

# “BEATING THE PETTY PERSON”: A RITUAL OF HONG KONG CHINESE<sup>1</sup>

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Ta Hsiao-jen (Ta Siu-yan, 打小人)<sup>2</sup> is a short ritual practiced primarily by the Cantonese Chinese in Hong Kong. Ta (Ta, 打) means “to beat”, and Hsiao-jen (Siu-yan), meaning “petty or debased person”, is antithetical of Kuei-jen (Kwai-yan 貴人), meaning “honorable person”. Thus, Ta Hsiao-jen (Ta Siu-yan) literally means “beating the petty or debased person”. The concept of a petty or an honorable person is defined in terms of ego’s self-interest. Thus, those who are harmful to the ego are considered “petty persons”, whereas those who are beneficial to the ego are considered “honorable persons”. This binary opposition is thought to be universal among the folk Chinese. The main objective of the ritual is to eliminate the undesirable influence of the “petty person”, while invoking aid from the “honorable person” for the ritual’s recipient who may or may not be the performer of the ritual.

In comparison with other types of ritual, Ta Hsiao-jen (Ta Siu-yan) is relatively short in duration and simple in form. Nevertheless, interesting theoretical questions may be raised in regard to the nature of the ritual. Being fairly popular among the Cantonese Chinese in Hong Kong, it has not yet received much attention from the anthropologists and there has been no systematic research on this custom.<sup>3</sup> I have described it briefly (Chiao, 1983) and recently completed a more detailed report on the ritual in Chinese (Chiao & Liang 1984). This paper will provide a full description of it, to be followed by a discussion on some theoretical issues pertaining to the ritual.

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1. The data for this paper were collected primarily between 1975 and 1978 with help of a number of students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

2. Throughout the paper, every Chinese term is given both the Mandarin and the Cantonese pronunciations (in a bracket).

3. Both Topley (1966) in her paper on Chinese Occasional Rites and Kani (1973) in his paper on “Charms” mentioned the “Beating the Petty Person” ritual.

To the best of my knowledge, the ritual has not been recorded in the local gazetteers or any other historical documents. Thus, the information which concerns its origin and historical development is currently unavailable. According to a number of the older and informed inhabitants in Hong Kong whom we enquired, the ritual was quite common in Dong-guan (東莞) and Zeng-cheng (增城) and also found in Nan-fan-shun (南番順) and Si-yi (四邑), all in Guangdong province.

The ritual is not supposed to be held inside a building which may be a house or a large temple. However, in small temples where the stone statue of White Tiger is set up under the altar of major deities, the ritual may take place. The places which are generally accepted as favorite are at cross-roads, at the bottom of a bridge and on a hillside. One explanation, according to folk belief, is that malevolent spiritual forces like to gather in those places and hence it is easier to catch them. Other sources suggest that it is easier to disperse the malevolent forces in these places. In the small temples where the White Tiger is housed, religious practitioners, commonly known as Na-mo lao (Nam-mo lo, 喃嘸佬), that is, "chanting fellow", perform the ritual for their clients at a small fee. A special place where the ritual is held is the Lover's Stone Park, situated in the mid-level hillside on Hong Kong Island. On the 6th, 16th and 26th days of each lunar month, many "beating the petty person" rituals are performed right below the Lover's Stone, a pointed stone formation which has become a popular fetish. Another specific favorite spot is at the sidewalk in the intersection between Hennessy Road and Canal Road which is in one of the busiest districts on Hong Kong Island. This spot is better known among the local people as Goose Neck Bridge. Indeed, a century ago there was a stream by the name of Goose Neck as well as a bridge over the stream. It is believed that people used to hold ritual there. Though no vestige of either is recognizable today, people still come to the spot to "beat the petty person" on the Chu (Chiu, 除), meaning "elimination", days.

According to the Chinese calendar, there are two or three such days in each lunar month. The day for all places to "beat the petty person" is Jing-zhe (Ging-dzat, 驚蟄), meaning "waking of insects", in the Chinese calendar. On this particular day, according to the folk belief, the insects arouse from hibernation. In the Western calendar, the date is usually March the 5th or the 6th. V.R. Barkarde (1978: 153) reports that this is the day when women in south China worship the White Tiger. This is definitely the case in Hong Kong. According to the local folk belief, the White Tiger opens its mouth on this day, and so does the "petty person". Hence, it is both logical and convenient for people to combine the worship of the White Tiger and the "beating the petty person"

into one ritual. The reasons why people worship one and “beat” the other in the same ritual will be discussed later in the paper. The White Tiger statue, which is made of a bamboo frame and yellowish paper with black spots has the size of an average cat and it stands in every site for the “beating the petty person” ritual.

The ritual may be performed for general blessing or exorcising purposes, but it may also aim at a particular “petty person” who is a real human being. In the former case, there is only one role, that is, recipient, and in the latter a second role, a target person, is involved. In either case, a practitioner may be hired to perform the ritual, and in this case, a third person, thus a third role, is involved. The recipients who initiate the ritual are mostly women. The ritual is usually performed for their own benefit, but it is also performed for the benefit of their relatives. A typical case may be that a woman hires a practitioner to give a performance for herself, her husband, or their son, or both her husband and the son.

Most of the practitioners, especially those perform the ritual in open areas, such as, sidewalk, hillside, etc., are women. Furthermore, a large number of them has a regular job, for example, the ones we have interviewed are either restaurant workers or hawkers. There are, however, a small number of full-time professionals who perform divination, date-selecting, and other rituals in addition to mere “beating”.

Like other rituals, the recipient is responsible for bringing food, various types of Fu (Fu, 符), meaning “charms”, paper cut figures of Hsiao-jen and Kuei-jen, and paper mock money and gold or silver bullion in the form of thick squares of coarse paper bent into the shape of a bowl. When the rituals is commenced, a pair of candles and three joss sticks are lit, and food is displayed. The “petty person” paper effigy wrapped in “petty person paper” is then fiercely beaten with a shoe or repeatedly pierced with a short sword while a canticle is being chanted. Following this, paper “charms” are rolled and waved over the recipient’s body, and then burnt together with the paper mock money and other paper goods. Finally, two small pieces of the plano-convex shaped wood, which are known as Pei (Pui, 杯), “cup”, or more formally, Pei-qiao (Pui-kau, 杯筊), “bamboo cup”, are thrown to the ground to determine whether or not the ritual is successful. There are also some individual variations in the performance of the ritual. For one way, the “petty person” may be beaten and pierced as we have just described and what is left from beating or piercing may be left on the ground or burnt. In a still elaborated way, the “petty person” is placed in a small paper-folded boat and both the figure and the boat are burnt together.

There are also variations in chanting. Among the nineteen sets of chants we have recorded from different performers, eight of them are found to be involving the supernaturals. These supernaturals are invited to eliminate the “petty persons” for the recipient as well as to bring luck to her. The rest of eleven chants do not contain any reference to any supernatural beings. The following is an example of the latter:

So and so is beating the petty persons.  
 The petty persons on streets.  
 The petty persons on roads.  
 Male petty persons.  
 Female petty persons.  
 Foreign petty persons.  
 Beat the petty persons and invite the honorable persons.  
 The honorable persons are invited with his honorable horses.  
 (The recipient) gets what she wants.  
 Thousand things are to her satisfaction.

As we can see, in this type of chant, the recipient’s wishes are stated and no help from the supernatural is sought. It is interesting to note that all the eight sets of chants which refer to supernaturals were used by professional practitioners and one of whom was a chanting fellow in a temple.

Standard food offered in the ritual includes peanuts, walnuts, candy, pork fat, sesame seeds and pears. These are selected because of the symbolic meanings that the names of the food bear. Thus, for instance, the monosyllable, Sheng (Sang, 生), in the bisyllable, Hua-sheng (fa-sang, 花生), “peanut”, means “growth” or “prospects”. Similarly, in Cantonese, the first monosyllable, Ho (Hot, 核), in Ho-tao (Hot-to, 核桃) for walnut, is partially homonymous with the monosyllable, Ho (Hop, 合), meaning “union” and “harmony”, the appropriate blessing for a troubled marriage or broken family. Candy is something sweet which symbolizes good things in life. While peanuts, walnuts and candy are associated with positive ideas notions, the rest of the food have symbolically constructive functions, for instance, pork fat is used to seal the mouth of the White Tiger, a mythological creature classified together with “petty persons” as being harmful and vicious. Sesame seeds are scattered around by the practitioner to disperse or eliminate “petty persons” and other bad elements of life. The Chinese name for “pear” is Li (Lei, 梨) which is homonymous with a monosyllable meaning “to separate from”. Thus, the display of pears in the ritual is meant to separate “petty persons” from the recipient. At the practitioner’s request, food for “consumption” not for symbolic functions such as cooked chicken may also be offered.

Several issues with theoretical interest may be raised with reference to the ritual of "beating the petty person", and these are (1) distinction between the supernatural and the natural; (2) distinction between religion and magic; and (3) beating and worshipping. These will be discussed separately in the following sections.

(1) Distinction between the supernatural and the natural. The "beating the petty person" ritual offers a case which exemplifies the obscurity of the distinction between the supernatural and the natural which many anthropologists hold. Both the "petty person" and the "honorable person" in the ritual are secular human beings and yet they are treated together with and indistinguishably from supernatural elements like Buddha. As a result, some scholars regard both the "petty person" and "honorable person" as supernatural. For instance, Marjorie Topley (1966: 104) contends that "honorable men" are "nameless officials" at the bottom of the hierarchy of Chinese gods. Hiroaki Kani (1973), who has done research on Fu (Fu, 符), "charm", in Hong Kong, believes that "petty person" can be viewed functionally as ghost whose supernatural influence can only be exercised through man. Both of these statements are counter-intuitive to the Chinese, nor have the authors produced any supporting evidence. We believe that both "petty person" and "honorable person" are conceived as being human by Chinese, and thus, a "petty person" is an imaginary personality or an abstraction of debased disposition possessed by some people. Thus, a "petty person" is symbolic representation of some living human being who are generally thought of as being mean, evil and debased. The description of the "petty person" and "honorable person" implies that these figures are considered ordinary people. The following is a passage from a chant recorded in a ritual held in the Goose Neck Bridge area:

Beat the petty person at a distance.  
 Beat the petty person nearby.  
 Beat the petty person in the same building.  
 Beat the petty person who may have dined together with her  
 (the recipient) .....

May she ..... get the support from the honorable person and the  
 precious horse.

The honorable person in the neighborhood.  
 The honorable person outside the house.  
 The honorable person inside the house.....

Both the "petty person" and the "honorable person" may be treated as if they are supernaturals, and this is only because there is not a clear and strict boundary between the natural and the supernatural held by the Chinese both in the way they conceive them as well as in the way they deal with them.

(2) Distinction between Religion and Magic. Classical anthropologists tend to emphasize the distinction between religion and magic. Though Malinowski (1931: 37) realizes that "the crude practical use made of certain religious rituals or objects makes their function magical", he still considers that it is important to make a distinction between the two:

For magic is distinguished from religion in that the latter creates values and attains ends directly, whereas magic consists of acts which have a practical utilitarian value and are effective only as a means to an end.

To this kind of argument, the "beating the petty person" ritual offers a challenge by blending all typical characteristics of magic and religion in one simple process. It is clear that the act of "beating" in the ritual is what Frazer (1963: 14) calls "homeopathic magic", especially when there is literally a target "petty person" to beat. After the "beating", however, the ritual begins a series of acts to invoke the blessing of the "honorable person". These acts are not dissimilar from any religious activities of blessing.

(3) Beating and Worshipping. Ta Hsiao-jen (Ta Siu-yan, 打小人), or "beating the petty person" is sometimes referred to as Pai Hsiao-jen (Pai Siu-yan, 拜小人), meaning "worshipping the petty person". When asked why such antonymous names should be used to refer to the same ritual, some of our informants explain that "worshipping is beating, and beating is worshipping". Such obvious inconsistency really puzzles non-Chinese researchers. Topley (1966: 113), for example, translates Pai Siu-yan as "worship (against) the little man", which, we believe, is misleading. As is conceived by Chinese, "beating" and "worshipping" are complementary with each other, rather than contradictory to each other in terms of their being a means of dealing with an object, whether a person or a god. The famous modern Chinese writer Lu Xun has made an observation regarding this point:

When Chinese come across someone or something which makes them uneasy, they usually deal with it in two ways: ..... press it down first, and when that fails hold it up ..... The

motivation ..... after all is to make it harmless. This is why many deities they worship are considered vicious. (Zhou 1925: 134-135)

This kind of complementary use of the two methods, “beating” and “worshipping”, is an important principle for Chinese to act on. The “beating the petty person” ritual, despite the occasional confusion of the meaning of its name, serves as a concrete illustration of this principle. In the ritual, after the “petty person” is beaten, there is always the act of offering of the rice and sometimes even money (usually by displaying coins) to the “petty person”. The White Tiger is then fed with pork fat, and, in some cases, it is also beaten. In still fewer cases, the White Tiger is beheaded at the end of the ritual.

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