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The Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods in Malaysia: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol

Abstract

The present paper describes and analyzes the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, a popular celebration among the Chinese in Malaysia. The origins of the myth of the Nine Emperor Gods may be traced back to the Nine Human Sovereigns of Chinese tradition, to the historical events of the Han and Ming dynasties, and to the circumstances of the Chinese immigration into Malaysia. The myth of the Nine Emperor Gods is enacted in a body of rituals, the significance of which is reflected in the symbolic representations of the gods. Myth, ritual, and symbol are thus ideologically interrelated to form a structural framework for the interaction of the yin-yang forces at different levels of the cosmic representations featured in the festival. The festival provides a venue for the yearly renewal of cosmic power, so that human life may be rejuvenated and human conflicts resolved.

Key words: Nine Emperor Gods — festival — myth — ritual — macrocosm — microcosm — infracosm

THE Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods (*Jiuhuangye* 九皇爺) in Malaysia is a form of temple fair celebrated only at temples dedicated to these gods. In a 1984 survey I found thirty-nine such temples in Peninsular Malaysia and none in the states of Sabah and Sarawak. In 1990 the number in Peninsular Malaysia had increased to fifty. My latest surveys, in 1991 and 1992, revealed a further three temples in the West Coast Residency of Sabah (two in Kota Kinabalu and one in Labuan).¹

The organization of the festival can be represented in the form of two large concentric circles. The inner circle forms the core of religious worship (*baibai* 拜拜),² while the outer circle represents the surrounding economic activity. The former aspect is manifested in the festival's numerous religious services and venues for devotion; a devout believer may even stay in the vegetarian lodge to meditate, study the scriptures, and interact with fellow vegetarians. The second aspect is represented by the brisk business of hawkers, peddlers, incense-stall keepers, and other petty traders (CHEU 1988, 19), as well as by the large donations received by the temples. Devotees are required to pay varying sums of money for ceremonies to maintain luck, to dissolve ill luck, and to give thanks (CHEU 1988, 114).³ Hence the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods may be seen not only as a spiritually inspired religious celebration, but also as an economically motivated religious fair.

Simple as the festival may appear to the layperson, it is in fact a quite complex affair. Because of this, long-term systematic planning is necessary. At the Nan Tian Gong 南天宮 in the community of Ampang,⁴ monthly meetings are held by an organizing committee composed of twenty members and a chairman. This committee, which is wholly responsible for organizing the festival, is helped by about two hundred members of the laity in the daily running of the festival.

The festival gets under way on the last day (28th or 29th) of the eighth lunar month. This is signified by the erection of a tall lamp

(*gaodeng* 高燈 or *jiuqudeng* 九曲燈) to the left of the temple square. Here a consecration ritual is performed to purify the temple grounds and deploy the spirit soldiers of heaven and earth, water and fire to the five ritual camps: the inner altar, dedicated to Doumu 斗母 (the Mother of the Big Dipper); the central altar, dedicated to the Jade Emperor, the God of Fate, Fude Zhengshen 福德正神 (or Dabogong 大伯公), and Guanyin 觀音 (Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion); the outer altar, dedicated to Tiangong 天公 (the Sky Deity); the star deities' altar, dedicated to Beidou 北斗 (the Big Dipper) and Nandou 南斗 (the Southern Dipper);⁵ and the tall lamp, dedicated to Tianguan Cifu 天宮賜福 (the Heavenly Official Who Confers Luck).⁶

The actual celebrations begin with the staging of an Amoy opera on the first day of the ninth moon, and builds to a climax with *koujun* 冠軍 (special feasts for the spirit soldiers and laity) on the third, sixth, and ninth days. The end of the celebration is marked on the tenth day by the lowering of the tall lamp and the recalling of the spirit soldiers from their respective posts.

For the purpose of this discussion I will focus on the three basic themes that most vividly characterize the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods: myth, ritual, and symbol. The mythic element of the festival always forms an important part of the ritual process, and the ritual always enacts myth or commemorates something related to myth (the Amoy opera, performed morning, afternoon, and evening, provides an important venue for this). Myth and ritual are in turn often manifested in symbolic form. A symbol is, in a word, something that stands for something else; it has a form of its own, and embodies a set, or sets, of meanings relating to myth and ritual. Symbols take the form of objects, acts, events, qualities, or relationships that serve as vehicles for conception — the vehicle is the form, and the conception is the symbol's meaning (LANGER 1960). A symbol, in other words, is a tangible formulation of a notion or belief (GEERTZ 1973).

THE NINE EMPEROR GODS MYTH

What, then, is the myth underlying the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods? There are, in fact, many written and unwritten versions of the Nine Emperor Gods myth, the former transmitted in texts and scriptures and the latter in various regional oral traditions in Malaysia and other parts of Peninsular Southeast Asia.⁷

The Classic Version

One of the earliest versions of the Nine Emperor Gods myth is linked to

the story of the Nine Human Sovereigns (*Jiurenhuang* 九人皇). The Nine Human Sovereigns, who, according to legend, lived in China thousands of years ago (WERNER 1932; DORE 1967), are Tianying 天英, Tianren 天仁, Tianzhu 天柱, Tianxin 天心, Tianqin 天禽, Tianfu 天輔, Tianchong 天冲, Tianrui 天芮, and Tianpeng 天蓬. Tianying, the eldest, is sometimes called Jiutoushi 九頭氏. The Nine Emperor Gods are said to be the reincarnations of these monarchs.

In Dore's account, the Nine Human Sovereigns are identified as the sons of Doumu. Doumu, also called Tianlao 天老 (the Grand One in Heaven), Daomu 道母 (the Mother of the Way), Doumu Tianzun 斗母天尊 (the Heaven-honored Big Dipper Mother), or Doulao 斗姥 (Old Woman of the Big Dipper),⁸ is said to have gained enlightenment after many years of meditation and occult study, and to have imparted her knowledge to the sons. Her spiritual power so impressed Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊 (Primordial Heaven) that she and her husband, Cheng Jucong 程巨從 (the king of Zhouyu 周御; title, Doufu Tianzun 斗父天尊, the Heaven-honored Big Dipper Father), were placed in control of the pivot of the north pole, around which the nine stars of the Big Dipper revolved under the surveillance of the nine sons (DORE 1967; DAY 1969).⁹ Together they were endowed with the power of controlling the heavens and the existence of all earthly creatures below.

Although Malaysian devotees of the Nine Emperor Gods are not aware of this version, certain Nine Emperor God temples do invoke the names of the Nine Human Sovereigns. C. S. WONG, for example, uses the appellation "Nine Venerable Sovereigns" in his account (1967). Most of the temples, however, have no idea that the Nine Emperor Gods are the children of Doumu; some temple-keepers say that the nine divinities were Doumu's adopted sons or disciples.

The Han Version

A second written version, given by DOOLITTLE (1966), is also little known among devotees, but nevertheless contains several of the motifs basic to many of the Malaysian myths of the Nine Emperor Gods (myths that often differ significantly from place to place and sometimes from temple to temple in the same region).

Doolittle's version dates back to the end of the Han dynasty, when the Taoist magician Zhang Daoling (Zhang Tianshi) used charms and talismans to cure the afflicted. Those consulting him were required to pay five pecks of rice, because of which his cult was nicknamed *wudoumi dao* 五斗米道 (the way of the five pecks of rice). Some accounts claim that he used magic to spread epidemics, causing people to turn to him for

treatment. By so doing he became wealthy and powerful, so much so that he no longer bothered to pay taxes to the royal court.

Aware of his actions, the emperor summoned him to the palace to teach him a lesson. In preparation the emperor ordered nine scholar-musicians into a secret compartment and told them to start playing eerie music as soon as a secret switch was thrown. When Zhang Daoling was before him the emperor threw the switch, then asked Zhang to exorcise the “spirits” that were causing unrest in the palace. The emperor was certain that Zhang would fail and thus be humiliated.

His plan backfired, however. Upon being challenged to exorcise the demons, Zhang calmly looked around the palace. He then unfolded his magic fan, which immediately revealed the whereabouts of the musicians. He scattered some rice and salt on the floor, then made a chop with his magic sword. All nine scholars in the secret compartment were beheaded and the eerie music came to a halt.

Because of his fear that the nine scholar-musicians would haunt the palace, the emperor ordered the severed heads to be interred in a large earthenware vase. The vase was sealed, labeled with a talisman paper to prevent the spirits from escaping, then thrown into the sea. Shortly afterwards, however, the emperor was disturbed night after night by dreams in which the bloody apparitions of the nine musicians appeared, asking him to canonize them as the “Nine Emperor Gods.” The emperor was too frightened to refuse.

This version, as mentioned above, has served as a model for many of the oral myths circulating among devotees. The main difference is that Doolittle’s version ends at the nine scholars’ canonization by the emperor, while many of the oral versions recount the adventures of the nine severed heads in the earthenware vase and their final ascent to heaven. Some genres emphasize the white blood that oozed from the heads, thus accounting for devotees’ wearing of white headgear during the festival.

Nan Tian Gong Version

The Nan Tian Gong account is one that takes the Han version a bit further, relating that some fishermen found a vase floating in the sea off Kongka (Songkhla). Strange voices came from it, calling for help. As the fishermen’s boat approached the vase a voice beseeched them to remove the talisman paper and unseal the vase. They did as they were told, and saw nine heads soaring into the sky in broad daylight!

Later one of the fishermen had a dream in which the nine divine brothers warned him of an impending storm, but assured him that he would be safe if he erected a flag on the masthead with “Jiuhuangye”

(Nine Emperor Gods) written on it. The fisherman followed the instruction, but the other crews just laughed at him when he advised them to do the same. Sure enough, the next time they set sail there was an unusually fierce storm, and all the boats except the one bearing the flag were wrecked and their crews drowned.

The Penang Version

The Penang version suggests that the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods is held in remembrance of the nine brothers associated with the last prince of the Ming dynasty. These brothers, from a fishing village in Fujian Province, are said to have helped the prince escape by forming a squad that escorted him from Fujian to Songkhla, Thailand, via Yunnan. They arrived in Songkhla under the guidance of the nine northern stars; after their arrival the stars gradually disappeared, and so did the prince and the nine divine brothers.

Shortly afterwards, the story goes, nine censors were found floating on the sea near Songkhla (some accounts mention instead Phuket Island, off the west coast of southern Thailand). The censors were believed to be the manifestations of the nine divine brothers, who had since ascended to the southern heavens. Their spirits, however, continue to visit the Chinese community during their yearly tour of the South Seas. Censors, regarded as the vehicles of the Nine Emperor Gods, are still used in the welcoming and sending-off ceremonies of the festival.

Ampang Version

This version relates the connection of the Hong Secret Society (*hongmenhui* 洪門會 or *hong banghui* 洪邦會) in Penang to the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods. According to this account, a Hong member by the name of Wan Yunlong was killed in a battle with the Qing forces at Changsha, Hunan, on the ninth day of the ninth month 1783. His followers fled to Thailand, where, rebuffed by the Thai authorities, they moved south to the Penang area in present-day Malaysia. Some Hong members settled in Ampang, where they worked as planters and farmers and organized a clandestine movement to overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming.

Once when this group was performing an initiation ritual for new recruits the police came to investigate. When they inquired about the purpose of the gathering, the group replied that it was praying for peace and protection. Seeing that there was only an incense urn and no image of any sort, the police said, "There's no deity here — what are you worshipping?" Thereupon one quick-witted soul pointed at the incense urn

and replied, "This is the god [*shen* 神] we worship!" Amused by the answer, the police asked, "If this incense urn is your god, then what is it called?" Another member replied, "It is called Jiuhuang Dadi 九皇大帝." The police took their word for it and departed. This accounts for the use of an incense urn to represent the Nine Emperor Gods during the festival.

This version owes its credibility to the fact that Ampang is still a stronghold of secret-society activity (CHEU 1982). The name Ampang itself is a legacy of the Triad group known as the Tiandihui 天地會 (Heaven and Earth Society): *Ampang* was originally *Anbang* 暗邦 (dark society or secret society), which was later changed to *Anbang* 安邦 (peaceful society). It is quite suggestive in this regard that during the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods two texts that signify the Tiandihui — the *Tiangongjing* 天公經 [The scripture of the heavenly father] and *Dimujing* 地母經 [The scripture of the earthly mother] — are read in the temples (CHEU 1993, 24–25).

THE RITUALS OF THE NINE EMPEROR GODS

Although ritual is related to myth, its performance does not require an understanding of myth. Thus many devotees carry out the rituals of the Nine Emperor Gods without knowing their underlying meaning or the related myths and symbols. To them, faith (*chengxin* 誠心) in the beliefs of their ancestors is more important — as long as they have such faith, what the myths say is of little concern. Belief therefore complements and supplements ritual: the former provides the theory while the latter provides the practical expression. Faith in the power of the Nine Emperor Gods to cure sickness and confer luck, wealth, and long life is sufficient to induce devotees to participate in the rituals; an understanding of the Jiuhuangye myth is not needed. The fact that their ancestors believed and participated in the rituals is evidence enough of its authenticity and efficacy. Myth, therefore, is taken as a matter of faith rather than as a matter of fact.

One of the ritual practices of the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, that of abstaining from meat, is related to the custom in the Chinese Double-Nine Festival (Chongyangjie 重陽節) of "mounting the height" (*denggao* 登高) on the ninth day of the ninth month, in which believers go to mountain resorts to avert misfortune and usher in luck (CHEU 1982). In Fuzhou and Taiwan kite flying during the festival serves the same purpose.¹⁰ The *denggao* ritual can be traced back to a fifth-century tale in which a Taoist magician, Fei Changfang 費長房, advised his friend Huan Jing 桓景 to take his family to a hilltop to avoid a calam-

ity to come on the ninth day of the ninth month. While Huan Jing and his family were on the hill a catastrophe did indeed occur, and all the domestic animals were killed. Huan Jing and his family were thankful to the animals for having died in their place. Believers subsequently abstained from meat during the Double-Nine Festival as a form of penance.

The Welcoming Ritual

The welcoming ritual, the first ceremony in the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, has at nearly every festival I have observed at Nan Tian Gong since 1977 taken the form of a street procession led by two disciples holding the two sides of an eight-trigram flag. Behind them four disciples carry a huge drum on a litter. After this come the members of a traditional musical choir, some of whom clang gongs, clash cymbals, and play oboes. Next come half a dozen sword-wielding and skewer-bearing spirit mediums, followed by the carriers of six sedan chairs and palanquins that convey the Jiuhuangye incense urn and the portraits of local deities. Following this are members of the organizing committee, including the *daoshi* 道士 (Taoist priests), *luzhu* 爐主 (censer master), *toujia* 頭家 (bosses), and a group of male and female disciples and devotees, each holding a lighted white candle and a bundle of incense papers with nine lighted joss sticks.

The procession leaves from the temple, passes through the Chinese residential quarters in Ampang, and stops at a river where the welcoming ritual is performed.¹¹ This is done in great secrecy, hidden from view by white cloths and protected by a truckload of riot police requested by the temple. The priest stands in the middle of the shallow stream and recites a prayer and incantations, beseeching the star deities to descend. When the Taoist gives the signal at the time of the deities' arrival, the censer master gently submerges the incense urn to its rim and slightly tilts its mouth to scoop up a drop of water; the drop that rolls into the urn is believed to symbolize the spirit of the gods. He reverently covers the urn with a yellow pennant, ceremoniously lifts it out of the water with both hands, and gently places it in the star deities' palanquin.

This is followed by the boom of the great drum and the sound of gongs, cymbals, and oboes as the palanquin is lifted from the ground. The return procession heads slowly and triumphantly towards the temple following the same route it came by, the barefoot flag-bearers marching with high-raised steps, portraying an air of pomp and grandeur. On arriving at the temple the flag-bearers usher the star deities into the Big Dipper Mother's palace, where no one except the censer master

is allowed to enter and where the spirit of the Divine Nine is believed to reside until the end of the festival.

Worship Ritual

The worship rituals performed during the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods are basically the same as those performed on ordinary occasions. Worship is called *baishen* 拜神 or *baifo* 拜佛, the two terms generally being used interchangeably. Only occasionally is a distinction made between them: *baishen* may be used when invisible spirits are worshipped, and *baifo* when idols are worshipped. The idols include representations of Buddha (*fo* 佛), bodhisattvas (*fozu* 佛祖) like Guanyin and Dizangwang (Kṣitigarbha), and other Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist saints like Guangong (the deity of war), Confucius, and Taishang laojun 太上老君 (Laozi 老子).

Worship in the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods involves the ritual process of presenting oneself at the temple with the intention of communicating with the Nine Emperor Gods and other related deities. The ritual is signified by the display of greeting gestures, or prostrations, in front of the altar of the Nine Emperor Gods. Devotees perform the ritual either silently or audibly, saying prayers, making vows, returning vows (*huanyuan* 還願), or reciting scriptures or incantations (*nianzhou* 唸咒). The scriptures recited at Nan Tian Gong include the aforementioned *Tiangongjing* and *Dimujing*, the *Beidoujing* [The scripture of the Big Dipper], and *Nandoujing* [The scripture of the Southern Dipper].

Worship rituals often include the offering of tea, fruit, flowers, and money, and the sacrificial burning of joss sticks, white candles, incense papers, paper images, charm papers, and other ritual paraphernalia. Worship also usually includes adding oil to temple lamps (or making offerings for the purchase of oil) and performing divinations (*bobei* 卜貝) to ascertain the Nine Emperor Gods' response to prayers, vows, offerings, and sacrifices.

Trance Ritual

Trance dances and trance rituals are also performed by the spirit mediums during the festival. The performance of these is one aspect of spirit mediumship, as opposed to spirit *possession*. In the former the deity conveys a message that is comprehensible and translatable, while in the latter no message is conveyed and any utterances that are made are neither comprehensible nor translatable.

Although spirit mediumship involves both trance dance and trance ritual, the two are inseparable: every trance dance contains a ritual, and

every trance ritual is enacted in the form of a dance. However, the trance dances and rituals may be divided into two general categories: those performed for the benefit of the community and those performed for an individual.

Trance dances and rituals that are performed in the streets and in the vicinity of the temple are believed to purify the environment for the general well-being of the entire community. A dance known as the lion dance, for instance, is thought to recreate the breathing rhythm of a lion and thereby coordinate the interaction of yin and yang influences. The lion's exhalation is believed to repel yin forces, and its inhalation to draw in yang forces from the surrounding area. In this way, the lion attracts yang and repels yin, thereby insuring the harmony of the environment. The same effect is produced, it is thought, by a performance in which the spirit mediums kick a red-hot iron ball or swing a spiked sphere. The kicking and swinging motions are supposed to represent the incandescent state of the primal universe, inducing yin and yang to produce the five elements and all things made thereof. The underlying purpose is to ensure the equilibrium of the universe in which humans live.

Trance rituals performed for an individual are more specifically intended as a form of exorcist healing. The ritual is performed by a spirit medium in a state of possession. He is assisted by an interpreter (who is more often than not a medicine man) and questioned by a devotee. The act of consulting the deity through the spirit medium with the assistance of the interpreter is known as "asking for peace" (*wen'an* 問安). Spirit mediums may perform ritual healing for spirit possession, loss of the soul, witchcraft, sorcery, and ailments due to natural causes. The standard treatment for the first four conditions is exorcism of the evil spirits responsible, while that for the last is the prescription of herbal medicine. Both, however, entail a lavish use of charms (*fu* 符), which include amulets, talismans, and prayer sheets.

Luck Rituals

While the trance dances and trance rituals are conducted by the spirit mediums, the luck rituals are invariably performed by Taoist priests. The rituals include those for maintaining luck (*baoyun* 保運), dissolving ill luck (*jieyun* 解運), and thanksgiving (*zuogong* 作供). The luck-maintaining ritual is propitiatory in function, positively reaffirming a devotee's luck so that yang may subdue yin. The ill-luck dissolving ritual, on the other hand, is prophylactic, dissipating or altering yin so that good fortune may enter. The thanksgiving ritual shows the devotee's appreciation for heaven's blessings; it may be performed either to propi-

tiate the Nine Emperor Gods who intervene on the devotee's behalf or as a follow-up to the prophylactic ritual.

The ill-luck dissolving ritual is designed to dispel ill fortune but is also intended, like the luck-preserving ritual, to consolidate and conserve good fortune. Although the two rituals are in many ways the antitheses of each other, their patterns are largely similar. There are, however, points of departure as well. For example, the ill-luck dissolving ritual is usually performed for smaller groups (and may even be conducted for individuals). The group usually comprises either a nuclear or extended family led by a patriarch, with the ritual itself being of three basic types: *dakai* 大開 (great opening [of luck]), *zhongkai* 中開 (medium opening), and *xiaokai* 小開 (small opening). The use of incense papers and charms is also more extensive and elaborate in the luck-opening ritual than in the luck-maintaining ritual.

The thanksgiving ritual is simpler than the other two, taking only about five minutes (approximately half the time required for the others). It consists of nine elements, like the rituals above. In the thanksgiving ritual the red seal of the eight trigrams is impressed on the forehead of white headgear and not on the clothes as in the other rituals; the impression is made at the beginning of the ritual and not at the end; each participant carries three regular-sized incense sticks rather than three irregular-sized incense sticks; the participants tend to be family groups rather than individuals or mixed groups; the kneeling procedure is much more elaborate; a vegetarian feast is laid out; and the burning of the incense papers and other sacrificial items is emphasized. The fees charged are also lower than those for the luck-maintaining and luck-opening rituals.

The above rituals are interrelated, of course: when devotees are blessed with good fortune they perform the luck-maintaining ritual to consolidate their position; when they encounter ill fortune, they participate in the ill-luck dissolving ritual to remove bad influences and usher in the good; when their luck turns for the better following the ill-luck dissolving ritual, they participate in the thanksgiving ritual to show their gratitude to the Divine Nine's intervention.

Purification Rituals

Bridge-crossing and fire-walking ceremonies are performed during the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods as a kind of composite purification ritual. They involve not only the devotees but also the spirit mediums, the Taoist priests, and the deities themselves. It is in this tableau of religious ceremonialism that the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods is

most vividly seen as a community rite of cosmic renewal or rebirth. The ritual leads the community from the state of yin to the state of yang, or, as the temple authorities put it, to “birth beyond death.”

The bridge-crossing and fire-walking ceremonies are “cleansing processions” related to the ritual circumambulations of the altar of the Nine Emperor Gods that some devotees perform, the trance-dance and trance-ritual street processions that the spirit mediums conduct, and the processions and circumambulations that form part of the luck-maintaining and luck-opening rituals. The bridge-crossing ceremony represents the surmounting of yin (since water is highly yin), while the fire-walking ceremony represents the acceptance of yang (since fire is highly yang). The two ceremonies are thus mutually inclusive purification rituals that are interrelated in meaning.

The bridge-crossing ceremony is held on the evening of the festival’s eighth day. A rather rickety bridge is set up in the temple grounds; in the central states of Peninsular Malaysia the bridge is made of wood and measures 6.5 meters long, 1 meter high, and 1.2 meters wide, while in the northern states it is made of steel and is either raised to a height of some twenty meters (like a hanging bridge) or placed on a platform and laced with sword blades.

The ceremony is open to everyone regardless of age and sex. As the devotees proceed to the bridgehead a Taoist priest stamps a red seal on their foreheads to signify that they are crossing with the Divine Nine’s blessings. The devotees cross the bridge in single file, many of them carrying bundles of clothes and personal belongings; the clothes are also marked with the seal of the Nine Emperor Gods to confer luck to whoever wears them. After they have crossed the bridge the devotees deposit cash (or red packets containing cash) into a wooden tub at the exit, in the belief that the offering will bring good luck and abundant blessings from heaven. People believe that crossing the bridge without incident is a clear sign that their good fortune and their standing with the star deities are assured.

As soon as the devotees have crossed the bridge the Taoist follows suit. Sword-wielding spirit mediums then “chop” their way over the bridge as if chasing after evil spirits attempting to cross in order to gain power. The spirit medium of the Emperor Gods is seen slashing his abdomen and bare back with his magic sword and flicking his demon-whip repeatedly across the bridge.

The fire-walking ceremony is held on the evening of the ninth day of the celebration. Some one hundred sacks of charcoal are used to prepare the fire-walking bed, which measures 3.5 meters long, 1.2 meters wide,

and 0.6 meters high. Some fifteen men are employed for the laborious task of preparing the bed, which requires more than seven hours. The bed is set up in such a way that the central fire path is solidly packed and the embers on the edges, ignited with the aid of kerosene, burn red hot. The bed is paved with incense papers and joss sticks that, when ablaze, make the path look red hot. A few seconds before the ceremony begins a large quantity of salt mixed with a kind of temperature-reducing chemical known in Hokkien as *pingxie* is thrown into the bed along with uncooked rice and tea leaves; the salt and *pingxie* melt and smother the embers while the rice and tea leaves burst into harmless sparks. The Taoist then signals to the processionists, who walk briskly across the charcoal path.¹²

The procession is led by the entranced spirit mediums to the beat of the drum and gong. They are followed by the bearers of half a dozen sedan chairs laden with idols, charm papers, jewellery and other precious objects, packets of dried tea leaves, and bundles of garments. Following them are some fifty disciples in white shirts and pants and with yellow headbands. All participants are barefoot, and each carries a rolled-up yellow pennant of the Nine Emperor Gods to protect him from harm. They must be ritually clean, having abstained from sex and observed a vegetarian diet for the past nine days. They are not allowed to wear leather belts and metal objects, including rings and belt buckles, as these objects are highly repugnant to the spirits.

Most participants in the fire-walking ceremony (and in the bridge-crossing ceremony as well) express the significance of the ritual with the word *guoyun* 過運, which they explain as meaning "to cross over ill luck and usher in good luck." Fire, as noted earlier, overcomes impurity and repels evil influences. As men purify themselves with fire, they expiate yin. Since females before menopause are ritually categorized under the yin ideological pole, they are strictly prohibited from participating in the fire-walking ritual. The fact that only postmenopausal women are allowed to participate accounts for the presence of only two women at the fire-walking ceremony each year, compared to some four dozen men.¹³

Thus both the bridge-crossing and fire-walking rituals provide worshippers with a way to free themselves from evil. The rituals are forms of sympathetic magic that help believers control nature so that they may better understand themselves and their relationship with good and evil. By crossing the bridge the devotees negate evil and acquire spiritual confidence and power, not only over themselves but also over the environment in which they live. By walking over the fire the religious virtuosos, by virtue of their ritual purity, enact the victory of good over bad,

mind over matter. As they purify themselves over the fire, the whole community, whose state of purity these virtuosi represent, is by magical implication cleansed of all evil influences.

The Sending-Off Ceremony

The sending-off ceremony typically involves the dispatch of the Emperor Gods in a miniature boat or real sampan loaded with such items as beans, rice, sugar, salt, flour, incense, and other ritual items. As the boat is launched the incense ashes accumulated during the previous year are tossed into the river to symbolize the gods' departure. The tall lamp is then lowered at noon on the tenth day, when six bowls of raw pork are offered to the White Tiger Deity (Baihuyue 白虎爺) located beneath Dabogong's altar, and red (instead of white) candles are lighted.

After the ceremonies for sending off the Nine Emperor Gods and lowering the tall-lamp the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods is brought to an end. In the words of the temple authorities, "The deities who attend the festival are dispatched to their proper places. The territorial spirit soldiers who gathered at the five ritual camps during the festival begin to disperse and return to their respective posts." Thus the pomp and grandeur of the street processions, the din of the spirit mediums' trance dances and exorcising rituals, and the religious fervor and joy of the worshippers and spectators all come to an end. The heat and noise created during the nine-day and nine-night festival give way, as suddenly as they came, to the cool silence that characterizes the ordinary state of the temples of the Nine Emperor Gods.

THE SYMBOLS OF THE NINE EMPEROR GODS

However vague the Malaysian Chinese may be concerning the myths of the Nine Emperor Gods, the rituals they perform during the festival are unmistakably related to the Divine Nine. This is best seen in the symbols relating to the representation of the star deities, the performance of the festival rituals, and also the devotees' conception of self (ontology) and the universe (cosmology).

As mentioned above, the Nine Emperor Gods are often represented by Doumu. She is most often portrayed as a Taoist deity, though in Buddhist temples she is sometimes represented as Zhunti, the Chinese counterpart of Maritchi, the Indian Goddess of Light. She is shown seated on a lotus in the same posture as that adopted by the Buddha and Guanyin. In the popular mind, however, Doumu is conceived of as the Goddess of Loving Kindness and Mercy. She helps Heaven maintain the universe in equilibrium, provides for human sustenance, and judges hu-

man deeds and misdeeds. She controls life and death and bestows upon humans rank and status, luck and fortune, prosperity and happiness, health and long life. Doumu's nine pairs of arms, which represent the Nine Emperor Gods, extend in every direction of the compass to meet human needs and to offer solace and comfort during times of suffering. The three faces of Doumu express the "triple gems" of *fu* 福, *lu* 祿, and *shou* 壽 (fortune, prosperity, and long life, toward the attainment of which the Emperor God rituals are directed). Despite Doumu's importance, however, the overall power lies squarely in the hands of the Nine Emperor Gods, the inheritors and promoters of Doumu's virtues and powers.

The Significance of the Numeral Nine

The significance of the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods is closely related to the numeral nine, as suggested by the fact that it is celebrated over nine days and nine nights during the ninth lunar month of the year. The Chinese conceive of nine as a sacred number imbued with elements of mysticism. Nine is the number of planets in the solar system, and is also the number of points on the Chinese compass. Doumu, too, has nine eyes (three on each of her three faces) representing the all-seeing stars and the all-knowing star deities, and her nine pairs of arms hold nine precious objects that symbolize nine special qualities.

The numeral nine plays a particularly significant role in ritual practice. At the Ampang temple two vertical lines of Chinese characters form a couplet that points to the significance of the numeral. The first line, to the left of the God of Fate's altar, reads *sanbai sangui sankoushou* 三拜三跪三叩首 (worship three times, kneel three times, prostrate three times). The second line, to the right of the altar, reads *jiuhuang jiuji jiuchohuang* 九皇九帝九朝皇 (nine kings, nine emperors, nine dynastic monarchs). To worship three times with both palms pressed together, to kneel three times with both feet placed side by side, and to prostrate three times with forehead touching the floor make a total of nine ritual gestures, or symbolic actions, entailing the movement of the upper, middle, and lower parts of the body. This forms a microcosmic replica of heaven, earth, and hades, or of the upper, middle, and lower worlds that constitute the macrocosmic planes of Chinese cosmology. We may thus derive $3 + 3 + 3 = 9$ from the first line. The nine kings in the second line equal the nine emperors and the nine dynastic monarchs (referring to the nine dynasties of China). Thus $9 + 9 + 9 = 27 = 2 + 7 = 9$ ("2" also indicates the two invisible star deities and "7" the seven visible star deities).¹⁴

In scripture the Nine Human Sovereigns form the constituent parts

of a composite structure. Tianying, for instance, resides in the south and is signified by the numeral 9; Tianren resides in the northeast and is signified by 8; Tianzhu resides in the west and is signified by 7; Tianxin resides in the northwest and is signified by 6; Tianqin resides in the center and is signified by 5; Tianfu resides in the southeast and is signified by 4; Tianchong resides in the east and is signified by 3; Tianrui resides in the southwest and is signified by 2; and Tianpeng resides in the north and is signified by 1. Each also relates his attributes to one of the five elements and nine planets (table 1).

TABLE 1
Symbolic Representations of the Nine Star Deities and Their Attributes

Star	Direction	Numeral	Element	Trigram
Tianying	South	9	Fire	Qian
Tianren	Northeast	8	Earth	Zhen
Tianzhu	West	7	Metal	Kan
Tianxin	Northwest	6	Metal	Gen
Tianqin	Center	5	Earth	Kun
Tianfu	Southeast	4	Wood	Dui
Tianchong	East	3	Wood	Li
Tianrui	Southwest	2	Earth	Xun
Tianpeng	North	1	Water	Kun

Source: CHEU 1988.

If the compass points associated with the Nine Human Sovereigns are joined by straight lines, a “nine” magic square is produced (figure 1). This square is known as the Yubu 禹步 (“the ritual steps of Yu [of the Xia Dynasty]”); Yu’s division of China into nine provinces is said to have been inspired by this square, as was his strategy for controlling floods. In some temples in Malaysia the names of the Nine Human Sovereigns are written on a piece of red paper, put in a glass frame, and placed on the altar where the portraits of other deities are enshrined.

Some Taoists argue that if zero is the symbol of the Supreme Ultimate (God being nowhere and yet everywhere), then 1 through 9 must represent the universe. This concept is expressed in the symbolic representation of the divine at the temple Qingguan si 清觀寺 in Penang. Built in 1882, Qingguan si is one of the oldest Nine Emperor God temples in Malaysia. It stands on a hilltop known locally as Cheng Jee Chan (Qian’er zhan 千二站, “1,200 steps”), and is the only temple in Malaysia that has a separate hall dedicated to the Big Dipper Mother (Doumu

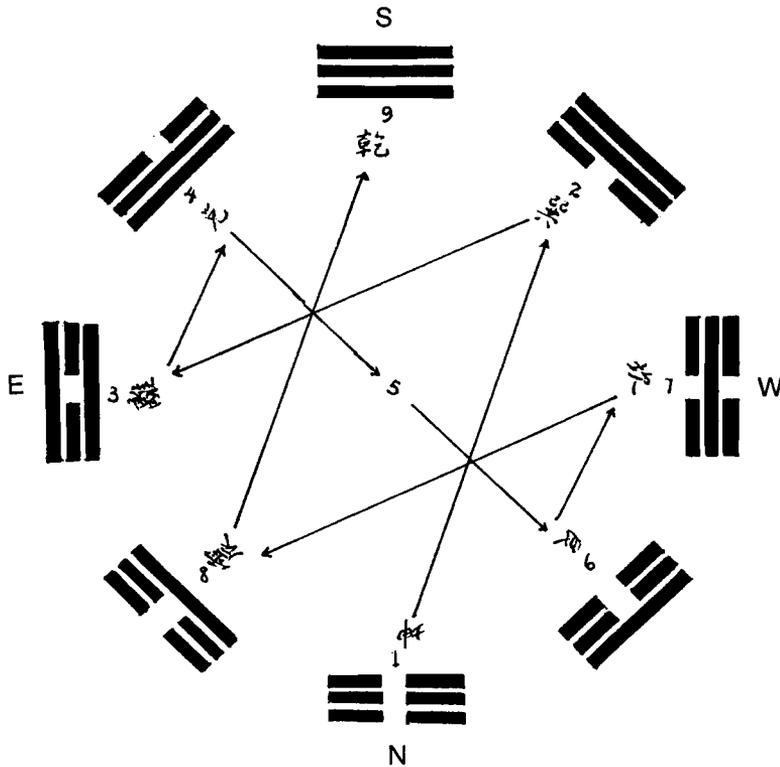


FIGURE 1. Numeral Representations of the Nine Emperor Gods and Their Attributes.

Gong 斗母宮). Each of this hall's eight sides has a stained-glass window depicting one of the eight trigrams. At the center of the roof is a dome-shaped structure with a yin-yang mirror representing the Supreme Ultimate; the roof itself symbolizes Heaven, in which the Supreme Being resides and controls the earth below. The hall contains no image or idol of any kind: there are only two vertical rows of Chinese numerals: *yi er san si wu liu qi ba jiu* 一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 (one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine) in ascending order on the left, and *jiu ba qi liu wu si san er yi* 九 八 七 六 五 四 三 二 一 (nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one) in descending order on the right. Above them is written *Jiuhuang dadi* 九皇大帝 (Nine great royal emperors). This numeric representation of the Divine Nine confirms our earlier argument that the gods are manifestations of the Nine Human Sovereigns, each of whom is signified by a number.

What the locals express in symbols reflects what they believe in myth; what they believe in myth is reflected in the rituals they act out during the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods. The rituals may differ from temple to temple, and from year to year in the same temple, but the belief remains basically the same. This is what the devotees are serious about, and this is what we should therefore be concerned with in the interpretation of the sacred symbolism. A telling example of this is the pollution taboo, which requires all devotees to avoid meat, blood, leather objects, metal, sex, and things relating to death prior to and during the festival. No one who did not believe would bother to observe such taboos. It may be true that the devotees are threatened with all sorts of terrible consequences should they ignore these prohibitions, but what concerns us here is that they observe the taboos meticulously and thereby strengthen their faith in the beliefs and practices of their ancestors. The symbols that form the basis of belief thus become so deeply embedded that devotees are induced to forgo worldly possessions and sensual pleasures during the festival. This is best seen in the way devotees conceive of themselves in relation to the Nine Emperor Gods and the cosmos.

The Conception of Self (Ontology)

Many devotees so internalize the ritual prohibitions that they feel sudden pangs of physical discomfort if they commit perceived offences against the rules (and thus against the divine). Physiological reactions include headaches, dizziness, nausea, fainting, and stomachaches, with symptoms of fever and general weakness.

The question we have to address is, Why is sensual pleasure considered so polluting? A clue is provided by the fact that the consequences of pollution are often associated with the body's nine orifices. These orifices are interrelated and reflect the state of mind in the way they interact with the forces of yin and yang. They represent the earthly sanctuaries of the nine bodily souls, just as the nine planets serve as the heavenly abodes of the nine star deities (in certain Taoist texts the nine bodily souls are related to the nine celestial breaths in the palaces of the brain). Both are interrelated in the planes of heaven and earth. Physical condition and spiritual consciousness thus reflect the relationship between the mind and the cosmos.

Some respondents thus claim that the taboos, asceticism, vegetarianism, and penitence associated with the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods serve as a way to purify (or, as one devotee put it, to "overhaul") the nine bodily orifices in a manner acceptable to the souls that control the body. Abstinence tests one's powers of endurance and self-discipline,

and expresses feelings of repentance. A devotee's ability to observe the taboos is considered a virtue, and thus a help in attaining the level of purity needed for the performance of ritual worship. Since ritual involves supplication to both heaven and earth, it provides a moral basis for the purification of the spirit as well as for the healthful conditioning of the body. The body and spirit form a microcosm, as opposed to the macrocosm formed by that which is external to the body. Ritual thus brings about a state of harmony between the microcosm and macrocosm, or between the believer and the world beyond.

The Conception of the Cosmos (Cosmology)

In the preceding section I discussed how believers conceive of themselves in relation to the world beyond (i.e., heaven and hell). A more down-to-earth example of a symbolic representation of the macrocosm is provided by the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan. In modern usage the Malay *negeri* means "state" or "country," and *sembilan* means "nine." Thus "Negeri Sembilan" literally means "nine states" or "nine countries" (Chin. *jiuzhou* 九州). Negeri Sembilan, in addition, is one of the nine states of Malaysia, which are headed by a total of nine sultans. This is of great significance to the Chinese, who, as mentioned above, regard the number nine as sacred in nature. The existence of Negeri Sembilan, and of Malaysia's ninefold structure, is regarded not as something coincidental, but as something preordained within the context of the Malaysian cosmology.

In this sense the above-mentioned altar scroll-characters, *jiuhuang jiu di jiuchaohuang*, may be seen to relate to the nine sultans. Support for this supposition may be found in a display in the main hall of the Malaysian Buddhist Association in Penang. In my first visit to the association I saw four color pictures on the walls of the hall, one of Amitabha Buddha, another of Guanyin, the third of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (Supreme Ruler), and the fourth the Permaisuri Agong (the Supreme Ruler's consort). The portrait of the Supreme Ruler is placed next to that of Amitabha Buddha, on the left, while the portrait of his consort is placed next to that of Guanyin, on the right. In the arrangement thus represented the Supreme Ruler relates to Amitabha Buddha and his consort to Guanyin. This suggests equality between king and deity and inequality between male and female, divinity and humanity.

Although the association here is Buddhist, I believe it could have just as well been made in a Taoist setting. Thus we might postulate that the sultans of the nine states of Malaysia symbolically represent the Nine Emperor Gods on the one hand and the nine planets of the solar system

on the other. Likewise, we may infer that the Supreme Ruler and his consort are symbolically related to Doufu and Doumu, respectively, and that Negeri Sembilan and the nine sultans of Malaysia are symbolically related to Malaysia as a nation-state in the same way that the nine planets and the nine star lords relate to the solar system. In this context, Malaysia represents an infracosm wherein the Supreme Ruler erects his seat of power, symbolizing Malaysia's unity as a nation and sovereignty as a state.

This argument is not without logic, for it finds support in the symbolism presented on the premises of a religious center. The location indicates that the symbolism reflects something highly conceivable within the mental framework of the Chinese mythmakers. We may thus see the above-mentioned representation, not as something arbitrary, but as the consciously thought out and schematized expression of a certain politico-religious worldview that makes sense to the Malaysian Chinese. As GEERTZ puts it, "It is the way they do things and like to see things done that signify ethos, and it is upon this worldview that ethos rests" (1967, 97).

The Chinese also use the numeral nine in broader symbolic references to the earth. The term *jiuzhou* (lit. "nine provinces"), for example, refers not only to the nine specific states of China as such, but also in a general sense to the world as a whole. It is thus a metaphor or generic term much like *wanwu* 萬物, "the ten thousand things," which refers to the myriad phenomena of the universe. Another excellent example of such a condensation is provided by the eight trigram system, in which the numeral nine signifies the nine points of the solar system, that is, the sum total of the center (0), represented by Doumu, and the periphery (1 to 9), represented by her nine sons or disciples. To the Chinese, as to the Malays, there is a kind of isomorphism in the interplay of yin and yang, as well as of the *kasar* (crude) and *halus* (refined) elements in the cosmos, that culminates in the ultimate intersection between good and evil and, hence, in a state of balance and auspiciousness.

CONCLUSION

In the above conceptual framework we see a threefold parallel structural relationship: the nine planets of the universe as the macrocosm; the nine sultanates of Malaysia as the infracosm; and the nine orifices of the human body as the microcosm. The rituals of the Nine Emperor Gods are an expression of the belief that the physical and spiritual condition of human society reflects the interaction of yin and yang between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Maintaining a proper equilibrium requires

spiritual harmony in the interaction between, on the one hand, the star deities controlling the nine planets and, on the other, the bodily souls controlling the nine orifices of the human body (or the celestial breaths controlling the nine palaces of the human brain).

Taoist practitioners see the Nine Emperor Gods as star deities who were once humans but who, through asceticism and spiritual enlightenment, ascended to heaven. The deities are therefore believed to be endowed with the celestial power to bring about harmony between yin and yang on earth as in heaven, in the microcosm as in the macrocosm. This belief, as expressed in the spirit of brotherhood characteristic of the worldview and ethos associated with the Nine Emperor Gods, represents but a facet of the religious behavior representative of Chinese tradition.

I have attempted in this article to demonstrate three things: that the human organism comprises a replica of the macrocosm; that both microcosm and macrocosm are physically and spiritually related in the two inseparable planes of heaven and earth; and that both microcosm and macrocosm are represented by two related sets of symbols, namely, the nine bodily souls or celestial breaths on the one hand and the nine divine brothers or star deities on the other.

Natural phenomena (the nine orifices and the nine planets) comprise the basis of the corresponding sets of sacred symbols that give meaning and form to concepts of myth and reality. The sacred symbols, in turn, inform our understanding of the macrocosm (as inorganic phenomena) and the microcosm (as organic phenomena) and of how they relate to one another in the realms of the known and unknown, the real and unreal, the auspicious and inauspicious, and the sufferable and insufferable. In these realms the unknown is made known, the unreal is made real, the chaotic is made less so, and the insufferable is made sufferable (GEERTZ 1973, 104).

In the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods the spirit-medium cult provides a set of sacred symbols connecting the various subsets of Chinese symbology, which range from written traditions like the Nine Human Sovereigns, the Nine Han Scholars, and the Nine Ming Emperors to oral traditions like the nine Qing rebels, the nine divine brothers, and the nine fishermen. The context in which these religious symbols work to create and sustain belief is ritual. It is through ritual that the symbols become meaningful in the world of space and time. The religious symbols are accepted because the worldview they support is believable and the ethos they maintain is justifiable. The worldview is believable because the ethos that grows out of it is convincing and authoritative; the ethos is justifiable because the worldview upon which it rests is seen to be

true (GEERTZ 1967). In other words, the myth underlying the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods (a myth that constitutes part of the Chinese worldview) is rendered meaningful and real within the context of social relationships and the world around it.

Once we understand this concept we can come to grips with the pragmatic philosophy that underlies the concepts of *fu*, *lu*, and *shou* and the systems of chronometry, horoscopy, and numerology that the ancient Chinese formulated and that present-day Malaysian Chinese find such a fascinating part of their belief system. Based upon the same understanding of Chinese pragmatism we may discern how this belief system has influenced Chinese culture and social institutions in Malaysia, and how individual and local conditions have induced the Chinese to accept the Malaysian macrocosm and infracosm on the one hand, and the Malaysian understanding of self (microcosm) on the other, for expressing their religious and sociopolitical worldviews.

Thus we can discern an isomorphic relationship between myth and reality. In Malaysia new myths were created (or old myths re-created) in the image of the nine divine brothers to help local devotees adjust to and reconcile themselves with the realities of a changing environment. The cult movement hinges upon the devotees' attempts to attain harmony with the environment in which they carved out a niche for themselves and at the same time maintain a sense of continuity between past and present, present and future. The significance of these sentiments is clearly represented in the myth, ritual, and symbolism that form the dominant themes of the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods.

NOTES

1. Sabah was formerly known as British North Borneo. As a legacy of the British administration, it is divided into four residencies: the West Coast Residency, the Interior Residency, the Sandakan Residency, and the Tawau Residency.

2. *Baibai* means worship or paying homage to a deity or deities (GUO 1987).

3. Since the 1980s, the donations received by the Nan Tian Gong have exceeded M\$500,000, or over US\$25,000.

4. Ampang is a Chinese residential area located about six miles from Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia.

5. The Milk Dipper in the constellation Sagittarius.

6. The new villagers in Ampang, Selangor, do not make a distinction between Tiangong and Tianguan. This is rather confusing, since Tiangong refers to the Heavenly Father whereas Tianguan merely acts as an agent of Heaven.

7. For some of the accounts of the Nine Emperor Gods myths in Thailand and Singapore, see CHEU 1993, chapter 2.

8. This is what she is called in some temples in the northern states of Kedah, Penang, and Perak.

9. There are, of course, only seven stars in the Big Dipper. LAI accounts for the

discrepancy by saying that seven of the Nine Human Sovereigns ascended to heaven to form the Big Dipper, the eighth is suspended in a limbo between heaven and earth, and the ninth has remained on earth to protect all earthly creatures (1984). The *Daozangjing* 道藏經 calls the seven visible Big Dipper stars the Qixingjun (Seven Star Lords), and explains that the other two stars are invisible. They may be seen only by Taoist immortals, or by ordinary humans on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month (see also HEINZE 1981).

10. According to J. J. M. de Groot, hill climbing and kite flying were added to the Double-Nine Festival during the seventh century (HODOUS 1918, 81).

11. The only place where the welcoming ritual is not performed at a river or waterfront is at Qingguan si in Penang. Here, the spirit of the Nine Emperor Gods is welcomed from Heaven on a hilltop, Qian'er zhan at Paya Terubong.

12. On several occasions I have heard devotees commenting to one another that the fire path felt cold to the touch as they walked over it.

13. According to the Taoist practitioner, women before menopause may contaminate and neutralize the ceremony. Such ritual restrictions on women are briefly mentioned by Joseph NEEDHAM (1983, 237–40). Sociologically speaking, the claim that menstrual blood is polluting to the fire-walking ritual is merely a means to restrict women's quest for spiritual power and keep them in a subordinate position. This is testified to by the conspicuous absence of female representatives in the temple organizing committee, despite the strong representation of women among the temple devotees.

14. In the microcosmic representation, 2 + 7 symbolizes the two invisible and seven visible orifices of the human body.

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