

## **CHINESE COMMUNITY'S INVOLVEMENT IN THAIPUSAM CELEBRATION AT SUNGAI PETANI SRI SUBRAMANIYA SWAMI DEVASTHANAM**

Karthees Ponniah and Kingston Pal Thamburaj

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Thaipusam, is a world renowned celebration that is dedicated to honor Lord Muruga and has been celebrated for over 100 years in Malaysia. It is celebrated notably in selected states and even given public holidays as it is participated by large masses of Indians. Although this auspicious event is participated mainly by Indians, the Malaysian Chinese have also shown particular interest in this celebration. Nevertheless, Malaysian Chinese who largely belong to the Buddhist faith take pride in participating and carrying out the usual rituals like carrying kavadi that is normally done by the Hindu devotees during this auspicious day. The Chinese in Sungai Petani grew up within the Indian settlement and are largely exposed to the Indian culture and practices. This has been one of the main reason behind the Chinese people's participation in Thaipusam. This study is conducted in Sungai Petani, Malaysia as it has the highest record of Chinese involvement in Thaipusam. Further details regarding the research are stated below.

**Keywords:** Thaipusam, Chinese Community, Lord Murugan, Kavadi, Trance, Hindu, Buddhist

### **INTRODUCTION**

Thaipusam is an auspicious day for Lord Muruga. This event is celebrated annually not only by the Indians but as well by the Malaysian Chinese in Malaysia. Sungai Petani, Kedah is recognized to host the 3rd grandest Thaipusam celebration at Sri Subramaniya Devasthanam and therefore the observation on the involvement of Malaysian Chinese in Thaipusam is done there (Nadarajah, 2012).

### **BACKGROUND STUDY**

Sungai Petani Sri Subramaniya Devasthanam is a longstanding temple that is 121 years old. This temple holds one of the biggest Thaipusam celebration after Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur and Penang Hill Top Temple. Every year roughly about 1 to 3 million people participate in Thaipusam celebration here. Therefore, it is not a surprising that Thaipusam at Sungai Petani holds the third place as the most notable Thaipusam celebration in Malaysia (Thaipusam Sirappu Malar, 2015).

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The number of Chinese participating and carrying out religious rituals during Thaipusam is equally as large as the number of Indians in Sungai Petani Sri Subramaniya Swami Devasthana's Thaipusam (Thaipusam Sirappu Malar, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Sultan Idris Education University, 35900 Tanjung Mali, Perak.

Thaipusam celebration in Malaysia is not only celebrated by the Indians but also participated by other races notably the Chinese (Ward, Colleen., 1984). According to observation carried out the Chinese people here have equally carried various kavadis and even fulfilled their prayers to Lord Muruga one day before, during and the day after Thaipusam. For the period of 3 days, the Chinese involvement in Sungai Petani's Thaipusam celebration is notable. Besides Sungai Petani, Penang Hill Top Temple records a high number of Chinese involvement as well (Significance of Thaipusam, 2012).

How deep is the influence of carrying kavadi during Thaipusam instilled in the Chinese community in Malaysia? How did the thought expand? Why did they instill these thoughts within them? Is their method of fulfilling ritual practice and carrying kavadi correct? Are they fulfilling these religious practice with the correct mind-set, in another word with the thought of Lord Muruga? Or are they just carrying kavadi for the name of it without a proper dedication and understanding of the practice? These questions piqued the researcher's mind to carry out this research. Collecting data regarding this serves as a good purpose for the Hindu belief system as well to understand the belief system the community practices to this day.

#### **THE AIM OF STUDY**

The research is done for the purpose below:

The reason behind the Chinese communities' involvement in Thaipusam.

To observe the validity of practice the Chinese community follows in Thaipusam.

#### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The research is carried out to fulfill the requirement of these questions.

Why do the Chinese participate in Thaipusam celebration?

Do they understand the greatness of Lord Muruga while carrying out the practices?

How do they practice their devotion towards Lord Muruga?

#### **HYPOTHESIS**

Based on the experience of the researcher and the observation of the kavadis carried by the Chinese community, there are few possible reasons identified as the reason behind the involvement. The research is expanded with these hypothesis made. The hypothesis is listed below.

1. Chinese people carry kavadis under the influence of their Indian peers.
2. The Chinese believe the act of carrying kavadi is mostly for entertainment purpose rather than an act of religious practice.
3. Chinese people who carry kavadi could not have followed the right religious procedure.

4. Chinese people who carry kavadi could be from the circle with low education qualifications. (Highest Qualification obtained is SPM)
5. Chinese people who carry kavadi are mostly labors and hard workers who rely on physical strength.

The validity of this hypothesis is tested and put into observation during the 2016/2017 Thaipusam celebration in Sungai Petani. The Chinese who carried kavadi during the celebration were interviewed to obtain information. The findings of the research are further expanded in this document.

#### **A REVIEW ON THAIPUSAM CELEBRATED BY THE CHINESE**

Firstly the researchers observed on the surface level on the way the Chinese community celebrates Thaipusam. An official from Sri Subramaniya Swami Devasthanam gave information that annually during Thaipusam, the Chinese people were observed to carry kavadi without gap throughout the Thaipusam day. Some had been carrying kavadi for not less than 20 years. Annually, 200 over Chinese devotees carry kavadi and milk pots. Based on researcher's observation, the Chinese do not practice these rituals individually, but they move in groups. Some groups consist not less than five members who carry kavadi and milk pots. Some other groups, however, consist nearly 15 members who carry kavadi and milk pots. Chinese individuals who carry kavadi are always surrounded by their family and friends who are Chinese as well. The family and friends crowd itself create a group not less than 30 members. Once they reach the temple, just like how Indians practice, these groups too, go around the temple thrice while chanting "Vel, Vel". The Chinese individuals carry a variety of kavadi, like "Alagu kavadi", "Thiirthak kavadi", "paal kavadi" (Milk kavadi), "Sedil Kutthuk Kavadi" and many more as a dedication to Lord Muruga.

In Sungai Petani, there are two places you can take kavadi from, one is from around the area of Sri Subramaniya Swami Devasthanam temple itself, and another is about 2 kilometers away, from Muniswarar Alayam (Thaipusam Sirappu Malar, 2015). Devotees take kavadis from either these two places and they dedicate it to Lord Muruga. The Chinese community, however, takes kavadi from Muniswarar Alayam, and walk towards the temple for 2 km to dedicate them to Lord Muruga. It is said that this journey is the most preferred journey by the Chinese. Based on the researcher's observation, there were no Chinese devotees who took kavadi from around the area of Sri Subramaniya Swami Devasthanam.

The Chinese who carry kavadi wear yellow, following the practice by the Hindu devotees. They do not wear footwear as well while carrying kavadi; they walk barefoot all the way to the temple. There will be a group of the band playing music around the Chinese who carry kavadi, it is believed this band is hired exclusively by the Chinese themselves. The band consists of Indian youths who play the basic Indian instruments, and it is observed that this is the only Indian

crowd that surrounds the Chinese crowd. Besides, there are groups of Indians, noticeable around the crowd, dancing (kavadiattam / samaya kutthattam) to the music played. The act of assisting the kavadi bearer, for instance, helping to fan the bearer, assisting the bearer to drink water and so on is as well done by the Chinese crowd themselves. Chinese women mostly carry milk pots, and it is observed that, this is their most preferred practice.

### **THE RELIGIOUS BELIEF OF CHINESE**

Based on the interview and information obtained from the Chinese devotees, most kavadi bearers are not practicing Hinduism. The majority of them are said to be Buddhists. However they claimed to have devotion towards Lord Muruga. However, they do not claim themselves as Hindu but called themselves Buddhists according to their official certificates. There are even some who belong to the Christian faith as well in this Chinese group (Choo Ah Ba, 2017).

Some Chinese said they do have the image of Hindu deities at home and they pray to the God. A Chinese lad named Tan Kim Soon, 2016, said he has the image of Ganesha, Muniandy, and Murugan at home and he prays to them. He further elaborated that he doesn't follow the Indian style with "Vibuthi" (Holy Powder) but prays to them using the Chinese practice and then puts his palms together in front of God to conclude prayers. Few other Chinese as well admitted that they have Hindu Gods' pictures at home and they too pray to Them as well.

### **THE REASON BEHIND THE INFLUENCE ON THAIPUSAM**

The environment these Chinese groups live is the main influence in their involvement in Thaipusam. About 80 to 90% of Chinese stays around the area of the temple. Since childhood, they claimed to have been witnessing the Indian carrying kavadis. The acts of the devotees bearing kavadis brought joy to them. Seeing the Indian devotees doing all these as their dedication to their God had influenced them to participate in this celebration, and that is how the involvement began. Therefore the main reason behind the influence is their environment. Other than that, individuals who have been influenced by these thoughts of involving in Thaipusam, later on, influenced their other family members into the thoughts as well. The Chinese as well said their involvement with the Indians as well is a reason to their participation in Thaipusam religious practice (Ng Bee Cheng, 2016).

Tan, a Chinese man during the interview, said that he grew up in an estate since small. Growing up witnessing the Indians celebrating Thaipusam and carrying kavadi, influenced him to carry milk pots. (Pertaining the fact growing up in estate, he spoke in fluent Tamil.) Although he had left the estate, he said that he still practices taking milk pot to temple to during Thaipusam. His wife and children as well participate in this celebration (Lim Kok Wei, 2016).

Chen Pei Yean, 2017, another Chinese man interviewed said that he has a particular interest in Hindu religion and have been reading many books written in English on the Hindu religion. Hindu belief has interested him and his wife is deeply keen to participate in Thaipusam yearly. They also claimed that they believed in Sai Baba and even went to Puttaparthi in India. Chen said that he and his wife never missed a single Hindu religion practice, from Navarathiri to other religious celebrations, as both of them participated in all. He said he started being involved in the thought of Thaipusam via the books he read and information he exchanges with his Indian friends.

### **FASTING**

Fasting is one the most important aspect of religious practice. Any cultural events, celebrations, functions in Hinduism will not be complete with the devotees fasting dutifully to complete the ritual. Fasting here indicates having meals without meat, fully vegetarian and as well eating nothing but only milk and fruits at night (Kartheges, 2015). When this question was asked to a Chinese, they said that they practice fasting accordingly as well. Some said the fast for seven days, some for five days and some for three days before carrying the kavadi (Lim Kok Wei, 2016). By this, we got to know the Chinese carry kavadi according to the correct religious way. Based on the interview 35 and above individuals confirmed that they fast. According to the Chinese point of view, fasting is by being vegetarian. They said during the period of fasting, they do not eat meat at all and try their best not to consume alcohol. Some admitted that they do smoke, but they all confirmed that they do not take meat at all throughout the fasting period (Chong Jin En, 2016). The milk pots carriers, however, said some only fasts on the day the carry the milk pot, and these were mostly women.

Therefore it is proven by this interviews, that Chinese people who carry kavadi observe the correct fasting method. The fact articulated by a researcher that Chinese does not fast correctly has been proven wrong.

### **IDUMBAN POOJAI**

Kavadi bearers during Thaipusam, after devoting their kavadi to Lord Muruga, will conduct prayers to the Idumban (Nadaraja, 2012). Hindus who carry kavadi according to the law of religion will definitely conduct a prayer to the Idumban, and after that only they will end their fast. This is done to pay respect to the Idumban as Idumban and the history of Thaipusam goes a long way back and is interweaved.

When the researchers researched on the knowledge the Chinese kavadi bearers have regarding this prayers, it is proven that they do. The Chinese, after carrying the kavadis, conduct Idumban Poojai (prayers), and after that only they break their fast. This prayer is conducted in the simplest way possible said the Chinese who was interviewed. Around 40 Chinese individuals who carried kavadi were

interviewed, and all of them confirmed that they do carry out Idumban prayers and only after that, they dissolve their fast.

However, though the practice of the prayers, the Chinese admitted that they do not know the history behind it and the reason why they have to conduct Idumban prayers. They carry this out as part of a must-to-do ritual, and that is all they know (Tan Boon Soon, 2016).

### **TRANCE AND KAVADI VARIETY**

The belief of trance is deeply embedded in the Hindu religion (Rasaselvam, 2016). Do the Chinese experience trance? Do the Chinese bear kavadi under the influence of trance or do they carry kavadis naturally? When these questions were posed to the Chinese, they said that they don't undergo trance. However in their group, there is one guy who experiences trance, and he experiences "Aiya" during the trance period. When the guy is in trance mode, he is said to speak a few words in Tamil and gives predictions without receiving anything in return (Lee Ming Jun, 2017).

The famous kavadi among the Chinese is the 'Alagu Kavadi'. If not for the temple officials to enforce the rule on the length of "alagu" (impaling) usually it will reach 3 feet, one said. Some as well pull chariot kavadi by poking 'sedil' at their back. Chinese devotees poke symbols like Om, 'Vel' (Hindu worship symbol), 'Soolam' (Hindu worship symbol) on their bodies when they carry kavadi. Some fill milk in miniature pots, attached with these symbols and poke them on their bodies. This is type of kavadi is famous among the Chinese.

### **MUDIKAANIKKAI (HAIR OFFERING)**

Do the Chinese practice hair offering? One can sight devotees walking around with their bald-shaven heads covered in Sandal paste (Santhanam). Hair is said to be the aspect of beauty for a human and offering that Lord Muruga is a belief practiced by the Hindus (Palani Thai Pusam, 2006).

The Chinese do not practice hair offering, and when asked their opinion regarding that matter, they had nothing to say. They asked the researchers on the need to offer hair and the reason behind it, when the researcher explained about it, they said that perhaps in future they might consider hair offering.

Therefore, we can see that instead of just following and practicing beliefs out of fun, the Chinese do actually practice whatever they do in the name of God wholeheartedly. The researchers approached Sri Subramaniya Swami Devasthanam official and asked regarding Chinese involvement in hair offering; the official confirmed that it is a rare sight to see a Chinese taking up this method of offering and only one or two would be seen doing this (Rajendran, 2017). However, even the one or two noted, he couldn't confirm whether is it a Chinese or a *Chindian*.

### **EDUCATION AND OCCUPATION**

The researchers firmly believed that kavadi bearer would have been laborers or people with minimum SPM qualification. The reason for this belief is because most Chinese people seen during Thaipusam are individuals with tattoo prints on their bodies, some look extremely tough and as well appear startling in appearance. Based on that observation, the researchers believed they should belong to people of lower education qualification. However, the result of interview completely defies the above statement.

Chinese kavadi bearers are individuals who are from a variety of occupational field. Most surprising fact was one of the kavadi bearers is a doctor who works in a government hospital. (This man was carrying milk pot, appeared decent.) Other than him, there were nurses, teachers, lawyers, factory manager, factory supervisor, restaurant owners and much more. There were also people who own small sundry shops and stalls among the people who carried kavadi.

### **REQUESTS AND BOONS (VENDUTHAL)**

Next, observing from the view of requests and boons, many carry kavadi as a note of gratitude towards God who fulfilled their request, some carry kavadi as an offering to the request they have in mind and to pray that their requests will come true. Why do the Chinese carry kavadi? What could be their requests? When the researches posed these questions to the Chinese, they expressed that they do not have such ideas in mind and they are simply carrying this practices out because they had been influenced by it since small. They also said that this is done entirely in the name of God and nothing beyond. Besides, they also said by carrying out these practices, they realized that they are living better and prosperously. Thus, they said they do not carry kavadi or milk pots with specific intentions but rather have basic requests like a requesting a better health and harmonious family (Woon Jin Xi, 2016).

### **GROUP MEMBERS**

During Thaipusam, Chinese devotees do not roam individually, but they move in groups. These groups are not permanent, but they are formed flexibly. Those who would want to join are welcomed and those who would want to leave are not forced to stay. These groups are formed by members of the family and friends.

Certain Chinese in groups are said to be carrying kavadi annually for years, and some said that they just started practicing this for 2-3 years consecutively. Usually, they said once they have started carrying kavadis, they do not stop doing it. When interviewed Lee from Singapore, he said that no matter where they are, whether is it work or studies, every year they will be at Sungai Petani and they have made it a habit to ensure their families meet up every year during this period.

Every group has its leader, and that leader is a person who knows Hindu religious practice at least to a minimal level. When interviewing Loh Ah Kheang, 2016, he said that his group leader is almost 50 years old and he experiences trance. Loh said that his leader usually experiences trance by Muniswarar “Aiya” (Hindu deity). He said that their kavadis are heavily influenced by Muniswarar where their big kavadis has “Aiya’s” sculpture and their Chariot kavadi as well has Muniswarar. Other than Loh’s group, there are about ten other groups who celebrate Thaipusam in Sungai Petani.

### **EXPENDITURE**

We are at a point that we have to frugal for any occasion at any cost. Due to various economic limitations, this has pushed us this far. Anyhow, Indians and Hindus who carry kavadis and milk pots, they still spend regardlessly for their kavadis, kavadi decoration, milk for their milk offerings, and so on.

Do the Chinese Hindus spend regardlessly for this auspicious Thaipusam event celebrated for Lord Muruga, when this question was posed the answer is definitely a yes. Notably, the expenses go for band (bhajans, kavadi songs, playing mridhungam, nadaswaram, tabla (Indian instruments) . The Chinese when interviewed said that they pay almost RM1000 to the person who arranges that for them. Every time the kavadi leaves Muniswarar Alayam to Sri Subramaniyar Swami Devasthanam, the band starts playing throughout the journey, and for that, they pay almost from RM5000 – RM6000 (Woon Jin Xi, 2016).

Next, when the researchers pondered whether the Chinese rent their kavadis or otherwise, the Chinese groups ensured that their kavadis are all self-made and they have a special store to keep all their kavadis. They said that under their possession they have about six big Kavadis, 2 Chariot Kavadis, and 5 Big Pushpa Kavadis. These are kavadis that their team members use by taking turns annually. They said that in future and present, they would never rent kavadis from Indians and these expenses do not bother them. They feel that this is done only once a year in the name of God and it is not an issue or burden (Hoo Chai Jun, 2017).

### **CONCLUSION**

There are much more information that has yet to be discovered by people. Most assumed that Chinese community only carries out practices for the sake of it but via this research, we could comprehend that their understanding and belief system goes past the depths that we had expected. We have to agree that there is purity and truth in their “intention” for Thaipusam. The thought of Murugan travels beyond the gate of race, religion, country and that is what the tradition of Chinese carrying kavadi realizes us. It wouldn’t be the surprise if one day Thaipusam which is regarded as an Indian event to be addressed as a Chinese event in future pertaining the fact of influence among the Chinese community to this day. Thaipusam could



be anyone's festival but what makes the statement is it is celebrated for Lord Murugan and this matters most.

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