

# The Nine Imperial Gods in Singapore

By

RUTH-INGE HEINZE\*

In the China of the past, on the ninth day of the ninth month<sup>1</sup> people would fast and climb the mountains to cleanse themselves from whatever evil had gotten attached to them during the preceding year. In the Singapore of today, people of Chinese descent celebrate the Festival of the Nine Imperial Gods during the first nine days of the ninth month.

For centuries, Chinese have upheld the belief that the Nine Imperial Gods—*T'ien ying* 天英, *T'ien jen* 天任, *T'ien chu* 天柱, *T'ien hsin* 天心, *T'ien ch'in* 天禽, *T'ien fu* 天輔, *T'ien ch'ung* 天沖, *T'ien jui* 天芮, and *T'ien p'eng* 天蓬—reside in the northern heavens, each on one of the seven stars of the Big Dipper (*Ursa Major*) and the remaining two gods on two stars nearby.<sup>2</sup> These two stars are invisible. They are stars of transformation which are visible only to the eyes of immortals.

The location of these two invisible stars has remained ambiguous. One Sung dynasty commentator of the “Nine Songs” says that they are “Sustainer” (Fu 輔 or Alcor, attached to Mizar) and “Far Flight” (Chao-yao 昭耀 or Bootis, the tip of an extended dipper handle). The opinions of medieval Taoists, however, differ. A map in a canonical version shows two ancillary stars as dipper treaders, one being “Sustainer” and the other “Straightener.” The former is Alcor and the latter is said to be attached to Phecda. “Straightener,” though, is an

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\* Dr. RUTH-INGE HEINZE collected the data for this essay in Singapore from June 1978 to June 1979, while she was conducting fieldwork on Fulbright-Hays Research Grant #1069-83079. She is presently Research Associate at the Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

invisible star and one of its names is "Void" (Schafer 1977: 239). Furthermore,

... this arrangement of stars is surrounded by another group of nine which cast a "light that does not shine." They are inhabited by feminine divinities, consorts of the gods who reside in the first group of visible stars. These invisible divinities from the "black stars" are invoked in many of the exercises designed to confer the power of invisibility (Robinet 1979: 56).

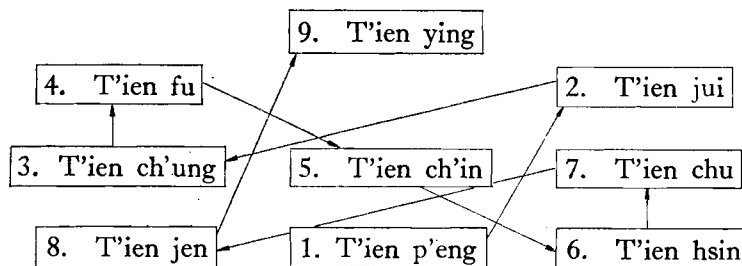
Wherever patterns of seven spots in the shape of the Dipper appeared, Chinese have considered them to be omens. The eyebrows of Lao-tzu, for example, have been described as being shaped like the "Northern Dipper" (Schafer 1977: 277).

In the past, the Northern Dipper has also been related to the Imperial Metropolis (Schafer 1977: 271), presiding over both the well-being of individuals and the welfare of the state. It was believed that cosmic harmony had been restored when a ruler was in consonance with the stars of the Dipper.

The divinities who might dwell in a Taoist saint, presiding over his formation and animating his subtle body, were also believed to be

only a transformation of the nine souls of the Lord, which, in the beginning, were the Nine Celestial Breaths or the Nine Original Heavens. Through a series of transformations . . . they became the nine divinities of the Palace of the Brain (Robinet 1979: 43).

Over time, these nine stars have become part of the Taoist cabala. Grand Supreme Perfected Men (*t'ai shang chen jen* 太上真人), belonging to the most exalted class of Taoist superbeings, can summon the Polar Deity (*T'ai i* 太一) by "pacing the road of the Nine Stars" (Schafer 1977: 239). The following magic square shows the positions of the Dipper stars indicating the direction of steps a practitioner should take during a ritual (Saso 1978: 139-140):



According to legend, the ancient ruler Yü the Great<sup>3</sup> used these steps to stop the floods (Saso 1978: 265). Doré (First Part, Vol. V, 1918: 669) says that the Great Yü (2205–2197 B.C.) saw a tortoise coming from the Loh River. The animal then bestowed on him a chart about how to regulate water. Schafer (1977: 396), though, maintains that Yü of the Chia Dynasty (1994–1523 B.C.) had been taught these steps by the “Realized Person” of Mount Chung. Pang (1977: 113) talks about the *p'u-tu* 普度 ritual where the souls progress through the nine courts of hell in a dance, using the steps of Yü. Pang reports that Taoists now use the pattern in a “secret left-handed mudra, tracing the nine steps on the palm of the left hand with the thumb.”

Schafer also speaks of the

study of methods of comprehending the esoteric meaning of the Dipper and its components, of learning to project one's secret self into it, of realising it within one's innermost anatomical chambers, of conjuring it to inspire to protest, to outlaw, to perform miracles. It is an active agent; its bowl will cover your head like an apotropaic shield, proof against the plague (1977: 49).

In Mao Shan tradition, an adept was supposed to

repose himself at night on a diagram of the dipper laid out on his bed, with its bowl like a canopy over his head and feet pointed to major stars. He is to recite the names of its stars, picture them in his imagination, recite prayers, and in the end bring their sublime embryonic essences into his body where they build up, in the course of time, an immortal body which will ascend to heaven in broad daylight (Schafer 1977: 241).

Each of the nine stars has a secret name and corresponds to a trigram of the *I-Ching* 易經. A Taoist ritualist must learn which of the five cosmic elements—wood, fire, metal, water or earth—corresponds to each of the nine stars connected with the constellation of the Big Dipper so that all spiritual forces can be tapped.

<i>Star</i>	<i>Secret Name</i>	<i>Trigram</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Element</i>
T'ien p'eng	Tzu ch'in	k'an	1	water
T'ien jen	Tzu ch'ang	ken	8	earth
T'ien ch'ung	Tzu ch'iao	chen	3	wood
T'ien fu	Tzu hsiang	hsün	4	wood
T'ien ying	Tzu ch'eng	li	9	fire

T'ien jui	Tzu hsü	k'un	2	earth
T'ien chu	Tzu chung	tui	7	metal
T'ien hsin	Tzu hsiang	ch'ien	6	metal
T'ien ch'in	Tzu chin	k'un	5	earth

Source: Saso 1978: 139-40.

Schafer (1977: 50) discovered further associations. He found that stars 1, 2, and 7 are associated with cloud-soul/actualizing spirit (*hun shen* 魂神) and stars 3, 4, 5, and 6 with white-soul/embryonic essence (*p'o ching* 魄精).

The earliest myths, recorded in China, say that the Nine Imperial Gods were the Nine Human Sovereigns who reigned a total of 45,600 years (Comber 1958: 20). There are, however, many later versions. Harada (1979), for example, speaks of nine heroes who helped the people at the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1912).

The mother of the Nine Imperial Gods is *Tou Mu* 斗母. It is said that she was the wife of King Chou Yu by whom she had nine sons. Some Chinese think she is the Polar Star near the heavenly palaces of her sons. Schafer (1977: 50) mentions a divine mother named "Female Pivot" (*Nü Shu* 女樞) who seems to be a female version of the Polar Star. Nü Shu conceived the prehistoric king or demigod Chuanhsü when she saw the seventh star of the Dipper, "Gemmy Light," piercing the moon like a rainbow.

In Taoism, Tou Mu has also been called *T'ien Hou* 天后 ("Queen of Heaven") and has been compared with *Kuan Yin* 觀音, the female form of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of Amitābha Buddha. Like Kuan Yin, T'ien Hou is of Indian origin. In India she was the Goddess of Dawn, *Marīci* ("Ray of Light"). The Tibetans called her *Semding* and every successive abbess was considered to be a reincarnation of Marīci.

The Chinese got to know her as the god *Chun-ti* 準提.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the Shang Dynasty (12th century B.C.), Chun-ti allegedly fought many wars in which gods, immortals and all kinds of spirits were involved. When in the seventh century A.D. Buddhists were persecuted in China, the Taoists adopted Chun-ti and transformed him into a goddess again, retaining, however, the warlike attributes of Chun-ti. At this time they gave her a husband and nine children.

The Queen of Heaven is also called *Ma Chu P'oh* 媽祖婆 ("Respected Grandaunt"), *Ma Tsu Ch'ung* 媽祖瓊 ("Respected Mother of Hainanese), and among others, *Su Yu Niang Niang* 俗優娘娘 ("Jade Empress Who Relieves the Suffering of the People"). One Singaporean legend says she was the daughter of a Hokkien sailor; the

Chinese encyclopedia *Tz'u Yuan* 辭源 (p. 377) reports her as the sixth daughter of a Fukien sailor named Lin Yuan who lived at in P'u-t'ien the time of the Sung dynasty (960-1179 A.D.). Comber (1958: 27-28) says,

One day, she had a vision in which she saw her father's junk caught in a storm and in peril of capsizing. She transformed herself into a water spirit and went to his assistance. She died at the early age of twenty, but her apparition has been seen skimming the waves many times since then by sailors. In the time of Emperor Yung Lo of the Ming dynasty (1403-1426 A.D.), she was deified as T'ien Fei (Lady-in-Waiting-to-Heaven), and not long afterwards a temple was built in her honour in the capital. Her style was subsequently changed to T'ien Hou (Queen of Heaven).

Comber (1958: 26-28) also tells us why the Queen of Heaven is often confused with Kuan Yin, frequently called the Goddess of Mercy. Both have, indeed, many attributes in common. "Both are merciful and kind and offer special protection to seafarers. But the Queen of Heaven is undoubtedly a Water Spirit and her origin differs considerably from that of the Goddess of Mercy."

Furthermore, the only feature T'ien Hou, the Queen of Heaven, has in common with Tou Mu, the mother of the Nine Imperial Gods, is the indication that earlier both may have been water spirits. However, Singaporeans have come to view the water spirits who have been elevated to the Taoist pantheon and Kuan Yin, the female form of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of Amitābha Buddha, as aspects of one and the same deity and they will name this deity according to their personal preferences, thus demonstrating the tendency from polytheism to monotheism.

Keeping these points in mind, let us now move to a discussion of the ceremonies in honor of the Nine Imperial Gods as they have been practiced in Singapore in recent years.

Ong Yew Kee, whose family owns the *Tou Mu Kong Temple* on Upper Serangoon Road in Singapore, is an accountant in his forties. He maintains that the Festival of the Nine Imperial Gods was introduced to Singapore by his grandfather Choo Kee. In 1910 his grandfather made a vow at a temple on the Malaysian island of Penang. He promised life-long fidelity to the gods in exchange for success in business affairs. After the deal in question had been closed satisfactorily, the grandfather bought the statue of one of the Nine Imperial Gods to represent all Nine Venerable Sovereigns (*Kau Wong Yeh* 九

王爺) and installed this statue in a small temple near his home in Singapore. However, an inscription on a tablet above the main entrance of the present, much larger, temple, tells us that the first temple was dedicated to Tou Mu, the mother of the Nine Imperial Gods, and was built on this site in the eighth month of 1881, i.e., twenty-nine years earlier than the temple of Mr. Ong's grandfather.

Soon after other Kau Wong Yeh temples were built in Singapore, e.g., the Hong San Temple at Lorong Tai Seng and the Leong Nan Buddhist Temple at Geylang Serai. The committees of each of these temples also claim that their sponsors introduced the Festival of the Nine Imperial Gods to Singapore. All agree, however, that the festival originated in Penang and all believe the gods bestow wealth and longevity on their devotees.

Belief in the Nine Imperial Gods continues to flourish. On the third and the sixth<sup>5</sup> day of each lunar month, large numbers of devotees come to worship the Nine Imperial Gods in their temples. In 1978, the crowds were largest on Sundays when devotees from all walks of life brought flowers, fruit and joss sticks. The Nine Imperial Gods are placated, as has been mentioned before, to grant longevity and to show their generosity by granting wealth as well.

It has been said that mainly women and older people will worship deities and spirits. The presence of more younger than older people and of more men than women in the temples, both during the year and at festival times, contradicts this opinion. One reason for the large number of men—and especially younger men—who come to worship at these temples may be that modern life has become more competitive for men and that young men in particular have difficulties in “finding their way.”

Representing a wide range of different age and sex groups, the devotees also come from different socio-economic groups, in fact, all socio-economic groups found in Singapore. Mr. Ong from the Upper Serangoon Road Temple stressed that his “regulars” include physicians and a prominent lawyer who was imprisoned during the Japanese occupation.

Some of the devotees maintain that they are Cantonese but English is spoken more commonly than any Chinese dialect. English is the first language in multi-ethnic Singapore. Of 2.5 million Singaporeans, 74 per cent are Chinese and among the Chinese population 42.2 are Hokkien, 22.4 per cent Teochew, 17 per cent Cantonese, 7 per cent Hainanese, and 7 per cent Hakka. Aside from the mediums who will speak the “language of the gods” (in Singapore usually an old form of Hokkien), the use of English has not diminished the vitality of Chinese

beliefs but the multi-ethnic as well as multi-religious environment added to the syncretism of customs and beliefs (14 per cent of Singapore's population are Malay, 11 per cent Indian and there are six religions—Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and folk religion not to count the philosophy of Confucius).

The main focus of activities around the Nine Imperial Gods is the festival during the first nine days of the ninth lunar month. Devotees will keep a vegetarian diet for one up to twelve days depending on the depth of their involvement and the degree of their piety.

The first day of the festival is marked by a procession to a river or the sea, whatever is closest to the temple, in order to "fetch the Nine Imperial Gods." (It should be remembered that the mother of these gods was originally a water spirit). When asked why the gods have to be fetched from a river, devotees may tell the following story:

During the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1912 A.D.), a rich man, head of a gentry family, invited many noblemen and wealthy people for dinner to celebrate his birthday. When a leprous beggar appeared, the guests showed their disgust and wanted to leave. The beggar advised to let the guests go, he would stay with the host overnight. The next morning it was discovered that the dikes had burst and that all those who had left during the night, had drowned in the ensuing flood. The host family and his property, however, remained untouched by the raging waters. The beggar then revealed that he was one of the Nine Imperial Gods who have power over rivers and seas and who control life and death.<sup>6</sup>

When the procession has reached the sea or a river, a Taoist priest invokes the spirits of the Nine Imperial Gods and invites them to descend into an urn with burning benzoin. It is believed that when the sacred ashes start to burn vigorously, the spirits have entered the flames. The urn is then put on a sedan chair and ceremoniously carried to the temple where it is kept at a secret place away from public view. The temple committee of the Tou Mu Kong Temple, Upper Serangoon Road, though, has decided to place the urn at the entrance of the central hall, so that all worshippers can pay homage to the deities when entering the sacred enclosure. In this case, secrecy is retained by permanently keeping another urn with ashes in a small pagoda behind the temple where only Taoist priests and Buddhist monks are permitted to enter.

Mr. Ong recalls that, in the past, devotees made the pilgrimage on foot. They had to walk for many miles and the whole procession had to wind its way in and out of traffic from the temple to the Wampon River and back. From 1974 on, processions have no longer been permitted to use main roads. Devotees therefore either use buses or cars

or travel on foot in small groups, leaving large distances between groups.

The number of sedan chairs used in processions differ. Depending on the decisions of the temple committees organizing the procession, two, four or nine sedan chairs seem to be in order. One of these chairs usually carries the sacred urn. One or more statues of the Nine Imperial Gods and one or two of accompanying gods may be placed on other chairs. The bearers of these sedan chairs are said to become possessed by the invisible deity they carry.

A professional medium may also accompany the procession so that messages of the gods can be related. That means, during a procession, it is improper to ask the medium, i.e., the deity through the medium, any questions. The deity, through the medium, however, points out spots where fatal accidents or killings have occurred. At these points, the procession will come to a halt, while a Taoist priest purifies the "unclean" site with blessed water and prayers to prevent malicious spirits from interfering with the festival and attaching themselves to one of the participants.

After the ritual fetching the gods from the river, devotees start to crowd through the temple doors which have already been opened at dawn. A bamboo pole with a yellow flag on top has been erected in front of the temple. Nine oil lamps,<sup>7</sup> each representing one of the Nine Imperial Gods, are hung from another bamboo pole which is tied crosswise to the first pole just below the yellow flag. Every morning and every afternoon at 5 o'clock, blessed water is sprinkled on the ground directly below these lamps to purify the site. Gongs are sounded to summon the gods and a temple committee member lowers the lamps, then hoists them again when the gods are supposed to have arrived. Mr. Sou Huat San, in his end twenties, who serves the Hong San Temple, told me that if one of the lights should suddenly flare up or explode, this indicates an impending disaster. He was quickly interrupted by other members who, in Hokkien and Teochew, told him to keep quiet and explained that such things rarely occur.

A bridge is put up on the temple grounds for the festival. Devotees cross this bridge before they enter the temple. This "rite of passage"<sup>8</sup> symbolizes the belief that the evils of the past year are left behind and that the worshippers enter a better future. Midway on the bridge, a temple committee member stamps the devotees' blouses or shirts just below the neck with a crimson stamp bearing the insignia of the deities. The red stamp seals the promise of the deities and is thought to ward off evil. At the end of the bridge crossing, the devotees receive yellow charm papers for more protection. These papers, on which the medium of the temple has painted divinely inspired characters, may



be burnt. Their ashes, will then be mixed with water, and drunk to internalize the blessings. Or the charm papers may be folded up and worn as amulets or they may be affixed to the walls of the devotees' houses. In addition, yellow threads may be tied to the wrists of devotees,<sup>9</sup> another precaution to avert evil. That means, the *ch'i* 氣 ("life force") of the devotees is prevented from escaping, evil influences are kept out and the threads, like the red stamp, also seal the promises of the deities. In return for the blessings, the devotees make donations in red envelopes (*ang paws* 紅包) and bring wax candles—some of these candles are up to nine feet tall—and thick incense sticks made out of sandalwood dust. Candles and incense sticks are frequently decorated with dragons and phoenixes. Fruit, rice and other food offerings are placed on the altar. These food offerings will be distributed among the devotees after the ceremonies and taken home for consumption. Some of the blessed rice will be added to the devotees' daily meals during the year.

Temples may put on *wayang* shows during the nine days of the Festival of the Nine Imperial Gods in Singapore. That means, Chinese operas are performed. The plot of such operas may unfold for two up to nine nights. Lion dancers and athletes may be asked to make an appearance. These shows are meant to entertain the deities while they are present in the temple. The worshippers keep coming and going, most of them using the opportunity to chat with other devotees they have not seen for a long time. Only a few settle down to enjoy the *wayang* for any appreciable period of time.

On the sixth day, temple compounds or the space where the festival is being celebrated are once again ritually purified with blessed water. For the Tou Mu Kong Temple, this water is drawn from the Kangkar River at the end of Upper Serangoon Road. At the Leong Nan Buddhist Temple, this ritual is omitted and the festival is celebrated continuously for the whole nine days. The committee of this temple invites at least forty monks to conduct the ceremonial chanting. When the monks take a rest, the gap is filled with taperecorded chanting.

Opinions about the attitudes of participants and assistants differ. The manager of the Leong Nan Temple who is in his end forties, explained to me that ceremonies should be carried out with reverence and the people taking part in them should be dressed in white as sign of their purity. Mr. Ong of the Tou Mu Kong Temple, however, found that outward display of piety is not necessary because all depends on the sincerity of the individual devotee. The celebrations at the Tou Mu Kong Temple therefore are kept as simple as possible. No well-known religious leaders deliver speeches. No invitations are sent out and no

dinner is prepared for the crowd. Formerly, the committee of the Tou Mu Kong Temple had requested the devotees to dress in white and had asked them to neither wear any silver or gold ornaments nor to use leather belts. Display of worldly wealth in front of the Nine Imperial Gods was regarded to be improper. Because the devotees ask for wealth and prosperity, any display of what they already possess would be out of place. The present temple committee is less rigid. Devotees are asked only to abstain from eating meat during festival time and are admonished to lead a "pure life" at least for the same period. White clothes, however, remained a must for temple assistants.

The assistants at festival times do not necessarily belong to the permanent entourage of the temple. With the large crowds many more volunteers are needed. The temple compound has to be swept clean and the crowd has to be kept moving through the different stages of worship. There are joss sticks, joss paper, candles, amulets to sell. The altar lamps have to be kept supplied with oil. Joss sticks have to be removed from altar urns to make room for the joss sticks of the next devotees and the stoves have to be controlled where piles of joss paper are continuously burned to appease the judges in hell and to furnish the soldiers of deified generals as well as the spirits of one's own ancestors with spending money. Bridges to cross have to be manned and there are many other important tasks. Most of the helpers are regular worshippers but many volunteers are total strangers. Nobody asks them for their reasons to volunteer. They are requested only to abstain from eating meat during festival time.

With more lion dancers, stilt walkers and musicians playing drums, cymbals, and gongs, the festival builds up to a climax on the ninth day. At the Tou Mu Kong Temple, a procession starts from the Upper Serangoon-Yio Chu Kang Junction to Kangkar at night. The procession is preceded by forty boys, each holding a colorful banner. The devotees carry joss sticks. They board trucks, buses, cars, and taxis to follow the gods. The sacred urn with the burning ashes, in which the Nine Imperial Gods are supposed to reside, is brought out of the temple and put on one of the sedan chairs. Other chairs may carry statues of the deities.

As soon as the chairs leave the temple, they begin to sway and to rock. Their bearers charge with the chairs into the crowd, running back and forth. Devotees bathe themselves in the thick smoke coming from the hundreds of joss sticks. Women may wave the smoke into their handbags. Then the chairs are put on trucks and everybody moves to a vacant lot at Kangkar where an altar has been erected and a Taoist priest is waiting.

A *chai koo* 齋姑 ("vegetarian nun") steps in front of the priest and performs a slow ritual dance, bending back, upright and sideways, rolling her hands ever so slowly above each other. The movements remind of *Tai Chi Chuan* 太極拳. Thus the nun is bidding the Nine Imperial Gods farewell, sending them off and wishing them a pleasant journey back to their stellar thrones.

The ritual lasts about one hour. During this time the assembly remains kneeling. Then the urn is carried to the Serangoon River. The Taoist priest, holding a yellow tablet, leads the way. When the procession reaches the fishing village at Kangkar, the people living there are already asleep because they have to get up at 3 a.m. to prepare the fish they caught for the daily auction. Their boats line the bank two or three deep. The jetty is decorated with burning candles right to the water and the Taoist priest launches the small boat on which the gods will sail home. The flaming urn is now put into the boat. The crowd remains silent, waiting for the boat to move which will indicate the gods' departure. When, after some time, the boat still has not moved and the priest as well as the boys with their banners have left, some of the fishermen may leap into their boats and turn on their engines. Then the water begins to churn and the gods are on their way.

The community of Gelang Serai, sponsoring the Leong Nan Temple, celebrated the Festival of the Nine Imperial Gods from the first to the tenth of October, 1978, at Katong, Mountbatten Road. Permission to use this parksite had been granted by the Singapore Bus Administration and the Physical Education Office of the Republic of Singapore.

On one side of the huge area, a temple tent had been put up. Large crowds came daily to pay respect to the statues of Amitābha Buddha, Kuan Yin, Kuan Kong, three of the Nine Imperial Gods (the second being the most important for this community), and the nine sedan chairs for the deities. Devotees kept coming to the temple tent. They placed their joss sticks, candles, and fruit on the different altars. Mediums were also available for consultation.

On the eighth day, the temple committee served a ceremonial dinner for ten thousand of their community members. Ten huge tents had been put up, each containing ten rows of ten tables which each seated ten guests. While everybody was waiting for the tasty vegetarian meal of many courses which had been prepared by fifteen caterers, the ceremony started with the chanted blessings of *Theravāda*<sup>10</sup> monks who had been recruited from local Ceylonese and Thai temples. After thirty minutes of chanted blessings from the Pāli Canon, the interest of the crowd diminished and dragons, held up by fifteen or more men,

began to dance in the aisles, breathing fire when the dragon "tamer" threw a chemical substance on the fire ball he carried on a stick which he also used to lead the way for the dragon. Athletes began to somersault and lions danced on the stage on the opposite side of the huge site. A Chinese opera was performed on the stage on the right end of the area, while the temple tent stood on the left end.

The Theravāda monks left their platform in a hurry, when the main medium, an elderly, stately woman clad as Kuan Yin, emerged from the temple tent. Waving swords and banners, the medium began to consecrate the site. Considering the size of the huge area, it was an admirable task which took almost one hour. She symbolically fought with the lion, subduing the animal, and she exorcised the entire space whirling a large pole which had two fire balls attached to each end.

During the dinner, representatives of the city, members of other communities, and guests of honor delivered seemingly endless speeches. The nine sedan chairs danced through the aisles. With these illuminated chairs, the gods, though invisible, made their presence felt. At the end of the long program, the medium signed a paper scroll with one hundred and eight panels. While members of the community sang Buddhist chants, she painted the characters with a brush in red. Her writing was supposed to be divinely inspired and did not necessarily resemble any known Chinese characters. The scroll with the one hundred and eight panels was then placed in the Leong Nan Temple to protect the community during the coming year.

Before the deities had to be sent off on the last day, the medium, once again clad as Kuan Yin and again wielding banners and swords, led a procession of over ten thousand devotees. She was preceded by other banner carriers. The devotees behind her were each holding three joss sticks and a candle. For two hours the crowd thus meandered slowly, in a very orderly way, across the huge space. While the procession was in progress, four women and three men, among them one Taoist priest and one *Mahāyāna*<sup>11</sup> monk, chanted the name of Amī-tābha Buddha. The singers took turns during the two hours of chanting, the *Mahāyāna* monk being the first to wear out and the lay women being the most enduring chanters. Singers, sedan chair carriers, and the crowd of devotees chanted themselves into different kinds of trances. Modern music, played on the stage on the far right hand side of the area, did not disturb them. The musicians only stopped when the main medium, leading the procession, came close to their stage. Minor mediums, who took the opportunity to offer their services, also fled when the main medium came in sight.

To illustrate the rationale behind the Festival of the Nine Im-

perial Gods as it was celebrated in Singapore at the beginning of October 1978, I will now cite excerpts from a speech delivered by Mr. Cheng Mu-Jung, Chairman of the General Administration Committee of the Leong Nan Temple, at the beginning of the ceremonial dinner.<sup>12</sup>

Good believers, both male and female, honored guests, with this ceremony today, the Lung-Nan<sup>13</sup> Temple honors the birthday of the second of the Nine Imperial Gods and also pays homage to the other Eight Imperial Gods. We are favored with the participation of high government officials and honored guests from all regions. There are senior monks conducting the ceremony and male and female believers who enthusiastically came to participate. There are certainly mountains and seas of people. All have come to accumulate good karma.<sup>14</sup> We all feel honored by your presence . . . . We received aid from all government departments to develop this vast site. They not only loaned the equipment but also took care of traffic and transportation problems. The enlightened government of our nation has the policy of looking at all religions equally. It has carried out this policy in a praiseworthy manner . . . .

The worship of the Nine Imperial Gods in our community has become more and more elaborate every year and the people who express their belief in carrying out the purifying services and in keeping the precepts<sup>15</sup> are also greatly increasing in number. The second eldest lord of the Nine Imperial Gods is the Star Lord of the nine luminaries.<sup>16</sup> He propounds propriety and filial piety and he urges mankind to give up killing and to practice goodness. This is a wonderful law to save the world. It is also directed toward the ills of the modern world and corresponds precisely to the law of the man-god vehicle.<sup>17</sup>

In the preceding paragraph, one god, called the Star Lord, propounds Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist ideas. Before we examine which religion dominates, let us look at the further arguments of this speech.

Many people have a wrong conception of the dharma<sup>18</sup> meeting of the Nine Imperial Gods, holding it for ordinary spiritual teaching because they don't know the complexities of Buddhist teaching. In fact, the dharma of the Buddha is divided into five vehicles. The first is the man-god vehicle, the second is that of the śravakas,<sup>19</sup> the third that of the Pratyeka Buddhas, the fourth that of the bodhisattvas, and the fifth and highest that of the Buddhas.<sup>20</sup> The

man-god vehicle stresses and propagates the correct ways of behavior for people living in our times. It expounds on the ethics which should be followed by mankind. The śravaka vehicle which is the Hīnayāna<sup>21</sup> is the basic law of the Buddha. It emphasizes the observance of the precepts and encourages spiritual cultivation. At the time of the [historical, my addition] Buddha, those who truly understood the twelve nidānas<sup>22</sup> pronounced by the Buddha, became enlightened. After the nirvāṇa<sup>23</sup> of the Buddha, people were left without master. They had to work their way through by themselves and through intense cultivation and one-pointed meditation they achieved the great release. They are called the sages of solitary enlightenment, i.e., Pratyeka Buddhas. The bodhisattva vehicle goes one step further. Those who practice this vehicle have broadened their hearts and practice the six degrees and the ten thousand ways. They have foregone their own enlightenment and widely work for the salvation of all sentient beings, like, for example, the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin who works for the salvation of all those who suffer and the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha<sup>24</sup> who made a vow to help all sentient beings suffering in the hells. Having given such great examples, we can truly call them bodhisattvas. The highest vehicle is that of the Buddhas. It can only be reached by those who cultivate the way of the bodhisattvas, attain the level of highest virtue and austerity and thus complete their enlightenment. Through their virtues they reap the fruits of supreme enlightenment<sup>25</sup> and can be called Buddhas. You can see that in Buddhist practices one advances step by step and cannot attain the highest, most perfect level in one stride.

The thoughts expressed in this paragraph are pure Mahāyāna Buddhism, although the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha may appear in Taoist hells as well. The speaker then changed his style to preaching a sermon.

The world in which we now live goes through the last stages of this kalpa.<sup>26</sup> Our thinking is extremely complex and there are all sorts of extremely diverging and confusing conflicts in this world, all kinds of fights, hatred, people going constantly to extremes. All this has contributed to the tragedy of the current world crisis. If we look at the causes, we see that basic principles violate conventions. Mankind pays only attention to material happiness and no attention to the spiritual enlightenment of the masses, to holding human society together and to maintaining peace and security. The goal of holding the dharma meeting of the Nine Imperial Gods is to propagate the principles of the man-god vehicle of Buddhism,

that means, to promote the moral concepts of our superior Eastern tradition and to make it possible for all men to carry out these principles effortless and with a heart devoted to abstaining from killing, to promoting of vegetarianism and to fostering of benevolence to suppress violent thought and action. Once our heart is devoted to benevolence, the virtue of forgiveness will become widespread and we will be able to coexist in peace with all nationalities. We also wish to promote filial piety for our father and mother and foster recognition of what others have done for us in repaying them. Doing this we truly earn the place we occupy in society and are good citizens. Because if we do not think of supporting our father and mother and cast off this duty, how then can we think of the welfare of our society and make true and loyal contributions to our nation. It is clear when it is said “to climb high, you must humble yourself; in going far, you must make the first steps yourself.”

The speaker again mixed Confucian with Buddhist and Taoist principles, before he turned to the main topic of his speech—the Nine Imperial Gods.

Why do we say that the dharma meeting of the Nine Imperial Gods follows the law of the man-god vehicle? According to Buddhist scriptures, when the Buddha, in the Heaven of Purity, taught the essentials of the dharma to the assembled lords, Indra and Brahma,<sup>27</sup> that means, gods, yakṣas, nāgas, bhikṣus, bhikuṇis, upāsakas, and upāsikās,<sup>28</sup> at that time, Mañjuśrī stood up from his seat and asked the Buddha to speak to the assembled heavenly beings about the seven primal star lords of the Northern Dipper. They were all Buddhas of the past who manifested to save and be of benefit to all sentient beings. Buddha said, “the eldest and first of the Northern Dipper is grand k’uei, luminosity of yang, the voracious wolf, the great star lord. He is the harbinger of the one who will come to the eastern world and who is called jina,<sup>29</sup> peerless.

These words seem to hint at the messianic mission of the first star lord who is likened to Maitreya, the Buddha-to-come, but let’s follow the train of thought of the speaker.

And that what Buddha mentioned appeared. “The second eldest lord of the Northern Dipper, the primal star lord, grand k’uei, essence of yin, vast gate, comes from the eastern world and is called wonderful treasure.” And that what Buddha said appeared. The quotations cited above sufficiently show that the dharma meet-

ing of the Nine Imperial Gods conforms with the doctrines of Buddhism. The scriptures say, the officials and the laymen of this world, monks and nuns, those within the Tao and those without, both of high and of low positions, insofar as they have an understanding and feeling, all are under the sovereignty of the Northern Dipper. When they are capable of sincerely cultivating and keeping the precepts according to the dharma, not only will their positions be raised and their lives lengthened, they will also gain salvation from being reborn and, being reborn in one of the heavens, they will live beyond suffering . . . . So it is my hope that all of you listening will be able to adopt the benevolent heart of the Buddha and will abstain from killing and will release life.<sup>30</sup> At the time of weddings or at the time of the death of a loved one, it is best to pile up blessings by releasing life and giving alms to practice benevolence . . . . On the other hand, whoever continues to kill during this time, will reap only harm and won't get any benefit. And so, I humbly and respectfully urge you to spread these doctrines . . . then everyone will be happy and every home will prosper . . . . [The speech ended with quoting a paragraph from the "Wondrous Scripture of the Northern Dipper for the Prolongation of Life."]

This speech shows clearly that the worship of the Nine Imperial Gods in Singapore may occur in a Buddhist context and be reinforced by the philosophies of Lao-Tzu and Confucius and that the rituals during the festivals have retained elements of earlier developments.

The element of fetching the gods from a waterway reminds us that water spirits were accepted in the Taoist pantheon where they became star gods. We note that the Nine Imperial Gods are supposed to reside on the stars of the Northern Dipper and that North is associated with the element of water, the principle of life and death or fate. When, Schafer (1977 : 221) tells us that star worship was already firmly established in Han times (202 B.C.-A.D. 221), this means that the Nine Imperial Gods became star lords before religious Taoism developed in the second century A.D.

Later Taoism absorbed Buddhist elements and the dipper gods became Buddhas who would manifest in bodhisattvas. The medium of the Nine Imperial Gods of the Leong Nan Temple appears clad as Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of Amitābha Buddha and the festival of this temple in Singapore culminates indeed with chanting the name of Amitābha Buddha. Furthermore, Buddhist precepts are so close to tenets of philosophical Taoism that calls for benevolent actions and abstention from killing blend without difficulty. Confucianism adds the



call for filial piety and loyalty to the state. Thus we find in Mr. Cheng's speech three world religions applied to Chinese folk religious practices.

When we talk about the Festival for the Nine Imperial Gods, we are basically talking about Folk Taoism. Esoteric Taoism upholds the view that

the stars were not gods but the chosen tokens and guises of cosmic beings, who might assume other guises and reveal themselves in other symbols. They were deities whose location was nowhere, who existed simultaneously in the brain and in outerspace, and could exhibit their numinous presence in any manner or place that seemed desirable. It would be demeaning to suggest that the adept could invoke or command their presence—rather he could, by patient study and years of discipline, create wholesome mental and physiological conditions within his person which made it possible for the gods to reach him, or, what amounted to the same thing, made it possible for him to perceive the divine presences (Schafer 1977: 224).

The practitioners of Folk Taoism, however, seek more immediate and material rewards, that means, longevity and wealth.

Harada (1979) has reviewed some of the numerous works on dipper lore.<sup>31</sup> He reports that, although Singaporeans believe the Festival of the Nine Imperial Gods came from Penang, a youth named Lin Yin brought scrolls of the Nine Imperial Gods, at the time of an epidemic, from China to Malaysia. The scrolls are now in the temple of the Nine Imperial Gods at Ampang near Kuala Lumpur and the master of ceremonies at this temple still claims to be related to Lin Yin. The devotees of the Ampang temple believe that nine retainers during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) were beheaded and later manifested in spirit form. They became the protectors of the country. People remembered them over the centuries and finally commissioned statues of them, calling the objects of their worship the Nine Imperial Gods.

Harada suggests that the belief in the Nine Imperial Gods may have originated in Fukien. He is not certain how many Imperial Gods were worshipped in China and whether images were made of them or not. The belief in the Nine Imperial Gods, though, spread to Yunan, from where it entered Thailand and then was brought to Malaysia.

Harada adds that the worship of Tou Mu, the mother of the Nine Imperial Gods, was widespread in northern as well as in southern China. Temples dedicated to her were found in Peking, Soochow and Hainan.

The stages of the festival at Ampang are similar to those in Singapore:

- (1) The gods have to be summoned and brought in from a waterway.
- (2) Lamps and banners are hoisted in the temple compound.
- (3) The site where the festival is celebrated has to be purified and all active participants have to vow to lead a pure life at least for the ten days of celebrations and it is generally expected that they wear white robes while assisting with the ceremonies.
- (4) Pails with rice and other food are placed on the altar to be blessed by the gods. After the final ceremony of the festival, the devotees take the food home for their own consumption. During the coming year they will add part of the blessed rice to each of their daily meals.
- (5) Pious devotees will walk unharmed on fire as proof of their belief. This phase was dropped in Singapore several years ago, because it was too difficult to control a crowd of over ten thousand participants during the fire walking. Onlookers had been in danger of being pushed into the fire.—It seems that the element of fire counteracts the damaging influences of the element of water and thus symbolizes the victory of life over death.
- (6) The gods are ceremonially sent off on a waterway.

Thus we can see that the ceremonies for the Nine Imperial Gods are remarkably similar wherever they are performed—in Singapore or Malaysia.

The worship of the Nine Imperial Gods and the rationale behind it are certainly syncretistic. It is this syncretism which makes the celebrations so relevant and satisfactory for practitioners who live in Singapore, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious city-state. More legends about the Nine Imperial Gods will doubtlessly be discovered in the future and will allow an in-depth analysis of the underlying motifs which led to the formation of such beliefs. We can also expect that new legends may even be created to keep the beliefs in the Nine Imperial Gods and their mother alive. The study of the socio-psychological dynamics of these customs has just begun.

## NOTES

1. This calculation is based on the lunar calendar and generally corresponds to about the beginning of October according to the solar calendar.

2. Four stars form the bowl (*k'uei* 魁) of the Dipper and three stars form its handle (*shuo* 杓). When we add the two invisible stars we reach the figure nine (Comber 1958: 20).

The word "dipper" should be interpreted as not only the stellar constellation and the residence of the Nine Imperial Gods but also should be thought of as a bowl with a handle used in temples for offerings.

Schafer, in his book on "Pacing the Void . . ." (1977), mentions furthermore that Chinese saw the constellation of Ursa Major as being the chariot of celestial beings.

It is not surprising that the names of the Nine Imperial Gods correspond with the names of the stars forming the Big Dipper. The stars corresponding with the last three names—*T'ien Ch'ung*, *T'ien Jui* and *T'ien P'eng*—are sometimes called *T'ien chung*, *T'ien feng* and *T'ien ping* respectively. Names are frequently mistranscribed. I have therefore decided to transcribe words according to the authors quoted. Wherever possible, I have supplied the Chinese characters to avoid confusion.

3. Yü divided China into nine provinces and had nine *ding* 鼎 ("cauldrons") cast to represent each of these provinces. These nine *ding* became symbols of power and prestige.

4. Chun-ti appears as a Taoist in Chapter 65 of the novel *Feng-shen yen-i* 封神演義 ("Tales about Integrating Spirits"). He allegedly lived at the end of the Shang and the beginning of the Chou Dynasties (according to the new chronology, around 1050 B.C.). In Chapter 71 of the above-mentioned novel he rides a red peacock and in Chapter 78 he represents the "Doctrine of the West." A modern "Study of the Landman Organizations" (*T'ung-hsiang tsu-chih-chih yen-chiu* 同鄉組織之研究 p. 40) mentions him as a deity in the clubhouse of the businessmen of Kiangsu/Chekiang. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Wolfram Eberhard for bringing these references to my attention.

5. These numbers are considered to be auspicious.

6. Harada (1979) mentions two sources for this tale, Liu Kou Win and Chu Chin T'ao. These authors think the Nine Imperial Gods are either *avatāras* ("incarnations") of Tou Mu or transformations of the Northern and the Southern Dipper, one representing life, one representing death, thus determining the fate of the people.

7. Schipper (1974: 318) reports that at a Taoist ceremony in Taiwan five or more votive oil lamps play an important part. He says "They are called *tou-teng*, bushel lamps . . . . These lamps symbolize *fate*: bushel=measure=the Dipper=the controller of Destiny." There is a connection between community representatives and the bushel lamps, "because each lamp represents the destiny of a given representative; together they stand for the fate of the community." In general, there will be five main dignitaries. "The title of the last of the five, Head of the Lamp of Heaven, refers to another votive lamp, which unlike the *tou-teng* is placed outside, in front of the temple, where it hangs on a long bamboo pole."

8. See Van Gennepe (1960).

9. For a discussion of the custom of tying the wrists (a) to keep out evil, (b) to keep one's vital essence inside, and (c) to seal a contract with a god or gods, see Heinze (1981).

10. Sanskrit, "The Word of the Elders," the oldest, more orthodox school of Buddhism.

11. Sanskrit, "The Greater Vehicle," a later form of Buddhism which among others developed the ideal of the bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be), a savior figure who foregoes his own enlightenment to save all sentient beings.

12. A printed version of this speech was distributed during the ceremonial dinner to which the temple committee had invited me. They gave me a copy of this speech. I am grateful to Professor Wolfram Eberhard and Stephen Bokenkamp for assisting me in preparing this translation.

13. 龍南 "Dragon South"; Hokkien, Leong Nan.

14. Sanskrit, "something that has been done"; the fruit of one's thoughts, words, and actions which will determine the quality of one's present and future lives; a basic concept in Hindu and Buddhist beliefs.

15. The ten Buddhist precepts can be compared with the Ten Commandments in Judaism and Christianity, the first Buddhist precept being "to abstain from taking life" ("do not kill").

16. The sun, the moon and the five planets, plus Rahu and Ketu.

17. In the *Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* (Soothill 1975) we find the explanation that (1) all those who observe the first five precepts will be reborn in the world of man; (2) all those who practice the ten forms of good action will be reborn in one of the heavens, i.e., will become gods; (3) all those who practice the Four Noble Truths will become Buddhist disciples; (4) all those who practice the twelve *nidānas* will become Pratyeka Buddhas, and (5) all those who practice the five *pāramitās* ("perfections") will become Buddhas or bodhisattvas. The speaker in Singapore puts men and gods into the same category but bodhisattvas and Buddhas into two different groups.

18. Sanskrit, "Universal Law," in this case, the Buddha's teachings.

19. Sanskrit, Buddhist "disciples," "those who listen," hence "monks."

20. It is believed that many Buddhas have manifested on this earth before the historical Buddha appeared. According to Theravāda tradition, he lived from 623–543 B.C., according to most Western scholars, from 563–483 B.C. Other Buddhas will materialize in the future, Maitreya being the next Buddha-to-come.

21. Sanskrit, "Small Vehicle," a slightly derogatory name Mahāyānists may use for Theravāda Buddhism (see notes 10 and 11).

22. Sanskrit, "cause, underlying factor."

23. Sanskrit, "blowing out," extinction of all defilements (*kleśas*), ultimate enlightenment.

24. Sanskrit, "Earth Treasure," one of the eight *dhyāni* (transcendent, produced by meditation) bodhisattvas. Probably first a female deity, Kṣitigarbha became the guardian of the earth and is associated with Yama who rules over the dead in the hells. From the fifth century A.D. on, Kṣitigarbha started to play the role of a savior who delivers sufferers from the hells which were believed to be located in Central China.

25. In Sanskrit, *amuttarā saṃyāk saṃbodhi*.

26. Sanskrit, a fabulous period of time, millions of years.

27. Hindu deities have become the protectors of Buddhism. They live in one of twenty-two possible heavens and are in need of salvation themselves. After they have enjoyed the fruit of their good karma in one of the heavens, they will be reborn on earth to cultivate themselves for their final nirvāṇa.

28. Sanskrit, "tree spirits," "mystical serpents" (guardians of the Dharma and protectors of the Buddha), "monks," "nuns," "male devotees" (who keep the ten precepts), "female devotees" (who keep the ten precepts), respectively.

29. Sanskrit, "victor," *arhat* (Buddhist saint), the Buddha.

30. During the festival vendors of fish and birds give the devotees an opportunity "to release life."

31. Harada mentions especially Liu Kuo Win, a scholar residing in Penang, and Chu Chin T'ao, and among the Taoist scriptures, he cites Yün Chi Ch'i Ch'ien 雲笈七籤, Chiu Huang Tou Mu Shuo 九皇斗母說, Chieh Sha Yen Shêng Chên Ching 解煞演生真經 and Chiu Huang Hsin Ching Chu Chieh 九皇新經注解.

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