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Chinese
Spirit-medium Cults in Singapore

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PREFACE

The concentration of this monograph on Chinese spirit mediumship in Singapore is chiefly a device for focussing attention upon the most typical, although rather extreme, manifestation of the major religious orientation of the overseas Chinese. Only by such a device is it at all possible to cope with the immense range of religious beliefs and practices found in Singapore. The accounts given here may chiefly be of value as a detailed record of religious rites, but it is hoped that the rites, shown in their institutional context, can also throw some light upon the wider ramifications of culture and society among the Chinese.

The field work on which the book is based extended from February, 1950, to November, 1951, and a preliminary report of the work was submitted to the Colonial Social Science Research Council. In its present form, the account is less intended for the sociological theorist than for those who take a general, or even a professional, interest in the affairs of the overseas Chinese and of Southeast Asia.

During the twenty-one months of field research, Singapore enjoyed a period of relative calm and considerable prosperity. The Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 still held bitter memories, but many of its immediate effects had been overcome. The Colony had already begun to advance on the path to self-government although the full impetus of the movement had not yet been felt by the majority of the population. Disturbing influences were due more to external than to internal events. The one exception was rioting by Muslims in December, 1950, over the case of Maria Hertogh. The two days of disturbances had a serious but not lasting effect upon public confidence. Although they suffered some casualties, the Chinese generally kept aloof from any trouble-making, and were notable for the philosophic manner in which they accepted the curfews that were imposed.

By the beginning of 1950, the Communist régime was established throughout China, and the attitude of most overseas Chinese had become that of awaiting the turn of events without showing much overt enthusiasm for either side.

The state of emergency due to Communist terrorism had continued since June, 1948, but its effect in Singapore was slight compared with that in the Federation of Malaya. In Singapore occurred isolated incidents involving arson, murder, grenade-throwing and the theft of identity cards, but security measures were sufficient to prevent any serious dislocation of life. Nevertheless, there was a persistent atmosphere of tension under the threat of Communist attack. The most important indirect influence of the emergency upon Chinese religious customs arose from the measures that had to be taken to restrict and control crowds and processions. The police had always had to keep a
watchful eye on these at Chinese festivals, but the prevailing situation made restrictions additionally necessary. A more important factor, from the viewpoint of the detailed description of rites, was the banning of fire crackers, except during limited periods in the Chinese New Year, thereby prohibiting one of the customary adjuncts to many religious ceremonies.\textsuperscript{1}

In June, 1950, the Korean war broke out. At first there was no apparent effect in Singapore but eventually the scarcity of certain commodities and the phenomenal increase in the price of tin and rubber led to steep rises in the cost of living. By the middle of 1951, many families which did not stand to profit directly from the conditions of prosperity were in severely straitened financial circumstances.

One spirit-medium cult was studied with as much thoroughness as possible. This cult was selected for detailed attention largely because it offered the best opportunities for consistent investigation over a long period. In addition, a relatively thorough study was undertaken of about a dozen other cults, selected chiefly for variations they displayed in relation to the first cult. As a further check upon the problems of variation, attention was paid to about forty additional cults. In all, then, the information given in this report is based upon a knowledge of some seventy spirit-medium cults, nearly sixty of which I visited and investigated personally. In most cases, observations were of occasions which included actual performances by possessed mediums.

The investigation of spirit-medium cults represented my main interest, but the scope of my studies was not restricted to this alone. In the course of this book, references are made to many other types of religious practice, and to the more general features of Chinese life in Singapore. These were given as detailed investigation as circumstances would permit, but in the present context they serve as background material to the central theme.

Throughout the book the term ‘South Seas’, which has now become well-established in studies of the overseas Chinese, is a direct translation of the phrase the Chinese themselves use when referring to the approximate area which Europeans know as Southeast Asia. The term ‘Malaya’ is used to cover both the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore.

Where monetary values are given they are quoted in Straits dollars, each of which is worth 2s. 4d. at the official rate of exchange. Without going into a detailed examination of its actual purchasing power, it can be taken as being worth about 2s. In other words, there are approximately $10 to the £ sterling, and three Straits dollars are about equivalent to the United States dollar.

\textsuperscript{1} Here, as elsewhere, references to the British colonial administration are restricted to the immediate relevance of governmental action to matters under discussion. No attempt is made to assess the part played by British administration in the creation and maintenance of law and order which has made Chinese enterprise possible, or of the contributions of the European community as a whole to commercial development in Southeast Asia.
A few remarks must be added on the perennial problem of the romanised spelling of Chinese words. In cases where a place or a street with a Chinese name has an accepted romanised spelling this form has been used without any attempt to give Chinese characters or alternative romanisations. Where a Chinese has selected a romanised name for himself or his business it would be discourteous not to follow a similar course, however incorrect phonetically his choice may have been. In all other cases, where it has been impossible to avoid the use of a Chinese phrase, and where it is desirable that characters should be given for the benefit of Chinese scholars, a romanised form has been given in the text. Although the National Language is very far from being a *lingua franca* among the overseas Chinese, I have found it convenient to give most of these Chinese phrases in the Wade romanisation of Mandarin. In a few cases, however, where this was not justified, owing to the use of a phrase which is peculiar to a southern dialect, I have used a widely accepted form of Cantonese or Hokkien romanisation with (C.) or (H.) after the word to indicate its origin.

In this connection, it should be pointed out that the terms ‘Hokkien’ and ‘Cantonese’ are used throughout as they are commonly understood in Malaya. That is, ‘Hokkien’ refers chiefly to the Amoy dialect and to the inhabitants of certain districts in southern Fukien, while ‘Cantonese’ refers to the dialect spoken in Canton, and to most, but by no means all, the inhabitants of Kwangtung province.

In two important cases, I have followed an entirely independent line in romanisation. So frequently do the words appear that in using the designation ‘shen’ for god or spirit and ‘dang-ki’ for medium, it is unlikely that any strain will be put on the reader’s powers of recognition. The former is derived from the Mandarin word *shén*, but deprived of its diacritical mark, and the latter represents the pronunciation of a colloquial Hokkien word. Any resemblance to the phonetically correct form (*tâng-ki*) is incidental. It would be going too far to use the plural forms of *shens* and *dang-kis*, so the reader must be left to infer from the context whether the singular or plural is intended.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge my great debt to the Colonial Social Science Research Council for a year’s post-graduate study in the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and at the School of Oriental and African Studies, followed by the period in Singapore and six months in England for the preparation of the report. The financial provision made for my accommodation by the Government of Singapore while I was living in Singapore is also acknowledged with deep appreciation.

Before his departure on a visit to Australia in 1951, Professor Raymond Firth was responsible for much of my training in the theory and techniques of social anthropology. He also advised me during my first year in Singapore. And I am also deeply indebted to Dr. E. R. Leach, for valuable criticism and for many helpful suggestions. It is a further pleasure to record my thanks to Maurice Freedman, who
preceded me by a year as research worker among the Chinese in Singapore, and who gave unstinting help in both practical and theoretical matters, at first, while I was in Singapore, and, subsequently, in his capacity as Lecturer in Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Valuable and expert criticisms of my work in its various stages were made by Professor Derk Bodde, Professor Schuyler Cammann and Dr. E. C. S. Adkins.

Other persons who made suggestions which have now been incorporated in the finished product were Mr. G. G. Thomson, Public Relations Secretary, Singapore; Mr. D. Duncanson, Assistant Secretary for Chinese Affairs; Dr. F. Gasser and Mr. John Padfield.

The publication of this book in its present form is entirely due to the Committee of Monographs on Social Anthropology of the London School of Economics and Political Science and particularly to the editorial work of Dr. Marian W. Smith. Mrs. E. M. Chilver, Secretary to the Colonial Social Science Research Council in London dealt most efficiently with the numerous administrative and financial points which arose concerning my work. I am also extremely grateful to the Colonial Secretary, Singapore, his Secretariat staff, and the heads of government departments for giving me all the help I required and for making the necessary arrangements for my stay in the Colony. My thanks are particularly due to three successive Secretaries for Social Welfare, Mr. T. Eames Hughes, M.C.S., Mr. G. Webb, M.C.S., and Mr. R. W. I. Band, M.C.S., for providing me with office accommodation and with many of the facilities of their department. I should mention especially the Assistant Secretaries (Finance), Mr. E. M. F. Middleditch and Mr. C. S. Dant, who were burdened with many additional administrative tasks on account of my presence.

I must record my appreciation of the facilities accorded me in the use of the Library of the University of Malaya, although I was in no way connected with the university, and of the interest shown and advice given by individual members of the staff. I am similarly indebted to the staff of Raffles Museum, particularly Dr. C. A. Gibson-Hill, for a time Acting Director, and Mrs. M. Topley, Acting Curator of Anthropology.

Among my Chinese friends in Singapore, I remember particularly the late Mr. Cheng Hui Ming, M.B.E., Assistant Secretary for Chinese Affairs, whose breadth of scholarship and knowledge of local affairs provided an invaluable fund of information. Also, Mr. Law Hung Ki, who, in addition to trying to teach me Cantonese, provided me with much of my background material concerning Chinese religious customs. Mr. Ly Singko performed a similar function in relation to Mandarin, and was, in addition, responsible for the growth of many stimulating ideas which I hope to be able to elaborate upon with his help at a later opportunity. Assistance of a somewhat different nature was given by Miss Margaret Lee, a graduate of the University of Malaya, who was sufficiently interested in research work to undertake a short study of a Teochiu Christian village in the northern parts of the island. Although
no explicit acknowledgments have been made, her findings have influenced some of my conclusions. Mr. Choy Chan Wah proved an invaluable guide to many aspects of Chinese life, while Miss Pitt Chin Hui, Secretary to the Singapore Buddhist Federation, did much to encourage me to study some of the purer expressions of Chinese Buddhism. My eventual concentration upon types of religious practice very far removed from what she and her fellow-Buddhists would advocate is not intended in any way as disrespect for the help I was given.

My chief thanks, however, are due to persons who cannot be mentioned by name; the many participants in the activities of spirit-medium cults who gave their willing co-operation. I am particularly indebted to the promoters, mediums and worshippers of the cult of the ‘Great Saint’ who endured my presence at their ceremonies on frequent occasions for over eighteen months. In spite of my efforts at preserving their anonymity, I am afraid that several of the cults I have described, and particularly this one, will be easily identifiable by inhabitants of Singapore. I must state as emphatically as possible that none of my criticisms of Chinese spirit mediumship should be taken to apply particularly to any one of the cults I have described. The more disreputable ones, from which certain generalisations have been drawn, have, in fact, been omitted from detailed reference.

To this it must be added that I realise that much of what occurs in spirit-medium cults is distasteful to Europeans and Asians alike. It is no secret that the Chinese, in general, are not particularly well liked by the other communities among whom they live in Southeast Asia. They are, of course, well capable of looking after themselves whether they are liked or not. But in common with most other peoples, they are highly sensitive to slights and discourtesies, particularly those provoked by an animosity based on unjustifiable grounds. The whole argument of this book, therefore, would be misused if the material concerning spirit mediumship were offered as evidence that the Chinese are a people with undesirable qualities. No opportunity is provided here for dwelling upon the many excellent qualities of the overseas Chinese, which have gained them at least the respect of other communities. It is hoped that the reader will take full cognisance of these good qualities as he proceeds in the pages which follow.

_August, 1954_  

A. J. A. E.
FOREWORD

This account of Chinese spirit-medium cults describes in great detail an important aspect of the religion of overseas Chinese in Singapore. It is an historical study, since the field research was carried out over nearly two years in 1950 and 1951. It is historical for two reasons. One is that the highly personalized nature of many of these cults has meant that they are short-lived, ephemeral. The other is that in the forty years since the study was made the life of the Singapore Chinese has changed radically, and many of their ritual practices must have altered accordingly. But at the time this research was carried out, anthropological field studies of Chinese social institutions were rare, and this particular investigation was unique. Most studies of Chinese religion anywhere had been of a literary nature, concerning the ideas and practices of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism; very little information was available about how ordinary Chinese conducted their daily ritual affairs.

The significance of this study is not just focused on the past. It has contemporary relevance, and for a field far wider than Singapore alone. For anthropologists, enquiry into spirit-mediumship, shamanism, ecstatic religion, possession, has become a recognised part of the discipline, over a broad ethnographic range. But the general problems involved, of alternative personality, of apparent lack of sensitivity to external physical stimuli, of claims in the name of spirit to knowledge and authority not possessed by the human medium, can attract the attention of psychologists, psychiatrists, and all interested in the obscure and complex workings of the human mind. The issues raised involve ordinary people too, since they show how anxiety, uncertainty, fear, disappointment and greed seek assurance and resolution from some source deemed superhuman, even spiritual. The basic beliefs revealed by this study of Chinese spirit-mediumship are not confined to Chinese.

Raymond Firth
May 1990
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THE CULT OF THE 'GREAT SAINT'

The cult which has been selected for description in the greatest detail is one which is composed largely of Straits-born Hokkien Chinese, many of whom, including the chief dang-ki and the chief promoter, are English-speaking. It can hardly be claimed that this cult is typical of all spirit-medium cults, but then no single cult in Singapore could really be said to be so. The most that can be claimed is that it manifests many of the more important characteristics of spirit mediumship in Singapore. Where there are deficiencies in this respect an attempt at compensation will be made in the next chapter by the presentation of further examples of spirit-medium cults.

As a subject for intensive study this cult has several outstanding advantages. The ability of several of the promoters and assistants to speak English and Malay helped to smooth out language difficulties, particularly by way of providing a ready supply of willing interpreters. Since many of them were workers in government offices and commercial firms, there was a sufficient degree of sophistication among them to admit the presence of a foreigner without too serious misgivings. This extended to a willingness to allow observation and flashlight photography on all possible occasions, in contrast to many other cults which, while not openly objecting to incursions upon their privacy, preferred it on the more elaborate occasions. Above all, there was an orderliness in the cult’s affairs, and a relative punctuality in its performances which permitted frequent and sustained observation in a manner not always possible elsewhere.

It will be obvious, however, that this orderliness has been applied in a highly ingenious manner, and renders the cult rather exceptional. It is, in fact, a cult promoted largely for the benefit of the Straits-born Chinese who do not want to become involved in more questionable spirit-medium practices which are found elsewhere.

The growth of the cult can be traced from the later days of the Japanese occupation, which ended in September, 1945. Several of its promoters had been connected with spirit-medium temples for many years before that. The dang-ki himself had begun to develop his powers at about this time, when, as he describes it, he was filled with a desire to do something to alleviate the suffering which prevailed in Singapore. He and others gathered together to call upon the shen to help them, and it was on such an occasion that he began to come under the influence of the ‘Great Saint’. Even so, the cult did not begin to operate properly until the early days of the British Military Administration which undertook the task of rehabilitating Singapore after the war. At first, the cult had its headquarters in a small house near the site of its present
temple. There were then eighteen promoters and two dang-ki. Nowadays, there is only one dang-ki, but since its earliest days the cult has had associated with it a second dang-ki who becomes possessed by 'General Chao' (Chao yuan shuai), a black-faced commander of the Heavenly Hosts of particular fame among the Hokkiens. This dang-ki is an elderly, Malay-speaking Hokkien, who had been practising for many years. At first he was fairly active, but after two or three years he became too ill to perform regularly, and was eventually admitted to hospital in a semi-paralysed condition. He was discharged about a year later, and continues to lead a rather pathetic, invalid existence, partly on the charity of the cult. He frequents the temple when ceremonies are taking place, and makes an occasional appearance as a dang-ki at festivals, particularly that of 'General Chao'.

The chief dang-ki, upon whom the existence of the cult really depends, is a wizened little man of about fifty who works as a clerk for a well-known Singapore firm. At one time he was a steward on ships sailing to Australia and elsewhere. He is married and has a son, but almost the whole of his life outside office hours is devoted to the practise of his powers of mediumship.

Under the British Military Administration, the cult leased a plot of land on a hillside not far from the railway station from the Hokkien Association, and built a wood and thatch temple at a cost of about $2,000. This building follows the usual pattern of a spirit-medium temple. In front is a substantial covered porch which leads into a main hall about twenty feet square. Another door leads out of the main hall into an ante-room on the left. To the right is a store-room in which the three ceremonial sedan chairs are kept, and beyond that there are living quarters and bathrooms.

By the time the temple was built, many of the essential furnishings had already been provided by the promoters and grateful worshippers, but in order to raise sufficient funds the number of promoters was increased from eighteen to thirty-six, and today the names of these 'temple members' can be found on two framed plaques hanging inside the door of the main hall. Each of these promoters contributed according to his means, but apart from that the list has little bearing upon the present temple organisation. Some of these early promoters have died, and some have paid no further attention to the cult's affairs. On the other hand, some of the more important positions are now filled by persons who do not appear on the original list. In general, however, the men who are chiefly responsible for the promotion of festivals are drawn from the thirty-six founders, even though they may not often make appearances at other times.

The real driving force behind the cult is a man who was not associated with it in its earliest days. His normal occupation is in a position of some trust in a government department. He and his wife, together with about six other regular assistants, are largely responsible for the smooth running of the day-to-day business. One of these assistants is a hospital attendant, another is an old man retired from service in a shipping
company, and three more are clerks or labourers in a well-known company of British merchants. In addition, four or five youths who live in the neighbourhood can be called upon to beat drums and gongs, and to perform other such minor duties. The resident temple-keeper is an old woman, but her duties do not amount to much more than cleaning and caretaking, since there are very few casual worshippers at the temple, and the chief promoter or one or other of his assistants is always in attendance when a ceremony is taking place. With the exception of the chief promoter, all the persons most intimately concerned with the cult’s affairs live within a few hundred yards of the temple. Although the area is situated within a stone’s throw of a main road running through a suburban district, most of it is built over with scattered thatched huts on a sparsely wooded hillside.

The cult usually meets eight times a week. One of these performances is held on Sunday mornings, when there is always the largest crowd and richest spectacle. The other performances are held at about 6 p.m. on each evening of the week, including Sundays, and consist of less spectacular versions of the Sunday morning performance. At least one festival is held each year to celebrate the ‘Great Saint’s’ birthday on the sixteenth of the Eighth Moon. If circumstances permit, two further festivals are held on the sixteenth of the First Moon and the seventeenth of the Second Moon, to celebrate the ‘Great Saint’s’ subsidiary birthday and ‘General Chao’s’ birthday respectively.

Since the failure of ‘General Chao’s’ dang-ki, the worship of the cult has been directed almost exclusively towards the ‘Great Saint’. According to the current version of the legend, for which no supporting authority can be found elsewhere, there are five Monkey Brothers who may appear when the shen is invoked. Each is likely to appear for a number of years before handing over to another brother, unless for any special reason the others have to be consulted. The first Monkey Brother is the wisest and most quiescent of them all. When possessing the dang-ki he can be identified by the manner in which he shades his eyes with his right hand while gazing into the distance. The second Monkey Brother is of fiercer temperament, and can be identified by the manner in which he scratches at his ears as a monkey would. He has a predilection also for eating fire and fruit. The third, fourth and fifth Monkey Brothers are more and more irascible, but there is no detailed knowledge concerning their characteristics since they have never yet appeared. So far it is only the second Monkey Brother who possesses the dang-ki, although the eldest brother is sometimes deferred to in difficult cases and may make a temporary appearance.

Among the worshippers at this temple women greatly outnumber men. Most of them could probably be classed as the relatives of labourers and junior clerks. There is always a sprinkling of women who come from the servant classes. Few men seem to come of their own accord. Most of those who have consultations with the dang-ki have been persuaded to take this course by their wives, and others who wait around the temple premises have come in the company of a wife or
sister. They are more prepared than the women to profess a certain scepticism, but this does not mean that they are not equally open to conviction if the results are satisfactory. Part of the dang-ki's skill lies in persuading his consultants that satisfaction has in fact been given. On one occasion, a young man came to the dang-ki to obtain protection for his brother who was shortly to be tried for a smuggling offence. When the case was over, he returned to report somewhat irritably that his brother had been fined $500. With a few well chosen phrases, the dang-ki was able to persuade him that he ought to be very grateful that his brother had escaped with a fine instead of suffering a heavy gaol sentence. By constant repetition that he alone can be efficacious whatever the trouble, the dang-ki is able to convince a number of people.

It is by methods such as these that the fame of the cult is spread. A satisfied worshipper tells her friends, and when these friends are in trouble they, too, will come to the temple. It is not surprising to find that many of the worshippers have relatives in the business houses to which some of the leading promoters belong. Beyond that it is difficult to ascertain what part of Singapore the worshippers come from. No records are kept of the day-to-day consultations and it is not an advisable procedure to question worshippers too closely in such matters. The only likely evidence can be found in the register of the temple's 'dedicated children' (Khoè-Kiá H.). These names, which number over five hundred, are kept in a bulky exercise book by the chief promoter. The names, with addresses, are written in romanised characters as well as Chinese in order to facilitate alphabetical reference. They may be those of children who have been brought to the temple and cured of some illness or they may be the children of ardent devotees who wish them to be under the protection of the shen in their early years. When a child is dedicated in this manner, he is given a red cake to eat and a medallion to wear. Once a year, on the shen's anniversary, the dedicated children are 'prayed for'. There is no stipulated limit of age up to which a child can be considered dedicated to the shen. This practice of compiling a register of 'dedicated children' is one which many spirit-medium cults have borrowed from the general practices of Chinese temple worship in order to spread their influence and give themselves an air of authenticity.

An examination of this register reveals that about seventy-five per cent of the 'dedicated children' live within a radius of half a mile from the temple. The others come from various parts of Singapore, but rarely from the far side of the city. There are a few cases which substantiate the promoters' claims that worshippers come from considerable distances, but it is apparent that the real influence of the cult is local. The only exception can be found in a following of about twenty persons who come from a Hakka village eight miles away which has no temple of its own. Within that area, it is capable of drawing most of the persons who wish to consult a dang-ki, but beyond that any reputation it may have depends largely upon the connections of its promoters. By one means or another, however, the cult has acquired the support
of over a thousand devotees who are prepared to make subscriptions and attend personally at the time of the annual festival.

**The Sunday Morning Ceremony.** On Sunday mornings from ten o'clock onwards the promoters and worshippers begin to gather at the temple. The chief promoter is usually seated at a table under the porch where the business with worshippers is transacted. Those who wish to buy incense sticks and other paraphernalia from him may do so. These supplies are stored on shelves beside the altar at the back of the main hall. If worshippers wish for consultations with the dang-ki, they are given cardboard tickets, numbered in both Chinese and English, showing their order of precedence. Inside the main hall, a bundle of red papers is hung on the left wall. The consultation is paid for, according to the means of the worshipper, by wrapping the contribution in one of these sheets of red paper and dropping it into a brass bowl on the offering table.

Meanwhile other temple assistants are lighting oil lamps and candles and pumping at the pressure lamps which provide the chief illumination inside the dark interior. The worshippers mingle with them, placing food and fruit offerings on the table, lighting incense sticks and carrying out their private obeisances to the shen. Soon the altar, which is shut off from the public by a low wooden barricade, can only be seen dimly through a cloud of incense smoke. As in the case of most spirit-medium temples, it is crowded with an array of small images. Several of them are representations of the 'Great Saint' in a variety of poses. At the back is a larger image of the many-armed Kuan Yin, who is treated as his superior in the Buddhist hierarchy.

By eleven o'clock, about forty or fifty people are waiting round the temple. Nothing can happen until the dang-ki arrives. At last he comes up the hill, a bespectacled little man in shirt and shorts. After a few words of greeting, he disappears behind the scenes and re-emerges dressed in a costume of saffron-coloured silk. Across his chest is a stomacher with an Eight Trigram design embroidered on it. A sash fastens this round his waist. His pyjama-like trousers, embellished with a floral design, are tied around his ankles. On the more important occasions he wears a tiger-skin belt, apron and gaiters. His spectacles have been removed and his feet are bare, but he still wears his wrist-watch. Standing beside the offering table he makes up the whole of his face with red and white grease paint until it becomes unrecognisable. He then dons a collar from which hang many-coloured strips of silk. With the help of an assistant he ties an orange cloth round his head so that the loose end hangs down the back of his neck. This is held in place by an ornate wire clamp from which there are suspended two long tassels, one on each side of the head. A folded joss paper is stuck into this just in front of each ear. He is then ready to begin. It appears that this costume has been elaborated, bit by bit, during the development of the cult. Earlier pictures of the dang-ki show him in a less picturesque costume and wearing no make-up. There was also a time when the
head-dress was not put on until after he had entered a trance. But now, as an exception to the practice in most other cults, the dang-ki puts on the whole of his costume, including the stomacher, before his performance begins.

When everything is ready the dang-ki goes round to the left side of the offering table and carries out his own obeisances to the shen. One of the assistants has now placed the special chair in the doorway, facing the altar. The dang-ki picks up a small hammer and starts striking a brass bowl to produce a clear ringing sound at regular intervals. So far the worshippers are paying no great attention to the proceedings, except the recent arrivals who are still pushing their way into the main hall to carry out their devotions and to place their offerings on the table. Most of them sit on the benches under the porch, chatting among themselves.

One of the assistants has now provided himself with a spray of fanned out joss papers and incense sticks. He signals to the youths standing by with drums and gongs in their hands. Having lit the incense and joss papers from a candle, he takes up a position in front of the offering table facing the altar. As he genuflects, the drums start beating rhythmically. He turns and goes out of the temple to the Eight Trigram flag hanging on the edge of the terrace. Here he genuflects again and places the joss papers on the ground to burn away. He returns to the main hall and places the incense sticks in a holder. The dang-ki has now been given a smaller spray of joss papers and three incense sticks. Having first bowed to the altar, he goes to the doorway of the porch and bows three times in different directions. When he returns he takes a folded paper, and having lit it, burns it round and under the chair in which he is to sit. Leaving the smouldering ash under the chair he takes the spray of three incense sticks in his hand and turns to face the altar. As he does this the assistants begin to chant the invocation in time with the beating of the drums. The dang-ki steps back and sits down in the chair, with his head lowered, his elbows resting on the arms, and the incense sticks held close under his face. He remains quite still as the drums and chanting continue. The ritual interpreter takes a large bunch of burning incense sticks and waves it slowly between the dang-ki’s legs so that his whole body becomes shrouded in smoke. After a minute or so the dang-ki’s muscles begin to tauten and his feet begin to shake on the bar between the chair legs. Gradually he rises in the chair, still standing on the bottom bar. The spray of incense is taken from him. He raises his head, gazes around him, and begins to make scratching motions with his hands behind his ears. His lips quiver with a malevolent expression. Then, with a little leap, he jumps forward from the chair and lands on his toes in front of the offering table. He stands there, snarling at the onlookers, with his body crouched low and shaking in every limb. The assistants get the chair out of the way rapidly and the interpreter hands him the bunch of burning incense sticks. Since it is the second Monkey Brother who has made an appearance, his hunger for fire must be assuaged. He picks carefully
at the embers and places some of them on the end of his tongue. Approving the flavour, he licks at the burning ends several times and finally sticks the whole bunch inside his mouth to extinguish the glow. In the course of doing this, he usually knocks a few of the embers to the ground and on to his feet. As he prances around he tramples on these while still burning without showing any signs of pain.

He hands back the extinguished bunch, which is thrown into the furnace outside the temple, and advances towards the offering table, where he is given a small cup of tea from which he sips. A few oranges and bananas have been placed in front of him. He picks these up and pretends to lick at them. He will peel the banana half-way down, but he never takes any part of the fruit into his mouth. When he has finished with them, he rolls them back on to the offering table.

While all this is taking place some of the more curious worshippers have crowded into the corners of the main hall to watch the performance. Others are peering through from the porch. But most of them are paying no great attention to what is going on. They have seen this or similar performances too often before. They know what to expect, and are not sufficiently interested in the variations on a familiar theme until the time comes for their personal consultations. Alternatively, there are some among them who are genuinely disgusted at the dang-ki’s self-mortification and do not wish to concern themselves with what they consider to be necessary but unpleasant preliminaries to the real business of the day.

As soon as the dang-ki has rolled the fruit back on to the offering table, the drums stop beating and there is a hush. The interpreter is standing at the dang-ki’s elbow to listen for the shen’s instructions concerning the next rites to be performed. Sometimes, but not always, the next item is the cutting of a white cockerel’s throat. This may have been decided in advance by the promoters, or occasionally it is carried out at the request, and expense, of a devotee. Whichever the case, neat rows of the larger type of charm paper will have already been laid out on the offering table. When the shen’s permission to proceed has been obtained a live white cockerel with its legs tied is produced from under the table, and has a few drops of charm water poured over its head. All the onlookers, except the assistants, are then sent out of the main hall. If they still wish to see what is happening, they can look through the doors and windows.

The drums start beating again as the dang-ki takes the cockerel in his left hand and grasps a sword with his right. Two or three times he pirouettes around by the door, and then advances towards the offering table and draws the sword across the cockerel’s throat. Throwing down the sword he seizes the struggling bird in both hands and sprinkles the blood across the charm papers on the table. Becoming more and more excited, he plunges the cockerel up and down, sending the blood-stained papers flying in all directions. Assistants hurriedly gather them up on flat basket lids and carry them out to the porch where the chief promoter arranges them in piles. The cockerel is taken
away and thrown on the ground outside the temple, where it continues to struggle until it is dead.

This item of ritual is not always carried out, and when it is included it is not always at this point in the programme. Occasionally it follows the next item. By now the chief promoter and his wife have marshalled a parade of worshippers inside the porch. These are persons with urgent requests to make, with particular emphasis on a change of luck. Each one has been provided with three large incense sticks at a cost of fifty cents, and a 'golden peck'\textsuperscript{1} at a cost of three dollars. Inside the 'golden pecks' are many strips of yellow paper. To this is added a pink strip on which is written the name and date of birth of the supplicant, or of the person concerning whom the request is made. These supplicants usually range from ten to twenty in number and occasionally include one or two men.

The dang-\textit{ki} has now taken up his Eight Trigram flag and horse-hair whip and has motioned to the suppliants to enter. In a straggling line, they follow him as he leads the way down the right side of the offering table towards the altar. They pass behind the barricade, make motions of respect as they pass the images, and return by the other side of the offering table. With jerky, theatrical movements the dang-\textit{ki} heads the procession as it makes three circuits of the offering table in this manner. Occasionally he leads his followers thrice round the porch as well. They then move out to the flat piece of land in front of the temple. The dang-\textit{ki} stops at the Eight Trigram flag which stands at the edge of the terrace and the suppliants form a semicircle round him. Two of the assistants have joined the procession, carrying a tea pot and a small tea cup. The interpreter takes the 'golden peck' from the nearest supplicant and sets it alight on the ground. While it is burning, he reads the name and date of birth from the slip of pink paper. The dang-\textit{ki} takes the cup filled with tea from the other assistant and sprinkles the liquid over the flames with a few dramatic gestures. The cup is replenished from the tea pot and the performance is repeated as each ‘golden peck’ is added to the flames. As the suppliants return to the temple, another assistant is standing by the door to take their incense sticks from them, to be placed in the holders over the offering table.

Finally, the dang-\textit{ki} too returns. The next item is for him to cut his tongue with a sword, and for this casual onlookers are again sent out into the porch. The youths stand by with their drums and gongs as the dang-\textit{ki} is handed a sword of a larger type than that with which he killed the cockerel. With the sword in his right hand and the Eight Trigram flag in his left, he does a wild dance, again pirouetting round and round in front of the offering table. The drums and gongs are beaten furiously as he turns to face the altar. With his feet splayed wide apart and his body crouched low, he draws the sword across his

\textsuperscript{1}A round receptacle, about nine inches in diameter and five inches deep, open at the top, made of yellow paper stretched over a bamboo frame. The sides are decorated with auspicious characters consisting of strips of red paper pasted on.
tongue, slowly at first, and then more rapidly as the drummers work themselves up to a crescendo. Suddenly, the dang-ki stops and looks around with a look of malevolent satisfaction. Equally suddenly, he leaps into the air and starts sawing at his tongue again. Three times he does this before he is satisfied that he has drawn enough blood. He steps up to the offering table and puts the sword down. An assistant is standing there with a wad of joss papers, ready to wipe it and restore it to its proper place. Another assistant has provided himself with a bundle of about two hundred charm papers of the smaller variety. As these are handed to the dang-ki one by one he deftly licks them with his bleeding tongue and lets them fall on to a basket lid which has been placed in front of him. They are spread out to dry and carried to the porch for subsequent distribution to worshippers.

The licking of charm papers may take from five to ten minutes. During this time many of the worshippers have made their way back into the main hall, particularly those who are early in the list of consultations and do not wish to miss their places. But the dang-ki still has several duties to perform before he can give individual attention to the devotees.

An assistant has collected together a pile of shirts and blouses belonging to devotees. This pile is placed on the offering table for the dang-ki to stamp with his blood. A wad of joss papers is placed under them at the point where the stamp will be brought down. For each one the dang-ki wipes the stamp across his tongue and makes a careful imprint just below the neckline. The articles are then restored to their owners. After that a further array of articles will be produced for consecration. Mirrors for use in the household and medallions which will be worn as amulets by ‘dedicated children’ are similarly treated with the dang-ki’s blood. Images and religious pictures are brought to him for consecration by a few dabs with a small bloodstained brush. There are usually one or two devotees who wish to set up ‘ping-pons’ on their family altars. The funnels are brought to the dang-ki for him to give each a lick of bloody saliva. It is possible that a new piece of temple equipment, donated by a devotee, is being installed. In such cases, the procedure is much the same. The article is placed on the offering table for the dang-ki to pick up, whirl around in the air several times, and mark in an appropriate manner with his blood.

Invariably, the red cakes which worshippers wish to take from the temple to consume at home with the blessings of the shen are laid out on the offering table. The dang-ki slices half-way through each one of these, collaborating with two of the assistants in an extremely neat manner. He holds the sword with which he cut the cockerel’s throat in his right hand. With his left, he reaches across to take a cake from the assistant standing to his right. He steps back, slices into the cake, and leaving it impaled on the sword steps forward again to take another, while the assistant on his left removes the cake from the sword and places it on a basket lid.

Before the actual consultations can begin, there is usually a stream
of worshippers who come before the offering table and kneel down to have their backs stamped with the mark of the shen. Some of these are young children led by their parents, and some are even babies who are held by their mothers while the dang-ki stamps them and with his finger makes a small saliva mark on the forehead. These babies differ greatly in their behaviour. Most of them accept the treatment placidly, but a few scream with terror at the sight of the strange figure.

When all such services have been rendered, the drums stop beating and the assistants call out that the first consultation is about to begin. The person with No. 1 card pushes her way forward. The interpreter and another assistant have stationed themselves on either side of the offering table, one of them equipped with a writing pad and pencil. A couple of youths with drums are still standing by for the moment when they will be required again. Otherwise, there is an atmosphere of relaxation in the temple. The dang-ki and the interpreters concentrate their attention on the immediate task and the person whose consultation is taking place hangs on every word that is uttered. Friends and relatives of the consultant often take a lively interest in what is happening, but the rest of those present seem to be settling down to wait their turns. The other assistants attend to minor duties or sit in the porch talking to friends.

There is no privacy in the consultations, which are carried out in a clear, audible voice. Anyone who cares to listen and who can understand the dialects being spoken can hear all he wants concerning the secret illnesses and worries of other worshippers. It is extremely difficult to say whether the atmosphere of bored inattention among many of the onlookers is anything but a conventional disguise for surreptitious interest in the affairs of other people.

The dang-ki speaks in the first person singular, as if he were the shen. He uses a type of old Chinese which the shen are supposed to speak, and occasionally breaks into pure Mandarin. Sometimes, however, he speaks a few sentences in Hokkien or Cantonese. He appears to understand all that the worshippers have to say, but his pronouncements are always made so that they require translation into the appropriate dialect. A majority of the worshippers are Hokkien-speaking, but there are always a fair number of Cantonese and Hakkas. Occasionally, a consultation has to be held in Malay, even when a Chinese worshipper is involved. Once or twice Indians have asked questions. The promoters claim that followers of all religions, including Islam, have been to the dang-ki for his help.

The consultations have the appearance of being held informally. The group of people chiefly concerned loll around the table, adding their comments to what has already been said whenever it pleases them. The person whose case is being considered may seem slightly hesitant about speaking out boldly in the presence of the shen, but she is often accompanied by one or more relatives who have no qualms about entering into a full discussion of the problem. One or both of the interpreters may offer advice and suggestions, so that a cross-fire of
conversation is maintained among four or five persons. But all the time the \textit{dang-ki} holds the centre of the stage at the head of the offering table, interrupting incisively when he considers that the discussion has gone far enough and making a pronouncement which cannot be disputed. Some old women want to ask an endless stream of questions, but usually he gives them short shrift and manages to clear up each consultation in a matter of four or five minutes. This does not necessarily end the matter, however, because there may still be some doubt as to the manner in which his instructions should be interpreted. The interpreter scribbles down what he can on his pad, but unless the \textit{dang-ki} is prepared to elucidate his advice the assistants and consultants have to make what sense they can out of his deliverances. A medical prescription may be included. Since it is improbable that the consultant can read Chinese, she has to take the piece of paper out to the porch and find another assistant who can help her. It is probable that she requires one or more charm papers for carrying out the instructions properly. Having been given these, she goes on her way full of hope that the \textit{dang-ki} has been able to remedy the affliction from which she is suffering. On the third day, she must return to the temple to report to the \textit{shen} on the success or failure of the cure.

Back in the temple the next consultation is now taking place. With each consultation the \textit{dang-ki} listens to the problem that is set him, and then leaps into the air and performs a short dance around the doorway. This is a signal for the drums to start beating again. Sometimes the drummers have not been paying sufficient attention and miss their cue. When this happens, the \textit{dang-ki} holds up the proceedings for several minutes to dress them down severely for laxity in their duties. However, if there is no such interruption, he finishes his brief dance and stands by the doorway, gazing out into the distance with his hand shaded over his eyes. Having gained inspiration, he returns to the offering table and delivers his decision. If a very difficult case occurs, it sometimes happens that the \textit{dang-ki} will defer his judgment until a later occasion, after he has consulted with his Monkey Brothers or even greater authorities in the pantheon.

The types of cases heard differ little from those dealt with in other spirit-medium temples. The immediate reason for most consultations is physical illness, but more often than not this is allied with other kinds of worry. Men most frequently complain that ‘their luck is bad’, while women often have family worries, caused by unfaithful husbands and wayward children. An exceptional number of cases at this particular temple are concerned not so much with the treatment of physical illnesses as with whether or not it is the right thing for the person concerned to enter hospital. The \textit{dang-ki} refuses to deal in gambling tips, but he is not averse to giving occult protection to defendants in court cases.

Some of the worshippers come to the temple in the expectation that the \textit{dang-ki} will perform a prescribed rite for them. It may simply be a matter of exorcising an evil spirit which is supposed to be afflicting the
patient. Or perhaps the consultant imagines that the trouble is being caused by the unquiet soul of a dead relative, in which case the dang-ki has to make enquiries in hell to ascertain what is leading to unrest. But often the consultant will leave the diagnosis as well as the treatment to the dang-ki, demanding a sufficiently plausible reason for the trouble as well as the prescription of a remedy. Often, no particular remedy is required and no special rite is performed. The devotee wishes only to ask a question concerning some future event or the possible consequences of a proposed course of action. Having been informed of the questioner’s date of birth and present place of residence, the dang-ki gives his answer, although he rarely commits himself very fully in cases where prophecy is involved.

The cases of physical illness range from headaches and indigestion to tuberculosis and cancer. He looks at the patient carefully and asks about the symptoms, but makes no attempt at a physical examination. In cases where the person is obviously very ill he can be most patient, kind and painstaking. He usually gives some simple practical advice, such as recommendations for abstaining from certain foods and keeping the body warm at night. If babies are proving troublesome, he may advise that their quantities of powdered milk should be increased or decreased. Occasionally, he prescribes a proprietary brand of medicine, such as a laxative or cod-liver oil; more often he gives a prescription for a Chinese drug which can be obtained from a pharmacist for a few cents. To this, however, he will almost invariably add directions for a ritual to be performed in connection with the taking of the medicine. For instance, the drug itself may have familiar ingredients, even though some of them may be distasteful like dried cockroach, but before it can be prepared seven round stones collected at seven pace intervals have to be gathered from outside one’s home and added to the concoction together with the ash of a charm paper that has been burnt. The whole mixture must then be boiled for a prescribed period, or until the liquid has evaporated down to a certain quantity, and drunk by the patient. Or incense may be ordered to be burnt, and offerings made at a crossroads at a prescribed time each day until a cure is achieved.

Many of the illnesses treated seem to be the chronic symptoms of deeply seated maladies arising from many years of malnutrition, excessive child-bearing and intestinal complaints. Many of the cases are of a type in which a European doctor would find it almost impossible to produce a radical cure. The patient’s will to live may be greatly strengthened by the provision of mild palliatives and a bolstering of morale. In this respect, the powers of the dang-ki are unsurpassed. Whatever the efficacy of his medical prescriptions, the occult devices which he uses are calculated to inspire confidence in the patient. A sick and worried man is assured that his luck will change after several months, or an ageing woman who fears that she has lost the affections of her husband is told that her horoscope ensures that his lasting affection is for her alone. A pregnant woman will bring her pot of flowers to the dang-ki for his blessing. She is assured that when she takes it home and watches
the plant grow so the child will grow within her and be delivered safely.\(^1\)

The question, of course, is whether the dang-ki discerns and treats serious ailments which should have been taken to a western-trained physician. The scope of faith healing is always open to debate, but allowing for the fact that not all dang-ki are equally able and scrupulous, their record in this respect is not a good one. Any doctor in Singapore will be able to cite many cases of patients whom he might have saved if they had come to him in time instead of resorting to a dang-ki, but it is doubtful whether this particular cult offends greatly in this manner. Most of its devotees are sufficiently sophisticated to attend a western-trained physician if they suspect that they are suffering from something which lies more within his scope to cure. In addition, the dang-ki is sufficiently acute to make occasional recommendations that his patients should go to the General Hospital for surgical treatment. If such a recommendation is made, the patient is also given a special charm paper which will protect him from all evil while in hospital.

On one occasion, a European doctor who had expressed great interest was taken to witness the ritual. It was known that several of the cult’s assistants worked for a well-known firm of British merchants as clerks or labourers, but it was not known that the partnership to which this doctor belonged undertook the medical attention of the employees of the same firm. He had been warned that it was possible that he might encounter some of his patients at the temple. He seemed to think this highly unlikely, but as soon as we had entered the temple he was in fact confronted with several patients whom he had treated in his surgery only a few days previously. Moreover, a few days later, he was able to identify a patient who came to him with a bad cold as one of the leading promoters of the cult. This evidence is not as contradictory as it might seem. It is a good example of the Chinese tendency to resort to several different agencies for the curing of illness in the hope that one if not another will prove efficacious.

On a Sunday morning, it may be necessary to hold between twenty and forty consultations. The performance usually begins between half past eleven and twelve; the preliminaries usually take a little over half an hour. The consultations may then carry on for from two to three hours. This means that the dang-ki has to keep himself at a pitch of efficiency for three hours or more at a time. Whatever his inspiration may be, such concentration, in the fetid atmosphere of the temple, is a considerable mental and physical feat. He sweats profusely, and the grease paint melts and smudges on his face. The assistants mop his back and body with a towel, and sometimes remove his head-dress to give him greater comfort. But still he concentrates intensely on each case, giving advice and medical prescriptions to whomever may ask for them. Finally when the last consultation has ended and he has ascertained that no devotees are waiting to hear him, he announces that he

\(^1\) This would seem to be a version of the Wai Fa Uen ceremony described by Mrs. Topley, 1951.
PLATE I

(a) Temporary stage and fair ground set up for important festival.
(b) Temple-keeper.
(c) Altar to the ‘Great Saint’ in a private home.
(d) Altar of Sino-Malay cult.
(a) Exorcism at crossroad during festival procession.
(b) Possessed dang-ki emerges from temple for procession.
(c) Sedan chair with images rocking as it progresses.
(d) Female dang-ki being carried in procession.
PLATE III

(a) Puppet stage set up for festival.
(b) Sword ladder.
(c) Ceremonial sedan chairs.
(d) Spirit-writing in progress.
PLATE IV

(a) Young dang-ki holds consultation.
(b) Fire walking.
(c) Novice medium awaiting possession.
(d) Dang-ki is supported at end of trance.
PLATE V

(a) Dang-ki performing on knife bed.
(b) Dang-ki — Kwan-ti — cutting tongue.
(c) Dang-ki having spear placed through cheek.
(d) Dang-ki surveying list of dedicated children (spear in cheek).
PLATE VI

(a) Dang-ki of the ‘Great Saint’ in full dress.
(b) Beginning of trance: dang-ki rises in chair.
(c) Dang-ki extinguishing bundle of incense sticks with tongue.
(d) Sacrifice of white cockerel.
(the shen) is going to return. He does a dance and gives a great leap into
the air, falling back into the arms of assistants. He is lowered into the
chair, which has been brought back into place by the doorway, and has
charm water splashed in his face. For a few moments he sits there,
exhausted, and then he gets up, restored to his normal self.

He claims that he knows nothing of what has happened since the
time when he went into the trance. He describes his feelings on entering
the trance as those of having someone else enter his body, filling his
chest and lifting him off his feet. After that everything goes black,
although he admits that he has faint memories of certain of his actions
during consultations. Apart from an understandable weariness, he feels
no ill-effects. His tongue shows no sword cuts or burn marks although
there is a small round spot on it which never appears to heal properly.

One of his first actions on being restored to consciousness is to empty
out the brass bowl in which offerings have been made, tear open the
red paper packets and count the money with the help of one of the
assistants. Unless there has been some munificent gift the proceeds are
rarely very great. It seems that the offerings average less than a dollar
for each consultation. Seventy per cent of the takings go to the dang-ki
and he returns the remaining thirty per cent to the temple ‘for charitable
purposes’.

Having pocketed his takings the dang-ki goes behind the scenes again
to remove his costume and wipe the remaining grease paint off his face.
He then goes home until the next performance.

**Week-Day Performances.** The Sunday morning performance which
has been described incorporates the cult’s basic ritual for all its
performances, whether held in the evenings of week-days or on festival
occasions. Hardly a day in the year passes without some sort of cere-
mony being held. The chief exceptions can be found on such days as
the eve of the Jade Emperor’s birthday on the ninth of the First Moon,
when it is the traditional practice for families to make acts of worship in
their own homes. Apart from that, the dang-ki and some of his
assistants are in attendance at the temple at about six o’clock on every
evening of the week, including Sundays. On these occasions, a less
spectacular version of the Sunday morning performance is given. The
dang-ki wears his special dress, but he rarely paints his face or puts on
his head gear. He does not eat burning incense sticks and he does not
lead a procession carrying ‘golden pecks’. He will not even cut his
tongue if there is a sufficient supply of bloodstained charm papers left
over from the previous Sunday. There may be only six or seven wor-
shippers present, and the greater part of the ceremony is taken up with
verbal consultations concerning sickness or other troubles.

Most worshippers come on Tuesdays, which by Chinese reckoning
is the third day after Sunday. This is the day worshippers return to
report on the success or failure of their cures. The next most important
day is Thursday, the third day after Tuesday, though it differs little
from other weekdays.
Exorcism in a Private House. The tendency nowadays is for a 
dang-ki to perform only in his own temple. A temple performance is 
far more satisfactory from the promoter's point of view. Quite apart 
from any occult considerations which render it desirable that the shen 
should be called down in a spot where all the proper precautions can 
be taken to safeguard the dang-ki, it is simpler to deal with the troubles 
of a large number of people in one place than to have to visit them in 
their homes separately. And from the worshippers' point of view it is 
far less expensive to take one's turn for consulting the dang-ki at his 
temple than to arrange a special performance elsewhere.

In theory, the dang-ki can be called upon to perform outside his 
temple at any place where his services may be required, but in practice 
such occasions are relatively rare. The cult of the 'Great Saint' only 
undertakes the task about five or six times a year, although this is partly 
accounted for by the fact that the dang-ki and nearly all the assistants 
are full-time workers in other occupations, and most of their spare time 
is already taken up with regular temple performances. If a visit is to be 
made, a good reason must always be given. Since it is by no means 
essential that the dang-ki should see the person he is treating, most 
cases of sickness can be dealt with by proxy, even where the patient is 
so severely ill that he cannot move from his bed. On numerous occasions, 
consultations in the temple concern sick persons who have remained at 
home. In some cases, the shen gives instructions that the dang-ki should 
go out and minister to the patient personally, and these account for a 
few of the occasions when the dang-ki leaves his temple to perform 
elsewhere.

It seems that the dang-ki used to be called out by popular demand in 
cases of epidemic or other such disasters, but popular support of 
spirit-medium cults nowadays is unlikely to be sufficiently strong for 
this. Most of the occasions, therefore, arise from the necessity of a 
personal visit to a building or area which is believed to be affected by an 
evil influence such as a ghost or poltergeist. The more serious cases of 
this nature cannot be dealt with simply by reporting them to the 
dang-ki in the temple. Even so, it is not easy to find someone who will 
bear the relatively heavy cost of calling upon the services of a spirit-
medium cult. At an ordinary consultation in the temple, there is only 
the cost of the 'red packet' to be considered; even where special 
apparatus has to be purchased the total cost need not exceed five dollars. 
But an individual consultation in one's own home costs far more. 
If the place for the performance is near at hand and the devotees are 
known to be poor the charge may not be excessive. But in such cases, 
the promoters and dang-ki are usually reluctant to go to the trouble. 
They will be more inclined to make the necessary arrangements if the 
incentives are great. A lorry must be hired to transport the assistants 
and much of the temple equipment to the site, and the house-owner 
must be prepared to spend at least ten dollars on food offerings, joss 
papers and a white cockerel to be sacrificed. In all, it may be necessary 
for him to spend from thirty to fifty dollars on the rites of exorcism.
When a visit to a place outside the temple takes place, the procedure followed is more an adaptation of the normal ritual than a ceremony specially designed for the occasion. The dang-ki goes through his usual repertoire of acts of self-mortification, and the remedy he prescribes is identical with one which he might recommend during his everyday performances. The assistants, too, behave in much the same way as they would in their own temple. The chief difference lies in the fact that the whole ceremony is directed towards a specific end.

One such occurrence related to the servants’ quarters in a European household. It was alleged that a Chinese houseboy had hanged himself from a beam on the verandah three years previously. Several persons claimed to have seen his ghost. The reputation reached such proportions that no servants could be persuaded to live there. Eventually, a young Cantonese girl agreed to stay provided the ghost was laid by a Chinese dang-ki. The ceremony was arranged for a Saturday afternoon. The cult promoters and assistants arrived in a lorry with much of the temple’s portable equipment, including the image of the ‘Great Saint’. A temporary altar was set up inside the room the girl was going to occupy, complete with the image, swords, whips, flags, candles, incense and fruit offerings. An Eight Trigram flag was planted outside the building and all washing was removed from the clothes-line in the vicinity.

The earlier part of the dang-ki’s performance was identical with the procedure followed in his own temple. He went into a trance in a chair placed near the doorway, ate burning incense sticks and cut his tongue to daub blood on charm papers. A white cockerel was then produced. Holding the bird and a horse-hair whip in his right hand, and a bundle of flags and a willow whisk¹ in his left hand, the dang-ki began a perambulation of the block in which the room was situated.

Preceded by an assistant hurling salt and rice into the air, and another cracking an exorcising whip at every corner of the building, the dang-ki pranced his way down the line of servants’ quarters, past the garage at the back, and returned once more to his altar. Here he cut the cockerel’s throat and sprinkled the blood on charm papers. One of these, together with the willow whisk, was fastened to the lintel of the door.

There was then a long conference between the dang-ki and his assistants. The shen informed them that the real cause of the trouble was not the man who hanged himself, but several unsatisfied ghosts who had been killed by the Japanese. This being so it was impossible to lay them completely. But any evil effect that they might have could be counteracted by suitable offerings.

The servant girl who was to occupy the room was called in and instructed to make offerings to the hungry ghosts on the first and

¹ The willow is considered to be particularly efficacious against evil spirits. Although the tree is not indigenous to Malaya, botanists have identified specimens as *Salix Babylonicus*, which is commonly found in South China. It was first discovered in Malaya eighty years ago, and it was noted that these willows were grown in Chinese temple grounds. The temple of the cult in question has a mature willow growing within a few yards of it, although as far as is known, there was no temple on the site before the present one was built a few years ago.
fifteenth of every moon, and throughout the whole of the Seventh Moon. She was then made to kneel down in front of the altar while an Eight Trigram flag was held over her head and the dang-ki made a stamp mark on her back as a special protection. After that the performance came to a close in the usual manner.

The immediate consequence of the rites was somewhat unfortunate. As soon as they had ended, the whole grounds were found to be surrounded by a strong posse of armed police who had arrived on the scene in response to a telephone complaint from a nearby resident concerning the unprecedented noise of drums and gongs in a predominantly European area. The puzzled Indian inspector had to be reassured that there had been no breach of the peace in the legal sense, and that such noise as there was would not be repeated.

It must also be recorded that the servant girl disappeared next day and was never seen by the householders again. It appears that she was more scared by the rites of exorcism than by the ghost. The promoters of the cult commented rather disgustedly that she was a modern kind of girl who had never been properly instructed in her religious devotions. For the time being the household had to make do without servants. As for the ghosts, there is no report that anyone ever saw them subsequently.

The ‘Great Saint’s’ Birthday. In keeping with the practice followed by all Chinese temples, the cult holds a festival at least once a year. In the case of the ‘Great Saint’, the most important day to be celebrated is his birthday, which falls on the sixteenth of the Eighth Moon. A subsidiary birthday, when a festival is optional, also occurs on the sixteenth of the First Moon. The scale upon which these occasions are celebrated may vary greatly from year to year. The most important factor is the amount of money that can be collected. A secondary factor is the day of the week upon which the festival falls. The chances of success are greatly increased if it falls on a Saturday or Sunday when more devotees are able to attend. Another consideration is the possibility of obtaining police permission in order to make the necessary arrangements. One of the most important items is a theatrical performance, which involves permits from the police, labour and fire departments. If a procession of more than fifteen persons is going to take place, further police permits are required. Another desirable type of permit is for a house-to-house collection to be made. There was a time when such permits could be obtained for collections all over Singapore. After the war, they were restricted to the areas in which temples were situated. But by 1951 abuses of the system had led the police to refuse all applications unless they could be proved in the interests of the whole community. In very few cases can this principle be said to apply in Singapore.

However, when the festival described here took place, towards the end of 1950, the more severe restrictions had not yet taken effect. It had been decided about three months earlier that a festival would be held on the grandest scale possible. Subscription lists were then opened,
and all subscribers were given a properly printed and signed receipt. As the time of the festival drew near, large sheets of red paper were prepared. The names of all subscribers, showing the amounts given, were written on this and posted up outside the doors of the temple in keeping with the usual Chinese practice. The majority of the offerings, however, took the form of promises of payment on the festival day.

The cult of the 'Great Saint' does not indulge in the more spectacular physical feats during its festivals. It is not, moreover, connected with a 'Shen of the Ramparts and Ditches'. The most that it can hold, therefore, is a procession during which certain rites of exorcism and worship are carried out. And because the promoters are proud of the fact that they are Straits-born Chinese who keep clear of the questionable practices indulged in by more recent arrivals in the country, they maintain no widespread connection with other spirit-medium cults which would enable them to call upon the services of additional dang-ki and to borrow special equipment.

There must, of course, be a theatrical performance in honour of the shen, and for this one of the better, but not necessarily the best, Teochiu companies is engaged. Their stage is set up a little way down the hill below the terrace on which the temple stands. A large awning is spread over the terrace so that it extends from the porch and covers most of the flat piece of ground in front of the building. Under this the three sedan chairs are placed on the edge of the terrace with their backs to the stage. The chair for carrying the shen's image is in the centre, flanked on the left by the nail chair and on the right by the knife chair.

The arrangements inside the temple remain much the same as usual, except that the table under the porch has been turned into an offering table and the chief promoter and his clerical assistants move out to another table under the side of the awning. In many ways, however, the scene has been transformed. Many new banners and streamers hang across the doorways and along the ceilings, and several highly ornate suits of paper clothing have been provided for the shen's birthday and hang on the walls inside the temple. Baskets of flowers hang from the beams in the main hall and the porch. From early in the morning streams of worshippers have been coming to make their obeisances to the shen. By the time the ceremonies are ready to begin, the offering table is piled high with gifts of fruit and foodstuffs, and a forest of incense sticks is sending up its smoke in front of the altar. The furnace outside is tightly jammed with the ashes and smouldering remains of the joss papers that devotees have burnt there. The chief promoter is exceedingly busy attending to a crowd of newcomers who have brought their subscriptions and are each receiving in return a receipt, a red cake and a couple of bloodstained charm papers.

By eleven o'clock the ceremonies are about to begin. The dang-ki has dressed himself in a new suit of clothing and has gone down to the back of the stage to complete his make-up. He emerges with his face painted rather differently from usual, his cheeks being uncoloured. He returns to the temple and dons his head-dress and the tiger skin that
is reserved for more special occasions. At about the time when he is ready to begin his performance, a roll of drums announces that the theatrical company is starting its show. Few people pay much attention, however, since the play will consist of one of the usual set-pieces with which all theatrical performances at temple festivals must begin. The dang-ki has started to sound his bell inside the temple and everyone flocks in that direction instead.

The first part of the dang-ki’s performance is much the same as that which is given every Sunday morning, except that it takes place under the porch, facing outwards, instead of inside the main hall facing the altar. On this occasion, the procession of worshippers carrying ‘golden pecks’ is omitted because a far finer procession will take place later in the morning. The business of daubing blood on charm papers is a very lengthy one because of the excessive number that will be required during the course of the festival. First a cockerel’s blood is used to mark the larger charm papers, and then the dang-ki cuts his own tongue to daub the smaller ones. After about ten minutes of this, he has to cut his tongue again in order to ensure a continued flow. Having completed these preliminaries, he goes out on the terrace and waves his horse-hair whip over the three sedan chairs. He seats himself first in the nail chair and then in the knife chair. While he remains seated there, a crowd of mothers carrying babies comes to him. As each baby is brought to him, he licks his finger and touches it on the forehead.

While this is going on three of the assistants have gone into the temple and taken out the images of the ‘Great Saint’, the ‘Third Prince’ and ‘General Chao’. These are the three small images that are to be carried in procession. They are brought down from the altar and carried out to the middle sedan chair on the terrace. It is most important that they should be tied to the seat securely. When the dang-ki has finished with the babies he makes certain that this job is being done properly and retires into the main hall of the temple. There, other assistants have two silver needles ready for piercing his cheeks. An Eight Trigram flag is brought in and held behind his head. Everyone except the immediate participants is sent outside. An assistant places a finger inside the dang-ki’s mouth and presses firmly with his thumb on the spot where the needle will be introduced. Then, to a thunderous beating of drums, the two needles are pierced through his cheeks, one on each side, so that the points emerge through his mouth. A few moments are spent in adjusting the needles in a position so that the dang-ki is still able to speak.

At this point in the ceremony, the leading child actors of the theatrical company are led with their retinue into the temple to deposit their doll on the altar. In accordance with the usual custom, this doll will be left on the altar until the end of the theatrical performance. The dang-ki receives the doll and the children depart with inquisitive glances at the outlandish figure.

The dang-ki is now ready to make a dramatic appearance to the large crowd waiting outside. Escort by his assistants and drummers he
makes his way out on to the terrace. Four other assistants have stationed themselves by the sedan chair holding the images, and on a signal they raise the chair from the ground. The chair begins to sway to and fro in a startling manner. Its momentum increases until the carriers can hardly restrain it. Soon they and the chair are rushing round the confined space of the terrace as if quite out of control. The circle of onlookers scatter to a safer distance and make frantic gesticulations of worship with their hands. For several minutes the chair continues to gyrate round the terrace with its carriers making strenuous efforts to control it. Then, for no apparent reason, it turns and rushes down the steps into a lane leading to the main road. In a more leisurely fashion, the dang-ki and his procession follow.

In his right hand, the dang-ki carries the long metal bar which is associated with the legend of the shen possessing him, and over his right arm he carries a bundle of flags. He is supported on either side by two of his assistants, one of whom is carrying an exorcising whip. While the procession forms up below the temple the sedan chair sways and swings on the roadway in an erratic manner. At the head of the procession goes a party of small boys carrying long poles to which there are attached an Eight Trigram flag and white banners announcing the identity of the shen and the temple. Behind them are two more small boys carrying a sandal wood censer slung between them on a pole. Next comes the sedan chair with the images in it, and behind that the dang-ki and his escort, followed by the main body of worshippers with incense sticks in their hands.

It is usual for the dang-ki, when out in procession, to pay his respects at the temples of the spiritual superiors of the shen possessing him. A few hundred yards below the temple belonging to the cult there is an older temple dedicated to the ‘Shen of the Ramparts and Ditches’ of that area. This is not one of the places where the dang-ki pays his respects, since, it is explained, it is not truly a Buddhist temple, and the ‘Great Saint’ belongs to the Buddhist hierarchy.

The progress of the procession through the streets is somewhat erratic since it is dependent upon the movements of the sedan chair. For a time the chair may behave itself properly, moving along at a normal walking pace with nothing more than a swinging movement from side to side. Then, without any warning it will rush forward at break-neck speed. Equally suddenly it will stop and gyrate round in the middle of the road. This is an indication that the shen is displeased with something at that spot. Assistants rush forward and help to support their colleagues who have become almost exhausted with the movements of the chair. At frequent intervals, they replace each other under the carrying poles. The drummers, too, have come rushing up and are beating their drums furiously as the chair staggers about. By now the dang-ki and his assistants have caught up with the chair. He makes a gesture, and perhaps calls upon one of his assistants to crack the exorcising whip in the air. After that the chair calms down again and proceeds on its way with a more leisurely swaying motion.
The first objective of the procession is a newly-built Buddhist temple about half a mile distant. This is a substantial and expensive building which is laid out in an orthodox Buddhist manner with images of the ‘Three Treasures’ occupying the place of honour on the altar. A smaller image of Kuan Yin is seated at their feet. Arrangements have been made for the cult to hold an annual ceremony in this temple. It is noticeable, however, that none of the monks resident at the temple participate in the ceremony, except as casual onlookers.

In order to reach the temple, the procession has to pass through narrow, winding streets. Assistants go ahead calling upon anyone with washing hanging out of the windows to pull it in while the shen passes by. When the forecourt of the temple is reached, the sedan chair begins to race around more madly than ever. Presumably this is caused by excitement on the part of the shen, and not anger. The rest of the procession follows the dang-ki into the temple, but the chair stays outside.

First the dang-ki bows low in front of the main offering table. Then he goes round it to the altar. Taking his bundle of flags in his arms, he offers these to Kuan Yin, his spiritual superior. He is handed a large bunch of flowers by an assistant and offers these too. After each offering, an assistant ties a short piece of pink ribbon round one of the needles through his cheeks. After that he goes first to the side altar on the left of the temple and makes his obeisances, and then to the side altar on the right of the temple. During this ceremony the main hall of the temple has become crowded with worshippers shuffling around rather uneasily. Few of them are quite certain what they should do until one of the cult’s promoters starts giving instructions as to when they should kneel, when they should stand, and when they should bow. Even so their movements do not represent the actions of a well-drilled body of worshippers. They still retain the individualism so characteristic of Chinese worship.

When this ceremony is finished, the procession sets out again in the same erratic manner as before to return in the direction of its own temple. Its next objective is a road junction several hundred yards away which is reputed to be a notorious spot for car accidents. When the sedan chair reaches this place, its movements become more violent than on any occasion previously. It dashes into the crowd of onlookers, knocking some of them down. It hurls one of its carriers off his feet so that others have to run forward and support it before it falls into a ditch. It bumps up and down, breaking off ornate bits of woodwork from its legs. Only when the dang-ki catches up with it does the shen consent to calm down slightly. One of the assistants produces a bundle of joss papers which he places in the centre of the road and sets alight. Another takes his exorcising whip and cracks it loudly. Holding his Eight Trigram flag, the dang-ki makes a sign which will ensure that the spot will be rid of evil spirits causing disaster. The shen is satisfied, and with a slow, swinging motion, he allows the chair to proceed back towards his own temple. Only in the last few yards does he become
excited again and rush headlong up the steps on to the terrace from which he started. The dang-ki follows the chair up the steps and persuades it to calm down and come to a rest on the ground.

The images are taken out and restored to their altar. The dang-ki enters the main hall of the temple and once again everyone except his chief assistants is sent outside. The Eight Trigram flag is held behind his head, and one after the other the needles are extracted from his cheeks. His cheeks are dabbed with absorbent joss papers, but there is no bleeding. He holds a short consultation with his assistants and then announces that the shen is going to return. He gives a great leap into the air and falls back into the arms of assistants to be revived in the usual manner.

That, for the time being, is the end of the ceremony. The dang-ki has been given only a few hours leave of absence from his office, so he must return there until work finishes at five o'clock. In the meantime the theatrical company is still playing, and hawkers have begun to gather in the lanes below the temple.

In the evening, when everyone can be present, the temple is more crowded than ever before. For three hours the dang-ki holds consultations with worshippers who look to the shen for advice and cures. By now the theatrical company has started playing one of the traditional dramas that are so popular with the large audience, while nearby the brightly-lit hawkers' stalls give the impression of a thriving fairground. It is not until nearly midnight that the final curtain falls on the stage and the crowds begin to disperse.

The festival lasts for two days. Next day there is no religious ceremony in the morning, but the theatrical company plays for those who care to watch, and the temple is open for the offerings of worshippers. But, in the evening, the dang-ki gives his usual performance, and once again the scene is transformed until late into the night by coloured lights and the noise of crowds who are taking advantage of the entertainment offered by this great local event.

The Second 'Great Saint's' Birthday. This festival just described had proved an undoubted success. Soon after it, the promoters began to make plans to celebrate the other 'birthday' of the 'Great Saint' on the sixteenth of the First Moon as richly as possible. This birthday occurs on the day following the first fifteen days of the New Year celebrations, and in view of the heavy expenses that most worshippers would incur at this period there was an obvious limitation on the funds that could be collected unless they were asked for well in advance of the New Year.

The New Year itself is not a time of great activity among spirit-medium cults although many of the larger Chinese temples are crowded with worshippers on appropriate days during the festivities. The first half of the First Moon is above all else a time for family reunion and the performance of rites in the home. But on the sixteenth, the normal pattern of worship is resumed for the rest of the year with a birthday festival for a shen.
Once again the festival falls in the middle of a week, which makes it an unsuitable occasion for a very lavish display. For reasons of expense, a full-scale theatrical company is not engaged. Instead, a small puppet stage has been set up a few yards down the slope in front of the temple. The method of performing is one rarely seen. In the usual puppet show or marionette show, the manipulators of the actors are either above or below the miniature stage. In this case, the manipulators are young girls, who work from directly behind the stage and partly in the audience’s view. They push the figures forward on sticks and manipulate the hands and feet with wires attached to their fingers. Even at its best, however, such a method does not seem to be a very popular theatrical substitute. When performed in a confined space, these miniature theatres can rival the noise produced by a full-scale show. But even a large theatrical company, with a full stage and orchestra, uses amplifying equipment when working in the open. A miniature theatre without the help of amplifying equipment cannot create the same impression.

The cost of this miniature theatre for two days is about $200 as opposed to the $1,000 or more that would have been required for a theatrical company. This has left a comfortable margin for the provision of other attractions. A company of Taoist priests has been engaged for the two days at a cost of $160, and a ‘Bridge of Peace and Prosperity’ has been purchased for $50.

For weeks before the festival, the promoters have informed worshippers that special arrangements have been made for them to be ‘prayed for’ individually. In return for a contribution of three dollars, the name and date of birth is filled in on a folder of salmon-coloured paper which is printed with special prayers, and commendations to the ‘Great Saint’. These will be retained by the temple for a short time after the festival and then burnt.

On the first day of the festival, there can be no doubt concerning the religious interest that it has aroused. Most of the men are at work, but from early in the morning women by the score have crowded into the temple to make their offerings and obeisances. As at the previous festival, an awning has been spread over the terrace, and at the edge the three sedan chairs have been placed. An offering table has been set up in the porch, and the table at which the business of the cult is transacted has been moved outside under a corner of the awning. The ‘Bridge of Peace and Prosperity’ is set up across the front of the temple, between the porch and the sedan chairs. It is a somewhat rickety contraption about twelve feet long and two feet high, built on a wooden framework. Sheets of paper are stretched along its sides on a bamboo frame, and painted to represent grey masonry. The pathway across the bridge and the four steps at each end are carpeted with yellow cloth. Under the bridge an oil lamp and a sandal wood censer are set on the ground, and on the steps at each end four red cakes are piled, with a spray of burning incense sticks stuck in the top.

At about ten o’clock, the first part of the ceremonies begins. The performers on the miniature stage below the temple have made their
preparations. The *dang-ki* is dressed and has painted his face. The Taoist priests have their equipment ready and put on their red robes. Their company consists of one very old man, two youths, and a couple of instrumentalists and assistants who remain unrobed. More or less simultaneously, but quite independently, the actors, the priests and the *dang-ki* begin their performances. The drums strike up behind the stage, the Taoist priests begin to chant inside the main hall of the temple, and the *dang-ki*'s assistants begin to invoke the ‘Great Saint’ from under the porch. While the priests and the actors continue more or less unnoticed the *dang-ki* goes through much of his usual performance, eating burning incense sticks, cutting his tongue and the throat of a white cockerel, and daubing blood on to many charm papers. At one stage the *dang-ki* has to enter the main hall of the temple. The priests are pushed out of the way unceremoniously to continue their chanting outside in the porch while the ‘Great Saint’ is consulted concerning the final details of the rites to be held that day. When the *dang-ki* emerges again, the priests are pushed back into the main hall to carry on with their own business.

The chief object of the present performance is the consecration of the bridge. The *dang-ki* approaches it from the porch, carrying his Eight Trigram flag and horse-tail whip, and views it critically, first from one end and then from the other. He waves his whip over it and asks for a sword. Standing at one end he cuts his tongue, and then crosses over the bridge carefully, supported on each side by assistants walking on the ground. He repeats the performance from the opposite end and then goes back to the main hall of the temple, where, after a few more words of consultation with his assistants he gives a leap into the air and the *shen* leaves him.

There is then a pause for about an hour and a half, during which the priests carry on with their chanting, the theatre begins its performance in earnest, and more and more worshippers crowd into the temple to pile their gifts on the offering table and light incense sticks to the *shen*.

At about midday the main performance of the day is due to begin. This is to be a procession to a nearby temple of Tōa-peh-kong in which all the participants will have first followed the *dang-ki* across the ‘Bridge of Peace and Prosperity’. The *dang-ki* enters a trance under the porch of the temple, and as a preliminary cuts his tongue again to daub more charm papers with his blood. The Taoist priests are once more evicted from the main hall so that the *dang-ki*, with the Eight Trigram flag held behind his head, can have his cheeks pierced with silver needles amidst an uproarious crashing of drums and gongs. He then emerges from the temple in order to lead his followers across the bridge before setting out on the procession. But at this stage an awkward and unexpected incident occurs.

Within the last month or two another spirit-medium cult had been started among one of the clusters of huts in a hollow down by the railway line about a quarter of a mile away. The promoters, assistants and *dang-ki* are all uncouth-looking youths with tattoo marks on their
arms and bodies. Their temple is housed in a tiny room in a row of shacks, but their equipment is sufficiently new and expensive to suggest that they have substantial funds at their disposal, allegedly acquired by extortion from shopkeepers in the locality. In fact, this cult seems to be little more than an illegal gang of young thugs which has embarked on the exploitation of spirit mediumship as one of its overt activities.

The shen possessing the dang-ki of this new cult is the ‘Third Prince’, so it is difficult to know why they should have chosen to hold a festival on the same day as the ‘Great Saint’s’ birthday; but whatever the reason, the procession, which had set out from its own temple somewhat earlier, comes up the steps of the ‘Great Saint’s’ temple at exactly the moment when the dang-ki is emerging with silver needles stuck through his cheeks. The ‘Third Prince’ dang-ki, with a long skewer through one of his cheeks, leaves his spiked sedan chair at the bottom of the steps and comes rushing up on foot. With him comes the sedan chair carrying his shen’s image, rocking violently and threatening to scatter the worshippers crowded round the ‘Bridge of Peace and Prosperity’. The ‘Great Saint’ dang-ki and promoters have little alternative but to greet the intruders as gracefully as possible. The dang-ki makes gestures of welcome to the visiting shen and invites him to cross over the bridge. The ‘Third Prince’ dang-ki does so, followed by about half a dozen assistants carrying swords, whips, drums and other paraphernalia. Realising that they are not very welcome, but having gained their objective, the visitors then leave hastily to carry on with their procession.

First, the dang-ki crosses the bridge, followed by the promoters of the cult and his assistants. The great mass of worshippers then crowd round the end of the bridge in order to make as early a crossing as possible. The dang-ki stands at the other end, making suitable gestures with his hands as each person crosses. Most of them are carrying sprays of incense sticks, and some of them struggle across with a couple of children in their arms as well.

In this procession, no sedan chairs are to be carried. The five small boys who will head the procession with flags have already stationed themselves below the temple in readiness. When the dang-ki considers that enough worshippers have crossed the bridge to form the nucleus of the procession, he sets off down the steps at their head, leaving the others to cross the bridge without his blessing and follow along as soon as they can. The flag-bearers lead the way, followed by the dang-ki who is armed with his silver bar, horse-tail whip and a bundle of flags. He is supported on either side by assistants, one of whom is the chief interpreter carrying the exorcising whips. Other assistants carry drums, swords, and gongs, and two small boys follow behind with a tray of cakes as an offering to the temple which he will visit.

The temple to Tòa-peh-kong is about a mile away, in the opposite direction to the Buddhist temple which was visited on the previous festival. The road crosses the railway bridge and passes several large blocks of modern flats. The inhabitants seem to take little heed as the
dang-ki and his procession go by. When the Tōa-peh-kong temple is reached the flag-bearers remain outside and the dang-ki goes inside followed by the crowd of worshippers. The ritual procedure is much the same as in the Buddhist temple at the previous festival. The dang-ki makes his obeisances and offerings, with his followers kneeling behind him, first at the central altars and then at the altars on the left and right. The greatest difference is that on this occasion he asks for Tōa-peh-kong’s blessing on his followers and throws the divining blocks to ascertain whether this will be granted or not. The answer comes down in the affirmative, and the procession leaves the temple to form up outside for the return journey. For most of the way, they go back by the same route, but before reaching their own temple they turn off down a side road to carry out excoriating rites at the same notorious spot for car accidents as at the previous festival. This spot happens to be near the temple of the new cult which intruded on the ceremonies before the start of the procession. As the dang-ki and his followers approach, this other cult is obviously expecting a return visit, but at the last minute a hasty message is sent forward to the youths leading the procession not to go down the track leading to the temple. The ‘Great Saint’ has declared that no return visit must be paid. The rite of exorcism is carried out at the crossroads, and the procession departs in the direction of its own temple, leaving the promoters of the other cult resentful at the spurning of their proffered hospitality.

As soon as the dang-ki returns to the main hall of his temple, he is immediately besieged by crowds of women seeking favours and advice of every description. Irately he tells them to get out of the way while he has the silver needles extracted from his cheeks. Once more the main hall is cleared and the Eight Trigram flag is brought in to be held behind his head while this operation is carried out. While worshippers crowd back into the temple, a large pile of the prayer papers towards which devotees have subscribed is placed in front of the dang-ki. One by one, he marks them with a stamp as the sign that the name on each has been specially commended to the ‘Great Saint’. After this, numerous articles of clothing and household ornaments are stamped in a similar way and returned to their owners. This lasts for about half an hour, by which time the dang-ki has had enough for the time being and announces that the shen will now leave until a later hour.

The next important ceremony takes place at about seven o’clock in the evening when worshippers who have missed the morning procession begin to arrive. Once more the dang-ki enters a trance, and leads a long line of devotees across the ‘Bridge of Peace and Prosperity’. This is followed by a long session in which medicine and advice are given to numerous consultants.

The next day the temple is open for prayer and offerings from early in the morning. The miniature theatre is still playing, and from time to time the Taoist priests don their robes and mutter their chants in front of the altar. At seven o’clock, there is a repetition of the same ceremony as that of the previous evening.
This festival can hardly be called spectacular, in so far as the weather was not of the best, the theatrical performance was not popular, and there were few hawkers who bothered to attend with their stalls and barrows. Even the display of religious rites was not of the sort which might be calculated to attract much attention, but for all that the occasion was marked by a display of devotion on the part of the worshippers such as is rarely seen in a Chinese temple, and which is probably the best possible indication of a cult's genuine affluence and popularity.

‘General Chao’s’ Birthday. The next occasion on which the cult could hold a festival fell on the seventeenth of the Second Moon, the birthday of ‘General Chao’. From its earliest days, the worship of the cult had been associated with this shen as well as with the ‘Great Saint’. ‘General Chao’ is one of the many military dignitaries of the Heavenly Hosts, depicted by a black-faced image; he has no necessary connection with the ‘Great Saint’ legend. Such popularity as he has in Singapore is probably due to a Hokkien belief in his efficacy as a shen of wealth.

In one respect, the date was admirably suited for the holding of a festival, for it fell on Easter Saturday, which was a public holiday. On the following day, too, any number of devotees who so desired could attend the temple. On the other hand, it was only a month since the last festival had been held, and as it had recently become almost impossible to get a licence for house-to-house collections there was great doubt as to the amount of money that could be raised. Besides this, there was another difficulty. Who should perform as the dang-ki for ‘General Chao’? The old man who was ‘General Chao’s’ dang-ki had been out of action for a year. For several months he had been in hospital in a semi-paralysed condition, but now he had been discharged, and although he could only hobble about with difficulty, he was determined to go through with his birthday festival. A short trial performance had been held in the temple to ascertain whether or not this could be permitted. The answer had been given that the old man could perform on ‘General Chao’s’ birthday, but that he could not undertake any feats of self-mortification. This, however, was most unsatisfactory for the promoters, since a festival demands something spectacular in the way of a dang-ki’s performance. The ‘Great Saint’ dang-ki could not be called upon to act as a substitute for his colleague. He was not one of those who could allow himself to be possessed by a variety of shen, and in any case there was a certain degree of jealousy between the two dang-ki. When the ‘General Chao’ dang-ki had been very ill, the ‘Great Saint’ had prescribed medicine for him which he had refused to take. Many of the ‘Great Saint’ devotees had ascribed his continued illness to this refusal.

Moreover, people in the neighbourhood were saying that the promoters were making too much money. The simplest method of countering such an accusation is to offer to turn the financial management of the temple over to a committee of persons in the neighbourhood
who are willing to serve on it. If this arrangement is adopted, the customary expectation is that the chairman and committee members do not stand to gain personally even if a profit is made, whereas they have to share the deficit between them if there is a loss. In a community where there are few wealthy members, it is unlikely that many persons will come forward to face this risk. If a committee cannot be formed, the management of the temple reverts to the promoters, to act as they wish. At the previous festivals, there had been no committee of management other than that formed among the promoters themselves. In view of the increasing criticism, it was considered that this was a suitable occasion for an attempt to form a committee that would undertake responsibility for festivals to be held in future.

It was agreed, therefore, that ‘General Chao’s’ birthday should be duly celebrated. The same puppet show would be engaged as for the ‘Great Saint’s’ second birthday. The ‘Great Saint’ dang-ki would be performing in his usual splendour, but as a precaution lest the old man failed altogether a young labourer who performed occasionally as ‘General Chao’s’ dang-ki was also engaged for the two festival days.

On the morning of the first day, the temple is set out in its usual festival arrangement, with an awning outside the porch, the sedan chairs on the edge of the terrace and the stage erected down below. Although it is a public holiday, it is apparent from the start that the occasion is not going to attract nearly as much attention as the previous festivals. Nothing happens until about eleven o’clock. The ‘Great Saint’ dang-ki has arrived, but the chief promoter has been called away on a job that prevents his appearance. The additional dang-ki is waiting in the temple, but no one is certain of what is going to happen. Suddenly someone draws attention to the figure of the old dang-ki hobbling up the hill on a stick. As he enters the temple, he greets the onlookers and repeats his determination to perform. He is helped into the side-room on the left of the main hall while final preparations are made for the ceremonies.

By about half past eleven, the performers are ready to begin. Two chairs instead of one have been placed in front of the offering table inside the main hall. The second chair is painted red, but otherwise it has no ornamentation or carving to distinguish it as the proper equipment for the use of a dang-ki. The usual preliminaries are undertaken by the assistants. While the drums are beaten and the invocation chanted, the ‘Great Saint’ dang-ki seats himself in the ornamented chair and prepares to enter a trance. As his body begins to shake, he is joined by the young dang-ki who comes into the main hall stripped to the waist, wearing an embroidered apron over his khaki-drill trousers and a green cloth round his head.

While the ‘Great Saint’ dang-ki goes through his usual performance of eating burning incense sticks and fruit, the ‘General Chao’ dang-ki seats himself in the second chair and in a few moments begins to tremble and jump in the manner expected of him. Soon the two of them are bounding up and down and gesticulating beside each other as elaborate gestures of invitation and acceptance are made between them.
The ‘Great Saint’ dang-ki then withdraws to the offering table set up in the porch to carry on with the rest of his performance of cutting his tongue and smearing the blood on charm papers. Inside the main hall, ‘General Chao’ settles down to a long and somewhat irate consultation with one of his assistants. Eventually he calls for a sword. He cuts his tongue and bleeds it into a small bowl of water. With a brush, he daubs the bloody mixture on to numerous charm papers. After a further consultation with his assistants, he calls for a larger sword and rushes with it out through the porch on to the terrace. Here he dances around, flagellating first his back and then his stomach while assistants spurt charm water on to him. At last they take the sword from him and persuade him to go back into the temple. He has not inflicted much damage upon his body apart from a gash in the upper part of his arm caused while wielding the sword rather strongly across his chest. Since this is still bleeding freely he uses the blood to daub several more charm papers.

By now the ‘Great Saint’ has followed ‘General Chao’ into the main hall and is waiting quietly behind him. The latter announces that his spirit is returning. He does several violent leaps, one of which sends most of the equipment on the offering table spilling, and jumps back to be caught in the arms of his assistants. The dang-ki is dragged back to his chair to recover consciousness. The ‘Great Saint’ now has the stage to himself, and announces that he will hold a short procession to carry out exorcising rites at the road junction below the temple where many accidents have taken place. With the Eight Trigram flag to the fore, the dang-ki with a few assistants and devotees sets out on his procession. The others who remain behind now turn their attention to the elderly dang-ki who has been sitting in the room beside the main hall. As soon as they start their drum-beating and invocations, the old man begins to tremble and mutter. He rises to his feet and demands that the green cloth should be tied round his head and that some black paint should be smeared on his cheeks. When this is done, he hops and hobbles painfully into the main hall where he begins to talk with his assistants in front of the offering table. In his prime, he had been an adept in the use of the prick-ball as an instrument of self-mortification. He begs to be allowed to use it again, but his assistants refuse. He then hops out through the porch and stands on the terrace, still muttering and gesticulating with his right hand. His left arm, which is almost useless, hangs by his side. When he sees that he cannot persuade the assistants to let him have his way he hops back to the offering table under the porch. Once again he has a long consultation with the assistants. At last they coax him back into the main hall where he continues to expostulate rather petulantly.

In the meantime, the ‘Great Saint’ has returned to the temple, having completed his short procession to and from the road junction. He is waiting quietly in the background while ‘General Chao’ holds the stage. It would be inexcusable to hurry the old man unduly, but at last, to most people’s relief, he announces that he is going to return. Instead
of leaping into the air as a younger dang-ki would do the old man sinks down gently into the arms of assistants and is helped away into the side-room from which he started his performance.

The time has come for the ‘Great Saint’, too, to return. After a few more words of instruction, in which he announces that he will be back again at half past five that evening, the dang-ki gives his usual leap before being revived. One of his first remarks on emerging from the temple after cleaning off his make-up is a rather pointed observation on how few people are present. He adds, quite correctly, that when it is the ‘Great Saint’s’ birthday, the place is so packed that one can hardly move.

‘General Chao’s’ birthday is the end of the ceremonial year. The next great occasion is the major birthday of the ‘Great Saint’ once again on the sixteenth of the Eighth Moon. Frequent visits were, however, made to the cult until late in 1951. These included the next ‘Great Saint’ festival, but there is little more to add. The festival was more than ever marked by a great display of devotion on the part of over a thousand worshippers, but the ceremonial aspect showed a decline in splendour which was paralleled by a similar decline in many other spirit-medium cults.

A full-scale Teochiu theatrical company was engaged, and a procession was held to the same spots as in the previous year. But this time the sedan chair carrying the three shen was not included in the procession. The reason given was that it might be a rainy morning, and so the shen remained strapped to their chair on the terrace.

The old dang-ki made a brief appearance at this festival in the role of ‘General Chao’, but otherwise he sat, rather neglected, in the ante-room each Sunday morning while the ceremonies were going on, maintaining all the time that he was growing stronger every day.

The rival cult below the hill disappeared soon after its interference in the ‘Great Saint’s’ festival.

The chief promoter still rules the affairs of the cult with a firm hand, although one or two of his assistants do not appear as frequently as before. Complaints that the promoters are making too much money have come to nothing, and now it seems to be accepted in the neighbourhood that the temple will be run far more successfully if left in the hands of its promoters. In general, the cult flourishes even better than before. Within the period of eighteen months during which frequent visits were made, it was noticeable that the number of worshippers and the intensity of their devotions increased considerably. The extent to which this was due to the interest shown by a European and some of his friends can never be ascertained. It is more probable that it flourishes largely on its own merits, and will continue to do so for as long as the present dang-ki and chief promoter have a hand in its affairs.
APPENDIX I

EXAMPLES OF INVOCATIONS

The translations of four invocations are given here by way of example. All four were acquired from the same temple, which possessed copies in both Chinese and romanised Hokkien versions. It was normally the romanised versions that were used when reference had to be made to them. The Chinese versions, which were hidden away in a drawer, were badly dog-eared and had some of their parts missing. For this reason, it can hardly be claimed that the translation is an accurate representation of the original. No one was able to translate the romanised version into even colloquial Hokkien. In order to acquire a text that was sufficiently coherent for translation recourse had to be made to the Chinese version, in which gaps were filled in by guesswork based on the more complete romanised version. The first three invocations are to the 'Great Saint' and the fourth is to the 'Third Prince'.

I. Respectfully we invite the presence of the Great Saint equal with Heaven, the mighty Black Tiger General, whose feet stand on the Seven Stars and the five-coloured clouds, who holds in his hand a golden bar, and who visits Heaven accompanied by the son of the Dragon of the Eastern Capital. In this ancient temple our first concern is to drive away evil spirits and kill the influences that trouble men in this world.

We, your followers, worshipping the Great Saint equal with Heaven, beseech you to descend speedily, for we know that when the order is given the Heavenly Army will come to our aid as quickly as we hope.

II. Respectfully we invite the presence of the Great Saint equal with Heaven—Sun Wu-k’ung. Spirit of cleanliness, come majestically to this Buddhist temple, bearing in your hand a golden ring and cloths of five colours When Heaven is dark you have a clear Buddha-like heart. You hold in your hand a golden bar when you ascend to Heaven. Standing on a coloured cloth you can go anywhere. Sweep away all uncleanliness to clean the world. Nothing can resist your golden bar.

We, your human followers, respectfully invite you. You can change into seventy-two different forms. We, your followers, worshipping the Great Saint equal with Heaven, beseech you to descend speedily, for we know that when the order is given the Heavenly Army will come to our aid as quickly as we hope.

III. He who shakes the Heavens comes from the west riding on a tiger and a dragon, bearing a holy seal, and practising the methods of Duke Ting. Your voice like thunder makes the shen and devils tremble. With your golden bar you have great strength, chasing the devils and whipping evil spirits. You can save a myriad of people. Now we invite you, the one who can shake Heaven, to come before this altar. With your sword you can kill evil spirits, and in this way you can demonstrate your spiritual powers. Wake, wake and save us.

We, your followers, worshipping the Great Saint equal with Heaven, beseech you to descend speedily, for we know that when the order is given the Heavenly Army will come to our aid as quickly as we hope.
IV. As Commander-in-Chief of the Thirty-Three Heavens you can lead the Heavenly Armies to this altar. You have only to show your golden spear and the doors of Heaven will be opened. You bear the sun and the moon on your head, and you govern the earth. We pray before this altar just as if your spirit were here.

Once in the palace of the Dragon King you demonstrated your powers. You have conquered the sea-world with your might. At the age of only three your princely son worshipped the Northern Dipper. Please lead your Heavenly Army to this altar.

When you drew your bow the five points of the compass were created. Your feet are standing on a fiery wheel of seven stars. All your generals are exercising their powers above the altar. They make sand fly, stones roll and caves open.

Come quickly to cure our sickness and save us from misery. May 80,000 soldiers come riding down from Heaven. We, your followers, respectfully invite you.

These invocations are hardly worthy of lengthy comment.

It is immediately apparent that Buddhist and Taoist symbolism are inextricably confused after the typical manner of Shenism. In the fourth example, it is not even clear whether the object of the invocation is to call down the ‘Third Prince’, his father, or both at the same time. In any case, the exact meaning of the words is incidental to a performance in a spirit-medium temple. The words are always chanted by rote, more as a set formula at the correct time than as a meaningful prayer.
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