



Transformation of the sacred and the profane in space and time case study Chinese ritual in Chinese temple in Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia

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Abstract

Existing discussions on the sacred and the profane have continually treated space and time in a co-extensive or unified analysis, despite the fact that in several cultures, separation between the two concepts of space and time is highly necessary in order to comprehend shifts or exchanges between the sacred and the profane. This article intends to showcase a transformation within the conception of the sacred and the profane observed in the dimension of time separate from the dimension of space, in which the dimension of time ultimately determines the conception of the sacred. In several cultures, separation between space and time is highly necessary in comprehending the conception of the sacred and shifts or exchanges between the concept of the sacred and the profane itself. For example, Chinese culture has since the beginning, separated the dimension of space and time in the conception of the sacred. This research was conducted in a Chinese temple in Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia. Through the ceremony held in the temple, the transformation of the sacred and profane in space and time can be seen.

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Introduction

Emile Durkheim defined religion from a perspective of sacrality. Religion is defined as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. All religious beliefs, both simple and complex, exhibit one common characteristic, which is the separation between the sacred and the profane. The sacred is always defined to be something more superior and powerful, which in normal conditions remains untouchable and must always be respected. Things which are profane in nature are part of ordinary, everyday lives. Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends act as representation systems which exhibit traits that are sacred, containing virtue and even simultaneously power within them. In Durkheim's perspective,

the sacred is not synonymous with the divine. The sacred does not necessarily have to be gods or spirits, but can also take the form of rocks, trees, and pieces of wood (Durkheim, 1965). What is sacred is not considered so only on the basis of divinity but also on prohibitions that set it apart from the profane (Durkheim, 1965). The sacred consists of beliefs and practices which unite all its followers and turn them into a single, collective moral community (Durkheim, 1965). The profane consists of all which cannot touch the sacred. To step into the sacred, one must leave profane life behind whilst assuming a sacred identity (Durkheim, 1965). Durkheim argues that every religious belief always requires a classification of things, both real and human ideas, and divides them into opposite categories, namely the sacred category and the profane category. That division of things into two domains is the main distinguishing feature of religious thinking compared to other matters. Thus, religious belief is a representation that expresses the essence of various things which are sacred (Rudyansjah, 2015).

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Hence, the present study aimed to investigate the transformation within the conception of the sacred and the profane observed in the dimension of time separated from the dimension of space. In particular, the Chinese culture became the foci in this study. Section two describes some theoretical underpinnings. Section three explains data collection and analysis procedure. Section four presents and discusses the findings with specific references to previous research. This paper ends with a concluding remark and recommendation.

Literature Review

Religion, as defined by Durkheim, is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden (Durkheim, 1965). The process to become something sacred is accomplished through the legitimation of collective beliefs and rites. According to Durkheim, rites prescribe the rules of conduct in the presence of sacred objects: how, when, and to whom one should pray, sacrifice, conduct peace rituals, and so forth. From here comes the need for sacred spaces; places of worship which translate common belief into common rituals, manifesting the sacred world and its connection with the profane world. These sacred spaces generally unite the moral community. For Durkheim, religion is a social fact. Since religion is a social fact, religion must become concrete and for religion to become concrete, objects, persons, spaces, and time believed to have mystical powers emerge to then be sacralised or made sacred.

The definition of the sacred and the profane in Western thought has been influenced by Durkheim’s perspective, which divided the sacred and the profane based on time and space. According to Emile Durkheim, religious and profane life cannot coexist in the same space. Sacredness requires special locations to be set aside for religious rituals. An example of a sacred space is a place where ritual objects are stored when they are not used, forbidden to profane persons (Durkheim, 1965). On the other hand, religious and profane life also cannot coexist at the same time. Sacredness demands a dedicated time to be set aside for religious rituals. As a consequence, everyday activities must be suspended while major religious ceremonies take place (Durkheim, 1965).

For Durkheim, all things sacred possess three determining characteristics. First, they must be social in nature, because they need to be shared in order for them to continually exist. Second, sacredness must always be transposed in the form of a material object. Collective ideas and sentiments must be represented in order to be perceived and understood by the community. Finally, everything sacred is expressed symbolically. The connotative meaning and significance of the sacred would always take precedence over the denotative meaning of the profane world. Despite contradicting one another, sacred and profane things are both formed from material objects. Sacredness can be shaped and transformed among different objects. The profane can transform into the sacred and the sacred can lose its divine property and become profane.

A similar opinion has been expressed by Eliade (1957), who defined sacred as a cosmic reality separate from aspects of everyday life. Eliade stated that modern man is a non-

religious man, for whom the spatial aspect of the world is essentially homogeneous, whereas the religious man experiences the world as something non-homogeneous, sacred in some parts and not so in others. In particular, the religious man experiences the world as having a sacred centre and seeks to live in it. The religious experience of ascribing special values to certain locations due to personal associations, such as a place of birth (Eliade, 1957), showcases how sacred space and time are truly found in real space and time, permanent and eternal; in contrast with space and time in the labile, continually-changing profane world.

The concept of sacred places according to Eliade was evident from the presence of holy sites. The most obvious example would be the church; its door is the threshold distinguishing between the sacred and the profane. The outside is the profane and the inside is sacred. Similar to the church, ancient cultures also recognize sacred doors, which open towards the sky, the realm of the gods, a sacred place revealed to the religious in the form of various signs acknowledged to come from the divine (Eliade, 1957).

The concept of sacred time according to Eliade is experienced through religious festivals and profane time during ordinary everyday life. Religious festivals actualize sacred events from mythological origins, and as a result by celebrating religious festivals and participating in them, one can step outside ordinary time into a sacred era. Religious festivals occur periodically, making sacred time circular in nature. Conversely, the modern, non-religious man does not experience sacred time. Although they may have periodic celebrations, they do not experience them as something sacred involving interaction with the divine. According to Eliade, for ancient cultures, the origin of the sacred is found during New Year’s Day. The cosmos has become profane due to chaos and through religious festivals the cosmos is renewed and becomes sacred once again. The mythology of creation is thus repeated in the period of the New Year (Eliade, 1957).

Conception of the sacred in a unified dimension of space and time is highly influenced by the views of Durkheim and Eliade. In several cultures, separation between space and time is highly necessary in comprehending the conception of the sacred and shifts or exchanges between the concept of the sacred and the profane itself. For example, Chinese culture has since the beginning, separated the dimension of space and time in the conception of the sacred. In the cases of ceremonies held at Chinese temples in Indonesia, such as Chinese New Year (*Imlek*), Chinese Lantern Festival (*Capgomeh*), God’s Birthday Festival (*Sejit*), Hungry Ghost Festival (*Cioko*), Mid-Autumn Festival (*Tiongciu*) and Winter Solstice Festival (*Tangce*) are representations of popular religious beliefs (folk beliefs), it can be seen that the dimension of time instead of space ultimately determines the conception of the sacred.

Methodology

The research method used in this study is qualitative descriptive method and case study with an ethnographic study approach. Qualitative research methods are carried out in reasonable situations and the data collected is qualitative. Qualitative methods try to understand and interpret the

meaning of an interaction between human behavior in certain situations. Case studies are also used as research methods to complement qualitative descriptive methods. In this study, researchers used an ethnographic approach. Ethnographic studies describe and interpret culture, social groups or systems. Although the meaning of cultural is very broad, ethnographic studies are usually focused on patterns of activity, language, beliefs, rituals and ways of life.

Participants

This research was conducted at a temple in Bekasi City; that is Hok Lay Kiong Temple. The temple was selected because it is the largest and the oldest in Bekasi City. Additionally, the researchers were concerned with the lack of research on the community of the temple since 2013. This research was ethnographic in nature, so the main data collection technique was participant-observation. The technique resulted in a portrait of the observed society from their own perspectives (the emic), which required a certain period of time. In doing this ethnographic research, in addition to the implementation of participant-observation, the researchers strengthened the data by doing an in-depth interview. The key informants were the temple workers: the manager, the staff (called *biokong*), the temple security workers, and some of the other participants such as the wives and the children of the temple security workers, the chefs, and some of the worshipers present in every ceremony at the temple.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with seven key informants. The researchers also did an observation, employing participant observation technique. The study was conducted at the time of Chinese New Year Festival (*Imlek*), Chinese Lantern Festival (*Capgomeh*), Xuan Tian Shangdi (Hian Tian Siang Tee (玄天上帝) birthday Festival (*sejit*), and Hungry Ghost Festival (*Cioko*). Because it was an ethnographic study, data collected were based on extensive research. This research was conducted in 2016–2017.

Data Analysis

Since this study was designed as a qualitative research, the process of data analysis was inductive, emphasizing the inductive inquiry to generate descriptive data. The data collected were coded so that the meaning of certain utterances could be obtained. Finally, the coding results were sorted out, classified into some categories, analyzed, and synthesized to be the findings of the study.

Results

Transformation of the Sacred and the Profane in Chinese Ritual in the Temple

Transformation of the sacred and the profane in Chinese popular belief can be observed through offerings to gods and ancestors, served in the form of food, as the most elementary

form of Chinese religious practice. Chinese people in Bekasi usually go to Hok Lay Kiong temple to pray, seek fortune, and do divination. This temple is devoted to Xuan Tian Shangdi (玄天上帝) as a main deity. Chinese Bekasi people believe this deity can give prosperity, luck, wealth, and health. Every year, this temple celebrates many festivals and rituals such as Chinese New Year, Lantern Festival, God's Birthday Festival devoted to Xuan Tian Shangdi, and Hungry Ghost Festival. These ceremonies always prepare food both as an offering and to eat. Food is understood as a servitude to the divine. In Chinese culture, food can function in many ways, such as in the forming of social bonds, creation of identity, creation of values, national culture and past heritage, display of locality, relationship with ancestors and the cosmos, and representation of collectivity. Food is a kind of social institution and value system, for to prepare food as an offering, one has to understand the way it is served. Food becomes a representation of not just human relationship, but also communication between humans and the spiritual world. Cooking and serving food for the gods becomes a tool of communication in ceremonies. In every ritual ceremony, food is manifested as its centre; connected with the ritual calendar, the past, and the bond between ancestors and the present. It is the fulfilment of duty towards parents and ancestors, and strengthens and reinvigorates social and emotional ties with living friends and families (Chang, 1977).

Xuan Tian Shangdi's birthday is celebrated on 3rd of the 3rd lunar month. It is held over three days. On the god's birthday festival, the god altar table is covered with delicious food, such as birthday tarts, pastries such as moon cakes, bowl cakes, and a lot of traditional cakes, pork, pork heads, fried chicken, noodles, shrimp, red eggs, bowls of rice. The fruits offerings are such as bananas, apples, sugar apples, oranges, longan, dragon fruit, pears. The vegetables offerings are such as cabbage, tomatoes, tofu, mushrooms, celery, peas. These foods symbolize thanksgiving for three worlds; namely the celestial realm (represented by poultry animals, such as chickens, ducks), natural earth (represented by quadrupeds like pigs, goats), and natural water (represented by aquatic animals such as fish). Every offering made in a temple has the meaning of achievement. The offerings are a form of gratitude because the requests and prayers have been received by the gods. These offerings do not mean offerings for the gods to eat, but symbolize prayer and hope for the people (Figure 1).



Figure 1 The food offerings during Hian Tian Siang Tee birthday festival shows gratitude from the people to the god Hian Tian Siang Tee

Food is a normal, everyday thing, but in these ceremonies, food becomes sacred. The temple visitors believe in the sacredness of the food in the ceremony. On the god's birthday festival, the temple serves a lot of food to people who come to eat together. This is called *cia pangan*, which means eat together for blessings and salvation. Like a temple keeper said, everyone has to eat in the temple so as not to leave any food. Through the god's birthday ritual, these ordinary foods become sacred, and all people try to get these foods to receive blessings and get salvation. Through Chinese ritual and time dimension, the ordinary, everyday nature of food is transformed to become sacred.

Besides food, there is Chinese amulet paper, which is called *hu/fu* 符 paper. Hok Lay Kiong temple gives *fu* paper on the celebration of the god's birthday and The Lantern Festival (Capgomeh), which is held on the 15th day on 1st lunar month. People often ask for *fu* paper in the temple. People use or keep *fu* paper to avoid things that are not desirable, disadvantageous, for protection from bad things or bad luck. *Fu* paper as an amulet paper is sacred. Before it becomes something sacred, it is a normal and profane thing. Through the ceremony, it changes into something sacred. This change of *fu* paper from the ordinary to something sacred through a process of performance or ritual is performed by a medium spirit called *tongshen/ tangsin* 童身.

Figure 2 shows the medium spirit of Hok Lay Kiong Temple write an amulet of Hian Thian Siang Tee. Usually in a trance, the medium stabs a sword at the tongue. With the medium's blood bleeding during a trance state, he writes the spell on the *fu* paper with his blood, as ink, making the paper then become sacred. The medium's blood is believed as a sacrifice for good, which would cleanse the area of the evil air carrying disease, disaster, criminality, and other terrible omens. Without the blood spell written on *fu* papers, they would not possess their sacred nature. Before the medium performs the trance, a blessing ceremony is held. This blessing is done by smoking the medium's back with prayer paper which is burned from behind the body of the medium up to the head by another medium. When they began to enter the state of trance, they walk like taking steps in a stance while shouting and accompanied by loud drums and cymbals. This sacred amulet paper could also expire after a certain given time. Once the validity period of a *fu* paper has passed, it loses its sacred property and return to its mundane state.



Figure 2 The ceremony of amulet writing by medium

We also recognize *barongsai* as an art performance from Chinese tradition. It is a dance usually performed by two persons with a lion-like costume accompanied by music (Wibowo, 2010). In mainland China, *barongsai* is known as *shiwu* (*shi* 獅 : lion, and *wu* 舞 : dance) or the lion dance. The musical instruments accompanying the dance are composed of gongs, drums, and cymbals. *Barongsai* can be something ordinary at certain times and sacred at other times. *Barongsai*, which is performed at malls, markets, shopping areas is obviously mundane. It becomes sacred when it is performed during a ritual ceremony in temples; for example, during Chinese New Year (*Imlek*), Lantern Festival (*Chap Go Meh*), and God's Birthday Celebration. The costume, particularly the lion head of the *barongsai*, contains symbols with specific meanings. The lion costume consists of two heads, male (*fatsai*) and female (*hoksai*). There are also dragon characteristics found in *barongsai* costume, as evident from its rough body, its horn, and its forehead. The dragon also has a symbolic meaning for the Chinese as a creature that can fly to the heavens and possesses high intellectual capacity, as exhibited by its wide forehead. Nie Joe Lan mentioned that the dragon is a Chinese mystical creature often used as the sovereignty symbol of Chinese empires. This explains the abundant presence of dragon (*liong*) imageries in Chinese society (Lan, 2013) (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Barongsai enter the temple to pray and respect Hian Thian Siang Tee in Hok Lay Kiong Temple showing barongsai become a sacred thing.

The difference of sacredness in *barongsai* can be seen in spatial and temporal dimension. *Barongsai* which is performed in profane places becomes something profane, and that which is performed in a sacred place, like in a temple, becomes something sacred. When performed in a temple, it must be a sacred performance in sacred time. Prior to a sacred performance, *barongsai* performers would pray in the temple before their performance. To be performed as a sacred dance, *barongsai* has to be "filled" (*thiam*-ed) by sticking the *fu* papers of the temple main god (Xian Tian Shangdi amulet paper) onto the *barongsai*'s head at the temple entrance. The two lions would then enter the temple and pray and respect the gods in the temple, first to Tian/ heaven (天) then the temple

main god and the other gods in the temple. The mirror placed between the *barongsai*'s eyes also serves as a symbol of enlightenment to provide light for the *barongsai* and the *fu* paper against evil energies, reflecting a *barongsai*'s function of dispelling evil auras and negative energies. The commotion from drums and cymbals is believed to have the power to drive off bad spiritual energy, whereas the power from the *barongsai*'s dance and presence would rid the place of the evil spirits and bring good fortune in exchange.

Discussion

Differentiation between the sacred and the profane in Western traditions is clearly evident, embedded in the concept of space. Christian traditions showcase the church, especially the altar, as a sacred space. This Western perspective cannot be used in observing the concept of the sacred in the Eastern perspective. A unified conception of the sacred in a unified dimension of space and time cannot be implemented in Chinese culture. Chinese society views the sacred in a different spatial dimension to Western society. In general, Chinese religious beliefs spread within society, evident from the abundance of places which are considered sacred, such as family altars, paths leading towards temples, mountain temples, temporary temples in markets, and streets during *xunjing* when statues of gods are paraded.

Conception of the sacred and the profane in relation with space in Chinese culture can be observed from the fundamental principle of Chinese cosmological practices, that is, the triad of natural forces represented by the relationship between heaven, earth, and man, a trinity which is repeatedly worshipped in practices within Chinese beliefs. This can be observed from the worship of gods; in any temple, *Tian* (god) is worshipped in an elevated sacred place, in an open space outside the temple. Laozi, Buddha, heroes or other great deified figures and ancestors are placed in mid-level altars, and earthly gods are placed in sacred ground space beneath the altar. Ghosts are worshipped at the back door or beneath the front door. These acts of worship align with classification of Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors (Wolf, 1978).

Time plays a highly important role in Chinese cosmology. Chinese culture divides time into several units, one of the most important being the lunar year or *sui* (歲). Every year is represented by a combination of 10 heavenly stems (*tiangan* 天干) and 12 earthly branches (*dizhi* 地支) which form a 60-year cycle. Each year is symbolized by one of the twelve zodiac animals. From this concept of time in Chinese culture, Chinese people have tried to change their *yun* 運 (chance of fortune) and pursue luck through fortune-telling. Time plays a very important role in the Chinese fortune-telling method, as evident from ceremonies to ward off bad luck (*baoyun* 保运), which take place annually. Such ceremonies usually take place in temples and can be performed collectively or individually. Every year during the lunar new year until the lantern festival, Hok Lay Kiong temple holds this ceremony, which is called *sembahyang kias*. This ceremony is intended for Tai Sui Ya (god of time) and Bai hu (white tiger guardian) in order to avoid harmful things.

Geertz, in discussing the concept of time in Balinese society, asserted that the use of a calendar based on intersecting cycles is a means to eliminate time. Cycles are assumed to be less dynamic and ritual calendars become the repetition of static events, maintaining cosmological order (Geertz, 1973). In Chinese religious culture, both time “reversible” and “irreversible”, cosmological order and history, unity and diversity of human experiences, are interlinked in festivals, which create the experience of time. The lunar cycle is the primary temporal frame which dictates the cultural practices of Chinese beliefs. (DeBernardi, 1992) explored three aspects of the cyclical calendar frame; first, activities based on the cycle provide a predictable rhythm of reunion and dispersal, which generates a sense of the endurance and indestructibility of community and sub-culture. Second, the cycle provides a sense of cultural continuity through acts of commemoration, which keep social memory vivid and alive in the present. Finally, the structure of the festival cycle provides a cosmological framework and metaphor for the understanding of human experience.

Ceremonies do not serve as a creation of something past, but instead as the affirmation of future triumph and the birth of something new. The historical aspect of time can be observed in the commemoration of past events, which have been chosen and arranged to provide model aspirations for the community. For example, the Mid-Autumn Festival (the 15th day of the 8th month of the Chinese calendar), in addition to celebrating the beauty of the full moon in autumn, also commemorates the uprising against the Mongols, coordinated through rebellion instructions hidden in mooncakes. The gods celebrated in the temples provide ideals of moral virtue in the retelling of their lives, such as piety, loyalty, compassion, and self-restraint.

The culture of Chinese beliefs syncretises events into a commemoration structure which regulates perspective of the past, inserting past culture with the certain past of a community. The ceremonial cycle then forms a connection between the structure and events, synthesizing stability and change, past and present, diachronic and synchronic.

Ceremonies in the Chinese calendar structure are connected to heaven and earth, which are associated with the dualism of *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳), similar to the dualism of space in Chinese culture of “above” and “below”. In Chinese beliefs, *yang* is associated with the gods (those above/in the heavens) and *yin* is associated with ghosts trapped in the underworld. The symbolism of heaven and earth express two aspects of cyclical time; the regular celestial cycle of the heavens represents the eternal recurrent structure of nature (reversible time), whereas those trapped are associated with the recurrent structure (in the same, irreversible historical time) of the human cycle of life.

Time serves as the foundation for all traditional celebrations in Chinese culture. The orientation of time in Chinese culture is centred upon the past based on Confucian and Taoist culture, making traditional Chinese culture relative, unconfined, and flexible. The relative nature of time in Chinese culture can be seen from the existence of two traditions in the calculation of the Chinese calendar. The importance of the separation of the concepts of space and time in Chinese culture is also shown by the existence of the gods

who ruled space and time. Every space in Chinese culture has its own god, for example, the god of the kitchen, the god of the door, the god of the city, et cetera. The Chinese believe in the god of time known as Tai Sui. Tai Sui determine the fortune of each individual based on their Chinese zodiacs (*shengxiao*). From the explanation above, it is clear to distinguish the spatial and temporal dimension to see the sacred concept in Chinese culture, that some places can be sacred due the time dimension.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conception of the sacred, which has to this day been discussed in a unified dimension of space and time, appears to have the need to be observed with the dimensions considered separate. Observation of the sacred in a unified dimension has received strong influence from Durkheim, leading other researchers to follow in Durkheim's footsteps and adopt the same perspective. Chinese culture, however, has separated between the two in observing the sacred. The Chinese perspective differs greatly from the Western perspective, which observes the sacred under a unified dimension of space and time.

Conception of the sacred in Chinese culture is highly determined by time. Transformation of something mundane or profane into sacred is highly determined by time. This is in the same vein as Geertz, who showcased that every Balinese temple (*pura*) becomes sacred after respectively going through a ceremony known as *odalan*, which means "emerging" or "appearing". During *odalan*, the temple enters an active state as the gods descend from the heavens and occupy the temples. Outside *odalan*, the temple becomes silent, uninhabited, and empty, and no activities would take place in the temple.

Conception of the sacred must be observed in separate dimensions of space and time and it must be considered that the Chinese conception of the sacred is highly influenced by the dimension of time. From Chinese religious festivals appear transformations of the sacred and the profane. Ritual ceremonies of the Chinese are representations of folk beliefs and thus, in conclusion, it is hoped that this perspective is applied not only towards Chinese folk belief but to other forms of folk beliefs.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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