THE ALIEN COMMUNAL PATRON DEITY
A comparative study of the Datuk Gong worship among Chinese communities in Malaysia
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ABSTRACT
When many Chinese immigrants settled in the Malay peninsula in the late 19th century, they not only brought the patron gods of their homeland, but also created a new local patron deity—the alien Datuk Gong. Datuk Gong worship is a combination of Malay keramat and Chinese Bo Gong worship. Although usually regarded as a personal guardian spirit, Datuk Gong is also seen as a communal patron deity of some Chinese communities in Malaysia. Different communities shape their own images of the patron deity based on the social reality, especially that of ethnic groups in these communities. This article selects two Chinese communities in Malaysia, Broga in Negeri Sembilan and Machap Baru in Melaka, as examples of distinct types of Datuk Gong worship: Chinese spirit worship versus trans-ethnic saint worship. A comparative analysis of similar legends of Datuk Gong, and disparate rituals and development of the worship in the two communities indicates that Datuk Gong worship reflects the Chinese community’s understanding of the social reality they have experienced, and their response to changes in the social environment.

KEYWORDS
communal patron deity; Datuk Gong; ethnicity; keramat; Malaysian Chinese; social reality

Introduction
In writing about the communal aspects of popular cults in imperial and pre-1949 republican China, C.K. Yang (1961: 81) notes, 'No community in China was without one or more collective representations in the form of patron gods, the cults of which served as centres for communal religious life'. Similarly, today most Chinese communities in Malaysia have at least a communal temple (Tan 2018: 17), because many Chinese immigrants who settled in the Malay peninsula in the late 19th century brought the patron gods of their homeland. The immigrants used the symbol of the patron god to bring together Chinese of similar speech groups. Organising local communities through worship and religious celebrations gave a sense of community and of being Chinese (Tan 2018: 5–6).

However, the patron deities of some Chinese communities in Malaysia, Datuk Gong, are non-Chinese in most cases. The Datuk Gong cult is a particular folk belief of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia; just as Datuk Gong is a combinative term of the Malay word datuk and the Chinese gong. Datuk Gong worship is a combination of Malay keramat and Chinese Bo Gong worship. Datuk Gong is usually Malay, although there are variations such as Chinese, Orang Asli (aborigines), Indian and Siamese (Thai) Datuk Gong. As a result of its wide spread in the 20th century, Datuk Gong is a local version of a general communal folk belief. Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia is a unique example of the adaptation of a Chinese folk belief to a new geographical and cultural context.