

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

23, Jalan AU5 C/3
Lembah Keramat
Ulu Kelang, Selangor
Malaysia
22 February 1982

BEB-3

Rites and Sprites

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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4 West Wheelock Street
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Dear Peter,

A short time ago, I dreamt that, while I lay in bed, some friends came to visit. They were sitting across the room, chatting amiably among themselves. When, however, I attempted to rise to join them I found that I could not move, as if a great vise had clamped me to the mattress. Struggle was impossible and speech nearly so; I seemed to be without breath. When, finally, I managed to cry out, my friends faded from view and the grip was released.

Later, I described this dream to a Malay acquaintance.

"Oh," he said, "you probably had a hantu sitting on your chest. They do that sometimes. Mischievous creatures, hantus."

Hantus are Malay ghosts, part of a supernatural pantheon that is very much alive in Peninsular Malaysia* and apparently elsewhere in Asia as well. Recently, Asiaweek magazine asked me to do a cover illustration for an article on such Asian superstitions. Asiaweek, as the name suggests, is a regional English-language weekly. Formed about six years ago by former columnists and sub-editors of the well-established Far Eastern Economic Review, the magazine is targeted for local Asian audiences, with a small readership in the West. Both the Review and Asiaweek are headquartered in Hong Kong.

The article, entitled "Secret Powers," was to be a potpourri of Asian belief systems, with the emphasis on their role in modern Asian life. Cover stories sell magazines and this story, with its potentially wide appeal, was considered by the editors to be a particularly saleable item. To be effective, the cover illustration had to get the superstition message across to as many Asian ethnic groups and nationalities as possible, distilling a variety of belief

* The Federation of Malaysia consists of Peninsular Malaysia (formerly Malaya), bordering on Thailand and Singapore and East Malaysia, the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, bordering on Indonesian Kalimantan.

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systems into a few succinct visual passages. The Asiaweek art director wanted something for everyone: "palmistry charts, lottery tickets, charms, amulets." After some consultation with Henry Steiner, the Asiaweek cover designer, we finally decided on a close-up portrait of a man's neck and shoulders, his open-collared shirt revealing an arrangement of necklaces, each with the appropriate charm or talisman. I would research the problem from the Malaysian point of view. Steiner and the Asiaweek art department would work with whatever sources were available in Hong Kong.

Malaysia's diverse population provided abundant reference material. Previous visits to the Peninsula and subsequent research had given me some familiarity with the local belief systems, though scant understanding of the various charms, talismans and other associated paraphernalia. Here was a chance for further research. Moreover, this was an opportunity to apply some rather esoteric knowledge to a communication problem.

Hantus are not the Peninsula's only Malay ghosts. There are others: malaikats (angels), jinns (genies), lansuyars, penanggalans and pontianaks (assorted vampires), polongs (familiar spirits) and jembalangs (soil goblins). In addition there is the belief in semangat, the cosmic force which animates all things.

The jinns and hantus are the most widely recognized Malay spirits. The former are manifestations of Islamic belief, for almost all Malays are Muslim. The latter, like their lesser-known compatriots, are remnants of the animistic and Hindu traditions that preceded the arrival of Islam on the Peninsula. Now Allah presides over this syncretic community.

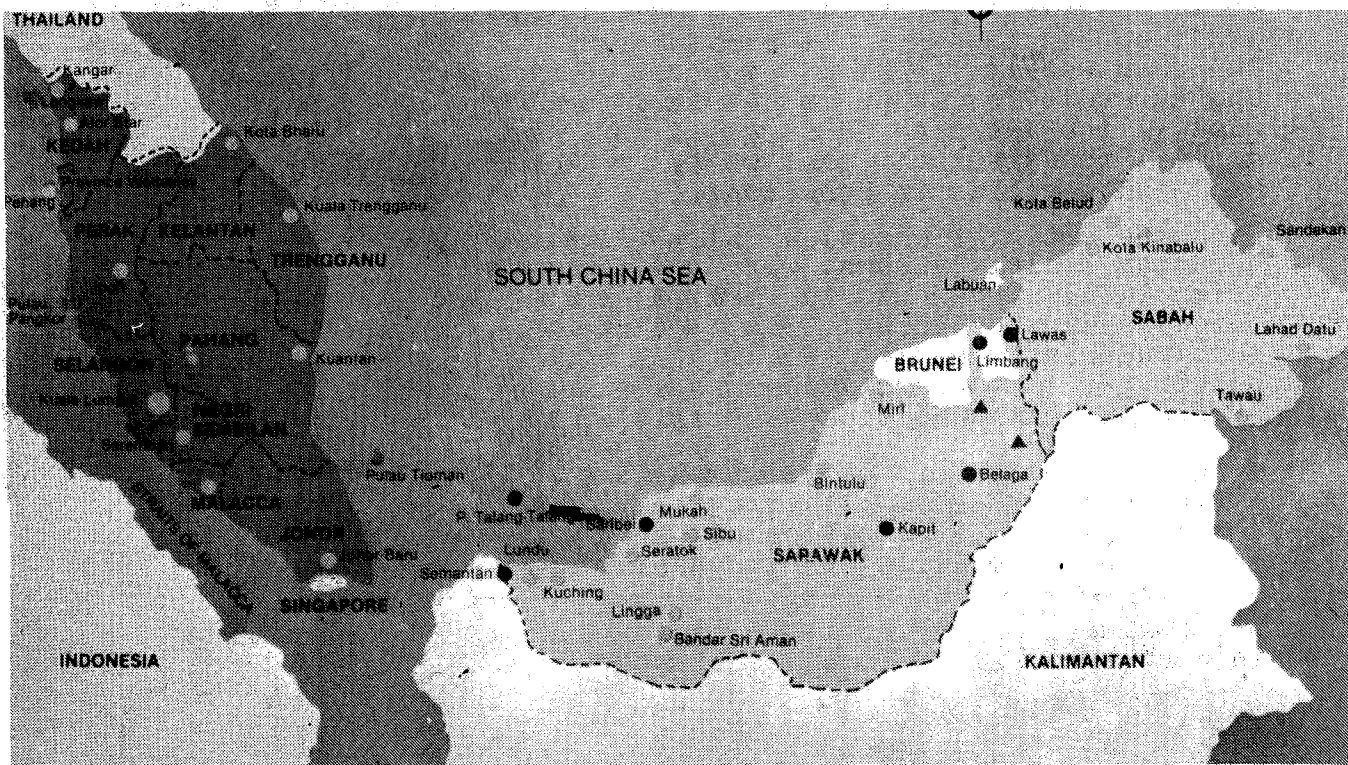


figure 1

Malays, however, now constitute only 53% of the local populace. Though Malaysia has been a sovereign nation since 1957, the Peninsula was ruled by the British for almost a century (trade began even earlier; a British trading station was established on Pinang Island in 1786). Colonial policy encouraged the immigration of Chinese workers, traders and merchants and the forced importation of Indian laborers and smaller groups of other races. Today, Malays and their ethereal counterparts must now share the Peninsula with some rather incongruous neighbors.

The Chinese make up 35% of the Peninsular population. Their traditional belief system combines elements of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucism and allows for an immense pantheon of gods. The forces of Yin (light, warmth, life) and yang (darkness, cold, death) animate the Chinese universe. Spiritual manifestations of these complementary opposites are the shen (benevolent dieties, angels) and kwei (demons).

They accompany men through life and act upon them as agents of Heaven.



figure 2

Most of the Peninsula's remaining 12% are Indians and most of these are Hindu. As such, they believe in sakti, the universal force, and its personified manifestations: Siva, Visnu, Brahma and a host of lesser devas (gods), raksasas (ogres), asuras (demons) and bhutas (ghosts). The cult of Siva is particularly popular in Malaysia.

There are also smaller numbers of Sikhs and Jains (mostly Indian), Buddhists (mostly Thai) and Christians (whose adherents are not tied to any one race).

Of course, the orang asli (original people, i.e. aborigines) inhabited the



figure 3



figure 4

Peninsula long before the arrival of these other groups. The orang asli are still around, but most have been unable to compete successfully with the latecomers and have been reduced to small numbers living in the hills and jungles. Though materially impoverished, they have rich spiritual traditions. Two groups, the Mah Meri and the Jah Hut, have succeeded in marketing their traditions in the form of carvings of their spirits and ghosts.

Belief in the supernatural continues to survive, nay thrive, despite Malaysia's position as second-most-developed-nation (Singapore is the leader) in South-east Asia. The burgeoning economy, high per capita income and literacy, rapid urbanization, well-developed communications and advanced Western-style medical care provide stiff competition for traditional culture. Less resilient aspects are hard-pressed to survive.

Many of my urban Malaysian friends prefer Arrow shirts to batik (wax-resist printed fabric), think The Empire Strikes Back is the most and Mak Yong (dance drama) a bore, praise pyrex and scorn rattan. Yet these same Malaysians still invoke the spirits, propitiating, coercing or threatening them, whether buying a car, taking an exam, seducing a lover or simply curing a headache. Even Malaysians that depend primarily on Western medicine often take no chances and employ local cures as well. Modernity may have diluted these beliefs somewhat, but it has not obliterated them; the two systems somehow manage to exist in tandem.

My first encounter with Malaysian superstition was in 1973. Only a few weeks into a yearlong stay with a Malay village family under the auspices of the APS exchange program, I slipped into one of the numerous potholes that line the roadsides near Johor Baru. Swelling in the leg caused my host mother some concern. She offered to try a home remedy.

"Best not go to the hospital," she said. "They'll just put you in a cast or give you an injection." I soon learned that these were real phobias in my host family. Consequently doctors were only used as a last resort.

She squatted on the ground and mixed up a paste of kapur (white lime), air limau (lime juice) and air (water; pronounced

"ayer"). This she applied to the affected limb as a series of downward pointing arrows. All the while she muttered barely audible incantations. These, I later learned, were Koranic ayat (verses), chosen for their healing powers.

Mystic Sufi Islamic beliefs current in Malaysia hold that for every word in the Koran, indeed every letter, there is a common and esoteric meaning. Initiates who can comprehend the latter meaning learn to repeat certain key phrases that are believed to effect cures, weaken enemies and insure invulnerability from attack.

سُوْرَةُ الْفَاتِحَةِ

figure 5

In a day or so the swelling subsided and I was back on my feet, though whether this was due to divine intercedence I cannot say. My host family, however, was convinced that, once again, Koranic power had done the job.

My host mother was well versed in the Koran, having taught scripture at the local madrasah (religious school) for

a number of years. throughout the year, villagers would visit our home with small complaints: an aching back, a head cold or a toothache. Always there were the incantations and, sometimes, a prescription: a vial of oil, a bottle of water or a piece of kemanyan (benzoin), activated with the appropriate phrases. Payment was never demanded.

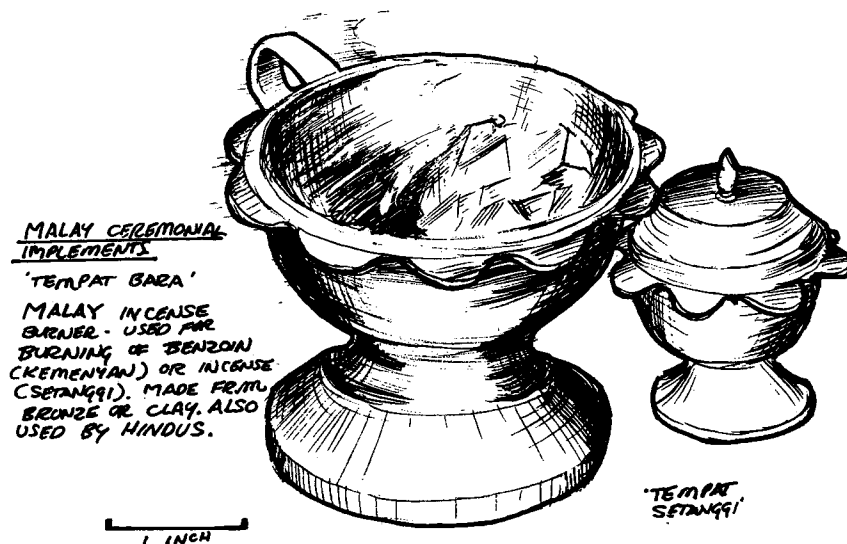


figure 6

For more serious problems, villagers

would visit the local bomoh (shaman). My hosts, however, preferred to keep such treatment in the family and often relied on Umi, an aunt, also a bomoh, living 200 miles to the north in the federal capital, Kuala Lumpur. Umi, Arabic for mother, also has the prestigious title Shariffah, indicating her descentance from the Prophet Mohammed. Her methods, typical of bomohs in general, are exceedingly popular because of the alleged efficacy of her cures. Among her followers are numerous government officials. On any given day one can visit Umi's home and find a chauffeur-driven Mercedes with tinted windows parked in the drive. Neighbors strain to catch a glimpse of the figures inside; a "big shot" is undergoing treatment.

Umi can, at a moment's notice, fall into a trance of sorts, her body possessed by an unidentified spirit. This entity guides her ministrations, usually massage with a specially prepared oil or the leaves of a particular tree or bush. In trance, Umi's normal medium-range voice climbs to a high falsetto, like that of a small child. The treatment over, the spirit leaves her and she returns to normal consciousness. Again, payment is not demanded (there are exceptions to the rule. Many Malays make tidy side-incomes moonlighting as bomohs, though I know of few that make such work a full-time profession).

Other members of the family have also become involved in traditional medical practice. On my most recent visit to my host village I found that Azahar, youngest of the three brothers, had become possessed with a laying-on-of-hands curative ability. This he attributed to his involvement in a Sufi invulnerability cult: Budi Suci Sejati. Members of the cult believe that a Muslim, pure of heart, can, with the proper incantations and hand movements, knock a foe to the ground or hurl him into the air. Other formulae are believed to stop knife blades and bullets from penetrating the skin. A long period of initiation, under the supervision of a guru, is required to master these skills.

Such invulnerability cults have a long history in the Malay Archipelago. Hang Tuah, the legendary 16th century Malay warrior, used magic incantations to prevent the cannons of invading Portugese warships from firing on his vessel. More modern warriors, resistance fighters, soldiers and thieves, have relied on invulnerability charms and amulets to protect them from enemy bullets. Understandably, such faith wanes a bit when a believer is shot and killed.

Though heartily condemned by orthodox Muslims as sinful and contrary to Islam, most of the Malays I know still believe in the efficacy of their incantations and tangkal, the collective name for charms and amulets. The black cloth neck-bag pictured on the cover is representative of such tangkal and for the purposes of the illustration, Malay beliefs in general. This particular charm was prepared by a bomoh I recently visited on Lagnkawi Island. It is filled with aromatic woods and is used to protect the wearer, usually a child, from tapeworms.

The Year of the Dog: Our New Year Predictions
 Wanted: A Japanese Princess for a Japanese Prince
 Moral Education in Singapore: Is it Working?

ASIAWEEK

FEBRUARY 5, 1982

AUSTRALIA A\$1.50
 BANGLADESH Tk 4.00
 BRUNEI B\$ 1.00
 BURMA K\$ 8.00
 HONG KONG HK\$ 6.00
 INDIA R\$ 1.00
 INDONESIA Rp 100
 JAPAN ¥ 400
 KOREA W\$ 9.00
 MALAYSIA M\$ 1.00
 NEPAL N\$ 8.00
 NEW ZEALAND NZ\$ 1.25
 PAKISTAN R\$ 1.00
 PAPUA N.G. K\$ 1.00
 PHILIPPINES P\$ 1.00
 SINGAPORE S\$ 1.00
 SRI LANKA R\$ 1.00
 TAIWAN N.T. \$ 5.00
 THAILAND B\$ 1.00
 U.S.A. US\$ 1.00



Secret
 Friends or Foes?
 Powers

figure 7

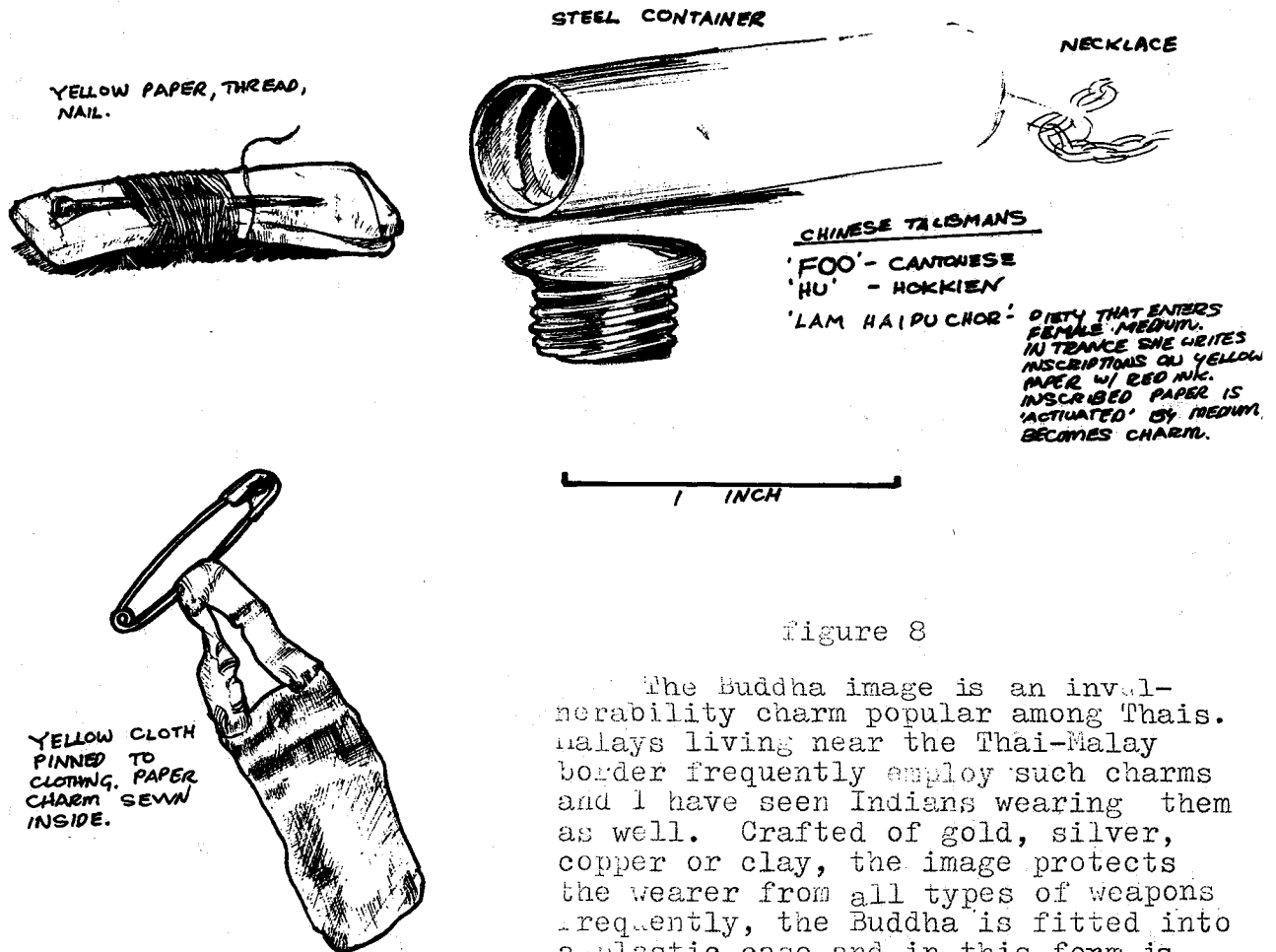


figure 8

The Buddha image is an invulnerability charm popular among Thais. Malays living near the Thai-Malay border frequently employ such charms and I have seen Indians wearing them as well. Crafted of gold, silver, copper or clay, the image protects the wearer from all types of weapons. Frequently, the Buddha is fitted into a plastic case and in this form is called a "Bell Buddha" for the shaking sound the image makes.

Chinese charms have different names depending on the dialect. They are called hu in Hokkien and fu in Cantonese. Usually a medium, possessed by a spirit, writes a magic formula in red ink on a small piece of yellow paper. This is rolled up and inserted into a cylinder of gold, steel or silver, or sewn into a cloth case similar to the Malay tangkal.

One of my friends used a number of such charms, in various containers, to ward off the amorous advances of her employer and to neutralize any charms he might be using to gain her affections. She obviously went to the right medium, for the suitor eventually turned elsewhere for romantic stimulation.

Though the episode was long past, she still carries the charms in her purse:

"After all," she said, "I've come to no harm so far. It certainly can't hurt to carry a little extra protection."

Numerology (touched on briefly in BLB-1) is also an important aspect of Chinese beliefs. In Cantonese, by far the largest Chinese language group on the Peninsula, certain numbers rhyme with auspicious and inauspicious words and are avoided or chosen

for this reason: lok, six, is close to the pronunciation of happiness; sei, four, is similar to the word for death.

In the game of pai kau (3 cards), popular among the Chinese, players try to get combinations of cards equalling 10 or multiples thereof (20,30), which also count as 10. Combinations adding up to more or less than the ideal 10 (or 20, or 30) are valued on a 1 to 9 scale: 9, 19 and 29, being close to 10, are auspicious; 1, 11 and 21 are the worst possible numerical combinations.

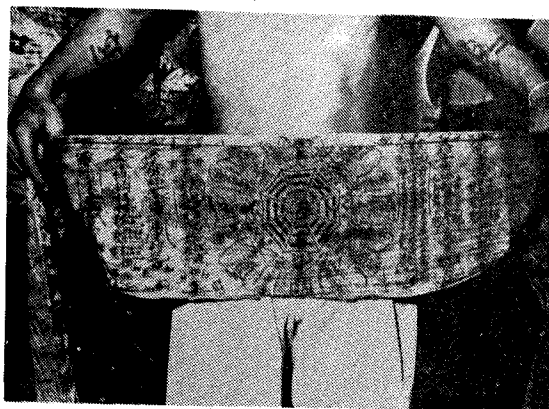


figure 9

The rhyme and pai kau systems have been extended to the Malaysian vehicle licensing system. Any one license can have up to 3 letters and 4 numbers. As Malaysians are allowed to bid for upcoming license numbers, plates are often chosen for their auspicious implications. Particularly lucky combinations, like BBB 8888 (8, bat, rhymes with fat, prosperity. From a distance the license plate reads 888 8888 or prosperity times 7) can go for thousands of ringgit (the ringgit is the Malaysian dollar. M\$2.2 equals US\$1). Fortunately my own reasonably auspicious plate, BAH 9371, cost a mere M\$30, the usual fee.

Numerology is also applied to the 4-digit lottery, empat nombor ekor. Numerical combinations are sometimes chosen for their similarity to auspicious license plates. After a car accident, passersby copy down the plate numbers of the involved vehicles and quickly go to the nearest empat nombor ekor shop to place a bet. If the vehicles were overturned, the numbers are written in reverse order. A facsimile lottery ticket, representative of Chinese numerological beliefs, has been included in the cover illustration, stuck in the shirt pocket.

The shirt itself is a Javanese batik pattern. Batik has reached a high level of sophistication on Java; certain batik patterns have deep ritual significance, enhancing fertility or, like amulets, protecting the wearer from evil. The Javanese shopowner that sold me the batik I used as reference for the illustration insisted that this was the kusumane-gara pattern, particularly powerful, but she wasn't sure just how.

The other items pictured in the illustration, i.e. the red-knotted choker, the eye amulet and the yin-yang talisman were inserted for different



figure 10

reasons. One of Steiner's friends claimed to have been given the knotted red neck-thread by a Tibetan lama. As these necklaces are supposedly popular in Tibet and Nepal, the inclusion of one in the illustration might add an element relevant to the audience in that region. The yin-yang is one of the most recognized Chinese occult symbols in both the East and the West. Readers missing the significance of the other symbols might catch on with this one. The Eye of Horus, an Egyptian symbol, was inserted specifically for Western readers, the other possibility being the eye-in-pyramid symbol on the reverse of the US\$1 note. Steiner felt that westerners could associate the eye with occult power more easily than with the Malay *tangkal*, the steel tub or the other amulets. For whatever reason, the Asiaweek art director also wanted to see some sort of "evil eye" motif included in the illustration.

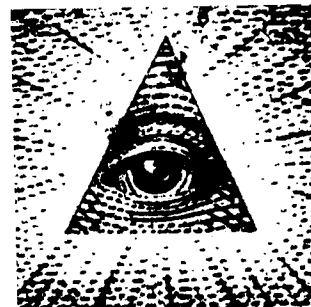


figure 11

The finished illustration, executed on gesso-coated illustration board in oil, casein and collage, was published in the February 5, 1982 issue of Asiaweek. Did all this intricate balancing of regional and religious systems result in an eminently saleable cover? As far as Malaysia goes, I'll never know. We had not reckoned with the Asiaweek marketing department.

Asiaweek, it turns out, was purchased a few years ago by Reader's Digest, a magazine which has had great success with stick-on paper covers. As the Digest cover is normally a table of contents the additional cover-leaf provides some pictorial interest and draws potential readers' attention to certain choice articles inside.

The parent company chose the "Secret Powers" issue to introduce these cover leaves, called "tip-ons" here, on a trial basis in Malaysia and the Philippines. Tip-ons in each country

are designed to draw the readers' attention to regionally specific articles. The inaugural Malaysian issue featured a hot-pink and red tip-on with the bold, white headline, "Secret Powers; Strange Tales of the Bomoh." Subsequent issues have featured tip-ons in bright orange and red, day-glow yellow and electric blue, with alluring headlines: "Malaysia Cracks Down On Nude Photo Racket"; "A Cry For Help From Malaysia's Heart Patients."

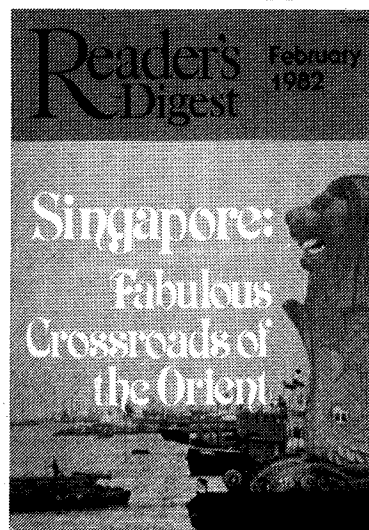
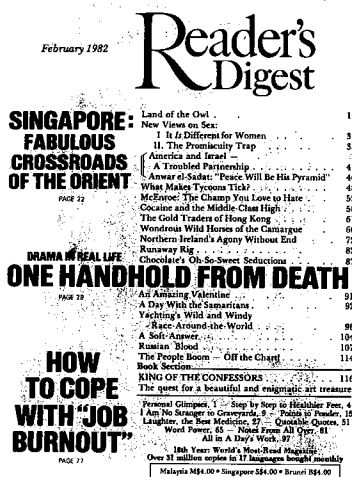


figure 12

Apparently, the

The Year of the Dog: Our New Year Predictions
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ASIAWEEK

FEBRUARY 5, 1987

ASIAWEEK
 A WEEKLY JOURNAL OF
 ASIAN AFFAIRS
 EDITORIAL BOARD
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SECRET POWERS

STRANGE TALES OF THE DOMOH

intent is not to edify, but to entice. Indeed, the brightly covered magazines are veritable beacons on the newsstands.

But have the new covers increased sales? According to Mr. Kamaruthin, circulation manager at U.R. Sasaratha Raj (M) Sendirian Berhad, Malaysia's Asiaweek distributors, the tip-ons have been moderately successful. The "Secret Powers" issue garnered only average sales (exact figures were confidential), but at least twelve issues will be needed to make a viable comparison with unadulterated covers. Malaysia-specific covers have always sold well in the past, he said. The use of tip-ons is an attempt to exploit this reader preference. Kamaruthin felt that a substantial increase in sales would be needed to justify the expense of regional tip-ons for all of Asia.

Wouldn't the use of tip-ons eventually obviate the need for cover art? Well yes, but Asiaweek is a business and magazines have to be sold.

This no-nonsense attitude is prevalent at the business end of commercial art. For after all, illustration is commercial art. Despite exhibitions, glossy catalogs and other fine art trappings, illustration's main purpose is communication. Good illustration is often good art, but to survive, illustrators have to sell a product, tell a story or communicate an idea better than the photographers and designers that are the competition.

Either that, or mutter a few incantations. For art's sake.

Sincerely,



Bryn Barnard

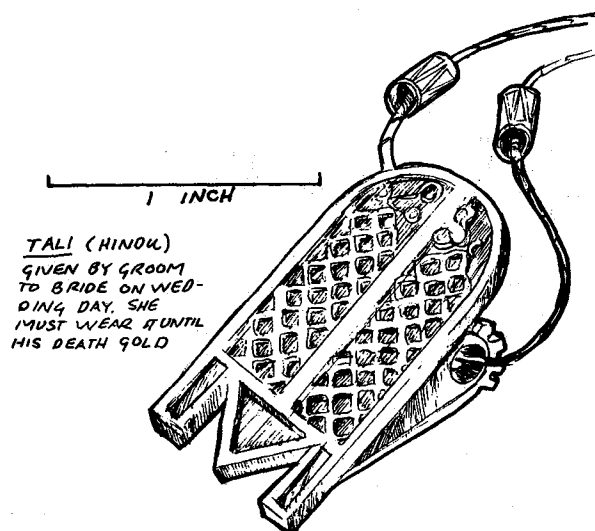


Figure 14

List of Illustrations

1. Map of East and Peninsular Malaysia. Tourist Development Corporation of Malaysia brochure.
2. Ji, Chinese character for "auspicious" From Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation advertisement.
3. Sketch; Chinese shrine near Taman Permata housing area; BEB; guache on bristol board
4. Sketch; Bes Penajen sculpture, Ja Hut origin; BEB; charcoal on illustration board.
5. Al-Faatihah, first surah (chapter) of the Koran. BEB after Al-Qur'an; Bahagian Ugama Jabatan Perdana Menteri, Kuala Lumpur.
6. Sketch; ballpoint and felt-tip pen on bristol board; BEB
7. Asiaweek magazine cover; BEB; original in oil, casein and collage on illustration board.
8. Sketch; Chinese talismans; BEB; ballpoint and felt-tip pens on bristol board
9. Photograph; Shaw, William; 1975; Aspects of Malaysian Magic; Kuala Lumpur; Muzium Negara
Chinese medium with protective spirit belt.
10. Photograph; motorcycle licenseplate; BEB
11. US\$1 note (detail)
12. Reader's Digest magazine cover, with and without tip-on; February, 1982.
13. Asiaweek magazine cover, with tip-on. February 5, 1982.
14. Sketch; ballpoint and felt-tip pen on bristol board; BEB

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1975 Aspects of Malaysian Magic; Kuala Lumpur; Muzium Negara
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Kuala Lumpur; Bahagian Ugama, Jabatan Perdana Menteri

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