

MANAGING THE TORTOISE ISLAND: TUA PEK KONG TEMPLE, PILGRIMAGE, AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN PULAU KUSU, 1965-2007

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Introduction

The Marina South Pier was unusually crowded for a Saturday evening. Many people, both young and old, waited patiently for the ferry to arrive. For most of them, it has been a year since they were last there. They were carrying plastic bags containing offerings such as joss sticks and paper, fruits, and prosperity cakes (*huat kuay* 发糕) to worship the Grand Uncle (*Tua Pek Kong* 大伯公) on Pulau Kusu (*Guiyu Dao* 龟屿岛), a well-known pilgrimage island in Singapore. These people were among the 100,000 to 200,000 regular pilgrims from Singapore and overseas visiting the Guiyu Fushangong Tua Pek Kong Temple 龟屿福善宫大伯公庙 (hereafter *Tua Pek Kong Temple*) during the annual pilgrimage season on the ninth lunar month.

This article examines the *Tua Pek Kong Temple* and religious activities in Pulau Kusu as they intersect with the larger forces of social change, state management, and development of the Southern Islands since the independence of Singapore, from 1965 to the present. It argues that the state's interest in the economic potential of the *Tua Pek Kong Temple*, and the attempt to seek profit from its religious activities, particularly over the last two decades, has very much affected the temple and contributed to the commercialization and "touristization" of the island. State authorities in mainland Singapore have tried to exert more control over the temple through the management of the island. Profit was made from the island's religious activities through the authorities' monopoly of goods and services, promotion of commercial activities, and their attempt to transform the island into a tourist site.

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Literature Review and Methodology

The majority of the literature on the offshore islands of Singapore has focused on two major islands—Pulau Ubin and Sentosa. Joan Henderson examines the management of Pulau Ubin. He discusses the proposals presented by the various agencies and their implications on the island.² Lisa Lim uses Pulau Ubin as a case study to highlight Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and to draw the relationship between coercion and consent in ruling modern societies.³ The other island often studied is Sentosa, a popular tourist site in Singapore, receiving a considerable attention from scholars interested in the study of tourism in Singapore.⁴ In contrast, Pulau Kusu, and the Tua Pek Kong Temple on the island, has not been explored in the existing literature on Singapore's offshore islands. Thus, this study will use the specific example of Pulau Kusu to illuminate some of the larger themes of island pilgrimage in the history of Singapore.

The geographical isolation of pilgrimage islands often contributes to enhancing their perceived sacredness because of the greater inaccessibility to these places.⁵ Therefore, island pilgrimages have received a considerable amount of attention. Yü Chün-fang examines the Putuo Shan, the island home of the Guanyin Bodhisattva, and argues that miracles and pilgrimage sites played important roles in the cult of Guanyin and contributed to its domestication and sinicization.⁶ Margaret Kenna studies the involvement of returning migrants during the patron saint's festival on Nisos, a Greek island, over two decades.⁷ Another useful example is provided by Andrew Watsky, who points out that the Japanese island of Chikubushima is now best known as the thirtieth of the fifty-three stations on the centuries-old Western Japan pilgrimage route dedicated to the Kannon Bosatsu.⁸

While being important pilgrimage sites, pilgrimage islands are susceptible to political control and state management. Myra Shackley suggests that pilgrimage

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- 2 Joan C. Henderson, "Managing Tourism in Small Islands: The Case of Pulau Ubin, Singapore," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 8, 3 (2000): 251.
 - 3 Lim Bee Fong Lisa, "Hegemony, Dominance and Resistance in Singapore: Pulau Ubin as a Case Study," *Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore Working Paper No. 176* (2005), <http://sociologsg.files.wordpress.com/2007/01/lim_wp_176.pdf> (10 November 2007).
 - 4 See, for instance, Peggy Teo and Brenda Yeoh, "Strategies to Meet the Challenges of Theme Parks in Singapore," *Pacific Tourism Review* 5, 3-4 (2001): 97-111; T. C. Chang, "Theming Cities, Taming Places: Insights from Singapore," *Geografiska Annaler* 82, 1 (April 2000): 35-54.
 - 5 Myra Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites: Service Provision and Visitor Experience* (New York; London: Continuum, 2001), p. 5.
 - 6 Yü Chün-fang, "P'u-t'o Shan: Pilgrimage and the Creation of the Chinese Potalaka," in *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, ed. Susan Naquin and Yü Chün-fang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 192.
 - 7 Margaret E. Kenna, "Mattresses and Migrant: A Patron Saint's Festival on a Small Greek Island over Two Decades," in *Revitalizing European Rituals*, ed. Jeremy Boissevain (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 155.
 - 8 Andrew M. Watsky, *Chikubushima: Deploying the Sacred Arts in Momoyama Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p. xi.

and sacred sites are often the center of political or religious power struggles because possessing an important site has a greater political and territorial significance.⁹ She also notes that the emotive character of venerated places always makes them an appropriate focus for making political capital.¹⁰ Two recent edited volumes comprehensively discuss the issues of religious tourism and the management of pilgrimage. Daniel Olsen and Dallen Timothy point out that governments, scholars, and tourism agencies have recently paid more attention to the increased visitation to sacred sites and the growth of cultural and heritage tourism. They contend that this rise in public interest can be attributed to the economic potential of religious tourists. Consequently, venerated places are now regarded as tourism resources that can be “commodified for travelers interested in cultural and historic sites”.¹¹ Razaq Raj and Nigel Morpeth argue for a “reassessment of analysis underlying religious motivations of travel and a full exploration of the pressures for sacred spaces to become venues for commercialized and festival arenas”. They hope to shed some light on the changing nature of religion in the society, and further the debate for both policymakers and academics, in considering the policymaking challenges surrounding the future development of religious tourism and pilgrimage.¹² How then have the forces of state management and development affected the Tua Pek Kong Temple and contributed to the commercialization and “touristization” of Pulau Kusu? The aim of this article is to situate Pulau Kusu within the larger global context of pilgrimage islands. It seeks to contribute to the growing literature on island pilgrimages and the management of sacred sites.

The primary source for this article is the fieldwork conducted in Pulau Kusu. I made three trips to the island on 22 September 2007, 27 October 2007, and 13 July 2008. On my first visit, I conducted an in-depth interview with Madam Sim Chwee Eng (Shen Cuiying 沈翠英), 78, the owner (*miaozhu* 庙主) and caretaker of the Tua Pek Kong Temple. At the age of 16, Madam Sim married her late husband Xue Fucheng 薛福成, who was the fifth-generation descendant of the founder of the temple. She has since then stayed on the island for more than sixty years and was tasked to take care of the temple after the death of her husband. Madam Sim, her son Seet Seng Huat (Xue Chengfa 薛成发), and their Indonesian maid, are the only inhabitants on the island.¹³ She takes care of the temple chores and gives blessings to the pilgrims. Her children and grandchildren have moved to mainland Singapore, but they often visit her on weekends and give her a helping hand during the pilgrimage season. Madam Sim was extremely

9 Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites*, p. 140.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

11 Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy, “Tourism and Religious Journey,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

12 Razaq Raj and Nigel D. Morpeth, “Introduction: Establishing Linkages between Religious Travel and Tourism,” in *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Festivals Management: An International Perspective*, ed. Razaq Raj and Nigel D. Morpeth (Wallingford, Oxfordshire; Cambridge, MA: CABI Publications, 2007), pp. 12-13.

13 Overnight stay is not allowed on Pulau Kusu. See Sentosa, “Kusu Island,” 2007, <http://www.sentosa.com.sg/explore_sentosa/nature/island_kusu.html> (10 November 2007).

forthcoming about the history, beliefs, practices, and issues concerning the Tua Pek Kong temple. However, a problem I encountered was that she has forgotten some of the details probably due to her old age. On my second trip, which was during the pilgrimage season, I conducted a short interview with Madam Sim, addressing some of the missing points from the earlier interview.¹⁴ In addition, I interviewed five regular pilgrims¹⁵ and two stall vendors¹⁶ on the island. These informal and loosely structured interviews provided me with valuable insights on Pulau Kusu and the pilgrimage associated with it. I made my third trip on a crowded Sunday. During this visit, I interviewed three tourists from different countries to find out the motivations behind their visits, and their general opinions and thoughts of Pulau Kusu.¹⁷

Unlike many Chinese temples in mainland Singapore, the Tua Pek Kong Temple neither keeps any written records, nor publishes any commemorative books and magazines. Hence, I depended on the temple inscriptions for information on the history of the temple. I took several photographs to record the inscriptions carved on large stone tablets in the temple. The names of the major donors as well as the year of major renovations can be found on these inscriptions. As such, these steles are useful complements to the oral sources, and lend further background and understanding of the temple.

In my attempt to obtain the government's perspective for this research, I tried to contact, via email, the officials from the Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC), Singapore Tourism Board (STB), and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). While there was no response from STB, URA replied with the statement that they do not give interviews. Zee Soh Fun, the Communications Executive of SDC, had kindly provided SDC's official position on Pulau Kusu. As there is a dearth of available government documents and interviews, I depended on a number of newspapers and official internet sources. The local newspapers, *Lianhe Zaobao* 联合早报, *The Business Times*, *The Straits Times*, *Today*, and *Xinming Ribao* 新明日报, provide useful information, especially on the important development plans concerning the island in recent years. The official websites of Sentosa and the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) offer useful information on the SDC, the government statutory board that manages Pulau Kusu. These internet sources shed some light on the state management and development of the island. Therefore, these written and internet materials allow me to triangulate the sources, and also provide more breadth than oral accounts alone would allow.

14 I am grateful to Victor Yue for organizing the trip.

15 The five respondents are: Peter Ho, 48, male, Singaporean; Kok San Moi, 65, female, Singaporean; Li Xiuping, 45, female, Singaporean; Tan Wee Meng, 35, male, Singaporean; and Wong Kah Hwee, 42, female, Singaporean.

16 The two stall vendors are: Mok Siew Min, 20, female, Singaporean; and Tan Beng Teck, 43, male, Singaporean.

17 The three tourists are: Nwai Nwai Ayu, 40, female, Burmese; Michael Gesbert, 37, male, French; and Susan Hasler, 22, female, Swiss.

Setting the Context: Managing the Southern Islands in Singapore

A former British colony, Singapore attained its independence in 1965. The People's Action Party (PAP) government took measures to build a stable, but adventurous economic future for the country. These measures include: economic planning, industrialization, manufacture for export, and attracting multinational corporation investments.¹⁸ From 1965 to 1985, Singapore experienced rapid economic growth and was swiftly transformed from a third world trading port to a prosperous metropolis and major manufacturing hub.¹⁹

The PAP government exercises virtually complete control over most features of Singapore's domestic economy.²⁰ The MTI, which was created out of the former Development Division of the Ministry of Finance in March 1979, is responsible for seeking opportunities for Singapore's economic growth, executing the existing policies, and providing general directions for the country's economy.²¹ It oversees ten statutory boards, which are semi-independent agencies that specialize in implementing specific governmental plans and policies.²² The SDC, which was established under the Sentosa Development Corporation Act of 1972, is one of the ten statutory boards operating under the MTI. One of the most important functions of the SDC is to control, manage and administer the Sentosa island, and any other islands or land elsewhere owned by or leased to them.²³ According to the Sentosa website, the SDC takes charge of property investments, management and the strategic development of five other businesses, including the Southern Islands Development, which oversees "the master planning and transformation of a cluster of islands—Kusu, Lazarus, Sisters, St John's, Seringat (previously known as Renget), Hantu, Biola, Jong and Tekukor islands—into a waterfront lifestyle destination".²⁴ As such, the SDC is the agent managing the Southern Islands for the Singapore Land Authority.²⁵ The context of Singapore's economic development since its independence, and the management of the Southern Islands in general and Pulau Kusu in particular by the SDC, are important for us to understand

18 Diane K. Mauzy and R. S. Milne, *Singapore Politics under the People's Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 66.

19 Carl A. Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 107.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

21 Ministry of Trade and Industry (hereafter MTI), "About Us," 17 February 2007, <<http://app.mti.gov.sg/default.asp?id=2>> (10 November 2007).

22 MTI, "Department and Statutory Boards," 18 November 2005, <<http://app.mti.gov.sg/default.asp?id=100>> (10 November 2007).

23 Attorney-General's Chambers, "Sentosa Development Corporation Act (Chapter 291)," 15 October 2007, <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=Reved-291&date=latest&method=part> (10 November 2007).

24 Sentosa, "Sentosa Leisure Group," 2007, <http://www.sentosa.com.sg/about_us/sentosa_island/corporate_structure.html> (10 November 2007).

25 Zee Soh Fun, email interview by author, 17 July 2008, Singapore; Sentosa, "Southern Islands," 2007, <http://www.sentosa.com.sg/explore_sentosa/nature/southern_islands.html> (10 November 2007).

how the religious activities on the island intersect with the larger forces of social change, state management, and development.

The Tortoise Island: Temple and Pilgrimage

Pulau Kusu, which means “Tortoise Island” in Chinese, is also known as Pulau Tembakul or the Peak Island. One of the Southern Islands in Singapore, it is located approximately 5.6 kilometers away from the south of mainland Singapore. Pulau Kusu was formerly a burial site for immigrants who died on quarantine on St John’s and Lazarus Islands. It was later enlarged by reclaiming land from two tiny 1.2 hectare outcrops on a reef so that it was expanded to an 8.5 hectare island in 1975.²⁶ On Pulau Kusu are two places of worship, namely the Tua Pek Kong Temple, which will be explored in this article, and the Kusu Keramat.²⁷



Figure 1. The location of Pulau Kusu among the Southern Islands of Singapore. Source: Google Earth, Version 4.3

26 Wu Yanhong, *Xinjiapo fengtu zhi zhier: Mingsheng guji* [The second volume of the local conditions in Singapore: Places of interest and national monuments] (Singapore: Hongyan gongzuoting, 2007), pp. 113-114; Urban Redevelopment Authority (hereafter URA), *Southern Islands Planning Area: Planning Report 1996* (Singapore: URA, 1996), p. 8; Sentosa, “Kusu Island”.

27 Keramat (or kramat) can be broadly referred to as the tomb of Islamic saints. For studies on keramat worship in Singapore, see for instance, P. J. Rivers, “Keramat in Singapore in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 76, 2 (2003): 93-119. Examples of famous keramats in Singapore include Keramat Habib Noh, Makam Puteri Radin Mas, Keramat Sheikh Ali, Makam Sharifah Rogayah, Keramat Bukit Kasita, Kampong Glam, and Kusu Keramat. The Kusu Keramat is located on the hilltop in Pulau Kusu. It commemorates Syed Abdul Rahman, a pious man, his mother, Nenek Ghalib, and his sister, Puteri Fatimah who lived in the nineteenth century.

According to the signboard on the island, as well as popular historical accounts, the earliest mention of the Kusu Reef can be traced back to the seventeenth century. On March 1616, Dom Jose De Silva, the Spanish Governor of the Philippines, was believed to have his fleet grounded at the Kusu Reef. Thus, the island became first known in the seventeenth century as “Governor’s Island”, and was later adopted by the British as the “Governor’s Straits”. In 1806, James Horsburgh, the hydrographer to the British East India Company, renamed the island “Goa Island”. Following the arrival of Stamford Raffles in 1819, Daniel Ross, the hydrographer to Raffles, selected the island as a reference point for ships entering the new port. Subsequently, a signal station with a signal mast manned by the Harbor Master’s Department was built on the island in 1822.²⁸

There are many legends surrounding the sacred origins of Pulau Kusu. The five accounts below, recorded on the signboard in the island, are believed to be the most popular:

1. 150 years ago, two holy men, Dato Syed Rahman, an Arab, and Yam, a Chinese, made a meditation and fasting trip to Kusu. In the course of their religious retreat, Yam fell ill and Syed prayed fervently for his recovery. Through the intervention of divine forces, a boat miraculously appeared with food and water, which saved their lives. Syed and Yam later became sworn brothers.
2. Sailors shipwrecked in the waters near Singapore during one lunar ninth month centuries ago were rescued by a giant turtle which turned itself into an island.
3. Two fishermen had wrecked their boat while plying the waters near Kusu. On sighting this adverse situation, a giant tortoise transformed itself into an island to provide refuge for the shipwrecked fishermen.
4. More than a hundred years ago, an Arab named Syed Abdul Rahman left Singapore in search of peace with his wife and daughter on a journey. While they were in a sampan, they were caught in a violent storm which capsized their boat. A giant tortoise spotted them and brought them safely to an island. Legend also has it that their lost sampan not only returned but was loaded with food.
5. Centuries ago, passengers on board a ship were stricken by an epidemic but all recovered as soon as it anchored near the island of Kusu.

While these origination myths may vary slightly, they all share a common theme: the sacred origins of the island and the spiritual potency and miracles associated with it. The source of miracles is commonly believed, as illustrated in the following account by Madam Sim, to have been performed by none other than the Grand Uncle. Grand Uncle, as I will discuss later, is a popular deity among the Chinese and has a special place in Singapore’s religious culture:

28 Wu, *Xinjiapo fengtu zhi zhier*, pp.112-113; *Lianhe Zaobao* (hereafter LZ), 30 July 2007.

The Grand Uncle must have used his magic power to transform the tortoise into an island. Without his magic powers, the sailors and fishermen would not have been alive. Since we believe that the miracles occurred on the ninth lunar month, devotees make pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu to give thanks to him and to pray for blessings. This has continued for more than a century.²⁹

Madam Sim was quick to link the origins of Pulau Kusu to the miracles that many believed to have been performed by the Grand Uncle. Regardless of whether these stories are meant to be taken literally or have been stylized to fit the expectations of the pilgrims, in both cases, the deity is the center figure in their narratives. As the name of the temple suggests, Grand Uncle is the chief deity of the Tua Pek Kong Temple in Pulau Kusu. It is therefore important to understand who the deity is and examine the temple and pilgrimage on the island that is dedicated to him.

The Grand Uncle and his Temple

The Chinese worship deities for many reasons including “health, longevity, fertility, peace, marriage, employment, promotion, passing examination, overseas study, travel, business, weather, and geomancy”.³⁰ The Grand Uncle is one of the most popular gods among the Chinese community. There are many debates surrounding the origins, identity, and belief of the Grand Uncle.³¹ Zheng Zhiming simplifies the different perspectives on the cult of the Grand Uncle into two categories, namely the belief in tutelary deity and overseas Chinese pioneers’ worship of ancestral spirits.³² In earlier days, the Grand Uncle was regarded to be second only to the Mazu 妈祖 in the protection of seafaring Chinese migrants.³³ Devotees generally seek blessings from the deity to avert accidents and disasters, cure illness, and bestow prosperity and wealth. Many trust that he has the ability to “turn the humblest hawker into a prosperous merchant”.³⁴ Other deities that

29 Sim Chwee Eng, interview by author, 22 September 2007, Singapore.

30 Cheng Lim Keak, “Chinese Deities, Emigration and Social Structure in Singapore,” *Asian Culture* 21 (June 1997): 39.

31 See, for instance, Zheng Zhiming, “Kejia shehui Dabogong xinyang zai dongnanya de fazhan” [Development of Grand Uncle belief of Hakka society in Southeast Asia], *Huaqiao Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of Huaqiao University] 1 (2004): 64-65; Li Tianxi, *Huaqiao Huaren minjian xinyang yanjiu* [Studies on the folk beliefs among the Overseas Chinese] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2004), pp. 211-224; Chen Bosheng and Li Liangshi, “Kejiaren yu Dabogong de guanxi: Yi Xinma weili” [The relationships between Hakka community and Grand Uncle belief: Examples from Singapore and Malaysia], in *Minjian wenhua yu huaren shehui* [Folk culture and Chinese community], ed. Li Weiyi (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 2006), pp. 60-61.

32 Zheng, “Kejia shehui Dabogong xinyang”, p. 65.

33 Godfrey A. Chatfield, *The Religions and Festivals of Singapore* (Singapore: D. Moore for Eastern Universities Press, 1962), p. 12; Xinming Ribao, *Miaoyu wenhua* [Temple Culture], Vol. 1 (Singapore: Focus Publishing Ltd, 2005), p. 18.

34 Chatfield, *The Religions and Festivals of Singapore*, p. 12.



Figure 2. Grand Uncle. Source: Xinming Ribao, *Miaoyu wenhua*, Vol. 1, p. 18.

are being worshipped in the temple include the Guanyin Bodhisattva, Eight Immortals (*Ba Xian* 八仙), God of War (*Guan Di* 关公), and Tiger God (*Hu Ye* 虎爷).

Due to the lack of written records, little is known about the origins and history of the Tua Pek Kong Temple. The signboard located at the entrance of the temple claims that the temple was built in 1923 when Chia Cheng Ho, a wealthy businessman, donated money to build the temple in honor of the Grand Uncle. However, Madam Sim offers a different account:

The Tua Pek Kong Temple has existed for more than a century. However, it only became a popular pilgrimage site after a major renovation in 1923. My late husband was the fifth generation descendant of the founder of the temple. Since its establishment, the temple has undergone five major renovations.³⁵

The earliest temple inscription dates back to 1909, the *Yi You* 己酉 year of the reign of Emperor Xuan Tong 宣统. However, the stele was erected to commemorate a major renovation, not the establishment of the temple. The last inscription dated

35 Sim Chwee Eng, interview by author, 22 September 2007, Singapore.



Figure 3. The Guiyu Fushangong Tua Pek Kong Temple. Photo by author.

to 26 August 1946 (Thirty-fifth year of the Republic of China), was also put up to commemorate a restoration project. Although these inscriptions suggest that the temple was established much earlier than 1923, it is difficult to trace the history of the temple and the genealogy of the annual pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu.

The Annual Pilgrimage

Each year during the ninth lunar month, it is estimated that between 100,000 to 200,000 devotees from Singapore and overseas including Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, will make their pilgrimage to the Tua Pek Kong Temple in Pulau Kusu.³⁶ As discussed earlier, the month is considered sacred because it is linked to the origination myths of the island and the miracles performed by Grand Uncle. Many pilgrims visit the Pulau Kusu to pray for health, longevity, safety, good luck, wealth, household harmony, and fertility and will return again next year to give thanks for the blessings they have received during the year.³⁷ Although there are some variations behind the reasons for making

36 See, for instance, Xinming Ribao, *Miaoyu wenhua* [Temple Culture], Vol. 2 (Singapore: Focus Publishing Ltd, 2007), p. 42; *The Straits Times* (hereafter *ST*), 12 October 2007; *ST*, 2 October, 2005.

37 Xinming Ribao, *Miaoyu Wenhua*, Vol. 2, p. 42.

the pilgrimage, most pilgrims have made regular annual visits for several decades and agree that the Grand Uncle in Pulau Kusu is particularly efficacious (*lingyan* 灵验):

I believe that the Tua Pek Kong Temple on Pulau Kusu is more powerful than the ones on [mainland] Singapore. Many years ago, I prayed for a son and Grand Uncle actually fulfilled my wish.... A few years ago, I prayed again for my son to do well in studies, he really did very well for his A-level exams. He is currently serving his National Service and will be entering a good local university next year. I am very thankful to Grand Uncle for his blessings.³⁸

I used to make pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu with my mother when I was young. Now that she has passed on, I continue this practice with my wife and children... The Grand Uncle on the island is very powerful. I will always remember how he saved me from my business failure. A few years ago, my business was badly affected by SARS,³⁹ and I was on the verge of having to close down some of my shops. I decided to make a special trip to Pulau Kusu to ask blessings from the Grand Uncle. After that, my business improved miraculously and I even started to turn losses into profits. I am very grateful to Grand Uncle and hence, I will never fail to make my annual pilgrimage and make donations whenever I visit the temple.⁴⁰

These testimonies probably best explain the significance of the annual pilgrimage to the pilgrims and the reasons behind its continuity. In addition, the devotees are more than willing to spend huge sums of money on donations and the purchase of religious goods and services for their pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu. Altogether, the pilgrims' expenditures are more than sufficient to sustain the temple for the entire year, and further contribute to Tua Pek Kong Temple's wealth.⁴¹ Therefore, pilgrimage to a sacred site is likened to the consumption process, in which a service "product" (sacred site) is consumed by its "consumers" (pilgrims).⁴²

The Singapore state authorities have recognized the economic potential of the Tua Pek Kong Temple and the annual pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu. Over the past two decades, they have tried to exert greater control and management over the island. Several development plans can in fact be largely considered as an attempt by the authorities to commercialize and profit from the religious activities.

38 Li Xiuping, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

39 The SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic broke out in Singapore in 2003 and it took a severe toll on the country's economy. See Trocki, *Singapore*, p. 177.

40 Peter Ho, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

41 Sim Chwee Eng, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

42 Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites*, p. 76.

Management, Development, and Commercialization

The role of government statutory boards in undertaking and managing large public enterprise and projects has been a key feature of Singapore's total political economy.⁴³ Several statutory boards were involved in proposing and making major plans to develop the Southern Islands in general and Pulau Kusu in particular over the past two decades. As early as 1989, the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (STPB) (later renamed Singapore Tourism Board in 1997) planned to engage "specialist consultants [on] what can be done to convert these 'largely under-utilized' [Southern] islands into a 'tropical playground of international standard'".⁴⁴ Pulau Kusu was subsequently left out of the plan because it was a pilgrimage site.⁴⁵

In 1994, the then acting National Development Minister Lim Hng Kiang made a three hour constituency visit to the St John's and Kusu islands, home to seven families, who belonged to his Telok Blangah ward. After his visit, Lim announced that the two islands would be "preserved as 'rustic getaways' for the family in development plans for the Southern Islands" instead of "resorts with big, five-star hotels".⁴⁶

The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), Singapore's national land use planning authority, produced a comprehensive proposal entitled "Southern Islands Planning Area: Planning Report 1996". The planning report offered detailed planning objectives and strategies, and made several proposals concerning the land use, residential, commercial, sports and recreation space, transportation, and special and detailed controls of the Southern Islands.⁴⁷ However, May Goh, the URA public relations officer, assured the public that Kusu Island would be kept in its existing natural state.⁴⁸ Following that, there were no plans to develop the Southern Islands until ten years later.

The plan to develop the Southern Islands into a "premium resort" was brought up again in 2006. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) was planning to launch a Request for Concepts (RFC) for the Southern Islands as early as in the first quarter of 2007. This would set "the ball rolling for a resort or even super-exclusive haven for billionaires".⁴⁹ While Mrs Pamela Lee, Sentosa's managing director of the Southern Islands Management, claimed that there were no new plans for the temple on Pulau Kusu,⁵⁰ a later report suggested that the STB was interested in attracting developers to develop the Southern Islands into a "mini-Monaco in Asia" and that they would even "be encouraged to integrate the religious structures on Kusu Island".⁵¹ According to the

43 Trocki, *Singapore*, p. 174.

44 *ST*, 19 August 1989.

45 *ST*, 17 September 1992; *ST*, 7 September 1993; *ST*, 12 January 1994.

46 *ST*, 13 June 1994.

47 URA, *Southern Islands Planning Area*, pp. 15-25.

48 *ST*, 28 May 1996.

49 *The Business Times* (hereafter *BT*), 29 November 2006.

50 *Today*, 1 December 2006.

51 *Today*, 19 January 2007.

Communications Executive of SDC, the Singapore government is currently reviewing these plans with participation from the private sector. Hence, more details can only be revealed at a later stage.⁵²

While the major plans are still pending, several development projects in Pulau Kusu have already been completed, especially over the last two decades. These projects were carried out in an attempt by the authorities to strengthen its management over the island, and benefit from the economic potential of the Tua Pek Kong Temple's religious activities. The state management and development of Pulau Kusu could be seen in three aspects: first, the monopolization of control over transportation; second, the building of new facilities; and finally, the introduction of commercial activities into the island.

Transportation

In the past, pilgrims had to make their way to Pulau Kusu in bumboats or sampans. However, in 1975, the ferry service was implemented as the "officially sanctioned" means of getting to Pulau Kusu and ferry tickets were only available on sale at selected NTUC FairPrice outlets, and pier ticketing office, or by making a direct booking with the SDC.⁵³ In this way, transportation was in the control and monopoly of the state.

Following the closure of the Clifford Pier in 2006, the Marina South Pier took over as the departure and arrival point for ferries going to Pulau Kusu. Currently, the ferry service has been outsourced to the Singapore Island Cruise, a local sea transport company. The company is proud to claim to be the "*one and only* company in Singapore that provides daily ferry transport services to Kusu and St John's Islands".⁵⁴ As the sole monopoly, the ferry fares has increased substantially from SGD\$11.50 for adults and SGD\$7 for children in 2002⁵⁵ to the present SGD\$15 and SGD\$12, respectively.⁵⁶ Madam Sim expressed her concern over the increase in ticket pricing over the last two decades:

In the past, it only cost less than fifty cents to take a bumboat to Pulau Kusu. Anyone could afford to make their pilgrimage to the island and pray to Grand Uncle. Now, people have to pay \$15 to make their trip to the island. It is far too expensive for the elderly! It is sad to know that some of them may not be able to afford the ticket and thus unable to make their annual pilgrimage.⁵⁷

52 Zee Soh Fun, email interview by author, 17 July 2008, Singapore.

53 See, for instance, *ST*, 8 October 2007; *ST*, 14 October, 2006; *ST*, 2 October 2005; *ST*, 20 September 2004.

54 Singapore Island Cruise, "About Us," 2007, <http://islandcruise.com.sg/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=26> (10 November 2007). Emphasis added.

55 *ST*, 20 September 2002.

56 Singapore Island Cruise, "Services (Schedule)," 2007, <http://islandcruise.com.sg/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=21&Itemid=31> (10 November 2007).

57 Sim Chwee Eng, interview by author, 22 September 2007, Singapore.

Nevertheless, the expensive ticket prices did not stop the regular pilgrims from making their annual pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu. While most of my respondents complained about the cost of transportation, they all agreed that it will not be a major hindrance to their pilgrimage. As one of them put it, “no matter how expensive the ticket would cost, it will never stop me from making my pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu”.⁵⁸

New Facilities

In recent years, the SDC constructed several new facilities on the island, including a new jetty, a bridge, pavilions, signboards, wishing wells, toilets, tortoise sanctuary, and a hawker centre. The regular pilgrims were pleased with these new facilities and offered favorable comments:

These new and modern facilities have made the island more attractive to younger pilgrims like me. Although my main purpose here is to worship the Grand Uncle, I will be more than glad to see good and nice facilities around. I’m planning to ask my friends here for a picnic or a swim in the lagoon in the near future.⁵⁹

Long time ago, there were very little facilities on Pulau Kusu. The island was not even reclaimed and the Tua Pek Kong Temple was just directly above the sea. There was no bridge, pavilions, public toilets, and so on... These new facilities have certainly made the annual pilgrimage more convenient for the elderly. For instance, the railings at the jetty are really helpful. I do not need to be afraid of falling into the sea.⁶⁰

In spite of the conveniences, the facilities come at a cost to the temple. Madam Sim mentioned that when the authorities embarked on the construction projects, they asked her to make a monetary contribution, justifying that the projects were done for the benefit of her temple.⁶¹ However, using the example of the wishing wells, Madam Sim revealed that the new facilities do not necessarily benefit the temple. In fact, the state even makes use of the religious status of the temple for financial gain through collecting donations:

The wishing wells are state properties. If you look carefully, you will notice the big word ‘Sentosa’ on them. All the donations made to the wishing wells do not go to the Tua Pek Kong Temple but to the so-called Sentosa authorities. Many pilgrims were unaware of the ‘trick’ and hence made donations to these wishing wells thinking it would benefit the temple.⁶²

58 Wong Kah Hwee, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

59 Tan Wee Meng, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

60 Kok San Moi, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

61 Sim Chwee Eng, interview by author, 22 September 2007, Singapore.

62 *Ibid.*

Commercial Activities

Vibrant commercial activities during the pilgrimage season have started in the last few years.⁶³ These activities were introduced by the state authorities to generate profit by renting out hawker and bazaar stalls to vendors during the pilgrimage season. While the hawker centre sell food and drinks to the pilgrims at above market prices, bazaar vendors sell souvenirs such as the “lucky tortoise” (*xingyun gui* 幸运龟), “prosperity rice bucket” (*facai mitong* 发财米桶), and “fortune cat” (*zhaocai mao* 招财猫). From my short interviews with two bazaar vendors, setting up souvenir stalls were highly lucrative:

We have been selling souvenirs for the past few years... Business is good because many people like to buy auspicious souvenirs to bring home for good luck. Although I’m not sure if the souvenirs can bring them luck or help them to strike lottery, I’m very sure that they have brought us with good luck and allowed us to make profits every year!⁶⁴

It is quite profitable to sell souvenirs on the island. For instance, the cost price of a “lucky tortoise” is only about fifty cents and we are selling them at two dollars... Since there is no souvenir shop in the Tua Pek Kong Temple, devotees, pilgrims, and tourists definitely have to buy souvenirs from us.⁶⁵

While these products neither have direct connections with the Grand Uncle nor the Tua Pek Kong Temple, the souvenirs are regarded by the pilgrims as “sacred and auspicious products”⁶⁶ as they are perceived by the pilgrims to have acquired the sacredness of the site.⁶⁷ The popular demand for these souvenirs attracts the suppliers to return each year to set up stalls on the island. Subsequently, the authorities continue to make profit through the stall rentals.

In the context of Singapore, where economic development has been accorded the top priority by the state, religion and economics are “far from diametrically opposite poles”. In fact, the teachings of religion have been “harnessed by the state to encourage religious adherents to strive for economic progress” in the country.⁶⁸ In the case of Pulau Kusu, the state’s development of the island since the 1970s can be interpreted as an attempt to harness the economic potential of religion and to maximize profit from a religious site.

63 Madam Sim was unable to recall exactly when these activities started.

64 Mok Siew Min, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

65 Tan Beng Teck, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

66 Peter Ho, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore; Wong Kah Hwee, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

67 Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites*, p. 86.

68 Lily Kong, “The Commercial Face of God: Exploring the Nexus between the Religious and Material,” *Geographia Religionum*, 10 (1996), <<http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/geokongl/georel.pdf>> (10 November 2007).



Figure 4. Sale of souvenirs. Photo by author.

Generally, governments are able to influence the management of religious heritage sites through marketing and commodification. They can also implement specific policies and strategies pertaining to “maintenance and interpretation”, which range from “suppression to standardization”.⁶⁹ The monopolized control over the ferry service, construction of amenities and promotion of commercial activities on the island during the pilgrimage season are examples of the strategies of the state in the management of Pulau Kusu. When pilgrims make their visits to Pulau Kusu, they do not just spend their money on temple donations and offerings, but also on the state-monopolized goods and services. As we shall see in the next section, the state is not only interested in profiting from the pilgrims, but is also keen to target the tourists.

69 Daniel H. Olsen, “Management Issues for Religious Heritage Attractions,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, p. 113.

“Uniquely Singapore”:⁷⁰ Towards a Touristic Island

Since the late 1980s, the STPB had been interested to promote and market Pulau Kusu as a tourist attraction.⁷¹ At present, the development of Pulau Kusu, with the addition of new facilities, has made it more attractive and conducive for tourist activities. According to the “Uniquely Singapore” official website for tourist information on Singapore, Pulau Kusu, together with three other islands—Pulau Ubin, Sentosa, and St John’s Island—are the “isles of Singapore”⁷² promoted by the STB and tied to its “Tourism 2015” project which aims to attract 17 million visitors to Singapore by the year 2015.⁷³ The promotion of Pulau Kusu has attracted many tourists to the island in recent years.

Although there are no official statistics available on the number of tourists visiting the island, Madam Sim estimated that the island received more than a hundred tourists every week. However, she was rather unhappy that most of these tourists are non-pilgrims, and they visit the temple solely for sightseeing. Furthermore, their attempt to take photographs of the Grand Uncle and other deities in the temple has greatly annoyed the temple caretaker:

Most of the tourists, especially the Caucasians (*angmo* 红毛), are only here to walk walk see see. They are not interested in worshipping the Grand Uncle... Some of them even tried to take pictures of his sacred image. I need to constantly remind them that photo taking of the gods is not allowed in the temple. In fact, I even put up the ‘No Camera’ signs in the temple, especially on the altars, to ensure that the rules are followed.⁷⁴

From my interviews with the tourists, I found that they visited the island mainly for sightseeing or recreation. Susan Hasler, a college student from Switzerland, was sun tanning by the lagoon, and she was unaware that the Tua Pek Kong Temple is a famous

70 Singapore Tourism Board (hereafter STB) adopts “Uniquely Singapore” as the slogan to market Singapore as a tourist site with a “unique blend of the best of the modern world and rich cultures to deliver enriching experiences”. See STB, “Uniquely Singapore,” 2007, <http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/about_singapore/uniquely_singapore.html> (10 November 2007).

71 *ST*, 19 August 1989.

72 STB, “Isles of Singapore,” 2007, <http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what_to_see/isles_of_singapore.html> (10 November 2007).

73 The “Tourism 2015” project was introduced by Lim Hng Kiang, the Minister for Trade and Industry in 2005 to “ensure that tourism remains a key economic pillar by tripling Tourism Receipts (TR) to S\$30 billion, doubling visitor arrivals (VA) to 17 million, and creating an additional 100,000 jobs in the services sector by 2015”. See STB, “Tourism 2015,” 3 November 2007, <<http://app.stb.gov.sg/asp/abo/abo08.asp>> (10 November 2007); *BT*, 29 November 2006.

74 Sim Chwee Eng, interview by author, 22 September 2007, Singapore.

place of worship.⁷⁵ The two other tourists interviewed visited the island for sightseeing. Although they visited the Tua Pek Kong Temple, they did not worship the Grand Uncle and were not interested in the religious activities on the island:

One of my friends who visited Singapore told me that Pulau Kusu is a very beautiful island and so I decided to come here to have a look... I visited the Tua Pek Kong Temple and I think it is really beautiful. I took a lot of photos at the temple. However, I did not worship there because I'm not a Taoist and I don't believe in the deity.⁷⁶

I got to know about Pulau Kusu from *Lonely Planet*⁷⁷ and the Singapore Tourism [Board] website. It is a very beautiful and serene island... I was at the Tua Pek Kong Temple just now. I have never seen so many tortoises in a Chinese temple and so I took a few pictures to show my friends... I'm a Catholic and that's why I don't worship at the temple.⁷⁸

In reaction to the tourists, Madam Sim expressed her deepest concerns over the growing commercialization and "touristization" of Pulau Kusu over past twenty years. As most of the tourists are non-pilgrims who visit the temple solely for sightseeing, she was worried that the increase in tourist activities would lead to the decline in the sacredness of Pulau Kusu, which would in turn result in the secularization of the island:

Most tourists do not seem to treat Pulau Kusu as a sacred site and do not pay respect to Grand Uncle. While some of the nicer tourists would make a small donation, most of them would simply regard the Tua Pek Kong Temple as if it is some showroom and try to take photographs of everything they can find... I really do not understand what the government is trying to do to the island. The future of the island seems bleak and I am really afraid that government will eventually take control over the temple.⁷⁹

While her concerns over the growing commercialization and "touristization" of the island are valid, her belief that tourism will result in the complete secularization of the island may be too pessimistic. A recent study suggests that rapid social change and modernity in Singapore have not resulted in the decline of religion. Instead, it contributed to a process of religious revivalism in the country.⁸⁰ Many Chinese still continue to practise their traditional customs and rituals, even if they have been adapted

75 Susan Hasler, interview by author, 13 July 2008, Singapore.

76 Nwai Nwai Ayu, interview by author, 13 July 2008, Singapore.

77 *Lonely Planet* is a popular travel guide.

78 Michael Gesbert, interview by author, 13 July 2008, Singapore.

79 Sim Chwee Eng, interview by author, 22 September 2007, Singapore.

80 Tong Chee Kiong, *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 12.

to suit modern conditions.⁸¹ The legends of the Grand Uncle and the annual pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu remain an important part of Singapore's Chinese religious culture. Both the young and older pilgrims are likely to continue their pilgrimage amidst the rapid development and "touristization" of the island:

Despite the changes that are happening in Pulau Kusu, I feel that the annual pilgrimage will remain an important Chinese religious practice... As you can see, the temple is so crowded today. In fact, you can even notice that many young people are here to worship the Grand Uncle. I believe that such important tradition would continue to be preserved by the younger generation.⁸²

I have made annual pilgrimages to this island for the past fifty years or so. Many things have changed over the years. For instance, in the past, we used to take a bumboat or sampan to Pulau Kusu. With the implementation of the ferry service, we took a ferry to the island at the Clifford Pier. Now we go to the island from the Marina South Pier. No matter how much has changed, my belief and faith in the Grand Uncle remains the same. If one day, I can no longer walk on my own, I will still make my annual pilgrimage to Pulau Kusu in a wheelchair.⁸³

While Madam Sim's concern over the secularization of the island is possibly less likely to come to fruition, her worry over the control and ownership of the temple is indeed a genuine one. The Singapore state, as Lily Kong suggests, is driven by material interests in its management of religious structures. Consequently, with the oppositional conceptions of sacred space, tensions exist between religious individuals and groups and the state, and these conflicts are often caused by specific issues, such as the establishment, preservation, relocation, and demolition of religious buildings.⁸⁴ In the case of Pulau Kusu, the STB's attempt to touristize the island is obviously driven by material concerns. With the active promotion of "Tourism 2015" and the pending plans to develop and transform the Southern Islands into a mini-Monaco in Asia, it probably best explains the reasons behind Madam Sim's vision of a bleak future for Pulau Kusu and the Tua Pek Kong Temple.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

82 Tan Wee Meng, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

83 Kok San Moi, interview by author, 27 October 2007, Singapore.

84 Lily Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions of Sacred Space: A Case Study of Religious Buildings in Singapore," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 18, 3 (1993): 346.

Conclusion

Many governments in the world have exerted political control over their sacred sites, even to the extent of limiting access, freedom of worship or even freedom of expression.⁸⁵ In the context of Singapore's economic development since its independence, and the management of the Southern Islands by the SDC, the Tua Pek Kong Temple on Pulau Kusu and its religious activities have overlapped with the larger forces of social change, state management, and development. By positioning Pulau Kusu within the broader setting of pilgrimage islands and the management of island pilgrimages, this article contends that the Singapore state's interest in the development of the island in general and the temple in particular have led to the commercialization and "touristization" of the island. While the well-known Tua Pek Kong Temple remains a special place in religious terms, the wealth it generates from the pilgrimage has made itself a target of state control and supervision.

The Singapore state authorities have adopted three measures to make profits out of the annual pilgrimage to the Tua Pek Kong Temple, namely the monopolization of ferry service; the construction of new facilities; and the introduction of commercial activities into the Pulau Kusu. On one hand, if we consider these "state-monopolized" good and services as profit seeking ventures to benefit from the pilgrims, then the "touristization" of the island in recent years can thus be considered as an attempt to reach out to the non-devotees. On the other hand, the state investment in the tourist infrastructure is what makes the island—and the continuation of the temple activities—viable in the context of a land-scarce city-state where every bit of land has to pay its way. This issue can also be extended beyond the dichotomy of pilgrims and tourists. While self-styled pilgrims make use of government-managed transportation and other facilities on Pulau Kusu mainly designed for tourists, it is also possible that some tourists could even end up going back "religiously" if they end up liking this pilgrimage island.

The STB's promotion of Pulau Kusu seems rather successful with the gradual increase in the number of tourists over the last couple of years. Nevertheless, it has become a major concern for Madam Sim, who has stayed on the island for more than half of her life. While her attempt to draw a casual link between tourism and the secularization of the island is not entirely convincing, her worries over the future of the island and the possibility that the state will eventually seize control of the temple are crucial. Probably, to the Singapore government and most pilgrims, the Tua Pek Kong Temple is simply an important place of worship. To Madam Sim, the temple is her sacred mission, her only source of livelihood, and her very home. What would be the future of the island? I am afraid that only the government, and perhaps the Grand Uncle, has the answer.

85 Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites*, p. 140.

Postscript: In Memory of Madam Sim Chwee Eng (1929-2008)

On 13 July 2008, I went to Pulau Kusu to collect additional data for this revised manuscript. When I entered the Tua Pek Kong Temple, I was greeted by Mr Seet Seng Huat, the son of Madam Sim Chwee Eng. When he broke the news that Madam Sim died of a heart attack the previous week at the age of 79, I was stunned. Her departure was too sudden. I could still clearly remember my two interview sessions with Madam Sim last year at the Tua Pek Kong Temple. She was then still in the pink of health, happily reciting blessings for the devotees, and chit-chatting with temple visitors. Madam Sim was extremely frank and forthcoming in answering my numerous questions, and was never afraid to say what was on her mind. Her demise is indeed a loss to many temple devotees, pilgrims, visitors, and researchers of Pulau Kusu. She will be fondly missed by all who knew her. I would like to dedicate this article in her memory.



Figure 5. The late Madam Sim Chwee Eng with the author, 22 September 2007.

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