

WHO'S AFRAID of the Hungry Ghosts?

By Ong Seng Huat

What are Hungry Ghosts?

They are creatures with mouths, narrow throats and stomachs, who constantly food but can never ease hunger.

Hungry Ghosts occupy one to six realms in Buddhist cosmogony the other realms belonging humans, animals, celestial being and so forth. The law of karma applies to beings in all six realms, determines their subsequent incarnation. In the cycle of karma people who indulge their desires and greed are reincarnate as Hungry Ghosts.

All good Buddhists strive to ease the suffering of their fellow living beings, whether human or not.

They may not be able to rescue the Hungry Ghosts from their Hell, but they can pray that the throats of the Hungry Ghosts may be opened just a little to allow them to eat.

The throats of the Hungry Ghosts are constricted as if they were being hung upside down. For this reason, the Buddhist rituals dedicated to helping the Hungry Ghosts are termed Yi Lan Pen Hooi or ulabana in Sanskrit, which means, "saving those who are hung upside down".

The seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar is a time to meditate on the plight of the Hungry Ghosts. The festival of the Hungry Ghosts, as observed by the Chinese in Malaysia today, is popularly called Phot Thor, or "Common Salvation". Yet it is not, strictly speaking, a Buddhist festival. The festival expresses an eclectic mix of folk belief and rituals, with elements of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

The Taoists name the same festival "Observance of Central Origin" or Teong Guan Chek. To the Taoists, the seventh month is a period of repentance. The Duke of the Earthly Realm descends to earth on the fifteenth day of the seventh month to record the thoughts and actions of the people, and to judge them. Nevertheless, as a god of mercy, he offers forgiveness for those who truly repent and make supplications. It is also a time to ask for forgiveness on behalf of the ghosts, especially if they are ones own dead relatives.

The Duke of the Earthly Realm is one of the three Dukes who help the Jade

Emperor oversee the state of human affairs. The three Dukes visit the earth at their appointed times to pose as inspectors and judges of mankind, with the power of solving the problems of those who pray to them. To please the Dukes, true Taoists observe a vegetarian diet for that day and refrain from taking life. Traditionally, it is a day of rest for the hunters, fishermen and butchers.

The powers of each of the Dukes and the times they visit the earth are very much linked to the seasons and agrarian cycle in China. The Duke of the Heavenly Realm descends on the fifteenth day of the first month, heralding the end of winter and showering blessings on the people: the latter welcome him with lantern parades.

In contrast, the end of summer is a period of disease and pestilence, and the people look to the Duke of the Earthly Realm for forgiveness of their sins. Likewise, the Duke of the Watery Realm who comes on the fifteenth day of the tenth month visits the world with punishment, in the form of plague and illness.

The Chinese traditionally believed that all types of diseases were caused by evil spirits. Thus they were more concerned with protecting themselves from the ghosts than with praying for their salvation.

It is believed that by the late Sung dynasty the Chinese had fully incorporated the elements of the various beliefs into a common observance. According to a contemporary text, *Tong Ching Mung Hwa Luk* or "Tong Ching Dreams of the Flower Life", the people of China celebrated Teong Guan Chek with lights symbolising the Buddhist *Yi Lan Ten* or Lantern of "Yi Lan" and prayed to their ancestors at night.

The flags that are posted on the food offerings today bear the name of the supplicant. This flag is supposed to have the power to ward off evil. Originally, there used to be only one flag at the table of offering, and at the end of the festival everyone would try to snatch away this flag. The fisherman would stick the flag on his boat to receive infinite blessing and protection at sea and the farmer would use it to protect his livestock.

On the last day of a *Dhor thor* celebration, the paper effigy and all the paper goods are burned at midnight. The original practice was to send the ghosts away by sending an effigy together with offerings of food and coins in a boat out to sea. This symbolic way of averting diseases was practiced by the Hokkiens who lived in the seaside villages of the Hokkien province from where the majority of Penang Chinese originate. As the local population became less directly involved with the sea, they opted for burning the paper effigies to send the King of Hungry Ghosts back to the sky.

Though they have a mythological status, the three Dukes were based on three emperors of ancient China who lived several thousand years before Confucius. The latter quoted them as outstanding examples of "philosopher-kings". The Taoist texts indicate that the Duke to the Earthly Realm is the deified form of Emperor Soon, who was well known for his filial piety: he was filial to the extent of showing kindness towards his stepmother who tried to murder him. Due to his astounding virtue, a confederation of several provinces elected him Emperor and he was deified after his death.

Filial piety is a central principle in Chinese morality. Buddhism, being a rather abstract philosophy, would seem rather alien to the traditional Chinese way of thinking for it says little about one's relationship to the family, society and government.

As Buddhism spread to China, it was gradually adapted to conform to basic Chinese ethical and moral ideas. The Buddhist sutra on ulabana was introduced around the 3rd century B.C. as a relatively unimportant text, but gained prominence and popularity in China due to its relevance in the area of filial piety.

As the parable goes, Buddha set aside three summer months, between the fifteenth day of the fourth month to the fifteenth day of the seventh month as a period of retreat so that his followers could avoid killing the insects which were ubiquitous during this period. His followers were to stop accepting food from the public, withdraw to the caves and the temples and engage in mutual criticism and self-reflection.

One of Buddha's disciples, Maha Maud Galyunana had mastered the supernatural arts but found that he could not save his mother from suffering as a Hungry Ghost. With his extraordinary powers, Buddha's disciple could enter the realm of the Hungry Ghosts and bring nourishment to his mother - but as soon as she consumed it, the food turned into fire and scorched her throat. Finally, Buddha agreed to save his mother if he would prepare a feast of 100 different foods for the monks at the end of their fasting period.

The dissemination of this obscure Sutra, with its emphasis on filial piety, made Buddhism much more appealing as a religion to the Chinese. It is believed that the Taoists of the time counteracted by holding up Emperor Soon as an example of filial piety. They then elevated his importance by identifying him with the Duke of the Earthly Realm. As such, his example was evoked to fulfill a purely Chinese, non-Buddhist concept of filial piety.

Due to the influence of these two parables, the festival of the Hungry Ghosts has

also come to be associated with a ritual of filial piety; feeding the ghosts has come to be understood as feeding the souls of one's dead ancestors and relatives.

It is known that Buddhist and Taoist elements were introduced into the festival of the Hungry Ghosts during the reign of the Emperor Liang Wu Ti in the period of the Six Dynasties or Li~ Chou. These influences merely complicated a rather more primitive observance of the seventh month which was connected with the harvest.

It was the custom to clean the graves of one's ancestors on the day of Chenq Beng in spring, as well as during Teong Guan Chek in autumn, The whole community of peasants would get together for a celebration in honor of the late Emperor or Sky God (Thnee Kong), the Earth God (Thor Tay Kong) and their ancestors.

THE PENANG VERSION

In Penang, Thor Thor is widely observed by the Hokkien dialect group. The people of Hokkien (Fujian) province traditionally celebrate the seventh month in a different manner from other dialect groups in China.

Where once every village used to organise their own celebration of Thor Thor, this is now done by every Chinese neighborhood and street association. When the rituals were transferred from an agricultural society to a commercial society, they were modified accordingly. For instance, we discover that the chanting of the Taoist priest may be based on the original verses, but instead of praying for a good harvest, he prays for the prosperity of merchants.

The Penang Phor Thor rituals really reflect the combination of Taoism and Buddhism to the extent that they are without pure elements from either religion. The pure Buddhists cannot accept these rituals because, due to the changing lifestyle, vegetarian offerings have been replaced by meat offerings. In fact, Phor Thor seems to be the time when the most animals are slaughtered for offerings, so much so that the price of meat rises.

The trend today is to make an ostentatious offering of the ritual of "three meats" or san sen considered by Confucius to be the greatest form of offering to our ancestors. The three meats were originally beef, mutton and pork. In Penang, this has even been modified to pork, chicken and seafood which are more easily available.

Although a Taoist priest is normally invited to conduct the ceremonies, the

offerings are not dedicated to the Taoist god who is the Duke of the Earthly Realm, but to the King of Hungry Ghosts. Who would suspect that this fierce, hellish god is actually one of the incarnations of a Buddhist bodhisatva, the kind and merciful Kuan Yin?

Kuan Yin is the name of the Goddess of Mercy. The idea of the Goddess of Mercy evolved from that of Avalokiteshvara, a bodhisatva who is regarded as either male or androgynous. When the cult of the Avalokiteshvara spread to China, the bodhisatva was transformed into a fair Chinese goddess.

As the theory goes, whenever Kuan Yin ventures to save the Hungry Ghosts, she assumes the form of the creatures of that realm. A little effigy of the Kuan Yin always sits on the head of the effigy of the King of Hungry Ghosts, as the latter is a specific manifestation of the former. The King of Hungry Ghosts is actually called Tai Su au or "The Great Intellect" which is merely another title for Kuan Yin.

While the Buddhist and the Taoist concept is actually to pray for the salvation of the ghosts, folk belief is based on fear of, not pity for, the ghosts who bring diseases and harm to human beings. That is why the people pray to the King of Hungry Ghosts, to keep the ghosts under control and out of trouble for the whole year. To cover all exigencies, they pray to Kuan Yin, who stands on the King's head, to subdue him. An old tale warns about accidentally laying a child on the table of offering - it will certainly be devoured by the King of Hungry Ghosts!

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