

The Phuket Vegetarian Festival

by Paul King

I thought I would take a break from my usual discussions on history of a particular permanent piercing and instead give a little history on my favorite October festival...and no, it's not Halloween!



This amazing festival is most commonly known as “The Phuket Vegetarian Festival.” The less common names are “The Festival of the Nine Chinese Emperor Gods” and its literal translation, “The Festival for Gaining Grace by Eating Food without Meat.”

The festival is celebrated around the beginning of October, every year between the first and ninth day of the ninth month of the Chinese Lunar calendar. The island of Phuket¹ is most famous for viewing the festival but several nearby cities with Chinese communities also hold celebrations. The nine day festival climaxes with the most intense feats of body mortification ritual still in existence today. On the days of parade, hundreds of practitioners in trance, parade through the streets, with lances as long as 10 feet, pierced through holes in their cheeks as large as 1” (26mm). Some practitioners² splash themselves with boiling oil, hack at their backs with hatchets, slice their tongues with saw blades or flagellate themselves with a ball and chain covered in nails. This is endured while walking for miles barefoot from their home temples to the temple by the sea. The arduous

trek can take 4 hours or more.

The festival is said to have started at the Krathu (Kathu) sometime between 1820 and 1840. A drama troupe from China was hired to perform traditional operas to entertain the Chinese miners. While the troupe was in Phuket an epidemic was spreading and many people died. The performers also became ill. Fortunately, they realized

it was the ninth month and that they had not paid homage to the Nine Emperor Gods. They sent a man to the Fujian Province in China to bring back an urn containing large incense, which he kept lit on his journey from China, symbolically inviting the Gods to Phuket. The festival was started, the epidemic soon ended and the locals have been doing it ever since.³

According to the Master Narrative of the Vegetarian Festival, the festival is devoted to the Nine Emperor Gods, the sons, or manifestations, of the Goddess Doumu. Though Doumu is not directly involved in the festival and its ritual events, she is theologically the pivotal divinity of the festival; but since she does not play an easily perceptible role in it, visitors, devotees and even participants are often unaware of her importance. She is, however obliquely present in the festival though often misidentified as the popular deity, Kuan Yin.⁴

The Goddess Doumu helps heaven maintain the universe in equilibrium, provides for human sustenance, and judges all human deeds and misdeeds. She controls life and death, and bestows upon humans

rank and position, luck and fortune, prosperity and happiness, health and long life.⁵

The Nine Emperor Gods or “Kiu Ong”, as a manifestation of Doumu’s powers, are believed to have control over peoples’ fate. As mediators of Doumu’s power they are the principal deities of the Vegetarian Festival, which starts with their invitation ritual and arrival, and ends with their farewell ritual and departure.⁶ Although the Vegetarian Festival appears to have little significance in mainland China, the Nine Emperor Gods do appear in mainland mythology.⁷



Spirit Mediumship is an ancient technique of communication with the supernatural, in China as elsewhere. In Chinese folk religion a deity takes possession of the body replacing the medium’s own Yang element of the soul.⁸ Mediumship is not a role one should aspire to. In fact mediums often claim that they were reluctant to accept the bargain, (this bargain usually dealing with extension of life, either because of a horoscope forecasting an early death or a serious sickness).⁹

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Purification of space, of impure and dangerous forces, conceived generally as evil spirits, is one of the principal ritual activities of the spirit mediums.¹⁰ Self-purification, comprehended in a variety of ways is the primary declared purpose of the customs and precepts adhered to by the devotees during the festival.

The acts (of ritual piercing) are considered purification. It assures one's good fortune and to prevent misfortune in the coming year.¹¹ Some devotees believe that by torturing themselves the mediums take away the sins of the attending public.¹² Any mishaps such as excessive bleeding when pierced, suffering cuts on their soles when climbing bladed ladder or burns in fire walking are perceived as signs of personal impurity.¹³ Participants claim not to feel any pain. The absence of pain demonstrates to the evil forces the fierce power of the possessing deity, scaring them away.¹⁴

It is estimated by the late 1990's there were between 1500-1650 spirit mediums partaking in the Phuket Vegetarian Festival. The majority of participants serve as mediums for just a few years. There has been controversy within the local Chinese communities as well as anthropologists regarding the increasing of size, number and overall severity of the ritual acts.

Some consider it is the lowly spirits or deities, rather than the higher gods, who perform the most "gruesome" feats of self-mutilation.



Tourism is not generally thought to be the reason for the increase in numbers of mediums or intense feats. Some scholars believe it is the increasing shift of the disadvantaged members of society orienting to materialism. The irony is though there are many spectators viewing

the festival by far most of the island's tourists do not view any of the festival.

This festival is a unique glimpse into the past. Witnessing the feats, one can not help but be in awe of the power of both humans and the supernatural. Go....!

¹ "Phuket" is pronounced "pu" not "fu". The island is the largest in Thailand and is located off of the southwestern coast.

² also referred to as "Spirit Mediums"

³ The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Phuket.(CVFP), Religion, Ethnicity and Tourism on a Southern Thai Island, by Erik Cohen, pub. White Lotus Press, 2001 page 51

⁴ CVFP, page 21

⁵ CVFP page 22

⁶ CVFP page 23

⁷ CVFP page 25

⁸ CVFP page 36

⁹ CVFP page 38 and 39

¹⁰ CVFP page 28

¹¹ CVFP page 113

¹² CVFP page 89

¹³ CVFP page 112

¹⁴ CVFP page 128

¹⁵ CVFP page 125

