event.

Keywords: Singapore; Hungry Ghost Festival; digital technology; live streaming; religion online; spirit mediums; digital culture; ritual event; *getai* performance

1. Digital Stagings of Deities and Ghosts

Chinese temples in Singapore have recently incorporated the use of video streaming technology in religious festivals, deities' birthday celebrations, and anniversary celebrations. This use of live streaming is most prevalent during the Hungry Ghost Month, where it is believed that the gates of Hell open during the seventh lunar month and spirits wander amongst the living. During this month, “public performances ranging from traditional Chinese opera (denoted in Singapore by the Malay term “wayang”) to live concerts, commonly known as *getai* in Singapore” accompany “religious rituals and offerings, feasts and auctions for charitable purposes” (Liew and Chan 2013, p. 273). Since Liew Kai Khiun and Brenda Chan's most recent and comprehensive study of Hokkien popular music in Singapore in 2013, there has been a shift to live streaming of *getai* (loosely translated as song-stage), made popular by the Facebook Live function which was fully rolled out in 2016. In an earlier research on *getai*, Chan and Yung (2005) provide a historical narrative of *getai* in Singapore as part of their construction of “a genealogy of social transformation of leisure and recreation” of the Singaporean Chinese. They argue that this transformation,

... culminates in the moment of recreational consumption, or recreation as consumption—a unique moment of modernity when we posit, as ideal types, three places where recreation occurred: in the streets, in the parks, and on the air. (Chan and Yung 2005, p. 106)

Extending the “places” mentioned above to the digital and online spaces, this article closely examines the intersections between the spiritual and the digital. It also locates religious acts on the Internet and analyses online videos of religious rituals that now circulate with other forms of public entertainment. It follows developments in the field of religion online that looks into “how individuals and communities are dovetailing the Internet into their daily local and transnational lives” (Cheong et al. 2009; see Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002). Evolving from the earlier “organised attempt” and the “one-to-many communication” (Helland 2002, p. 207) approach to providing information about a religious group or organisation to the Internet, Chinese temples in Singapore, for instance, are embracing the online platform as another site for religious activity that incorporates the hallmarks of popular entertainment and online videos. Popular entertainment performed during religious festivals and birthday celebrations is essentially for humans, spirits, and gods to enjoy, and this is performatively signalled and emphasised at various points during a performance. This remains a significant aspect of such entertainment—despite Singapore’s long modernity project, spirits persist. As cabinet ministers and members of parliament are increasingly present at these festivities and would often post images of their attendance on social media, there is a sense that the new reality for Chinese temples in Singapore is one that encompasses multiple addressees, each involved in their own form of archiving. Each new post or mediated message on the Internet then increases their public visibility. Moreover, “the scale and expense of temple festivals—in particular the quality of the theatrical performances—is a direct index of the success of the temple”, as Jean DeBernardi points out (DeBernardi 2012, p. 296). In that regard, I argue that temples perform their rituals and festivities through a bricolage of gestures, machines, practices, and mediated performances that come together in an assemblage of human creativity and technological revelation of the gods, spirits, and human participants. More specifically, the digital adds to the index of the success of a temple in scaling up its festivals, blurring the divide between deities and humans as a result. This assemblage of mediation is discussed in terms of performance, where I closely examine the performative gestures and acts that signal the intersections between the spiritual and human realms, and between popular entertainment and religion. Through performance and digital mediation, these intersections form and gather.

Figure 1 offers a view of where I sat when I attended a *getai* performance in Eunus and serves as a starting point for this study, that is, to draw one’s attention to the layers of performance, agency, and mediation involved in staging entertainment for both the living and the spiritual.



Figure 1. Front Row seats for the spirits at a *Getai* performance at the open field at Eunus, 2017 (Image: Alvin Eng Hui Lim).

This article critically examines the digital turn and the use of digital technology, where both humans and spirits are made available for digital transmissions, performing to the digital camera in ways that alter the performative aspects of religious festivals and processions. In direct ways, the performance stage extends to the digital platform, where *getai* hosts, singers, and spirit mediums have become increasingly conscious that they now have a digital presence that exceeds the live event. They speak of and with the deities and ghosts, directly to the digital cameras positioned in front and around them. This “live” event of the deities and ghosts is quickly disseminated through wired and wireless connections. This has ramifications on how religious rituals and public festivals are experienced, and, thus, how they are to be analysed, particularly as religious rituals spill onto the online domain. Chan and Yung compare religious rituals with public festivals and argue that:

While religious rituals occur at a fixed time and in a fixed space, and participation is somewhat obligatory, the same cannot be said about public festivals, where participation is quite voluntary. This voluntary participation perhaps marks the beginning of individual freedom and autonomy, a characteristic of modernity project. In an immigrant society like Singapore, both the content and form of public festivals were traceable to various migrant-sending communities of Southeastern China. As it happened, festivities in Singapore were community-, place- and calendarbound, reflecting visible boundaries of various subethnicities that divided the Chinese community deeply. (Chan and Yung 2005, p. 106)

However, the live streaming and video recordings of religious festivals made available on social media platforms blur those “visible boundaries” and a network is beginning to form online, albeit still limited in spectatorship and participation. While not quite as “public” as festivals that temporarily occupy open spaces and streets, online videos simultaneously stage the live rituals and processions to online audiences that follow groups and individuals such as Victor Yue, a well-known figure amongst those who “follow” online media on Taoism and Chinese temples in Singapore. Yue created the Facebook group, “Taoism Singapore”, where he and others such as photojournalists, videographers and enthusiasts actively post photographs, video recordings and live streaming videos on Facebook. Temples with social media handlers and pages will then “share” multimedia contents or produce their own videos on Facebook and YouTube. Their presence on the online domain ensures that any given religious event is archived for future viewing. More importantly, a devotee or even a non-religious viewer has the opportunity to witness a religious ritual or spiritual possession online as it happens without being physically there. While religious rituals occur “at a fixed time and in a fixed space, and participation is somewhat obligatory”, the participation and reception of these rituals and public festivals multiply with social media, forming a network of interactivity that extends beyond the visible boundaries of subethnicities or geography. Elsewhere, I have theorised that:

When technology is considered in relation to the spaces that religious and spiritual practices or divinities inhabit, technology mediates these spaces and re-purposes them, such as re-designating them as sacred space, public space, communal space or simultaneously all of these. (Lim 2019, p. 122)

Religious festivals in Singapore are to an extent still “community-”, “place-” and “calendar-bound” but the spatial-temporal (i.e., not being able to attend a performance or ritual live) boundaries are blurred by the incorporation of digital technology. This blurring redefines the believers’ relationship with their gods, where a god’s embodied presence is a priori tied to a medium, an effigy or an object in a physical temple. The digital medium, by extension, can transmit a spiritual presence alongside other forms of mediation. This article examines the implications of mediating religious rituals and entertainment in temple spaces digitally through an ethnographic study of *getai* performances during the Hungry Ghost Festival Month in 2018 and 2019, the 100-year anniversary of Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple and the visit of the temple’s tutelary deity from Anxi, China, combined with my viewing of several live streaming of spirit possessions in Chinese temples in Singapore.

2. Getai and Ghosts “Live” in Singapore

Getai performances are not strictly organised during the Hungry Ghost Month. Providing entertainment during the birthdays of deities as well, *getai* has recently gained renewed popularity. Part of the reason for this is the extensive use of digital video broadcasting and LEX(S) Entertainment Productions (or Lixing Entertainment), which is at the forefront of this endeavour to popularise the practice. Often referred to as a “uniquely Singaporean” culture at the start of a performance, hosts and singers of *getai* are well-known local celebrities, some of whom have acted in local films directed by Singaporean director, Jack Neo, who is known for his mainstream Chinese films. Many of the younger singers in particular gained attention through the television programme and singing competition, “Getai Challenge”, organised by local media company, MediaCorp.

Initially streamed on RINGS.TV, an app that was made available on Android and Apple iOS, live videos of rituals and *getai* performances have moved to a more sustainable platform of Facebook Live. These videos are hosted on Facebook Pages, such as “Singapore Getai Supporter” (which is listed as a “secret” group), “Singapore Getai Fans Page”, “Lixing Fan Page” (with 21,000 fans) and “LEX-S Watch Live Channel”. These pages are mainly initiated and supported by LEX(S) Entertainment Productions, one of the largest entertainment companies that run and organise *getai* performances in Singapore. A key personnel who supports the broadcasting of *getai* performances is Aaron Tan, founder of LEX(S) Entertainment. Through his video on Facebook, I was able to observe the “simulcast” of a *getai* performance and spirit mediums possessed by gods of hell, *Tua Li Sa Ya Pek* (Mandarin: 大二三伯) in the form of a split screen (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. “HD *Getai* Live Broadcast”, posted by Aaron Tan on 3 September 2018 during the Hungry Ghosts Month¹. Source: Facebook.

Subsumed into the same video interface, the split screen highlights that the singer is performing to *Tua Li Sa Ya Pek*—which would have been missed with a static camera focussed on the stage. Meanwhile, the gods enjoyed their soup as assistants (*Zhou Tou*) attended to them. As the broadcast continued, online viewers commented at the side, often using emoticons. Midway through the *getai* show, the hosts announced that there were important guests, bowing to them as they named the *Ya Pek* hell gods present at their banquet table. Later, the Taiwanese singer (see Figure 2) who had been invited by the temple and producers, addressed the gods, pointed to the red egg in her hand and wished them “longevity” (Mandarin: 千秋). These performative gestures all point to the deities’ agency in directing

¹ The full video can be viewed on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/aarontan184/videos/10155417940076504/>; see video at 1:37:11 (accessed on 18 February 2019).

what happens on stage as well as on camera. In that sense, the digital restages these gestures for the online stage, where an online topography appears alongside the physical one.

For Joseph Comaroff (2007), the annual ghost month conjures a “ghostly historical topography [that] ... appears on top of the familiar one, a radical disjuncture of memory and topography that is violently, temporarily conflated within the hyper-controlled surfaces of the contemporary city” (63). This imagery of a topography, a second map, aptly describes the radical transformation of spaces in Singapore during the seventh lunar month—strong smoke pervades the air for days during the mass burning of joss paper throughout the island. Areas with a large population of Chinese residents, such as Hougang, will be clouded in a haze. To the environmental scientists, this becomes an issue of pollution as the burning releases inorganic compounds and metals into the air, which is later released back with rainwater (see Khezri et al. 2015). There is a third map, a juncture of memory and archiving that is embedded over and above “hyper-controlled surfaces of the contemporary city”. Indeed, on this liminal topography of ghosts and the living, “the carnivalesque character of ghosts, their ephemeral and disruptive visitations, evade the continual tending of the disciplinary state. They come and go” (Comaroff 2007, p. 65). However, through the Internet, they linger a while more and even co-perform with their offline manifestations. Arguing that the “cohabitation between the living and the dead as well as the superimposition of spiritual spaces onto everyday lived spaces are often ignored”, Terence Heng (2015) proposes that “there is indeed value in considering how spiritual space and physical space interact and how spiritual space is reified in material artefacts” (pp. 58–59). There is equal value in considering how the online topography provides another liminal node for the living and the dead to cohabit and interact, so much so that this is reified in both material and immaterial ways. This reification provides another site of spiritual revelation, an opportunity for an online spectator to encounter the spiritual. While devotees still go to the divine source—a temple, a shrine, or a medium possessed by a deity—the streaming video allows the viewer to witness the revealed deity almost in real time, despite not being able to be physically present at the live event. Though the revelation is arguably more directly witnessed when one encounters the deity live in the temple, where one can touch (and present the offerings to the deity), smell (the incense and burning smoke), and sense the divine presence, the digital videos privilege one’s sight and sound instead. The haptic is still engaged when the viewer chooses to type a comment or leave an emoticon on the real-time comments panel on Facebook.

In effect, the spirit possessions and spectral visitations in the “HD Getai Live Broadcast” video (see Figure 2), often a sight confined to a temple space or during processions (or *Yew Keng*), is broadcast live on Facebook and likely to appear on the newsfeed of Facebook users who like or follow the Facebook pages that share the video, making this video available to a large number of viewers. In fact, it has been shared 1353 times and has 81,000 views (as of 15 February 2019). Live streaming videos posted by LEX(S) Entertainment typically reach more than a thousand viewers. Hosts also often encourage audience members present with them as well as those online, to share their videos. While a video still lags behind the live performance by a few seconds, it matters little to Facebook viewers as they may choose to view it whenever they like or close the frame. The live video is then archived as a recording, which one can view again later. The archived video then becomes the keepsake, the memento through which a believer can re-experience the spiritual; it is also a record for viewers to watch the stage performance. This new practice echoes the practice of bringing home a talisman or an amulet from a temple, but it also does something else. The purpose of the live streaming is not to replace the live performance, but to extend the experience, especially in situations where a live audience member may prefer to watch the live streaming where there are close-ups of the performances, and perhaps leave a comment. Multiple screens are sometimes placed around the performance venue, particularly when it is a huge concert with international guests. Digital mediation, particularly when it is done with a high production value (such as the videos hosted by LEX(S) Entertainment), adds to the overall divine occasion, where the act of bearing witness to the divine revelation gets a boost in

grandeur and reach. This was the case for Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple, which I now turn to as part of my analysis on live streaming during temple festivals.

3. Case Study: Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple's 100-Year Anniversary Celebrations

In 2017, Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple in Singapore celebrated its 100-year anniversary of the arrival of its tutelary deity, Cheng Huang Ye (Mandarin: 城隍五舍公), from Fujian Anxi, in Singapore. As part of the celebrations, there was a concerted effort to incorporate digital technology in its promotion and archiving of the celebrations. This marked the digital turn of the temple, which culminated in the launch of its own app in 2018. QR codes of their app can now be found around the temple space and on Facebook. The app serves as a news and announcements portal, where members can quickly locate information about events at the temple. Through the app, users are directed to their Facebook page where they can view live streaming videos, video recordings, and photographs of the temple's religious events and festivals.

During the anniversary celebrations, Sheng Hong Temple was a transnational assemblage that featured and involved temples, spirit mediums, priests, lion, and dragon dance troupes, *getai* singers and celebrity hosts from Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Deities, spirit mediums, and priests arrived at Sheng Hong temple for *Yew Keng* (street procession); singers from the three countries each held a *getai* concert for three evenings, respectively. The final ticketed concert on 29 September 2017, helmed by popular Taiwanese singers and hosts, had a huge turnout largely because of the singers. Audience members had the opportunity to meet the singers of popular Hokkien music in person. The temple also produced a music video titled “安溪城隍傳萬里” (English: Renowned Thousand Miles) and sang by Yuan Jin, Aaron Tan's spouse.² A banquet was also held on 26 September 2017 at the compound of the temple and the guest-of-honour was then Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean. That evening was also the occasion for the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore to pray together on stage. In fact, Sheng Hong Temple is often able to invite ministers, members of parliament and the President³ to their events as a mark of their commitment to religious harmony. Framed by the camera that captured those moments, the intersection between politics and religion culminated in a perpetual emphasis on and endorsement of Singapore's state-performed multiculturalism.

These events are documented in a series of live streaming videos that followed the itinerary of deity Cheng Huang Ye and his entourage. From the arrival of the effigy from Anxi, China to its departure, devotees and online viewers could follow the route of the entourage (see Figure 3). Later, Cheng Huang Ye's economy class air ticket was posted on the temple's Facebook page, the main site where devotees could also download the schedule for the celebrations. Through the use of hashtags and clickable tags, devotees' own documentations of the event are also available (for posts that are set to “public”).

² View the full music video on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1702307036477190> (accessed on 18 February 2019).

³ See the photograph of President Halimah Yacob with Mr Tan Chuan-Jin at a Seventh Month auction dinner at the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple featured in a *Straits Times* article, 9 September 2017 (accessed on 20 February 2019), <<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-cabinet-to-speaker-plus-can-be-an-upgrade>>.

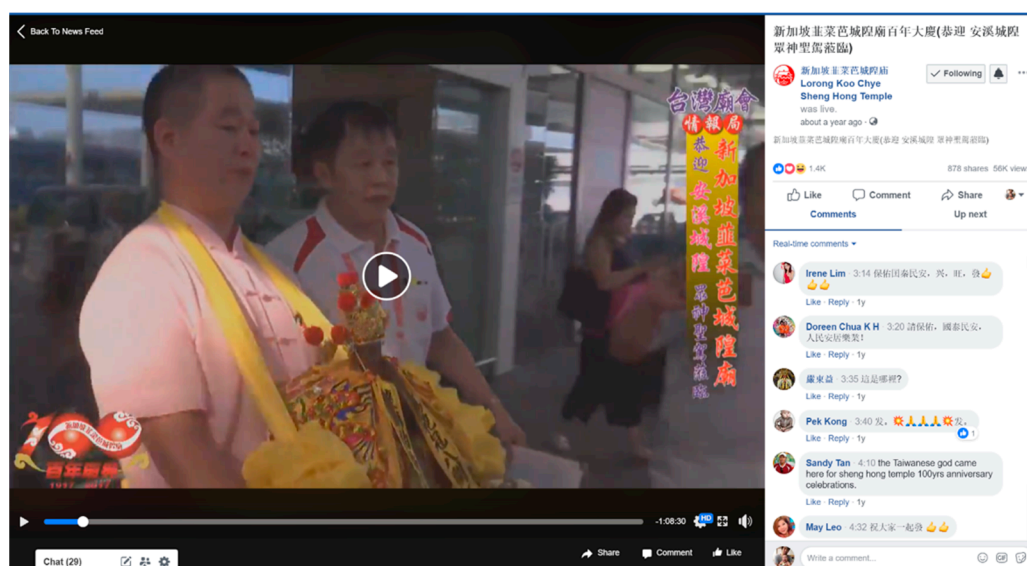


Figure 3. Screenshot of the moment when the effigy of Anxi Cheng Huang Ye leaves Singapore’s Changi Airport to make the journey to Sheng Hong Temple, 22 September 2017. Source: Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/LKCSHENGHONGTEMPLE/videos/1697361890305038/> (accessed on 18 February 2019).

I attended the *Yew Keng* at the temple on the day Cheng Huang Ye arrived in Singapore on 22 September 2017, as well as the *getai* performance on 29 September 2017. Even though I waited at the temple, I was able to view the online video of the effigy’s arrival at Changi Airport. At a few points during the streaming video, I caught a glimpse of myself engaging in my own documentation of the procession.

Figure 4 shows both the professional videographers commissioned to film the procession as well as devotees with their own recording devices, all of whom attempted to capture an image of the deity in his palanquin. The watermark on the video signals the transnational nature of the live broadcast: “台灣廟會情報局” (Temples of Taiwan Information Portal).⁴ This media outlet is part of Asia Radio Family (ASIA FM), a radio group based in Taiwan that also create webcast videos and the information portal that produces live streaming videos and video webcast of temple festivals all around Taiwan. Their videos and radio programmes are disseminated to both local listeners and viewers as well as overseas Chinese in the United States. Aaron Tan was instrumental in inviting the broadcasting group. Tan visited them in Taoyuan and approached several temples in Taiwan to invite their representatives to visit Sheng Hong Temple.⁵ This partnership with LEX(S) Entertainment formed part of the multilateral connection between the Hokkien Chinese in mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia. In other words, the transnational nature of the video streaming production reflects the transnational legacy of the deity and the temple’s missionary efforts to consolidate its network between temples and religious communities across geographical borders.

⁴ See their YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXl6Xc7SOWovOKzDN4D9IrA/> (accessed on 18 February 2019).

⁵ See the image of Aaron Tan’s visit to Taiwan, inviting representatives from the temples: <https://www.facebook.com/asiafmty/photos/pcb.1745615252396157/1745615212396161/?type=3&theater> (accessed on 18 February 2019).



Figure 4. Cheng Huang Ye's Palanquin Arrives Outside Sheng Hong Temple. Source: Facebook.

The endeavour in Singapore to produce live streaming of religious festivals and rituals learns much of its practice from successful live streaming projects in Taiwan. Apart from ASIA FM's webcast programme, SET Taiwan, a television channel of Sanlih E-Television in Taiwan (launched in 1993), produces the television programme called "Blessing of Formosa" (寶島神很大). Similarly, the programme provides live streaming of religious festivals in Taiwan on its YouTube channel⁶ and Facebook page⁷. During Sheng Hong Temple's processions, I observed the use of drones, a technique that is also used in the filming of large festivals in Taiwan. Particularly useful for the filming of Mazu Festival and the Dong Gang King Boat Festival (or 東港迎王, which is also a hashtag on Twitter) in Taiwan, the drones were able to fly over the ships and provide an unobstructed view as they travel across the sea with effigies and devotees. In the live streaming of Cheng Huang Ye's arrival at Sheng Hong Temple, there was also a drone involved in the filming from and providing an aerial point of view for online viewers. Subsequently, a video recording of the procession was shown on big screens that were placed next to the temple for the duration of the celebrations. Thus, the digital network has in fact informed the overall production of streaming videos in Singapore.

The *getai* concert was itself a showcase of technical capabilities with rich resources to back the use of multiple screens and studio-grade broadcast cameras. It is also a reflection of the transnational nature of popular entertainment: as popular singer, Weng Li You (翁立友) came on stage, there was an instant recognition and hype from the audience members. The camera panned to show his fans gravitating towards him and making requests to take photographs with him. They whipped out their camera phones and used the digital zoom function to take images of him. His songs are often used as theme songs for popular Taiwanese television drama series that are also a mainstay on Singapore's local television station. Hence, audience members were familiar with the songs and could sing along with him. Figure 5 shows the performance stage where three screens acted as the backdrop. Large LED screens were also placed around the concert area for audience members who were seated far away from the stage. Thus, at some corners of the venue, audience members turned their chairs to face the screens instead of viewing the singers onstage. This focus on the screens is also arguably closer to their prior encounters with the star performer and they are used to seeing celebrities up-close on screens at home.

⁶ The YouTube channel of "Blessing of Formosa" is available at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_s7aCmBPjzMUOgS0gcAf8g (accessed on 18 February 2019).

⁷ The television programme is translated as "God bless Bao Dao" on Facebook (accessed on 18 February 2019), <<https://www.facebook.com/pg/godblessbaodao/>>.



Figure 5. Popular Hokkien Music Singer, Weng You Li Sings the Sheng Hong Temple 100-year Anniversary theme Song (Image: Alvin Eng Hui Lim).

I had initially thought that the screened performance would not have the same effect of intimacy and immediacy as the live performance. However, upon witnessing the attentive looks of spectators (see Figure 6) watching a screen that was showing the live performance, I changed my opinion of the efficacy of screens. Philip Auslander (2008) writes that “our understanding of what counts as a live performance change continually over time in response to the development of new media technologies” (p. 109). For him, “the experience of intimacy in such a case results as much from the participants’ knowledge and experience of the artist’s normal practice as from the circumstances of the performance” (p. 109). In that instance, when audience members shared the space with each other, gazing in one direction toward the screen and sharing the same soundscape of the sound system, they shared a familiarity with the performance and the performer, whose songs repeated the recurring theme songs that have channelled through their television sets at home. This, in effect, produced an experience of intimacy, mediated by a combination of mediating devices. The cameras, then the screens, captured the gaze of many devotees and spectators. There was a tacit acceptance that the camera (and the camera operators) had a better view of the performance. Like the professional videographers and camera crew that crowded around the deity’s effigy and palanquin (see Figure 4), these forms of mediation work on the assumption that they can bring the witnesses of the spiritual closer to the live event. With this proximity and by proxy they circulate the images of deities for viewing and the devotees could then encounter their deity in proximity, as if they were next to him. This act of “recording” the deity repeats the reproduction of the deity’s effigies, carried around by the missionaries in the previous century to set up satellite temples in Singapore and beyond. Without acts of reproduction, the deity’s presence cannot be circulated.

The occasion gathered the diasporic Chinese in Singapore, mapped them onto a wider topography of ethnic Chinese across Malaysia, mainland China, Singapore, and Taiwan, and made manifest the cultural and spiritual linkages to their counterparts. It provided the context for the connection to be maintained and accentuated. This was facilitated through technology (both old and new media), which has the agency to consume the numinous into a product of personal objectification. The focal point of the festivities was Cheng Huang Ye. Without the splitting of his iconography through the form of effigies (the effigy in Singapore is the fifth one), there would not have been a strong will to correspond with the temples across the Chinese diaspora. In that sense, bodies migrate as well as spiritual beings, facilitated by the vehicles that carry and host them.



Figure 6. Audience members who did not have tickets to the *getai* performance had seats outside the temple to view the screen that was showing the live performance. (Image: Alvin Eng Hui Lim).

4. Capturing Gods in Machines

The network between Taiwan and Singapore is most exemplified by the sharing function on Facebook. The online platform provides the tools to share or embed videos across social media platforms. This creates a virtual network through which viewers across nationalities can view the festival across geographical boundaries. This suggests a shared heritage and genealogy, a departure from Daniel Goh's observation that, "ambiguities and contradictions of place, community and identity are far more attenuated for the diasporic Chinese communities in Malaysia and Singapore since cultural and ethnic links with China have largely been severed" (Goh 2009, p. 122). Here was an instance where the religious, spiritual, cultural, and ethnic links are maintained with China vis-à-vis Taiwan, assembling in Singapore to memorialise the migration of the Anxi deity.

From a performance point of view, the spiritual linkage between the effigies is clearly emphasised in a specific moment during the Cheng Huang Ye procession. In the temple courtyard, two icons of Anxi Cheng Huang Ye sit—the two effigies in the palanquin are placed side by side with the Singaporean equivalents, creating splitting images of the deity (see Figure 7). Like the celebrity from Taiwan, the same deity is then further redistributed as digital copies (videos and photographs) in the many cameras held up before and beside the effigies (see Figures 8 and 9).

A devotee gestures to pray, lifting his palms and placing them together. He prays. He then reaches into his pocket and dishes out his smartphone to capture an image of his deity. This sequence of gestures echoes the conventional act of bringing home the signatures of deities on talismans. Jeremy Stolow, citing Bruno Latour, writes that "Latour reminds us, it is not so easy, nor is it so desirable, to distinguish between reality and its construction" (Stolow 2013, p. 3). Following Stolow's provocation to "locate god in the machine", I argue that the ability to "bear witness" to the divine is supported by the technologies that bring the material world close to the illusory world of migratory deities:

For Latour it is this process of construction and denial of constructedness that brings the "real" world of technoscience into curiously close alignment with the "illusory" universe of idol-worship, fetishism, and other acts of bearing witness to transcendent powers of miracle, magic, and fate. (Stolow 2013, p. 3)



Figure 7. Cheng Huang Ye and his Redistributed Effigies and Palanquins. (Source: Alvin Eng Hui Lim).



Figure 8. A Devotee Reproduces an Image of Anxi Cheng Huang Ye. (Source: Alvin Eng Hui Lim).



Figure 9. The Combined Acts of Prayer and Photo-taking by Devotees. (Source: Alvin Eng Hui Lim).

The reproduction of the effigy conflates the real and the transcendental, the material and immaterial. At the heart of this performative act of “capturing” the gods is the belief that the gods lend themselves to being “captured” in their chosen vessels, travelling to and taking root in Singapore. As the story goes, the effigy that arrived in Singapore in 1917 was not meant to stay but Cheng Huang Ye’s migration into a local spirit medium (*tangki*) convinced everyone present at the epiphany to keep the effigy in Singapore and establish a temple (Xu 2007, p. 4). Diasporic gods with their “copies” and vessels act on their agency to disseminate and promulgate, and old and new technologies and mediums facilitate this. Following Latour and Stolow, the point is not to insist on the “copy” of gods as mere reproduction and mimicry, and therefore a lesser thing than the spiritual. Instead, the “copy” performs and actualises further performatives from the devotees and the spiritual. (Latour 2010) This is a practice that echoes premodern technologies of circulating spiritual messages and divine presence through paper and objects that can be produced in bulk and easily circulated. Daniel Stevenson provides a comprehensive examination of how incantations and formulas were “inscribed on paper and carried as talismans ... burned in conjunction with evening rites for distributing food to hungry ghosts and the dead” during the Song period in China (Stevenson 2015, p. 372). Paper was also used to inscribe prayers on, “in advance of a ritual performance” and “read aloud to the assembled deities and parties” (Stevenson 2015, p. 407). Though the mediums are different, digital mediation performs a similar function in circulating the spiritual message and framing a ritual (and *getai*) performance to its own “assembled deities and parties”. Paper sheets also helped to circulate incantations from Buddhist sutras in the Southern Song period (see Footnote 38 in Stevenson 2015, p. 357). The popular practice of using and burning paper for the hungry ghosts is continued till today, though with variation and simplification. The incorporation of digital technology and live streaming also ignores this distinction between real and copy. In fact, I argue that the use of digital technology continues this fundamental understanding that the thin boundary between the spiritual and material reality can be bridged through an easily disintegrable medium. The digital, like paper, supplements and circulates the spiritual encounter and predicates the occasion for performance and ritual. Each archiving and live streaming of the spirits and deities bridge the spiritual through construction. Each circulation also re-performs the spiritual. More practically speaking, such digital tools facilitate the constant need to bear witness of the divine and to commemorate this moment with a memorial token. Moreover, this act of archiving a deity is conflated with the act of recording a celebrity (at the *getai* performance). The blurred boundary between the spiritual and material reality further intersects with celebrity culture and popular entertainment, forming an interface among the digital, the spiritual, and for these devotees the almost habitual practice of personal archiving with a camera phone.

5. Conclusion: Temple Interfaces, Networks and Algorithms

This study would not have been possible without Facebook’s algorithms. I was able to observe these live streaming videos because of the algorithms that push similar content and Facebook pages of temples onto my newsfeed (see Figure 10) over the last two years. With each new “like” and new page I follow, Facebook continues to suggest relevant pages to follow. Perhaps, one can critique this as the temples being co-opted into a new hegemony and being beholden to the new technologies of media giants. However, on the social level, it provides the means for like-minded devotees and believers to meet and interact with each other. On the transnational level, the digital platform bridges the geographical distance between devotees of the same deity or religious tradition. What is more significant in this study is that a network of temples seems to be emerging, as administrators and followers of temple pages add each other, resulting in a quick dissemination of live videos of spirit possessions, distributing the image of a deity across a wide geographical area. After all, devotees believe that the same god can simultaneously possess multiple spirit mediums at the same time but at different places. The god is available to be digitally reproduced as well.

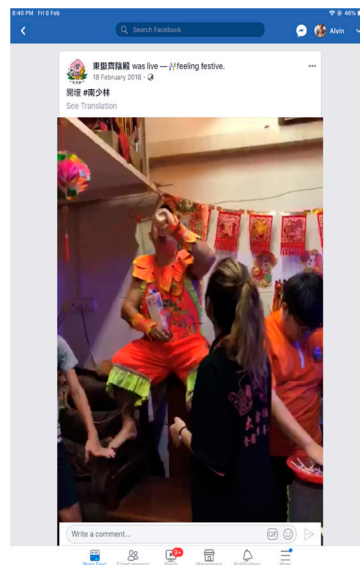


Figure 10. Example of a Temple Pushing Live Videos of Spirit Possession to Followers on Facebook. (Source: Facebook).

Place, as Terence Heng reiterates along with Ingold (Ingold 2000), Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1991), and Soja (Soja 1989, 1996), “is made in the spaces of everyday life” (Heng 2015, p. 59). The fully lived space of Soja’s conception and combination of first and second space must and should include the networked space of the Internet. As more devotees are wired into the wireless networks and form their communities across nationalities, the ongoing research on Chinese temples and deities across the Southeast Asian region can benefit from connecting with and analysing existing networks formed and maintained online, such as the International Baogong Cultural Heritage⁸, 新馬王爺信仰聯誼會⁹ (Singapore–Malaysia Ong Ya Faith Fellowship) and 閩台新馬法主公信仰聯誼會¹⁰ (Min–Taiwan–Singapore–Malaysia Fa Zhu Gong Faith Fellowship).

Nevertheless, there are limitations to this analysis of digital space and the freedom it affords to temples to display their spiritual activities. This excessive online display of spirit possession and religious processions follows a diasporic belt of the Southern Chinese, unable to penetrate the “Great Firewall” of China. As long as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter platforms are blocked in mainland China, the visits of deities from China to Southeast Asia will be staged both online and offline as an assemblage of particular groups and networks that are at the periphery of mainland China. As much as such formations territorialise and connect the temples together, it can also deterritorialise if the networks are not maintained. Hence, future analysis must still take into account the pilgrimages and visits alongside the function of a deity’s visit to a specific community. Digital spaces layer over Heng’s spiritual second space and Comaroff’s ghostly topology (Comaroff 2007), but they do not necessarily disintegrate the borders that still limit their passages of spirits and the living. What it can account for, however, is the new place that spirits and ghosts inhabit and the performative gestures that signal this new inhabitation, albeit in digital codes and algorithms. Through digital mediation, new performatives emerge that combine conventional practices with new technologies. As a conclusion, this article is an attempt to consider the shift toward digital stagings of spirit possession, temple festivals, and religious rituals as a continuation of the symbiotic relationship between construction and religious belief: digital media are the new performative means to manifest the spiritual.

⁸ See their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/internationalbaogongculturalheritage/> (accessed on 18 February 2019).

⁹ See their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/381498255679270/> (accessed on 18 February 2019).

¹⁰ See their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/131638447455262/> (accessed on 18 February 2019).

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