She spent three years interviewing mediums for her PhD. Actress Margaret Chan is now an expert on Taoist trances and lion dances.

by CLARESSA OON
ARTICLE INVESTIGATOR

THE voice is still boomy and resonant, that crisp English accent even more pronounced. But Margaret Chan has undergone a reinvention of sorts.

Long a force on the Singapore stage and still remembered as the cocksmash-crashing Penang matric of the 1994 television soap Masters Of The Sea, she is now an expert on Taoist rituals such as the long ke (spirit mediums) and lion dances.

As part of her PhD in theatre and performance studies with the Yong Hwa- way, University of London, the Hokkien-speaking Chan, now 46, spent three years, up to 2003, conducting research among Taoist communities in Singapore, China, Thailand, Malaysia and Taiwan.

Now Dr Margaret Chan and a theatre studies lecturer at the Singapore Management University (SMU), her school-marmish ensemble today of black silk blouses, narrow hose-length skirt and sensible black pumps completes the transformation from actress to academic.

The theatre anthropologist will speak on Chinese lion dance on Saturday at the SMU Auditorium, in a talk organized by SMU and The China Society.

Chan explains that in Taoist theology, where spirits are all around and images speak to you, the lion head is actually a helmet made, a doorway for the spirit to enter.

Lion dance rituals have the lion guorng ('revealing the light'), the pre-dance dotting of the lion's eyes, mouth and nose with red ink or chicken blood, signifying the spirit entering the lion before the dance.

Such rituals, she adds emphatically, may now be secularized, 'but the roots go very deep. It's a fascinating, fascinating world.'

CHAN'S scholarly life began when she, her husband, a law lecturer, and their two children relocated briefly to London when he was posted there in 1996.

As she puts it wryly: 'At that time, I felt I was growing old and didn't have stamina for TV and stage. I thought I should do further studies - as they say, if you can't teach.'

So she enrolled in a master's course at the Central School of Speech and Drama, finding herself at least 10 years older than everyone in her class.

"I was this giant big thing jumping around in a bastard and tightie - it was frightful."

Then she decided to go for the ultimate in the paper chase - the PhD.

Here, this English-educated actress, who cannot speak more than a few phrases of Mandarin, felt the urge to delve into her roots.

"I am Hokkien. I can speak it, and I wanted to interrogate the practices of my people, the Hokkien diaspora."

She saw no clash between her Christian beliefs and her choice of topic, maintaining that she is just studying performance in the everyday life of a community.

"Oh, it's a fascinating story. A fascinating story, she enthuses in her perfectly enunciated tones.

She interviewed 15 and 20 long ke for her research, all of whom could talk about their work only when in a trance - 'otherwise they lose their powers' - or if they had left the profession.

'I told them I was a monogamous because you're not supposed to approach them if you're pregnant,' she adds wistfully.

According to her, pregnant women avoid watching the long ke because of the fear that spirits may descend and possess the dancer.

As long ke worship is 'yang' and essentially a male and passive worship, menstruating women, whose blood is 'yin', also cannot be present during sacred ceremonies.

Before a ritual in Temple, she says, a long ke becomes like an ordinary person, chit-chatting to the people around him or having a cigarette.

In trance, however, "there is another angel controlling him." His eyes may roll, and he speaks in a different voice, usually a falsetto.

Among other things, the medium experiences pain - but does not show it - when he skewers himself. Her eyes widen as she explains how the long ke talks on the spirit of that weapon to arm himself and protect his people.

After a while, Chan lost her fear of approaching these mediums and would ask them about their beliefs and the significance of their rituals.

"They usually don't speak very much. I didn't dare ask them what they saw for fear of scaring them."

She reveals, however, that "one reared fella told me, very seriously, that the road to hell is exactly like the road to Changi Airport - very straight and long, with buses on both sides."

Chan is currently developing her PhD research into a forthcoming book, to be published by Singapore University Press.

Now that her two children are grown-up - daughter Cica, 20, is a lawyer based in Tokyo while son Jonathan, 18, is doing his national service - her ongoing writing on spirit medium worship keeps this devoted mother occupied.

"Many people ask me why I do this. They say, you don't need the money."

She is not too sure of the reason herself, apart from the curiosity of finding out more about Chinese culture.

"You do it because it's there. I always tell people that the dragon at your tail is the dragon that you put there, and it drives me on."

- The Mystical Lion, a talk by Margaret Chan with lion dances demonstrated by the Wuha Association of Singapore and the SMU Lion Dancers, is on at the SMU Auditorium, 469 Bukit Timah Road, on Saturday from 4.30-7pm. Admission is free.