

## Getting Good Fortune: The Case of a Tangki Ceremony in a Chinese Temple in Kelantan

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**Abstract:** The bridge crossing ceremony during the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods is a well-known event in the temple of Ling Ying Dian, Kota Bharu. The people go there in order to change their current situation with the intention to purify themselves and achieve a better destiny. Actually, this is similar to a rite the passage in which the situation from the person changes in this case from ill-fortune to good-fortune.

**Key words:** Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, Tangki-rite de passage, from ill-fortune, good-fortune, passage, better destiny

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### INTRODUCTION

The festival of the Nine Emperor Gods is well-known. It takes place every year on the ninth month of the lunar calendar. The Nine Emperor Gods are legendary figures and are famous in the Chinese pantheon of Southeast Asia. There are many stories about them. According to one story, thousands of years ago nine influential people lived in China. Their names were Tianying, Tianren, Tianzhu, Tianxin, Tianqin, Tianfu, Tianchong, Tianrui and Tianpeng (Tong, 1996). It is believed that the Nine Emperor Gods are reincarnations of these monarchs (Tong, 1996). Actually, there are more than this version but all the versions stress the unique characteristics of the Nine Emperors. Now a days, many people do not know the background of the story of the Nine Emperors.

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.

The festival of these Gods is celebrated as it can change the situation of the people. It is said that it can cure health and that it can help to get a long and prosperous life.

In this study, the researchers focus on one part of the festival which takes place during the afternoon and evening time of the festival which lasts for nine days. It is the bridge crossing ceremony of the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods. Different rituals and ceremonies are performed at different times. The research team conducted

the research in the Ling Ying Dian Temple in Kota Bharu. Kota Bharu is the state capital of Kelantan, Malaysia. In a descriptive way, the research team tries to illustrate how the bridge crossing ritual looks in this region.

**Literature review:** So far, there is only very few literature that focuses on the situation of Chinese temples in Malaysia. During the colonial time, some ethnographers looked at the Chinese spirit mediumship. A good example is the article of William G. Stirling who wrote about exorcism (Stirling, 1924). One of the other works who looked at the topic of Chinese spirit mediums in general was written by Alan J.A. Elliott. He conducted his research in Singapore in the 1950's. It is a fascinating work that described the role of the tangki (Chinese spirit medium). He stressed that three religions play a major role for the Chinese population in Singapore: Taoism, Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism. However, the Chinese spirit medium is connected to the folk religion with its own features. Elliott calls this Shenism (Shen is the term for a spirit or deity). He describes Shenism as follows.

In the present accounts, therefore, it would be taking too great a liberty to designate the whole religious tradition with which we are dealing as 'Shenism'. As we have seen, the dominant themes of Shenism are drawn from popular and corrupt Taoism with influences from Confucianism and perhaps more importantly from ancient folk religion (Elliott, 1990).

In this type of folk religion, the medium (tangki) has different functions. Some researcher describe their function in respect to healing (Kleinman, 1980) and some

researchers describe their importance for the Chinese folk religion as a whole. A good example is the book of DeBernardi. She looked at the situation of the so-called popular Chinese religion on the Malaysian island of Penang (DeBernardi, 2006). She described certain cases which give a good impression for the reader how the popular religion is practiced. Furthermore, she found out that the Chinese in Penang are convinced that there are cycles of high or low luck and that these cycles might determine whether one is successful or not (DeBernardi, 2006). Certain rituals in which the tangki plays an active role can change the situation.

Newer researchers focus on the tangki as a kind of war magician who can enter in a state of trance and fights against evil demons (Chan, 2016). Chan described the acting of tangki in Singapore. Regarding the literature, it is not necessarily a contradiction if one researcher focuses on healing whilst another focuses on war magic because it is expected that the expelling of evil spirits is essential for the healing process.

The Chinese spirit mediums play a major role for the Chinese folk religion in Southeast Asia and the Nine Emperor Gods. One of the researcher who describe the role of the Nine Emperor Gods and its festival is Cheu Hock Tong. In his study *The festival of the Nine Emperor Gods in Malaysia: Myth, Ritual and Symbol*, he gives an impressive overview of the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods and its background.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research objective and method:** The research objective is to illustrate the bridge crossing ritual of the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods and how it is conducted in one Chinese temple in the East Coast of Malaysia. In the Malaysian state of Kelantan, the Malays form the majority. Furthermore, Islamic rules and regulations are widespread. Therefore, it is interesting to research in how far the traditional Chinese way of life could be maintained. The scope was to describe the bridge crossing ritual of the well-known festival of the Nine Emperor Gods and how it is practiced in one temple. A further objective is to show whether certain ritual theories can be adopted and so to contribute to the field of Chinese studies in Southeast Asia.

In this research, the researchers look at one specific case which describes a part of the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods. It will be tried to look at the ritual that explains the way how a person wants to change his situation. The method which was chosen was a combination of non-participant observation together with ethnographic interviews. Most of these interviews were

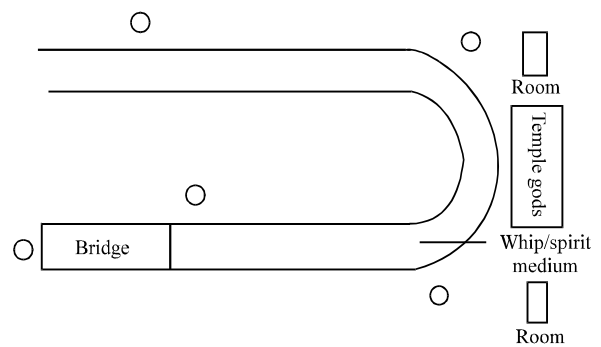


Fig. 1: The setting of the bridge crossing ritual

mainly unstructured in-depth interviews. In the anthropological theory, there is a famous ritual theory of Victor Turner that stresses that there are three parts of a ritual, namely the separation, the liminal phase and the re-integration. The main idea is that there is a change from one status to another. Such rituals are usually subsumed under the term rite de passage (Gennep, 1981). The hypothesis in this study is that there is a rite de passage here too, namely from the status of bad luck to the status of good fortune. Furthermore, it will be argued that the three phases that were described by Victor Turner can be used here. Each stage has its own unique characteristics and will be described in brief.

**The festival of the Nine Emperor Gods and its relation to fortune:** In the afternoon and evening time of the festival, there is a ritual that involves the bridge crossing. This seems to be special for this temple as other authors stress that the bridge crossing is usually during the evening of the eighth day of the festival only. In the Ling Ding Yian temple the bridge is covered and around 7 m long (Fig. 1). Lamps are installed in order to stress that the atmosphere is happy. Cheu emphasizes that the bridge crossing ritual helps to purify oneself. The evil will be left behind.

By crossing the bridge the devotees negate evil and acquire spiritual confidence and power not only over themselves but also the environment in which they live. In the case of the research at the temple in Kota Bharu, the whole setting was like it is shown in Fig. 1.

In Fig. 1, we can see that the bridge is at the very beginning. It is considered as a good sign if a person can cross the bridge without any negative incidents. The white circles represent temple committee members. There are a number of temple committee members around the whole area too. They and the spirit mediums stamp the clothes of the people at the end of each station (Fig. 2-5 and Table 1).

The people who attend the bridge crossing ritual must make the following preparations. At the beginning,

Table 1: The bridge crossing ritual (starts from the left side above and ends at right side)

Before the crossing	In the semi-circle	After the crossing
Bad luck		
'Normal' clothes of the people	'White' clothes of the committee members	
	Bridge	
	Spirit mediums stamp the devotees clothes	
	Spirit mediums use the whip in order to cast out evil spirits	
	Gods	
	Music (Plate 3)	
	Using yellow and red flags. The devotees will be swept by these. This should bring good luck	
	Using willow and water. The water is filled with colorful praying flowers. The devotees will be swept by these	
		'Purified' devotees



Fig. 2: The bridge that will be crossed during the festival



Fig. 4: The drums that are used during the bridge crossing ceremony



Fig. 3: A spirit medium marks the devotees



Fig. 5: The spirit medium is using the whip

they come to the temple with the intention to change their current situation. There is a crossing from a profane to a sacral world in the sense by Eliade (1998). According to him, the architecture itself can symbolize a crossing from the profane to the sacral world (Eliade, 1998). The people who want to get rid of their bad luck and to purify themselves enter the temple which can be considered as sacral as this is the place to communicate with the Gods. However, during the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, the area around the bridge forms a kind of semi-circle. Only the people who want to change and to purify themselves and their current situation enter this area. The committee members wear white clothes and fast during the whole festival. This symbolizes also that there is a sacral situation.

The whole ceremony consists of three 'levels' which are similar to the states of a rite de passage. The people

enter the temple and cross the gate beside the bridge. It can be considered as a kind of separation. The people enter a 'world' that is completely different from the usual way of life.

In this second state, there are symbols and persons which indicate a change. These people hear music and they can see the people of the temple committee in their white clothes. Furthermore, the tangki are present. Their presence is necessary in order to prevent that the evil spirits follow the people. It can be said that the people are in a world where humans and people are close. There is still a hierarchy between Gods and people but the situation is different from a 'normal' one.

With the whipping of the air behind the devotees the people can enter into the 'normal' world and pray to the Gods in a normal way. They go back into their usual way of life and expect that their former unfortunate way of life

is left behind. The bridge symbolizes the change from one situation to another. The features of each stage are written down in Table 1.

At each check point, the committee members or the spirit mediums stamp the people on their clothes. Each chop stands for the Nine Emperor God name which is Jiu Huang Da Di. Furthermore, within this semi-circle, there are a number of spirit mediums who are necessary for the success of the ritual. The intermingling of the spirits (spirit mediums) with people, the drums, etc., signal the unique situation. This inversion of the usual situation leads to a 'change'. The devotees can leave the semi-circle in a purified state with a better fate. For the people, it is important to believe in the power of the Nine Emperor Gods to change fate so that the ritual will be successful.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this study, the bridge crossing ceremony of the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods was described. It was one of the main objectives to illustrate the way how this ritual is performed in Kelantan. Furthermore, the ritual theory by Turner (1964, 1989) and Gennep (1981) was used partially in order to get another point of view. The researchers found out that this ritual theory is effective and can be used in this sense. So, we can conclude that Victor Turners ritual theory cannot only be used in 'typical' Rites de passage but in other circumstances as well. Other author considered this theory useful and went beyond the considering of so-called tribal rituals. Starkloff for example, used this theory and looked in how far it can be used in the church (Starkloff, 1997). In our case, the people want to change their situation by entering a sacral environment. They are in between two states. Victor Turner calls this 'betwixt and between'. The old state is left behind and the new state not yet reached. After crossing the semi-circle the evil spirits do not follow the devotees anymore and therefore, they can enter a life in which they are more 'purified'.

### **CONCLUSION**

The ritual of bridge crossing happens during the afternoon and evening time of the festival of the Nine Emperor Gods. It is described by considering the typical stages of a ritual. Furthermore, the role of the tangki is elaborated.

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