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## Performing Identity: Expanding Shenist Ritual on a Thai Island

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## Abstract

The Chinese Shenist Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods allegedly originated in Fujian Province, China, and was first documented among the Sino-Thai community in Phuket, Thailand, in 1825. However, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, this nine-day religious event has experienced a rapid increase in size and significance. Utilizing ethnographic fieldwork and literature, the rituals and their inherent cosmology are framed against mythical and historical contexts in order to assess the relevance of theories for the growing numbers of shrines, devotees, attendees, and spirit mediums (*mah song*). Within the framework of the festival, the prominence of identity and the creation of the self as a Chinese person is discussed through the work of anthropological theorists such as Radcliffe-Brown (1965), Csordas (2002), Tambiah (1985), and Turner (2012). Ultimately, the liminal space of the rituals performed enables a Chinese identity to take priority in a Thai domain despite a history of forced assimilation. In addition, identity politics are also linked to the rise of festival participants in Phuket as some Southeast Asian countries perceive a threat to their state government's authority from this festival's "cult" beliefs and practices, particularly those involving circumambulation.

*Keywords:* identity, person, ritual, performativity, liminal, embodiment, *mah song*,  
Phuket

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## Performing Identity: Expanding Shenist Ritual on a Thai Island

### Overview

#### Introduction

In May 2014, I moved to Thailand for ten months to teach English as a foreign language in the northern province of Lamphun. Before arriving, I investigated what might be of interest to see and do during term breaks and national holidays. As I was a strict vegetarian at the time, my attention was drawn to a blog post discussing a vegetarian festival. After a search on Google, I soon discovered the Vegetarian Festival as celebrated on Phuket Island in southern Thailand is an important annual event and one that did not correspond at all with my initial imaginings. Numerous photographs illustrating spirit mediums with elaborate facial and body piercings confronted me, and I realized that there is significantly more to this festival than reluctance for eating animals. From that serendipitous point onwards, I was determined to learn the history and details of these practices and to attend the rituals. Luckily, the head of the school where I was teaching allowed me to take two days off work in order to spend four days, including the weekend, in Phuket.

In 2016, I received approval to do fieldwork research and attend the nine-day festival. More appropriately called the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, this event entails an annual cleansing, containing both subtle and overt rituals, that takes place during the first nine days of the ninth lunar month of the Chinese calendar. A period of fasting and abstinence is demanded of devotees, especially the mediums, for the entirety of the festival. The fast includes an injunction

against eating meat, referred to as eating *je*<sup>1</sup>. *Je* is not technically the same as a mere abstention of meat, rather, *je*—which translates to “bland”—is an avoidance of meat, fish and sea food; eggs and milk; and vegetables with a strong odor such as onions, coriander, flowering garlic chives, and garlic. During the festival, the spirit mediums and other devout members often begin eating *je* two weeks before the first ritual takes place and continue to eat the prescribed diet during the course of the festival. It is important to note that a command to follow the Buddhist precept of not killing animals is intertwined with this term (Cohen, 2001). Therefore, eating *je* for a set period of time serves as contrition for the killing and eating of animals during other times of the year.

In addition to eating *je*, one must also abstain from drinking alcohol, lying, engaging in intercourse or sexual behavior, stealing, gambling, and swearing. Abstinence is an essential element of purification during this time and one that is often overlooked due to more “spectacular” practices of the mediums (Maud, 2005). Furthermore, women who are menstruating or going through menopause may not enter the shrines; pregnant women and mourners may not attend the rituals, which may scare the fetus; and kitchen utensils and storage containers are not to be contaminated with meat. Moreover, clothing that is not white is to be avoided as is excessive jewelry and the use of leather products.

Unlike Buddhist monks, the Taoist priests who perform the rituals at the shrines do not live in the temples and are indistinguishable from the general population in terms of having

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<sup>1</sup> The Thai alphabet does not have standardized ways of connoting the sounds from Thai into the Roman alphabet. Some letters in Thai also sound like a combination of two different English consonants and are therefore written in English texts in different ways. In this case, *je* is sometimes written in English as *jay*, *jeh*, or *che*.

families, diet, and dress except during certain rituals (Jordan, 1972). Spirit mediums (Hokkien: *tâng-ki*; Thai: *mah song*) work alongside priests during particular rites. *Mah song* are people chosen and generally possessed by lesser gods and spirits. During the festival, the gods descend into their *mah song* in order to cleanse the community of demons and ill fortune by participating in various ritual practices. Some of these practices involve what is occasionally labeled as “self-mutilation” but are referred to in this paper as bodily “tests”, “trials”, or infliction (de Groot, 2007).

Devotees—attendees who believe in and hope to acquire the benefits of these rituals—may be local residents, members of the wider Sino-Thai population, or visitors from other countries. Devotees believe in the efficacy of participating in the rituals of the festival; benefits are not exclusive to *mah song*. For the nine days, devotees wear white clothing and adhere to the required abstentions and fast. Local devotees often position miniature altars (*to ui*) in front of their businesses or homes for the duration of the festival as the *mah song* occasionally bless them (see Figures A1-2). Joss paper<sup>2</sup> is placed underneath the legs of these altars to prevent them from touching the ground. Devotees differ from tourists who may happen upon a ceremony or event accidentally or are drawn to a particular rite or ritual of the festival for the express purpose of spectating. However, these two categories are not mutually exclusive and may overlap one another to a various degree through religious tourism.

While I have continued to research this religious practice for the past two years, I do not claim to understand every detail or to have a complete knowledge of all of the rituals. However, the purpose of this work is to formulate a substantiated viewpoint and reasoning for how ritual may act as a medium for conceptions of personhood and identity within the context of expansion

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<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, Chinese paper burned during ceremonies and rituals for ancestors or deities.

of the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods in Phuket, Thailand.

### **Reasons for Research**

Ritual may be conceived of as a window into or a mirror of social life: “Like art, ritual is a kind of language, a way of saying things” (Beattie, 1966, p. 65). The rituals of renewal, purification, and good fortune that constitute the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods provide insight into a particular social group—specifically the Sino-Thai community and their creation and conception of personhood and identity. Child (2010, p. 59) remarks: “[w]hile collective consciousness remains an aspect of the individual’s inner life during mundane periods, Durkheim suggests that ritual activity is designed to generate an excitation of social and emotional forces in the participants that enables collective consciousness to predominate at these times”. Therefore, when specific rituals not only gain recognition and acceptance but also engender exponentially larger numbers of ritual locations and participants, a shift in the collective consciousness is indicated and should be assessed.

#### **Growth and expansion: surveys and estimates.**

The Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods has existed in Phuket, Thailand, for over 150 years. The earliest known documentation dates to 1825. For most of the succeeding years, the festival boasted a relatively low rate of expansion. However, since the 1980s, the number of temples and shrines honoring the aforementioned gods and Dou Mu, their mother according to some myths, has significantly increased. Moreover, participation in the festival has risen and the number of spirit mediums has proliferated.

One metric to gauge this growth is to inventory the number of temples associated with

the Festival for the Nine Emperor Gods. Cheu Hock Tong's surveys<sup>3</sup> (1993) of temples in peninsular Southeast Asia in 1984 designated 48 temples in total: four in Thailand, 39 in Peninsular Malaysia, and five in Singapore. Six years later, he recorded 64—six in Thailand, 50 in Peninsular Malaysia, and eight in Singapore. By 1991, three more temples were established in inner Sabah and the West Coast of Malaysia (Cheu, 1993).

Cohen's research focuses on southern Thailand, and his 1997 survey (2001) located 27-29 temples dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods within four provinces; 13 of the temples are in Phuket. The dramatic difference between Cheu and Cohen's numbers raise the possibility that Cheu's surveys did not accurately reflect the number of associated shrines. However, the fact that six of Cohen's 13 shrines in Phuket had only been established after 1990 suggests a rapid expansion. Regardless, Cohen is convinced of the continuing growth of the number of shrines.

During my fieldwork, one informant, Kanyalak, asserted that 27 shrines in Phuket participated in the festival in 2015 while this year, in 2016, there were 31 (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). A comparison of Kanyalak's figures from Phuket alone—a single province in Thailand—with Cohen's earlier numbers representing four provinces indicates a continued expansion of the festival. Sutinee, another interlocutor, estimated that there may be as many as 50 or 60 shrines in the entirety of Phuket—not simply Phuket Town—if one includes small shrines as well (Sutinee, personal communication, 2016).

An upsurge in the numbers of devotees and *mah song* corresponds with the increase in

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<sup>3</sup> Various academics have cited Cheu Hock Tong's work on the topic of the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods. Oddly, some academics cite "Cheu" while others have used "Tong". When citing himself, he uses "Cheu Hock Tong". For the sake of brevity, I have chosen to follow the more frequently used way of referring to him as "Cheu" although there is an admitted discrepancy.

shrines. Cohen estimates there were 1500 *mah song* by the end of the 1990s. Participant growth at individual shrines can also be assessed through the increased number of sedan chairs (*chai pian*) used to carry statues of the gods during street procession rituals. These wooden chairs, carried on horizontal poles, are numbered to denote the order in which people process and require a minimum of two to four people to carry them. Cohen (2001) states there were more than 20 sedan chairs at Jui Tui, the largest shrine, marking the highest number he recorded at any of the shrines. By 2016 at Bang Niao, the second largest shrine, the highest number I noted on one of the many chairs in the shrine's compound was "64". Part of the difficulty in gauging the number of shrines and their participants may result from Thailand's state policies that require shrines to be associated with ordained monks. Kataoka (2012) notes that Chinese temples do not operate in this manner and are precluded from being recognized as religious institutions by the Thai government. Kataoka refers to this ambiguous status as "religion as non-religion" (p. 461) and specifically identifies 42 such temples in Phuket.

### **Initial hypothesis framing fieldwork.**

Cohen (2001) contemplates tourism as a contributing factor to the festival's expansion yet concludes that it is not the primary motivation in Phuket. My initial hypothesis regarding this growth was that political and hierarchical features of the stratified social system in which the devotees live might be prompting the expansion. The reasoning behind this idea is attributed to Thailand's hierarchical social system as a nation. Even everyday greetings like the *wai*, the placing of one's palms together with fingers pointed upwards and bowing one's head, reflect these social structures. Slight variations of the *wai* are dependent upon whom one is addressing and what status that person holds in relation to the person giving the *wai*. In addition, both class and racial stratification exist at different levels within the country.

I questioned if feelings of threatened status and security might have an effect on the number of participants and the degree of participation in the intrinsic rituals, some of which involve bodily risk, that comprise this festival. At the time of my fieldwork, although King Bhumibol Adulyadej was still alive, it was not clear if succession would fall to the prince, Maha Vajiralongkorn. Indeed, it was inappropriate to even discuss the king's death. While his son was next in line to inherit, Vajiralongkorn has tended to be less popular than his sister, the king's second of three daughters who, though well-loved by the public, is neither the first-born nor a male. It is important to note that there is still a gender hierarchy. Furthermore, Thailand has undergone numerous military *coups d'état*. Therefore, the premise was considered that serious concerns regarding an unstable future might be a contributing factor for the increase in a religious practice that endeavors to cleanse the community and provide luck for the upcoming year. Through the course of my research, a very clear point manifested that while an increase of social or political disorder may result in some devotees turning to long-established rituals and gods for assistance, it is neither the main nor only reason for the growth of the festival. Indeed, the inverse may prove equally relevant if not more significant.

### **A Brief Note on Personhood**

The concept of the "person" as a category instead of an object reveals insight into social structure and values for each respective society. While some academics may argue that personhood is a once-and-for-all status, this work will take the viewpoint that it is, rather, a continual process of attainment. This position, that social values are realized throughout one's life, is supported in both non-Western and Western societies and is briefly explored in this section.

Before delving into Western and non-Western personhood, some clarification on how

“person” is identified may be of use. Radcliffe-Brown (1965) separated the idea of the individual from the person and concluded that the individual is a biological organism while the person is the complex of social relationships. MacFarlane (1978) takes a similar stance in that the self is the individual’s awareness of a unique identity, and the person is society’s confirmation of that identity as socially significant. In other words, personhood is outwardly conferred on the individual by society as a whole. Yet, some scholars have suggested that there is not a unique self as interactions with other people construct that identity: “These others are seen to reflect back to us particular ways of imagining and performing self-identity. This self is also often referred to as a ‘looking glass self’ and illustrates how self-identity is always the expression and manifestation of our incorporation of how we are positioned and responded to by others” (Blackman, 2008, p. 23).

Taking this idea of societal bestowal one-step further, the status of person becomes something that must be attained. In non-Western societies, a gradual attainment of personhood is more commonly understood and openly acknowledged than in Western societies. Among the Tallensi, Wari’, or Taita, personhood is developed and even lost (Conklin and Morgan, 1996; Fortes, 1987; Harris, 1978). The process of becoming a person therefore involves key ideas and values in the respective societies.

In the West, personhood tends to be viewed as a natural given along with the body and is stable once established. However, in reality, there is not a unified opinion on the topic. A clear case of such division is seen in the ongoing pro-life/choice debates. At what point does the individual—the biological organism—receive the status as a person involved in social relationships (Radcliffe-Brown, 1965)? Moreover, personhood, as a socially conferred status, may be revoked when social norms or rules are violated (Stanescu, 2012). Therefore, although

Western culture appears to present personhood as a natural given, the discrepancy over when the individual, as defined by Radcliffe-Brown (1965), becomes a person shows that this status is outwardly bestowed. Ultimately, the category of personhood aids in outlining the social values in different cultures, even though the exact definition of what constitutes a person may vary. This concept of personhood and that of the self and identity will prove of significance in the later analysis of the festival.

### **Methodology**

A literature review is incorporated to explain the historical background and nature of the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods including past and present theories and perspectives regarding its rituals. The contents of the review are interwoven in the subsequent chapters alongside my own ethnographic accounts and observations.

Fieldwork in Phuket used participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and snowball sampling. All conversations with participants utilized informed oral consent for use of their information, direct quotes, and email or contact information, if provided, for follow-up questions. The Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) guidelines were followed. All participants were 18 years of age or older.

This study sought a maximum of three sets of participants. First were people living in Phuket, who were engaged in the festival, especially those of Chinese heritage. At times, the ability to ask general questions about the nature of the festival during the event involved implied consent as informants were devotees who were already engaged and taking part in the ceremonies. The second category was that of Thais who do not practice this religion; these participants were interviewed in Northern Thailand through snowball sampling. Western attendees and tourists were intended to be approached during the festival for a brief, semi-

structured interview although that proved futile.

The majority of my informants whom I met in Thailand actually approached me. As a single, taller-than-average, Caucasian female, I quite literally “stood out” from the devotees, yet my white clothes and continuous presence around the shrines eventually caused enough curiosity among several people to prompt them to start a conversation. A few women found my notebook to be particularly entertaining. When asked what I was writing about and if they might look at the pages, I always consented. The notes, written primarily in English with some Thai script intermittently woven in, caused more than one informant to remark that they were happy to discover that a foreigner was learning their language.

I met one such individual during the invitation ritual. Sutinee, a woman in her early 50s, born and raised in Phuket but currently living in Australia, stated that it was “destiny” that we had met so that she could tell me about the festival (personal communication, 2016). She further commented that my demeanor reminded her of women in northern Thailand. Noticing my singular dimple, Sutinee asked in a joking manner, “Are you *mah song*?” She was referring to mediums whose faces may show the scars from prior piercings. After a while, she determined that perhaps I was Thai in a past life to have found my way to Thailand and the festival.

Of the roughly 20 people with whom I had conversations or full interviews, the three referenced in the course of this work most often are Sutinee (mentioned above); Kanyalak—a woman in her mid 40s who was born in Singapore, has lived in Phuket since 1982 and speaks Cantonese, English, and Thai; and Poom—a man in his 30s and former *mah song* who has spent his entire life in Phuket.

Ethical conflicts were minimal. The religious festival and practices being researched are neither exercised covertly nor viewed as threatening to the dominant ideology in Thailand. Even

so, identities for participants are kept confidential through coding and pseudonyms unless the informants requested the use of their authentic names. Furthermore, observational notes were taken during religious ceremonies that are publicly open to both devotees and tourists. Therefore, it was not anticipated that my presence or observations would be considered an undue intrusion. The intent was to encourage the participants to feel ownership of the data collected and presented as they are the ones advancing available information.

It is noted that photographic consent was not gathered during many rituals. There are two reasons for this action or lack thereof. First, as the spirit mediums were in trance with the spirits of the gods inside of them, it would be inappropriate to approach the *mah song* during that time to ask for their consent to use these photos in my research. Occasionally, *mah song* would be surrounded by their assistants as photographers—professional and amateur—quickly gathered in front of them for the brief, posed opportunity, thus demonstrating that photos are not illicit during the event. Second, nearly everyone attending—devotee, attendee, tourist, and researcher—took photographs or videos whether on their phones or with actual cameras. These images are frequently shared on social media or utilized in print or online articles accessible to a wider public.

Of course, boundaries should be maintained. While observing mediums being pierced before seven o'clock in the morning at San Jao Shrine, certain foreigners were taking photos in an intrusive manner—some placing their cameras within six inches of the mediums' faces. At one point, a *pi liang* (medium's assistant) gently prodded a photographer away only to have the gesture ignored after a few seconds. A foreign woman audibly gasped placing one hand over her mouth while continuing to take photos with her camera held in her other hand as a younger *mah song* was pierced. If not for Poom (personal communication, 2016), who said it was permissible

to take photos and my own observation of *pi liang* documenting the ritual on their phones, I would have felt uncomfortable doing so. However, I kept an appropriate distance choosing to utilize the zoom feature instead of getting in the way.

### **Tribulations**

Language barriers were of concern at the onset of this research. While I know a certain level of Thai after living in the country for 10 months, I am by no means fluent nor had I had the opportunity to practice the tonal language for the intermittent 18 months between leaving my post in Thailand and returning for fieldwork. Furthermore, there was the potential for informants to speak Hokkien, a Chinese dialect, of which I have no familiarity. However, on my first day returning to Phuket, I walked two blocks from my lodging for dinner and happened to engage in a conversation with Mohng<sup>4</sup>—the chef, her sister, and her niece. At first, they asked me questions about being able to speak Thai. I insisted that I can only understand a small amount of their language, but Mohng (personal communication, 2016) noted how much she liked foreigners who try to learn Thai and that I was doing very well with it. This helped me regain some confidence. There were also several participants that I conversed with who spoke English well having lived or studied in other countries before moving to or returning to Phuket. Others who spoke minimal English spoke mostly in Thai, and I felt that we understood one another fairly well through the use of basic wording when discussing concepts for which I did not previously have a vocabulary.

Rain posed problems in getting from one location to another a few times. One morning, although I was planning on going to Sapam Shrine and viewing the *mah song* being possessed

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<sup>4</sup> All names used in this research are pseudonyms unless requested to use authentic names by the informants.

and pierced, the rain was pouring so heavily at 05:00 that I decided neither to try walking the distance with my notebook and camera nor to risk a motorbike journey in the slippery dark. Of course, that is a decision one has to make when attending a festival in Thailand's rainy season.

An unforeseen difficulty in garnering information and perspectives from Thai nationals in the Northern part of the country who do not practice this religion involved the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. I arrived in the province of Lamphun only an hour before the King died. By the time I began speaking with participants in the evening, rumors of his passing were circulating, and an emotional shadow was being cast over the entire country as the military publicized that an official announcement would be made that night. The following day was not conducive for conducting semi-structured interviews as general conversations with people often resulted in tears whenever the king was thought of or discussed. Many businesses also shut down for a few days during the initial mourning period.

Finally, the amount of existing academic literature referring to the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods specifically within Thailand is limited. Therefore, sources detailing the same festival within other countries in Southeast Asia have been read and referred to in the course of this work to provide a general framework around which anthropological theory and my own fieldwork intersect.

### **Indigenous Terminology and Translation**

Today, the language used, translations chosen, and connotations applied often act as barriers to understanding and appreciating the original meaning of the festival and its accompanying rites and rituals. For example, some of the English words used to describe various aspects are not true equivalents of the original Chinese or Thai words. For instance, the terminology of "gods" in relation to the festival may be problematic. Elliott (1955)

acknowledges English equivalents are troublesome: “The term ‘god’ is inaccurate and fraught with the overtones of western theology, while the term ‘spirit’ is too impersonal and too vague” (p. 28). Instead, Elliott proposed the written pronunciation of the Chinese word *shen* derived from Shenism—an amalgamation of folk religion, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism—for a powerful being that can possess mediums and effectively deal with devils.

Hamilton (2003) incorporates Elliott’s concept by describing the festival as a Taoist-Shenist ritual. The label of Shenism may be beneficial due to the unique and syncretic nature of this practice. However, various academics, including Hamilton (2008), have also labelled devotees and their practices associated with the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods broadly as a cult, even while deconstructing the problems of doing so. The use of the term “cult” implies more negative connotations in English than the most equivalent Thai term, *latthi satsana*, that “can be applied to a variety of phenomena without any moral or negative overtones” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 26). Incorporating gods and ritual aspects from Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religion, the Festival is still very fluid as different regional beliefs continue to be merged into it in each respective country where it is currently practiced in Southeast Asia like Thailand, Malaysia, and Taiwan (Lee 1986). Although not a “residual category”, popular religion does contain its own “defining structures” (Overmyer et al. 1995, p. 315).

#### **The Festival’s various names.**

In addition to difficulty deriving from specific translations of words and terminology, another problem arises from the variety of names in several languages that refer to the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods. The formal Thai name is *Tetsakaan thue sin gin je*; this translates to “The Festival for Gaining Grace by Eating Food without Meat” (Cohen, 2001, p. 47). In Hokkien, a Chinese dialect from the Fujian region, *kiu ong ia* or *Jiuhuang shenghui* is used

(Cheu, 1993; Maud, 2005). However, other names are employed more frequently such as *phrapeni gin pak*, “the custom of eating vegetables”, or *jia chai*.

More commonly known in English as the Vegetarian Festival, the term “festival” is not an accurate description in regard to the purpose and sentiment of these ritual practices. This label references the Thai description of *thetsakan gin je* (เทศกาลกินเจ) or Festival of Eating *Je*, *ngan gin je*, or sometimes simply *gin je*. However, the traditional title using *phrapeni* connotes a more serious implication instead of the “festival” of *ngan*. Cohen (2001, p. 48) cites an article written in 1968 (Nelson) labeling this event as a “Vegetarian Celebration” while informants related that it used to be more “solemn”. *Thetsakan*, a second translation for “festival” has implications not only of fun, gathering together, and joy but also of religious overtones (Hamilton 2008)<sup>5</sup>. As Hamilton (2008, p. 171) states in a footnote: “the event described here is a religious/spiritual rite actually accompanied by solemn recognition of evil spirits, it would probably be better described as a *pitthii* (ritual), but Thais seem to prefer categorizing it, like all kinds of temple fairs and celebrations, as a ‘festival’”.

Cheu (1993) notes that this particular event is closer to a religious or temple fair that is localized with a specific deity being celebrated in temples that are dedicated to said deity. While vendors do set up stalls in the streets closest to the larger shrines, the intent of the organizing shrine association members, spirit mediums, and devotees is not the buying and selling of merchandise but rather a focus on spiritual and communal cleansing. However, since “festival” is typically used locally to refer to these ritual events, this work will follow suit with the explicit use of it in a religious context.

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<sup>5</sup> From this point, “Festival” is capitalized as a shorthand reference to the full title of the “Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods” as a reminder of the religious nature involved.

### **Myth, Origin, and History**

Before one can discuss the significance of identity and personhood within the Festival, one must gain a clear picture of what is being celebrated, honored, and sought. Although an accurate history of the Festival does not exist, various mytho-historical narratives do and have found favor in different countries including Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Thailand. Yet, in researching the foundation of the Festival, concepts of identity already begin to emerge. Myths and origin narratives are not merely passive stories passed down from one generation to the next. Rather, they can be actively involved in the process of place-making and self-ascribed identity (Zene, 2007). Tambiah (1985) states:

words exist and are in a sense agents in themselves which establish connections and relations between both man and man, and man and the world, and are capable of 'acting' upon them, they are one of the most realistic representations we have of the concept of force which is either not directly observable or is a metaphysical notion which we find necessary to use. (p. 29)

Indeed, myths and rituals are both collective representations that are embedded in cosmological frameworks (Tambiah, 1985). A classic myth emerged in southern China and provided the underlying framework for the narratives associated with the Nine Emperor Gods and the Festival that honors them. As rulers and dynasties competed for power and control, new myths arose and were shaped by these authoritarian structures. The narratives assume different forms for different purposes and personify a cultural, religious and ethnic identity that is embodied in its devotees. A review of the origin narratives and associated myths as well as a historical frame of reference is essential before examining the practices and rituals associated with the Festival as it exists today.

## Myth

Cohen (1969) delineates qualities that define a myth: “a narrative of events; the narrative has a sacred quality; the sacred communication is made in symbolic form; at least some of the events and objects which occur in the myth neither occur nor exist in the world other than that of myth itself; and the narrative refers in dramatic form to origins or transformations” (p. 337).

Utilizing Cohen’s list of characteristics, one is supposed to be able to identify myths and differentiate them from other writings or narratives that do not exemplify the above qualities.

However, Overing and Rapport (2007) explain that defining “myth” is challenging due to the broad application of “myth” in academic and political spheres. Therefore, the context or frame of use influences the meaning, as “All kinds of discourse, speech, text, sets of ideas can be deemed ‘mythic’” (Overing & Rapport, 2007, p. 307).

Myths are instrumental to the process of ritual as they are perpetually enacted or commemorated in ritual (Cheu, 1993). Ritual and myth tend to employ symbolic representation:

A symbol is portrayed in the form of an object, act, event, quality, or relation that serves as a vehicle for conception—the vehicle is the form, and the conception the symbol’s meaning (Langer, 1960). That is, a symbol is something tangible, being a formulation of a notion, or belief (Geertz, 1973, p.91). In brief, a symbol is something that stands for something else. It has a form of its own, and it embodies a set, or sets, of meanings relating to the myth and ritual. (Cheu, 1993, pp. 19-20)

In addition, myths are mutually discontinuous and continuous as symbols may be transformed yet are capable of grounding and sustaining social groups that are themselves altering (Duara, 1998). Myth publicly delineates “distinctive social norms”, functioning as a source of community identity and reinforcing social cohesion (Overing & Rapport, 2007, p.

310). The continued reference to myth and origin narratives among the Sino-Thai community in Phuket enable a continuous heritage from a disconnected past (Cohen, 2001).

### **Origin Narratives**

The Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods is an annual religious practice purportedly originating from south coastal China with strong ties to Fujian Province; it has existed within Thailand for nearly two centuries, presumably first occurring in Phuket in 1825 (Cohen, 2001).

The origin of these rituals on Phuket Island is generally recounted in the following manner: A mysterious illness ravaged the people living in Phuket. They were unable to find a cure and many died. A travelling Chinese opera troupe performing in the area also succumbed to the disease. However, they remembered the practices performed in China during the ninth lunar month involving abstention from meat and prayers to the Nine Emperor Gods. By adhering to these strictures, the sick people became well. Afterward, an emissary was sent to a temple in China with an invitation for the gods to come back with him to Phuket. The emissary returned with scripture and a jar of ashes<sup>6</sup> from the shrine. The people recovered and continued to celebrate this event (Cohen, 2001).<sup>7</sup> From this point forward, the ashes from each year's Festival have been added to the original ash representing continuity of past and present.

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<sup>6</sup> Neither any of the narratives nor any of my informants explained what these original ashes were supposed to be.

<sup>7</sup> A similar account found in Singapore in which sacred scrolls were brought to Malaysia from China during an epidemic suggests a shared origin source; however, some Singaporeans claim that worship of the Nine Emperor Gods came to Thailand after spreading from Yunan to Malaysia (Heinze, 1981).

The accounts of the Festival's origins that I encountered on Phuket comprise all of Cohen's traits except for, arguably, one – the sequence of events described is not very fantastical, and the details could have occurred in real life. It was only in the fourth narrative that malaria was specifically named as the cause of the illness. This account was communicated over a sound-system before the bladed-ladder climbing ritual (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016).

These origin narratives provide an explanation of why the Festival is observed on Phuket. However, this Festival is a product of myths and folklore associated with the Nine Emperor Gods<sup>8</sup>, or *Jiuhuangye*<sup>9</sup>, that emerged over hundreds of years. Various textual and observational texts of the myths have been gathered during my research and brief fieldwork and may not always match. Cheu (1993) provides eight different stories collected from both written and oral accounts in various countries where this Festival occurs in Southeast Asia. The Nine Emperor Gods—*Jiuhuangye*—are considered to be reincarnations of the Nine Human Sovereigns—*Jiurenhuang*—who lived in China several thousand years ago and are associated with a constellation (Cheu, 1996). Kanyalak (personal communication, 2016) explains that the Chinese people slowly began recognizing and identifying the stars, especially the North Star, and asserts that records from 4,300 years ago reveal not only an awareness of stars as directional tools but also a belief that their movement affected dynasties and so were identified as gods.

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<sup>8</sup> Individual Chinese names given to the gods are twofold – one being the name of the stars and the other a \*secret name: *T'ien p'eng* (\*Tzu ch'in), *T'ien jui* (\*Tzu hsü), *T'ien ch'ung* (\*Tzu ch'iao), *T'ien fu* (\*Tzu hsiang), *T'ien ch'in* (\*Tzu chin), *T'ien hsin* (\*Tzu hsiang), *T'ien chu* (\*Tzu chung), *T'ien jen* (\*Tzu ch'ang), and *T'ien ying* (\*Tzu ch'eng) (Heinze, 1981).

Collectively, they are called *Jiuhuangye* in Chinese and *Kiu Ong* in Thai.

<sup>9</sup> See above footnote.

The “classic version” is one of the oldest written accounts. *Doumu* or the Big Dipper, controller of the North Pole, is the mother of the Nine Human Sovereigns who control the nine stars. *Doumu* bestowed her extensive knowledge upon her sons and together they surveil the universe and all that is in it (Cheu, 1993).

Kanyalak (personal communication, 2016) explains the relevance of Polaris—the North Star—and Big Bear—the constellation that includes the Big Dipper—and their incorporation into the status of gods differently than Cheu’s (1993) narration. In nature, Polaris is the guiding star that always points north and is believed to influence the four seasons. In mythology, Polaris maintains the equilibrium of the universe, reigns over death, cures ailments, and judges all deeds and misdeeds. Therefore, Polaris is acknowledged as the one who controls the book of death and is acclaimed as Dou Mu (斗姆), the mother of the Nine Emperor Gods. Kanyalak’s commentary aligns with Heinze’s (1981) assertion that Dou Mu was commonly worshiped in southern and northern China. A longer period of fieldwork would be required to assess which version is most prominent in Phuket.

Kanyalak (personal communication, 2016) explains that the Nine Emperor Gods are the inheritors, mediators, and promoters of Polaris, their heavenly mother. Having studied scripture that mentions seven visible and two unseen stars, she believes the nine gods to be the Big Bear as there had been nine visible stars in the past, but two of the stars’ lights diminished and are no longer seen. In Chinese astrology, according to Kanyalak’s research<sup>10</sup>, the Big Dipper brought the gods from heaven to maintain the balance of yin and yang—especially the sun and moon, coordinate the five elements, regulate the four seasons, synchronize the twenty-four solar

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<sup>10</sup> Kanyalak cited an author by the name of Chong (1999); however, I have not found a copy of her source to specify within the References section.

systems (*jieqi*), and approve the discipline of the stars (*xingji*). These statements complement Heinze (1981, p. 152) who asserts that “these nine stars have become part of the Taoist cabala. Grand Supreme Perfected Men [...] belonging to the most exalted class of Taoist superbeings, can summon the Polar Deity [...] by ‘pacing the road of the road of the Nine Stars<sup>11</sup>’”.

Although Cheu’s (1993) narrative is not widely known in either Malaysia or in Phuket today, the importance of Polaris is firmly integrated into the Festival. For example, Bang Niao and Jui Tui shrines, among others, display the Chinese character for the North Star in the nameplates above their entrances. Bang Niao’s sign specifically reads “The Palace of the North Star”. Moreover, the characters demarcating Polaris are in black lettering accentuating this special status instead of red like all other information. In addition, the tablet of the North Star displayed in many shrines is always in green, a symbol of death, as a reminder of her power. On the other hand, the tablet denoting the South Star—Canopus—which controls the book of life is red, a symbol of life. Of note, Chinese plaques on tombs name all members of that person’s family (children, grandchildren, et cetera), not just the deceased. During the Festival, family members visit these tombs and repaint the plaques. Those still living have their names painted in red, while the names of those who have died are re-written in green.

Not everyone in Phuket believes in the same origin narrative. For example, some claim the Nine Emperor Gods were the founders of the secret society revealed in the Festival’s esoteric use of symbols, language, and rituals (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). Another

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<sup>11</sup> Here the road of the Nine Stars refers to a specific pattern diagramed in Heinze’s article (1981). Of the three “columns”, groups of three stars are particularly ordered: 1) bottom center, 2) top right, 3) middle left, 4) top left, 5) middle center, 6) bottom right, 7) middle right, 8) bottom left, and 9) top center but slightly higher up than all of the others on the top.

explanation is proffered at the Phuket Thaihua Museum:

Taoism, Confusions [sic] and the Mahayana Buddhists believe there have been 7 Buddha's, and 2 Bodhisattva who wished clemency to all creatures so they divided themselves to be 9 avatars. Chinese people call them 'Kiew Ong' which means 9 Kings. According to Chinese astrology it means all the nine planets that have influence over the 5 earthly elements (soil, water, wind, fire and gold) were aligned. (Wall text, 2016)

Different narratives evolved over time and attained mythical status. In the Eastern/Later Han Dynasty (25-220), the *Jiuhuangye* are nine scholar musicians (Cheu, 1993). A Taoist magician, Zhang Tianshi, earned a living by curing illness, which he may have caused for that purpose; he eventually gained enough influence and money to stop paying the royal court taxes (Cheu, 1993). The Emperor was displeased and sought to humiliate Zhang by inviting him to the palace where nine scholar musicians were hidden away and instructed to play "crazy music" (Cheu, 1993, p. 22). The Emperor asked Zhang to exorcise the "demons" that were plaguing the palace and creating the noise. Zhang used a magic fan that "revealed the whereabouts of the musicians. Thereupon, he scattered some rice and salt on the floor and, with one chop of his magic sword, all the nine scholars in the secret compartment were beheaded and the 'crazy music' came to a halt" (Cheu, 1993, p. 22). The heads were sealed in a large earthenware vase along with charm paper to trap their spirits. Then the urn was discarded into the sea for fear the spirits would haunt the palace. Afterwards, the Emperor, who was troubled by "bloody apparitions" and nightmares, canonized the scholar musicians as the *Jiuhuangye* in propitiation. The Han version is a foundation for many oral accounts in which nine heads, sealed in an

earthenware container, endure a number of events before entering heaven (Cheu, 1993).<sup>12</sup>

Although certain motifs or elements are consistently shared among versions, variations and inconsistencies proliferate. Not all versions fall within Cohen's (1969) parameters in defining a myth while some share a correlation with a historical event. The narratives are not attempting to explain occurrences in the natural world like constellations in the sky. Rather, they offer an explanation of what has happened and provide a rallying cry for change.

Although the Han Dynasty ended in 220, the Han ruling house returned to power during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). In 1644, the Manchus overthrew the Ming Dynasty and established the Qing<sup>13</sup> Dynasty (1644-1911) (Sng & Bisalputra, 2015). The war and rebellions of this period acted as catalysts for new versions of *Jiuhuangye* myths.

The Ming version is found in the book *Xinjiapo xungen* by Qiu Xinmin and is the third written version (Cheu, 1993). In the Ming Dynasty, Lu Wang—or Jiuhuang—was the ninth prince whose successive nine generations comprise the *Jiuhuangye*. When the Qing overthrew the Ming rule, the Ming emperor, Congzhen, killed himself in Meishan in 1646. In response, Lu Wang and his allies resisted the Qing with an army based on Zhoushan Island, China. Attacked by the Qing, they fled to Taiwan to seek aid from Zheng Chenggong but purportedly capsized and drowned. Other accounts assert that Lu Wang drowned after reaching Taiwan and being rebuffed; regardless, incense urns are utilized to worship Lu Wang as *Jiuhuangye* in Fujian province (Cheu, 1993).

Interestingly, Cheu (1993) reports a tombstone on Jinmen Island, Taiwan, was discovered

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<sup>12</sup> Some genres relate how white blood oozed from the severed heads, “thus accounting for devotees’ wearing of white headgears during the festival” (Cheu, 1993, p. 22).

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes written as Ch’ing or Ching.

in 1959; it is inscribed with Lu Wang's name and states that he "died of asthma at the age of forty-five, on the first day of the Eleventh Moon in the year of *Renyin* (1662)" (p. 23). The tombstone lends more concrete evidence to the historical accounts that Lu Wang found his way to Taiwan after fleeing China. Ming supporters honored the rebel attempt by giving Lu Wang the appellation *Jiuhuangye*; nevertheless, Cheu finds several flaws with this account.

First, it is important to note that the number nine is a highly symbolic and mystical number associated with the Festival and accompanying rites (Cheu, 1996). Therefore, a major difficulty is the lack of any correlation between actual dates of the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods—the first nine days of the Ninth Moon—with any of the known dates of events in Lu Wang's life including his death date in the Eleventh Moon (Cheu, 1993). Moreover, the Ming account "does not provide evidence for the nine generations of the ninth prince of the Ming Dynasty" nor does it link to earlier narratives that "account for the invocation-of the *Jiuhuang xingjun* in pre-Ming scriptures, for the canonization of the nine scholars [nine scholar musicians] as *Jiuhuangye* by the Han emperor, and the ancient veneration of the Nine Human Sovereigns" (Cheu, 1993, p. 23). Although the account does incorporate the number nine, the appellation of *Jiuhuangye*, and the motif of the sea, there is nothing otherworldly, sacred, magical, or transformative and therefore does not fall into the parameters of myth as defined by Cohen (1969). This version is more realistic and reflects the feelings of the Ming supporters who oppose the Qing rule.

### **Secret Society: Hidden Rebellion in Plain Sight**

Even after the Qing gained power, opposition and rebellion continued. Secret societies were instituted whose goal was not only to overthrow the Qing Dynasty but also to return power to the Ming. New narratives of existing myths arose with hidden meanings and symbols that

supported the Ming.

The Bangkok version intimates that the nine divine brothers symbolically represent the nine emperors of the Ming Dynasty (Cheu, 1993). Scriptures of the Sun (*Taiyangjing*) and the Moon (*Taiyinjing*) are read during the Festival in Phuket and Bangkok: “When *Taiyang* or *ri* (the sun) is combined with *Taiyin* or *yue* (the moon), with *ri* on the left and *yue* on the right, the character “*ming*” (bright) is formed—here “*ming*” is said to refer to the Ming Dynasty” (Cheu, 1993, pp. 23-24). Further, the beginning of the Scripture of the Sun uses “*ming*”—hinting at the Ming Dynasty, “*zhu*”—a homonym for the Ming surname, and “*guangfo*”—a near homophone for “*guangfu* (the return of the light)” (Cheu, 1993, p. 24). These details aid in justifying this interpretation.

The Nan Tian Gong myth appears almost as an addendum to the Han version and is thought to form the basis for worship of the Nine Emperor Gods (Cheu, 1993). The severed heads of the nine scholar musicians (also referred to as nine divine brothers) are adrift in their sealed earthenware vase somewhere in the ocean near “Kongka” (Songkhla). Their cries for help are heard by fishermen who bring the vase onboard, strip off the charm paper, and proceed to open it. The nine heads ascend into the heavens. Subsequently, one of the nine warns a fisherman that a storm is approaching; however, he and his shipmates will be protected if they hoist a flag with the word *Jiuhuangye*. The fisherman shared this warning with other crews; however, they did not follow suit and were drowned while his crew was saved.

The Nan Tian Gong account demonstrates the power of the *Jiuhuangye* to protect the people, especially seafarers, and reinforces the basis for worship (Cheu, 1993). In addition, it combines the requisite elements to be considered a myth. Furthermore, building upon the Han version, this narrative provides a rallying point for opposition to

the Qing rulers as the scholars/brothers are perceived as Ming supporters while the Han ruler is recognized as the Qing emperor (Cheu, 1993). “This rebel movement often carried the slogan: ‘*fanqing fuming*’” (overthrow the Qing, restore the Ming) (Cheu, 1993, p. 26). As the Han ruling house had regained power in the Ming Dynasty only to lose it during the Qing ascendancy, reclaiming and reframing the earlier Han version for use by Ming loyalists would be reasonable.

The Penang narrative relates how the nine brothers of the Ming Dynasty’s last prince rescue him and take him from Fujian (China) to Thailand (Phuket in some versions) by following the nine northern stars (Cheu, 1996). Later, nine censers—thought to represent the “nine divine brothers”—are found adrift; these celestial beings descend from the “southern heavens” once a year to survey the “Chinese community” (Cheu, 1996, p. 54). This myth once again reinforces opposition to the Qing.<sup>14</sup>

In the Ampang account, an incense urn connects worship of the Nine Emperor Gods with the Hong Secret Society (*Hongmenhui*) (Cheu, 1993). Around 1734, one Hong member, Wan Yunlong, engaged in battle against Qing military in Hunan province and was killed on the ninth day of the ninth moon. Escaping to Thailand by sea, Yunlong’s supporters were spurned and they continued to the Penang area in Malaysia. Some Hong members migrated further and settled in Ampang. They continued to operate and expand their secret society with its mission to “overthrow the Qing Dynasty and restore the Ming” (Cheu, 1993, p. 23).

When authorities showed up unexpectedly at an initiation ceremony, Hong members said

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<sup>14</sup> Censers are used in ritual ceremonies today.

they had merely gathered for worship. When pressed to explain what god they were worshipping, as there was neither image nor statue present, one member pointed to an incense urn saying, “This is the *shen* (god) we are worshipping [...] called *Jiuhuang dadi*” (Cheu, 1993, p. 25). This myth explains why the gods are represented in an incense urn.

In the course of my research, Kanyalak not only reiterated some of the details from the Ming and Bangkok versions that Cheu (1993) describes but also pointed out physical evidence of their symbolic incorporation into the Festival and shrines around Phuket. The Ming Dynasty occurred in between a Mongolian dynasty and a Manchurian one known as the Qing Dynasty (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). When the Manchurians gained power, a secret society formed and used the Festival to urge younger generations to overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming Dynasty. During and subsequent to the Qing Dynasty, a “course of modern state building” was put into effect that led to a decrease of many religious cults during the twentieth century in China (Duara, 1988, p.792). As it was forbidden to congregate with the intent to promote rebellion against the Qing rulers, subtle symbols and hints were incorporated into Festival rituals enabling the symbolism to survive.

For example, instead of utilizing the traditional character meaning “celebration”, an atypical Chinese character that means “win” is inserted into the Chinese name for the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). This symbol pays homage to all those who died trying to restore the Ming Dynasty or were killed by the Qing for disloyalty and treason for supporting the Ming. Whole families and people associated with society members were also at risk of losing their lives. Similarly, during the Qing Dynasty, no one other than the emperor was allowed to wear the color yellow. Today, participants wear either white or yellow clothing. Turner (2012) discusses the “social skin” in which the body – skin, clothing,

hair, etc. – is a means of individual interaction with society. The precept to visibly distinguish oneself as a devotee throughout the nine days expresses a long history and a current identity as bodies can be embedded in meaning. Whether or not devotees are conscious of the history and symbolism, white is the color worn to mourn the loss of the Ming Emperor. Yellow is the color for emperors and displayed on the flags of the Nine Emperor Gods that symbolically represent the deposed Ming rulers. Furthermore, the hierarchy of the gods and their titles is militaristic connecting to the aims of the secret society to reinstitute Ming rule. There are emperors, generals, and soldiers. In particular, there are five Celestial Generals each representing one of the elements and having a specific color associated with it: yellow, black, white, green, and red (see Figure A3).<sup>15</sup>

Secret symbols still exist, but their meanings are not common knowledge; older generations have died and younger ones never received the information. For example, the wooden plaques along the doorway to the altar of the Nine Emperor Gods at Bang Niao display an inscription exclusively during the Festival. The symbols found on it do not technically exist in Chinese. At one point in time, Kanyalak had searched for someone to explain the symbols to her and eventually found a very old man in Phuket who knew their meaning.

One of the plaques translates to “Under the path of nature the sun shines brightly. Praise and admire the dragon”; the other says, “We are all friends under the moonlight of four seas to control the universe” (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). Of significance, the first

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<sup>15</sup> These generals were once demons who have begun to climb the ladder of merit to a place above ghosts but below gods through the process of “do good, receive good”. They are examples for others to follow.

inscription refers to a dragon that not only could mean emperor but also is written in the same way as the surname of the Ming Emperor's Royal Family. Furthermore, one plaque depicts the symbol for "sun" while the other depicts "moon". When "sun" and "moon" are placed together, as explained earlier, they mean "brightness" which is pronounced as "Ming". Although there are two separate plaques, their proximity to each other hints at the loyalty and aim of the secret society to overthrow the Qing.

Another indication of the secret society is a hand signal that was used to identify fellow members (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). Today, specific hand poses are found among statues or images in the shrines and used by some *mah song* in trance (see Figure A4). There are even poles carried in processions with this particular hand position at the top. The hand signal involves the index and pinky fingers extended with the two in between bent downwards and the thumb holding the middle two fingers down. Each finger holds a meaning and aspiration for those who use it. The society, or the Triad—heaven, earth, and human, could also use incense sticks to represent the hand signal.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, the secret society split into two branches. One

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<sup>16</sup> The first incense stick signifies the index finger or benevolence. This finger represents two people travelling to the capital in winter without enough supplies for both to survive. One gave what he had to the other and went off to die in the wilderness, sacrificing himself for his friend. A second incense stick represents the pinky finger and denotes loyalty and righteousness. This narrative involves three friends with no biological connection who swear to be brothers and never betray each other all of their lives. A third is for the thumb and signifies chivalry. In this account, people came to aid those bullied by others and the government. Finally, a half stick represents the middle two fingers to show that one should try to do what one can even without the ability to control the outcome. This story tells of a man in need who went to a village where he was told he could see a rich man who might buy his horse. The man did as instructed, but the rich man, never asking for the horse, gave the poor man food and shelter and then sent him away with some money. Later, the poor man heard that rich man was in jail and sentenced to death. Unable to save the rich man's life, the poor man went to the jail and gave the rich man some alcohol to drink and a piece of his own flesh that he cut off and cooked as a final meal. As the rich man still died, only half an incense stick is used.

believed that overthrowing the Qing dynasty was the first priority followed by getting rid of foreigners. The other branch reversed the order.

These narratives exemplify how a story or myth can proliferate and adapt over time. Although some details change, a number of elements are shared and repeated: the number nine, a container (earthenware vase, censers, incense urn), travel over water, themes involving a confrontation with power whether individual or political. This shared “mythic structure” is still being employed in more recent oral accounts such as the nine “Robin Hoods” combating “institutional injustice”, nine heroes of “the May 13 [1969] Incident” in Kuala Lumpur who sacrificed their lives, or nine guerrillas opposing the 1942-1945 Japanese Occupation of Malaysia (Cheu, 1993, p. 26).

### **Chapter Summary**

Ultimately, myths shift and evolve as they are passed down from one generation to the next, change localities, or incorporate new details based on real world events at various points in time. The world may act on the myths just as the myths may act upon hearers or readers of them. This is witnessed in the plurality of narratives regarding the Nine Emperor Gods where, over the centuries, a basic origin narrative has taken different forms for different purposes. A number of these versions are not only comingled but also shaped by the authoritarian structure of competing dynastic rules, rebellions and secret societies. Although many Chinese today do not know the history and background of this Festival due to the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s that eradicated many religious practices, the rituals, traditions and customs are imbued with outward signs and secret symbols of the past. The myths of the *Jiuhuangye* and their historical details establish aspects of an association with the Ming dynasty that were expressed within the rituals of the past and continue to do so in the present day. The symbols of the secret society incorporate

a Chinese identity from a specific time, ethnicity, and locale in China through Ming supporters who opposed the Manchurian Qing. In the process, these myths and narratives provide a shared community identity for their adherents and devotees whether in the context of a religious Festival, a protest group, or a secret society committed to the overthrow of those in power.

### **Rituals: Cosmology and Performance**

The Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods revolves around renewal and purification, migration, and good fortune. The devotees' desire for success, prosperity, and longevity are also important aspects of the nine days. Overt daily practices are not typically observed in public. However, when problems, illnesses, or misfortunes occur, Chinese devotees in Singapore rely throughout the year on spiritual intervention using divination through divining sticks and blocks (see Figure A5). Most temples have and use these objects even when there are *tâng-ki* with whom people may come and receive direct instructions or prescriptions for illness (Elliott, 1955). However, during the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, various rituals are performed in both subtle and overt manners, not all of which involve *mah song* as the primary focus.

Durkheim indicates the merit of ritual analysis lies in its ability to “produce and reinforce the core social relations that make society possible [...] In the process of performance, rituals can also change social relations” (Creed, 2011, p. 12). Rituals may further project “concrete present into mythical time [...] and bring] the superior divine realm or moments of beginning into the present human world to achieve a cleansing and a charging with moral potency” (Tambiah, 1985, p. 131). Therefore, a summary of some of the foremost rituals of the Festival will follow to provide an understanding of the events as well as a framework for later discussion and analysis.

#### **Welcoming Ritual**

Serving as an invitation to the Nine Emperor Gods who are also referred to as Kiu Ong<sup>17</sup>, the welcoming ritual occurs on the evening before the first full day of the Festival. The ritual I observed at Bang Niao began with the priest and devotees raising the *ko teng* pole. This pole,

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<sup>17</sup> According to the Phuket Thaihua Museum (Wall text, 2016), Kiu Ong also means “Nine Kings”.

approximately forty-foot tall, had a leaved, bamboo branch attached vertically at the top (see Figure A6). Multiple ropes manipulated by groups of people, some of whom are standing on nearby ladders or roofs, are used to hoist the pole into position at the appropriate time. Before the pole is actually erected, a large ball of yellow string is passed among the devotees. Holding the string, they surround the pole to create an auspicious barrier. As drums are beaten, the principal *mah song*, whose upper body is covered by elaborate tattoos including an image of a shrine across his back, circulates to different parts of the shrine and the front gate while cracking his whip and blessing the area (see Figure A7).

Every shrine has a principal *mah song* who is possessed by *Lao Ya*, the god of opera troupes. The principal *mah song* serves community members during the year by blessing items such as cars for devotees. During the Festival, the principal *mah song* cleanses the shrine through a process of demarcation, purification, and consecration rituals before the *ko teng* pole is raised. Demarcation is achieved when five bamboo planks with charm cloths tied on them are then thrust into the ground at the four corners with one in the middle of the shrine. The kitchen of the shrine is also cleansed with charm paper placed on cooking utensils, stove, pots, et cetera. Only after this process is completed can the lantern pole be raised. During ritual processions, the principal *mah song* walks under the ceremonial umbrella near the censer master who carries what is believed to be the ashes of the Nine Emperor Gods mixed with the original ashes that were brought from China.

During this interval, I witnessed another *mah song* in the crowd who became possessed and, with head shaking, did a step-skip-step walk up to the shrine. His shirt was removed and a

red decorated *siú to*<sup>18</sup> was placed on him. Eventually, the principal *mah song* made his way to the base of the pole. Instructions were shouted out over a megaphone by another man who stood nearby. Suddenly, all manner of drums were beaten as people yelled out instructions as to which rope needed to be pulled more or less until the pole was upright and fastened in place. Another bamboo branch, similar to the one on top of the *ko teng* pole, was attached close to the top of the vertical pole, although this one was horizontal to the ground. Later in the night, nine lanterns were lit and hung from the crosswise pole (see Figure A8).

As midnight approached, the gods entered into the *mah song* in preparation for Kiu Ong's arrival. At Bang Niao, it was close to 21:30 when devotees and *pi liang* gathered around the doorways to each of the altars as the *mah song* began to be possessed by the gods. Sounds similar to dry-heaving reached my ears as the gods cleared some of the *mah song*'s airways. An older, grey-haired *mah song* was crouched over directly across from me. His face contorted each time he made these strange coughing sounds; in between coughs, his eyes were widened.

While there were younger *mah song*, possibly 17 to 20 years old, there were also many adults whose grey and silver hair and looser, aged skin indicated they might range up to their 50s or 60s in age. When "the spiritual" came into them, they suddenly leapt up with energy—heads always vibrating—and convulsed, danced, skipped, or hopped up to the altars where they were given the *siú to*, whips, or other items associated with their gods. One *mah song*—head constantly and rapidly shaking from side to side—went before the statue of Naja and placed his hand briefly on a sandalwood log that was burning in a pot along with incense without a discernable reaction. The drumming intensified to alert the devotees that all of the *mah song*

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<sup>18</sup> A type of decorated apron, of various colors, with a loop for the head and ties around the back, all of which have an octagon with the yin yang symbol in the center on the front.

were close to being possessed. At this point, they filed out into the yard in the shrine's complex near the *ko teng* pole with devotees affording them some room. A lantern with nine candles was lit and hoisted towards the top of the pole to signal the arrival of the gods. All of the people knelt and prayed in silence. Then the *mah song* encircled the Nine Emperor Gods' palanquin (*tua lian*) carrying their flags<sup>19</sup>. The palanquin is decorated in yellow cloth with symbols of the Nine Emperor Gods that obscures the interior (see Figure A9). Once again, everyone watching was silent. The welcoming ritual concludes on the same night after a procession to a site usually near water—in Phuket, this occurs at Sapan Hin, a female shrine or *aum*, that overlooks the Andaman Sea (see Figures A10-11). Prayers and incantations are said until the moment the *mah song* indicate Kiu Ong is there.

### **Worship Ritual**

Both *baishen* (Hokkien: lit. worship gods; *shen* meaning god)—invisible spirits—and *baifo*—idols are involved in the worship ritual (Cheu, 1993). In this syncretic practice, the idols of both Buddha and Confucius are worshiped alongside the Taoist pantheon by offering fruit, money, tea, or flowers; pouring oil into lamps at the shrines (*tianyou*); lighting joss sticks and candles;<sup>20</sup> and burning charm papers, incense paper, paper images, or “other ritual paraphernalia” (Cheu, 1993, p. 31). The gods can answer devotees' and their prayers and efforts through divining (*bobei*) (Cheu, 1993). Devotees engage in these practices, which occur every day of the Festival; the presence of *mah song* or priests is not required.

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<sup>19</sup> The flags carried by *mah song* are generally black or yellow with Hokkien script across the, roughly, 2'x2' cloth that is attached to a short wooden pole. In the center may be a Fu Xi bagua representing Taoist cosmology.

<sup>20</sup> The candles are yellow in Thailand and white in Malaysia (Cheu, 1993).

### Trance Ritual

*Mah song* enact the trance ritual. A language of performance is involved when discussing the “dance” that *mah song* perform: “in every trance dance, there is a ritual, and every trance ritual is enacted in the form of a dance” (Cheu, 1993, p. 31). Lee (1986) divides trance into three stages—induction, consultation, and emergence. Induction may be achieved in several ways:

The medium may sit still, inhale incense, or cough violently as though he is about to vomit. These procedures are usually accompanied by chanting [...] The onset of trance is signified by head swirling, rolling back of eyes, trembling in various parts of the body, and changes in the pitch of the voice [...] Upon possession, the medium bows before the main altar and performs the Eight Trigrams Movement (in some cases, the Movement is performed before trance begins). Some mediums begin the trance by whipping in the air. (Lee, 1986, p. 203)

Edwards (1990, p. 7) paints a similar picture with air smelling of sesame and filled with the sounds of rhythmic drumming during the Festival in Malaysia as a *tâng-ki* dips his fingers into boiling oil before sucking some of the heated fluid into his mouth “all ease and dignity [...] In a graceful gesture, dignified, unhurried, he pursed his lips and sent the oil in an arching stream into the fire. Flames leaped into the air. The crowd gasped”.

Trance rituals can benefit either individuals or the community. Consultation may involve devotees who ask the gods questions through the *mah song*; when *mah song* answer by speaking in tongues, often said to be Hokkien, an interpreter or medicine man is required. *Mah song* may also perform healing rituals or an “asking for peace” ritual (*wen'an*) (Cheu, 1993, p. 32). Ritual healing is done to prevent loss of the soul, ailment caused by natural elements, spirit possession, and influence by sorcery or witchcraft as well as to exorcise supernatural sources. Talismans,

charms (*fu*), amulets, prayer charms, or herbal medicines may be used to accomplish these aims (see Figure A12). When healing consistently fails, it is not the *mah song* who is blamed; rather it is determined that the spirit causing the illness is rightfully avenging the living individual and therefore cannot be cast away (de Groot, 2007).

### **Street Procession Ritual**

When the *mah song* have the gods or spirits inside of them, they often process through the streets in order to purify the community of evil spirits and demons. These processions also clean the environment by balancing the yin with a restored yang (Cheu, 1993; Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). In trance, *mah song* are given a *siú to* along with articles that the possessing god uses, e.g. whip, sword, et cetera, by their assistants or *pi liang* (de Groot, 2007). Early in the morning at their associated shrines, *mah song* are pierced by assistants with a “master skewer”—a conical metal skewer (see Figure A13). Different shrines engage in this ritual on different days. Therefore, even though these rituals may occur on each of the nine days of the Festival, a *mah song* associated with a single shrine does not undergo piercing every day. Not much blood is shed allegedly from being in trance, when people are less likely to bleed heavily, and through a tearing rather than cutting of the skin (de Groot, 2007). Furthermore, just as prayer and meditation have been shown to lessen the amount of physical pain some people experience, research indicates that states of trance may release endorphins while serotonin release has been linked with self-hypnosis (Jackson, 2011; Lewis, 1989; Wachholtz & Pearce, 2009). In addition, “pain-coping skills” have the capacity to inhibit signals of pain from the spinal cord (Jackson, 2011, p. 376).

Younger, less established *mah song* tend to use more elaborate objects (see Figures A14-31). Cohen (2001) documented *mah song* with a large parasol, a musket, an electric fan, swords,

and more placed through the incisions made in their cheeks; a few *mah song* wrapped themselves in barbed wire. Some academics like Faulk (1994 as cited in Blackman, 2008, p. 89) discuss the implications of the mouth, which “connects and links a number of disparate functions [...and] is an orifice or ‘body opening’ that is neither entirely inside or outside”. However, after I asked Kanyalak (personal communication, 2016) about this theory concerning the mouth’s importance, she had a discussion with shrine leaders who did not attribute any significance to the mouth regarding these ritual piercings. Sutinee (personal communication, 2016) contends that, in the past, the *mah song* used to employ only one skewer through their cheeks to make those who doubted them believe that “the spiritual” was in them. Now, the piercings and demonstrations have become more extreme not only to show the gods’ power but also to honor the shrines with which the gods are associated. There are street processions daily during the Festival as not all of the shrines will perform this ritual on the same day. The processions in Phuket usually find their way to Sapan Hin Shrine. The procession itself is a ritual that goes through various public streets while *pi liang* carry sedan chairs with statues of the gods upon them and a large palanquin containing Kiu Ong; the public kneels down with bowed heads as the palanquin passes (Cheu, 1993; Cohen, 2001).

Among the male *mah song* I observed in Phuket, the traditional skewers were very prevalent as were swords and axes piercing their cheeks. Some of the more unique objects were oriental fans, the frame of an umbrella, and the bowsprit of a two-foot long ship whose hull was held up by a *pi liang*. Some of the *pi liang* had medical tape across slits in their cheeks indicating that they were also *mah song* who had been possessed by a god on a previous day. They occasionally distributed auspicious yellow threads to devotees lining the procession route. I also noted a larger proportion of younger *mah song* in their mid-teens than I remembered seeing only

two years earlier.

Bodily infliction is not limited to piercing. Five common tools utilized during the processions and rituals include a ball of nails that de Groot (2007) refers to as a prick ball with each nail 2-12 millimeters long, a sharp sword roughly 50 centimeters in length, a saw, a spiked club, or a large axe that is often considered the “most dangerous” item (Jordan, 1972, p. 79). These items are used by *mah song* to inflict pain on their own bodies for the benefit of the devotees attending the ceremonies (see Figures A32-35).

During the processions, the ceremonial umbrella symbolically protects the sacred ashes carried by the censer master. Although numerous firecrackers are lit by devotees and *pi liang* to welcome the gods and scare away evil spirits, firecrackers are not supposed to be thrown towards the palanquin (*tua lian*) of the Nine Emperor Gods (see Figures A36-40). This precept is not always obeyed. The palanquin also must not touch the floor or ground. Due to its weight and the amount of smoke from the firecrackers nearby, three groups of people have to alternate carrying it through the streets. Signs are carried preceding the ceremonial umbrella and *tua lian* instructing devotees to “be quiet” and “get down” as is proper behavior when the religious items pass by. Long trumpets are blown to announce the approach of the nine gods. The censer master and his assistant typically hold charm cloths in their mouths as they walk. Also in the processions are devotees who carry sedan chairs that hold images of the gods. In addition, Chinese percussion bands, generally comprised of children, are interspersed.

Many of the procession rituals ended at Sapan Hin where the gods released the *mah song*, although some *mah song* continue past the shrine and travel another direction. One of the younger *mah song* walked up to a group of friends after his piercings were removed. The only care given to him was some medical tape across the incision in his cheek. One of his friends

handed him a small container out of which the *mah song* took a bit of white powder and rubbed it against his nose while inhaling. A female *mah song* unwrapped a string of firecrackers in a circle around her bare feet which were then lit as she stood unwavering even as I had to cover my ears against the deafening sound.

On the fifth full day of the Festival, seven minutes before the procession from Tha Rua Shrine arrived, several people began ringing bells and pounding on the drum. The first *mah song* to enter the shrine placed his flag across the far left altar before slapping his hands on it several times and jumping backwards into the arms of his *pi liang*. The *mah song*'s body was stiff enough to hold the position of legs bent, feet off the stone floor, and right arm extended with his index and middle fingers pointed outwards. An assistant of the shrine pushed the legs straight before clapping the *mah song*'s shoulders three times and pressing the arm down at which point the man was no longer possessed and drooped momentarily against the *pi liang* (see Figure A41).

### **Luck Rituals**

Taoist priests may perform three different rituals that revolve around good fortune for individuals or groups of devotees (Cheu, 1993). The luck-preserving ritual (*baoyun*) reaffirms the yang over yin and is performed when good luck is encountered. Devotees may ask for the luck-opening ritual (*jieyun*) when contending with ill luck. Although this can be done on an individual basis, a priest might do this for one to two hundred people at a single time. This ritual propitiates Polaris (the North Star) and Canopus (the South Star). Clothes can be brought to be stamped with a seal of the Nine Emperor Gods (*Jiuhuangye*) to be worn later on. Finally, when good luck returns, the thanksgiving ritual (*zuogong*) is performed by the priest to prevent further ill luck and retain the good luck. Unluckily, I never saw these rituals conducted.

## **Purification Rituals**

*Mah song*, priests, and worshipers engage in and are cleansed by several unique ceremonies that occur during the Festival. Bridge-crossing, fire-walking, or bladed-ladder climbing rituals are performed as a “community rite of cosmic renewal or rebirth” (Cheu, 1993, p. 34).

### **Bridge-crossing.**

Generally taking place on the eighth day, the bridge-crossing ritual (*koi hawn*) allows everyone to participate other than women who are pregnant or menstruating. The ceremony provides for variations of bridges and heights, and devotees are stamped by the *Jiuhuangye* seal as they cross (see Figure A42). A bowl filled with either water or shiny paper to denote that element is positioned underneath the bridge (Hamilton, 2003).

### **Fire-walking.**

*Mah song* are typically the only participants who undertake fire-walking (*koi hoi*). In 2016, 18 shrines participated, once per shrine, during the last four days of the Festival. The pile of charcoal used for the fire-walking ritual can measure 1.2 meters in width, 3.5 meters in length, and 0.6 meters in height (Cheu, 1993). At Bang Niao, the fire was lit hours before the ritual took place in the courtyard of the shrine. I observed a group of four young men wearing dampened cloth wrapped around their heads and faces who were tasked with leveling out the large pile of burning wood that had become a pile of glowing coals several feet high. Two men on each side of the embers wielded a long metal pole with a flattened piece of metal welded to one side. They slowly scraped the top layer of coals closer to the ground. After each brush of the metal through the flames, the pole was doused with what I assume was water. When the coals were sufficiently distributed into a dense floor of fire, the men turned the flat metal side horizontal to the coals and

proceeded to pack them together by swinging the pole up and down and pounding the flat side onto the embers. These actions were repeated over and over; while water cooled the heated metal, the young men took short breaks away from the scorching heat (see Figures A43-47).

More than an hour passed. The temperature rose as the coals were spread closer to devotees, other attendees, and myself as we crowded along the fence surrounding the fire. The crowd pressed against each other further intensifying the heat. Finally, the drums began, the *mah song* came out from inside the shrine, barefoot, with charm cloths in their mouths and their clothes rolled up, and the fire walking began. The principal *mah song* went first after the censor master sprayed the coals with bits of liquid from a bowl he held. Cheu asserts that “Just before the firewalking ceremony begins, a large quantity of salt, mixed with a kind of temperature-reducing chemical known in Hokkien as *pingxie*, uncooked rice, and tea leaves are thrown into the pyre. The salt and *pingxie* will melt to smother the embers while the rice and tea leaves burst into harmless splinters” (1993, p. 36). As the other *mah song* went across, all I could see over the bodies of *mah song* waiting to cross or who had completed the ritual were heads bobbing up and down as the *mah song* either hopped across or, less often, walked slowly. The censor master continued to intermittently fling drops of the unknown liquid while the principle *mah song* occasionally threw handfuls of, what appeared to be, rice from a flat, woven tray. Due to my limited visibility, I could not see if there was a pennant thrown into the fire path “to signal that no one is allowed to walk over it anymore”, nor did I witness kerosene or incense papers being added to the fire to reheat it as Cheu documents (1993, p. 37). Yet the charcoal from the firewalking ritual is believed to be “efficacious”, capable of curing ailments and illness, and is sometimes taken home by devotees for these purposes (Cheu, 1993).

Precepts regarding Chinese astrology and cosmology are reiterated and followed by

participants. Each of the twelve zodiac signs has three incompatible signs identified in each of the vertical columns as follows:

Rat	Ox	Tiger
Rabbit	Dragon	Snake
Horse	Goat	Monkey
Rooster	Dog	Pig

This was the Year of the Monkey, so people born in the Year of the Tiger, Snake, or Pig were not allowed to observe the fire-walking ritual in 2016 (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). These restrictions assert the prominence of a Chinese belief system and one's position in that cosmology. In so doing, this cosmology distinguishes this group identity of devotees from others on the island or within Thailand.

### **Bladed-ladder climbing.**

Though not discussed by Cheu, the bladed-ladder climbing ritual (*khi toh thooi*) constitutes another purification ritual for *mah song* that took place at three shrines on the seventh day and one on the eighth in Phuket. Barefoot, entranced *mah song* climb a ladder, whose steps are made from knife-like blades—sharp edge pointed upward, and ascend to a small platform at the top from which they may throw charms (*fu*) to devotees and offer blessings before descending an identical bladed-ladder on the opposite side. Typically, the ladders have 36 steps on each side, which add up to 72 (see Figures A48-50). When seven and two or three and six are added together, the result is the highly symbolic number nine. The principal *mah song* ascends first. My experience mirrors Cohen's (2001, p. 97) as "Most [*mah song*] hold fast to the rails, to reduce the pressure on their soles. Some take two steps at a time. One or two hold only onto the blades, instead of the rails, a style of climbing demanding particular dexterity". Female *mah song*

are not allowed to make the ascent.

Walking across or lying on nail bridges is less common as are purification rituals utilizing boiling oil; *mah song* either dip their hands in the oil or dip a leaf-covered branch in the oil before striking themselves on their bare backs (Cohen, 2001; de Groot, 2007). When rituals that use hot oil have ended, after marking “various religious paraphernalia with dots of red ink”, *mah song* are released by the gods while devotees take bottles of oil home (Cohen, 2001, p. 97).

### **Invitation Ritual: Pak Tao and Lam Tao**

Cohen (2001) describes the invitation ritual for Pak Tao (the god of death) and Lam Tao (the god of birth) that begins with paper effigies and covered name tablets along with Yok Ong (the Jade Emperor God at the top of the Taoist pantheon) and Kiu Ong’s incense urns, umbrellas, and sedan chairs brought from participating shrines to a temporary altar at Sapan Hin. The head priest or lay prayer leader (*huat kua*) leads a prayer, some *mah song* become possessed, and nine flags are set up. The

*huat kua* kneels with incense sticks in his hands, inviting the gods; one of his assistants offers a tea pot, while a medium draws a line in the sand, as if to show the gods the way [...] upon which divining blocks are thrown. Once a positive response is received, the cover is taken off the gods’ eyes and their tablets [...] gold paper is burned and firecrackers lit. (Cohen, 2001, p. 87)

More firecrackers are set off during the subsequent street procession as the gods return to Jui Tui Shrine.

### **Food Offering to the Heavenly Warriors Ritual**

The principal *mah song* of the shrine performs this ritual (*kho kun*) in which grain, grass, and gold paper are presented to the spirits of soldiers and their horses; many *mah song* are

possessed by these spirits who hold statuses higher than ghosts but lower than gods (Cohen, 2001). Flags of the *mah song* are carried by five devotees to “invoke the spirits,” and a few *mah song* may become possessed (Cohen, 2001, p. 84). At Bang Niao, after the area was cleansed, I observed the offerings being selected by throwing five flags—one in each color of the five Celestial Generals—at buckets of different food and seeing which bucket in which they landed. These “choices” were then placed in five piles each containing the paper, grain, and grass. After the flags have been positioned in each of the five directions (North, South, East, West, and Center), two divining blocks are thrown until one faces upwards while the other faces down (Cohen, 2001). This indicates that the spirits have accepted the offering. The piles are set on fire and soon put out with water (see Figures A51-52). The *mah song* may engage in a short procession through some of the surrounding streets to provide blessings and purify the area.

### **Propitiation of the Seven Stars Ritual**

The sun, moon, and seven planets—the “nine stars of astrology”—that are sometimes associated with the Nine Emperor Gods and, by default, Dou Mu are honored in the propitiation of the seven stars ritual (*pai chit chaen*) (Cohen, 2001, p. 94). A high platform is ascended by a few principal *mah song*, one of whom prays to the stars and holds incense sticks that may be raised to the sky; as the *huat kua* reads a Taoist prayer, the devotees kneel below the *mah song* who wave their flags and shout at moments when a bell sounds during the ritual (Cohen, 2001). Festival contributors’ names are read from a list and the mediums throw charm cloth (*fu*) to devotees before descending; the principal *mah song* “then touches the eyes and forehead of new images of gods with red ink, thereby inviting the gods to inhabit them; he also touches various other objects for good luck” (Cohen, 2001, p. 95).

### **Sending-Off Ritual**

Everyone—priests, devotees, *pi liang*, tourists, and other spectators—may participate in the sending-off ritual (*sawng sin Yok Ong Kiu Ong*). After burning paper effigies of the gods and a paper house that has resided in the shrine during the Festival, the entourage processes with the *mah song* to a shrine located near water (see Figures A53-56). A small boat is launched into the water with ashes from the previous year. This is usually done by devotees of Chinese birth, which suggests a special significance in this act (Cheu, 1993). In Phuket, the censer master and the principal *mah song* send off the gods by taking the ashes onto a boat and scattering some of them into the sea. Then ashes from the current year are added to the urn; this symbolizes a “continuity to achieve infinity” (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). Only after the gods have been sent away do the shrines’ kitchens serve meat—chicken at Bang Niao in 2016—to mark the end of the Festival and the fast.<sup>21</sup>

### **Lantern Pole Lowering Ritual**

The *ko teng* pole is lowered in a ceremony (*long ko teng thiao*) the day following the sending-off ritual. Once the pole can be reached by the devotees crowded around it, parts of the bamboo branches are broken off and taken home as blessed objects (see Figures A57-58).

### **Chapter Summary**

The Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods focuses heavily on cleansing and renewal of individuals and the entire community in Phuket. The majority of the rituals during the nine days do not involve elaborate facial piercings and bodily inflictions of the *mah song* that so readily

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<sup>21</sup> I observed numerous teenagers dressed in white flocking to late-night food chains, like McDonalds, and exiting with chicken nuggets or chicken sandwiches after the ritual’s conclusion.

capture the attention of non-devotees. Many of the numerous rituals occur daily as different shrines perform them on different days or daily at various times. Others, like the welcoming and sending off rituals, are performed only once on a set day. The rituals follow specific precepts and are laden with Chinese cosmology and themes of continuity of the past with the present. Rituals may reinforce social relationships as well as change them and, in doing so, reinforce and alter social identity. Belief in the efficacy of the rituals and participation in the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods engenders a yearly re-creation for members of the Chinese and Sino-Thai community. These moments of cosmic renewal and rebirth ascribe an identity as a “Chinese person”; the self recognizes this identity as unique and strives to attain this socially conferred status through the performance of ritual (MacFarlane, 1978).

### ***Mah Song: Embodied Gods***

Within the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, *mah song* perform specific rituals to accomplish the aims of purification and renewal of luck. *Mah song* constitute a significant and overwhelming presence during the Festival. Poom (personal communication, 2016) claims there are more than 2000 *mah song* in all of Phuket—possibly 5 or 6000 by his estimate. Each shrine in Phuket has a certain number of *mah song* who are registered with their particular temple. For example, Jui Tui Shrine has 2000 *mah song* associated with it while Bang Niao has 500 registered *mah song* and around 300 unregistered (Kanyalak & Sutinee, personal communications, 2016).<sup>22</sup> Registration is important. If an accident occurs and a registered *mah song* is somehow injured, the shrine is responsible for that individual. As the numbers of *mah song* increase, questions arise as to what is involved in being a *mah song* and how and why these people become possessed by the gods.

### **Defining *Mah Song***

In this Festival, *mah song* (spirit horse<sup>23</sup>) in Thai and *tâng-ki*<sup>24</sup> (divining youth) in Hokkien are most closely equated to “mediums” among academics and English-speaking Thais

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<sup>22</sup> Bang Niao does not accept female *mah song* in accordance with traditional customs that sanction only men as such.

<sup>23</sup> This is a general, more literal translation. Different sources and academics use slightly different English words when translating *mah song*.

<sup>24</sup> As previously discussed (p. 16), limited literature on Thailand led to an incorporated analysis of the Festival within Southeast Asia. Therefore, “*mah song*” is written only for observations or literature specifically referencing Thailand while “*tâng-ki*” is used for studies in neighboring countries.

(Clart, 2003; Jordan, 1972). While some academics see little reason in differentiating between the terminology of mediums and shamans, other scholars have outlined distinguishing factors. De Groot (2007) refers to the Chinese religious practice involving mediums as Wu-ism—Wu being an animistic belief in which the possessed are labelled as shamans. Shamans are generally ascribed greater control over both the spirits and themselves (Lewis, 1989). The ability to remain conscious when acting as the communicator between the living world and that of the spirit world is an intrinsic characteristic of shamans who engage in the “conscious communication with spirits and deities, although they occasionally experience possession in trance. The claim to conscious control in divine communications is largely absent among spirit mediums who tend to submit passively to possessing spirits and deities and to have no recollection of what transpires during those encounters” (Ackerman, 2001, p. 295). In other words, shamans are still in control of their minds and bodies for the most part. People who are “chronically possessed” may eventually shift from involuntary, uncontrolled possession to a more voluntary and controlled state by invoking the spirits and inducing possession, but the mediums’ own identities are subsumed by the gods or spirits that then determine what is done or said (Lewis, 1989, p. 80). Although “spirit mediumship” tends to be viewed more positively than “spirit possession” (Samuel, 2010), “possession” will be used in the course of this work to describe the processes of gods or spirits taking control of the *mah song*.

Most *tâng-ki* claim a loss of awareness or control when possessed by the gods or spirits and do not recall what happened during that time (Jordan, 1972). The gods are now in control of the bodies of the *mah song* in both actions and words. Although the term “possession” is used when referring to *mah song* in trance, this is not quite the same as instances of possession in other areas of the world in which the person has no control over when the spirits enter one’s

body (Lewis, 1989). Indeed, *mah song*, once consenting, can expect to be possessed at set times, such as during the Festival, or can invite the gods into themselves at other times during the year. In fact, some older, professional *mah song* may induce trance with little effort or a few situational cues—like drums or gongs—when divining or healing (Cohen, 2001). Mediumship discussed here is further differentiated from other discussions of possession, as there is a “comprehensible and translatable” message that the *mah song* transmit from the gods unlike various other cases of spirit possession (Cheu, 1993, p. 31). However, *mah song* involved in the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods engage in rituals that incorporate bodily infliction to prove the authenticity of the gods’ power to protect them from pain and injury and insure rapid healing and lack of infection; the “primary occasion for mortification is when the gods must be present [...] for reasons other than oracular” (Jordan, 1972, p. 80).

### **Becoming *Mah Song***

Each *mah song* is usually possessed by a single spirit or deity typically from the pantheon of Taoist gods, and the same spirit or deity will possess that *mah song* every time. A common narrative is that a god negotiates a deal with an individual who is suffering from illness or an ill fate; the person’s life will be extended in exchange for becoming *mah song*. De Groot’s informants (2007, p. 343) explained “that the eight characters which constitute their horoscope or fate, are light [...] so that their constitution is so frail that they are bound to die young”. Therefore, one is generally thought to be chosen by the gods rather than actively seeking the role of *mah song*. This selection is usually professed as spontaneous possession rather than an acquisition:

It happens indeed, especially at religious festivals celebrated in temples with great concourse of people, that a young man suddenly begins to hop, dance and waddle with

wild or drowzy [sic] looks, and nervous gestures of arms and hands [...] All onlookers at once realize the fact that one of the gods whose images stand in the temple, or some other spirit, has ‘seized the youth’ [*liáh tâng*], and the parish will henceforth rejoice in the possession of one more medium for its intercourse with the divine world.” (de Groot, 2007, p. 344)

Possessed *mah song* are constantly moving just as the globe is constantly moving (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). They will “dance” to establish an equilibrium of forces (see Figure A59). In Taoism, the universe (*wu chi*) gave birth to the globe with one side always being positive and the other negative—yin and yang—one side is in light while the other half is in the dark. There are five elements, nine planets, the moon, and unseen forces and energy in the universe. When cleansed, people can better receive these forces in an attempt to achieve three main goals—success, prosperity, and longevity. *Mah song* chase away ghosts and lost souls, especially in intersections of streets where many accidents might occur, through this macrocosmic and microcosmic movement (see Figure A32).

### **Theories: health and social motivators.**

There are several theories as to why people become *mah song*. Mental illness is suggested by de Groot (2007, p. 343): “they must be a nervous, impressionable, hysterical kind of people, physically and mentally weak, and therefore easily stirred to ecstasy by their self-conviction that gods descend into them”. He questions whether a medical diagnosis, like epilepsy or anemia, might explain the shaking movements seen in mediums as well as their occasional collapse on the ground. Samuel (2010) ultimately refers to spirit possession as “pathology of the self” (p. 48) even after recognizing a decrease in recent years to categorize possession as psychopathology. In contrast, Elliott (1955) found no traces of psychological or physiological

disturbance among *tâng-ki* in Singapore. Cohen (2001) furthers this sociological line of thought by arguing that hundreds of *mah song* who do not have identifiers of being possessed most of the year and who all display these markers, like trance, simultaneously during temple rituals are highly unlikely to be mentally ill. Indeed, mental illness has been admonished by anthropologists such as Shapiro and Klass: “Equating possession trance with a psychiatric diagnosis or analyzing it as a response to stress is reductionist and ethnocentric” (Shapiro as cited in Klass, 2003, p. 76). Contrasting Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) with spirit possession, Klass (2003) found the idiosyncratic nature of the former is distinct from the culturally patterned latter where “the new identities are those of entities known to and accepted as part of the individual’s (and the individual’s community’s) belief system” (p. 115). In an effort to counter implications of mental illness in pre-existing vocabulary, Klass creates a new lexicon in which Patterned Dissociative Identity (PDI), not Patterned Trance, constitutes possession: “Individuals exhibiting PDI present alters deriving from and recognizable as entities of their society’s belief system [...] who speak and act in known, predictable, and recognizable ways” (p. 119). Varying from other cultural conceptions of possession as the cause of illness, possession during the Festival entails protection from harm for the *mah song* and blessings for good health and good luck for the community.

Proffering a different theory, social and cultural reasons are deliberated (Cohen 2001). Most *mah song* identified by de Groot (2007) and Cohen are from lower classes. In the broader sphere of anthropological study, spirit possession as a means to a voice when faced with a position of marginality has found various advocates. A lack of institutionalized outlets to express feelings might cause frustration, deprivation, or feelings of confinement leading to, what some might term, “feigned” possessions (Lewis, 1986; Giles, 1987). While these interpretations are useful, the difference between individual possession and, during the Festival, what is more

similar to mass possession<sup>25</sup> ought to be considered as should possession where individuals behave in a manner similarly described to the outdated disorder of hysteria—wailing, moaning, heavy breathing, jerking violently, and speaking in tongues—and those in which bodily trials are undergone—fire-walking, facial piercing, bladed-ladder climbing, and so forth.

Conversely, possession in some places is associated with neither marginality nor mental illness but rather “reflects increasingly important social realities” (Kenyon as cited in Klass, 2003, p. 72). Child (2010) cautions against using social disadvantage as the instigator for possession as “these inequalities often remain evident in societies with thriving possession cults, leading some sociologists to suggest that possession is a failed or extremely limited liberation strategy” (p. 53). However, addressing ritual, Strathern and Stewart (2011) consider divination as recourse for inequalities where issues of gender, power, personhood, ethnic identity, and language may be embodied. Lanman (as cited in Strathern & Stewart, 2011) maintains that the mind has a “Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD)” through which, during rituals, people are more sensitive to “potential agencies around them [...and] attribute events in these contexts to spirit entities” (p. 396). Emotions like fear, potential danger, or chance for advantage may trigger these moments.

Based on marginality or lower class position, community prestige gained from being a *mah song* is also considered. Tambiah (1985) asserts that “festivals, cosmic rituals, and rites of passage [...] are always linked to status claims and interests of the participants, and therefore are

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<sup>25</sup> Here, “mass possession” is used in the context that hundreds of mediums become possessed within a designated nine-day period. However, each individual medium may be possessed on a separate schedule within that period, as it is the possessing god that determines on which day(s) it will or will not participate (Lee, 1986).

always open to contextual meanings” (p. 125). As *mah song* are chosen by the gods, they stand out from the rest of the population. Yet, the increased status as *mah song* may only apply in trance when the god is inside of them. Clart (2003), echoing de Groot (2007), finds that there is low prestige in being *tâng-ki* as extra respect is only accorded when a deity possesses them, which may serve as a reason for reluctance to become *tâng-ki* in the first place. This viewpoint, while not undermining Tambiah’s claim, serves to narrow its field of use. False mediums are referred to in Taiwan as “divine rascals”, yet most *tâng-ki* are approached based on word-of-mouth recommendations from family or friends (Jordan, 1972, p. 74).

There is a hierarchy among the gods themselves and therefore also among the *mah song*: “[w]hile mediums usually claim to be possessed always by the same god or spirit, some experience over time a degree of ‘mobility’, as higher deities relieve the lowly gods or spirits who have possessed their bodies; consequently they come to play a more distinctive and significant role in the festival—a circumstance which possibly motivates them to persist in engaging in spirit mediumship” (Cohen, 2001, p. 120). If possession does recur more than a few years, three is the average that de Groot (2007) claims, older, established *tâng-ki* might experience a certain level of social prestige even when not possessed (Lee, 1986). The distinction of being possessed by the more important gods affords senior *mah song* additional respect although the highest-ranking gods do not deign to possess humans (Cohen, 2001). In order to achieve that higher status, *mah song* must partake in what appear to be painful rituals reminiscent of initiation rituals that ultimately provide a reputation and an identity with which it is difficult to part. Lee (1986) tells of a man who still practiced rituals as a *tâng-ki* in the evenings, even after he received a partnership position at work. However, the degree of prestige afforded *mah song* when they are not possessed is not indicated.

Atonement is also considered as a motive for people to become *mah song*. Many mediums in Phuket, both young and old, have tattoos that cover most of their backs and range from moderate to elaborate in design. In Thailand, tattoos are commonly believed to be a form of magical protection not only from the spirit world but also from bodily risk (Cohen, 2009, 2012a). Cohen stipulates that the occupations or activities undertaken by these individuals may be either morally questionable or pose an actual threat of bodily harm such as being stabbed, shot, or arrested. Therefore, cleansing one's body to enable a god to descend into it may not only cleanse one of past wrongdoings but also provide protection in the future. Thais view the actions of *mah song* as a way of acquiring merit in addition to blessing and cleansing the community (Cohen, 2009). Yet, Hamilton (2008) suggests that *mah song* themselves receive no additional merit of their own during the rituals when they are possessed as it is the god performing the actions in those moments. Of course, these actions, behaviors, and events should be understood as a totality of social factors.

Although Cheu (1993) believes there is a "strong economic motive behind" (p. 18) the Festival, I would argue that non-social motives, like monetary benefits, are not substantial in Phuket. When *tâng-ki* begin this line of work, they swear an oath that they will not accept "large profits" (Lee, 1986, p. 201). While *tâng-ki* may receive some payment for services, the amount is "entirely at the discretion of the devotees who seek their assistance" (Cheu, 1993, p. 18). As *tâng-ki* earn very little money, other jobs are typically held during the year and are the primary means of income (Lee, 1986). It is rare to find a professional *mah song* who is not engaged in another occupation. Those who are employed by temples usually receive a monthly salary that is provided from temple donations. For example, at Sapan Hin, people may choose to put money or charm paper in a donation box before ringing the bell that hangs above the box three times while

offering a prayer. Although not as common, *tâng-ki* will sometimes double as a temple keeper (Lee, 1986). More often, payment for ceremonies or temple donations are given to the temple priest while the *mah song* do not receive anything.

### **Cultural Relativity: What is Real to Whom?**

Regardless of the researchers' theories, many people believe in spirit possession within these cultural communities; the identities doing the possessing are "as 'real' as any other identity, including yours and mine, for they too are cultural constructs [...] the alters are 'real' identities and sometimes even 'real' Radcliffe-Brownian 'persons'" (Klass 2003, p. 124). Being a vessel of the gods in this particular case is often not a choice and is frequently claimed to be undesired. Jordan (1972) documented *tâng-ki* in southern Taiwan attempting to avoid becoming vessels of the gods by using "every possible inducement to persuade the possessing god to select someone else" (p. 71). Jordan recounts how one man ate charms or drank charmed water for two or three years when he felt the Third Prince, one of the gods, attempting to possess him. After being possessed and chastised by a more powerful god, he relented. When the Third Prince finally possessed the man, the god "became more violent and began striking [...] the man's] fist against his own face and mouth" (p. 72) to punish the *tâng-ki* for evading him. Jordan reports another man avoided the god that approached him and eventually made a compromise to become an interpreter of the divining chair instead of a *tâng-ki*.

Utan Tengkan, a 35-year-old Phuket husband and father, perceives being *mah song* as a duty; he still remembers what happened when he was first chosen by a Chinese god at 12 years of age:

I suddenly felt cold all over. I couldn't move. I couldn't control myself. I wanted to shout for my mother but my mouth would not move [...] Sometimes, the old

people who work at the shrine ask me to invite the god to come into me because there are people who need to consult with him [...] Every time the spirit comes, I know who I am but I lose control of my body. I hear the conversation going on between my body and other people, all in Chinese [which he normally does not know...] Am I scared? Of course I am [...] you ever [sic] get used to [it], no matter how many years you've been experiencing it [...] Every time my body is taken over by the god, I know what's going to happen, and I want to stop it. I want to run away. But, as I said, my body is not mine anymore and I cannot resist. I know that the spirit pierces my cheeks with the object, with no anesthetic, but I feel no pain at all. It's lucky that, in my case, he never uses any of the large, frightening objects you see some *mah song* carrying. (Interview)

This reluctance to assume the role of a *mah song* occurs to such an extent that resistance is almost necessary to be legitimized or considered sincere (Clart, 2003). Sutinee (personal communication, 2016) recalled that as a young girl in school, a classmate became a *mah song*. Years later, when they met again, Sutinee learned that the girl, now a woman, had eventually refused to be a *mah song* any more as it was too much for her.

While travelling to various shrines, Sutinee and I encountered another woman she grew up with who has been a *mah song* of Kwan Im, a goddesses associated with vegetarianism, for the past nine years. Sutinee explained that there are more than two hundred "parts" of Kwan Im, and that the woman embodies one of those parts related to love. The spiritual is always with this *mah song*. Therefore, she can "perform" at other times during the year if people ask Kwan Im questions or seek blessings through her. A blessing was extended to us in Hokkien. This young woman is one of many female *mah song* possessed by Kwan Im whom I had seen during the past

several days.

I also spoke with Poom (personal communication, 2016) about possession as he was formerly a *mah song*. I met him walking from Sapan Hin to Bang Niao. I had noticed a scar on his right cheek and was told that he became a *mah song* when he was 13 years old. Poom said he was not aware of what was happening when he was possessed, so the piercing was neither scary nor painful. No longer a *mah song*, he is now 33 and works at a successful business.

Sometimes, parental consent is required. In these cases, there is the potential for the family to prevent a child from becoming a *mah song*. Some people do not seek out *tâng-ki* through “fear of being stigmatized as backward and superstitious” (Lee, 1986). Therefore, family members may be fearful and concerned if the possibility for *mah song* exists among their relations. Cohen (2001) documents a boy in Phuket whose father, a wealthy Chinese businessman, prevented him from becoming a *mah song* and offered to sponsor a poor young man instead.

Kanyalak (personal communication, 2016) stated that older *mah song* may look for someone to take their place as their gods’ vessel, thus creating a voluntary possession as opposed to the involuntary, spontaneous possession that is typically associated with gods extending the lives of those bound to die young. Everyone receives the gods in different ways. Some will cry, some scream, and still others will “feel strange”. Kanyalak introduced me to a man, Natapong, whose father is the current president of one of the shrines in Phuket. Several years ago, his niece and nephew sensed the gods trying to possess them during the Festival (Natapong, personal communication, 2016). At the sound of the drums, their bodies stiffened and their hearts beat faster. However, their grandfather did not want them to be *mah song* and asked the principal *mah song* to disqualify them. The nephew, now 25 years old, and the niece, currently 17, do not

experience these feelings anymore. Natapong's wife also felt the gods trying to take hold of her during a street procession at one time.

In some instances, mediumship is desired and actively sought. Elliott (1955) states that one may either involuntarily become a *tâng-ki* or do so “by cultivating the powers consciously”, and further explains “in most cases, a man becomes a *dang-ki* by the conscious encouragement of the power that is meant to be latent within him” (p. 59). Novice *tâng-ki* may even seek apprenticeship from experienced *tâng-ki* (Lee, 1986). Cohen (2001) references a narrative from a devotee of a shrine where a foreigner wanted to be a *mah song* although he himself had never witnessed such an event:

There was one Caucasian who came to us two years ago [i.e., in 1986] in Krabi Province [Thailand] and asked to be possessed by a god or goddess. We knew that he was not a believer and only wanted to find out what we were doing, but we went along with it and called on the spirit of Chao Mae Kuan Im. When he was possessed by the goddess, he spoke fluent Chinese. It was magnificent. (p. 165)

Not personally having seen such attempts to become *mah song* by foreigners, Cohen (2001) only mentions such rumors. However, none of the narratives describe foreigners receiving facial piercings, which suggests Westerners are unwilling to pierce their faces to the extent seen among the Sino-Thai *mah song*. Social context is a determinant of spirit possession:

“Mediumship appears desirable mostly to those who have grown up in a social context strongly linked with mediumistic practices” (Clart 2003: 179). Poom (personal communication, 2016), noting that Phuket has “many [male] *farang* (foreigners)”, has heard rumors of four or five Western *mah song* who have Thai wives. During a street procession ritual, I saw one *mah song* who did not look Thai. He had slightly different facial features, long wavy hair past his

shoulders, wore a t-shirt (typically only female *mah song* wear tops), and had a single skewer through one cheek. Poom thought this particular *mah song* was either half-Thai and half-Caucasian or possibly Indian (see Figure A30).

### Chapter Summary

*Mah song* are both visually prominent and important figures in the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods as they are the embodiment of the gods and spirits who perform certain cleansing rituals and bestow blessings throughout the nine days (see Figure A60). Neither mental illness nor non-social motives appear as credible reasons for over 2000 people in Phuket—some estimates are as high as 6000—to become *mah song* every year. While social incentives like prestige are possible, whether and to what extent status and any benefits that might accrue continue when not possessed by a god is questioned and culminates in a discussion of cultural relativity. Engaging in this practice of possession by Chinese gods and spirits constitutes a framework in which the *mah song*—Chinese, Sino-Thai, or foreigner—are occupied by a Chinese being. Whether one chooses to interpret this metaphorically or literally, devotees generally believe that the individual's identity is replaced by that of another being's identity. In such moments, these individuals are subsumed by and recognized as the gods or spirits, physically becoming those Chinese entities. Furthermore, the act of piercing one's face or cutting parts of one's body may leave permanent scars (see Figure A61). These scars alter one's physical body for the social embodiment of the religious practice. They also act as visible markers of identity. In addition to showing Chinese heritage or connection, the bodily infliction identifies these individuals not only as *mah song* for the remainder of their lives but also, during moments of possession, as the gods that reside within them.

### **Ritual Identities: The Outsider and the Insider**

Although the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods and the rituals that comprise it have continued to be observed on Phuket since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there must be one or, likely, more underlying reasons for the relatively recent expansion of temples and shrines and the rapidly increasing numbers of *mah song* and devotees. Therefore, the concept of belief among devotees who are convinced of the efficacy of this religious practice merits further discussion. As “beliefs constitute alternate ways of talking about historical events and social realities [...they can be] understood as richly creative languages [...] with which to talk about reality” (West, 2007, p. 25). Participation in rituals that are observed from year to year and by one generation to the next invokes an historic identity that continues to evolve in the present. Yet, the intentionality and use of that identity and of what it means to enact the rituals needs to be considered, especially in regard to emic theories which propose financial gain as Festival motivators.

#### **Monetary Gain?**

Some academic scholars, like Cheu (1993) and Cohen (2001), have attempted to objectively assess the Festival’s economic function. Due to the performative nature of some of the rituals, this question is weighed and contemplated.

#### **Ritual performativity: for ritual’s own sake.**

The various rituals occurring over the course of the nine-day Festival are delineated in chapter three. All of the rituals are conducted publicly, although the number of devotees in attendance varies. These rituals tend to have an element of performativity associated with them as there is multidimensionality in their enactment. Tambiah (1985) asserts that:

Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative, wherein saying something is also doing something as a

conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the sense of indexical values [...] being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance. (p. 128)

However, the notion of “performance” does not indicate a lack of significance and meaning behind the practices. Festivals, rites of passage, and cosmic rituals, “however prescribed they may be, are always linked to status claims and interests of the participants, and therefore are always open to contextual meanings” (Tambiah, 1985, p. 125). Turner (as referenced in Hirai, 2015) notes that cultural performances are “active agencies of change” communicating cultural elements as well as reflexively generating “new forms of knowledge” (p. 12). This conception of ritual performativity needs to be engaged when considering the Festival’s relation to tourism, belief, and the intentionality of the two.

### **Ritual as tourism?**

As the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods has witnessed increasing expansion over the past 25 years, it is easy to misattribute the rise in numbers to tourism. Initially, Cohen (2001) held the position that the Festival was attracting foreigners who desired to view the “spectacular”, but after conducting fieldwork in Phuket, he makes it clear that his original hypothesis is contradicted. There are several reasons as to why tourists are not thought to be the primary motivators for the growth of the Festival. This section contends that the identities and persons established through the rituals are not assumed identities for large-scale economic bolstering.

If tourism and its associated economic impact were the primary focus of this Festival, the participating community as well as the Thai government would presumably emphasize

advertisement of the rituals and events. While the Tourism Authority of Thailand (T.A.T.) does disseminate information about the Festival and print programs of rituals, locations, and times, there is a marked lack of information and accuracy. The times and locations of events are often vague. Unlike an orchestrated and pre-planned program, there is no consideration or mention of the fact that the principal *mah song* may decide to change when, where, and what is done based on the will of the possessing god thus making the advance print material completely inaccurate at times (Cohen, 2001). Furthermore, the Thai government neither advertises well nor communicates the full religious meanings of the various rituals. Moreover, the T.A.T. deletes details of the Nine Emperor Gods in their writing of the Festival's "background" thereby effectively sanitizing the "cult" practice to make it more acceptable to the traditional Thai doctrine (Hamilton, 2008).

Throughout the 1990s, the T.A.T. advertised the Festival in a manner that downplayed the more visual ritual events and emphasized the vegetarian practices because of concerns that it would be seen as "barbarian" or "gruesome" and that those perceptions would mar foreigners' views of Thailand as a whole (Cohen, 2001, p. 151). Indeed, a Norwegian missionary in China proffered a negative view of *t'ang-ki* who engaged in similar practices as "sinister and repellent [...and] unpleasant" (as cited in Jordan, 1972, p. 81). Compared with festivals in the traditional Thai sense of the word, the T.A.T. does significantly less promotion (Cohen, 2012b). Attempts have even been made to regulate the length and size of the items used for facial piercings by the *mah song*, although the bans are not always observed (Cohen 2012b). The T.A.T.'s actions, revealing a preference for the "civilized" rather than the "sensational", lie in contradiction with tourism journals that, when turning to this topic, regard the feats performed by the *mah song* as the central theme (Cohen, 2001, 2009). Moreover, the Thai middle class has secularized the more

radical portions of the Festival in Bangkok “so that it can be more easily reconciled with notions of a rational modernity” through the lack of cosmology and emphasis on vegetarianism (Maude 2005, p. 166).

Even when tourists are in Phuket, they generally overlook the Festival’s occurrence as most tourists are drawn to the island for the beaches and stay at resorts and hotels nearby that are set apart from Phuket Town where the main rituals take place (Cohen, 2001). Hamilton (2008) concurs that attendance at the Festival by a small number of Western tourists is essentially coincidental. The resorts do not advertise the Festival as sending tourists to the interior of the island or away from the resort itself would result in a potential loss of income for them. Even Cohen (2001), who spent time in Phuket researching tourism in the “late 1970s and early 1980s [...admits that he] failed to pay attention to the festival” (p. 149).

Few Western attendees find their way to the rituals (Cohen 2001; personal observation, 2016). Westerners are most often observed at street processions or at shrines with larger events like fire walking and bladed-ladder climbing. However, the other less-visual rituals and daily prayers held at the shrines have significantly fewer, if any, Westerners in observance. Ironically, the visual aspects of the rituals are considered both too “gruesome” and “ward off” Westerners and too aberrant to be enjoyed as spectacle (Cohen, 2012b).

Rituals, which did not originate from a need to attract tourists, encompass greater meaning for devotees than mere commercial worship. For example, one shrine in Krabi engages in a glass shards-crossing ritual in which *mah song* walk across, lie on, or are dragged over broken glass (Cohen, 2008). This ritual is “not a spectacle for the general public” and is performed only at this particular shrine—undocumented in any other shrine in Thailand (Cohen

2008, p. 84). Similarly, the organizers of the Phuket Festival<sup>26</sup> do not stage events for tourists (Cohen, 2001). Regardless, a large influx of visiting Chinese attendees from other countries, like China, Malaysia, and Singapore, makes its way to Phuket each year (Hamilton, 2008). However, although visiting Chinese may attend in a “tour group”, their roles fluctuate as many make their devotions at the shrines and have a higher attendance rate at more of the rituals than Westerners (Maud, 2005). Distinctions are blurred, as audiences become participants by asking for blessings or receiving blessed items (Maud, 2005). For instance, at a propitiation of the seven stars ritual at Bang Niao Shrine in Phuket, Cohen (2001) saw “foreign Chinese visitors [among several hundred white-clad devotees who] were observed paying their respects to the gods and the lantern pole before the ritual started, but most left immediately afterwards” (p. 95).

Ultimately, tourism is not considered the primary stimulus behind the expansion of the Festival in Phuket. First and foremost, the Festival is a religious event. Although tourism generates positive economic impact for the beach resorts, few Western tourists attend Festival rituals. This is due in part to a distinct reluctance of government advertising combined with an unawareness of events and even an aversion to some of the ritual infliction especially among Westerners. Visitors from China and Southeast Asia may be categorized as religious tourists, but their observance and participation in the rituals preempts them from the role of pure spectator. Finally, marginal regions in Thailand without a distinct tourist population have also witnessed expansion in both the number of participating *mah song* and shrines built or dedicated to this religious practice (Cohen, 2012a). Other factors must be contributing to the Festival’s growth.

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<sup>26</sup> These comments are based on Cohen’s research and my own fieldwork but may not necessarily hold in other locations.

**Donations.**

Cheu (1996) and Cohen (2001) each debate the influx of donations that participating shrines receive during the Festival. Income generated through donations is used to refurbish and expand the shrines (Cohen, 2001) and might be construed as an impetus for building additional temples and shrines. However, neither author takes into consideration the cost of the materials needed for the rituals or the expense of organizing the Festival although both comment on the complexity and months of planning that is required. The organization, planning, and management of the Festival is undertaken by a chairperson and core committee of roughly 20 people who meet year-round and oversee some 200 assistants (Cheu, 1996). Cohen (2001) notes that there are skills and resources needed to partake in the Festival without which a shrine cannot celebrate fully or at all. Yet, expenses for the hundreds of candles, packets of joss sticks, and charm paper used for prayer and offerings by devotees, articles used to adorn the *mah song*, ritual items including coal for fire walking, and the massive amount of food<sup>27</sup> that is prepared daily during the Festival in the temple kitchens and often served for free, three times a day, to

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<sup>27</sup> During the Festival, tables overflowing with vegetables to be chopped and cooked are observable from the side or rear of the shrines (see Figures A62-63). Devotees often collect the blessed *je* food prepared by volunteers in the kitchens. Food containers are kept at home solely for this purpose and are not used at other times of the year (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). The food from the shrines will cleanse the body, and many people will use their containers to take food home and share it with family, friends, or neighbors (see Figure A64). These containers were common sights near the kitchens; dining areas set up with tents, plastic chairs, and fold-out tables; or near burning sandalwood which purifies the containers when waved over the fire.

attendees are not calculated. These actions attest to the significance of the religious purpose of the Festival as devotees do not gain anything financially by attending the ritual events and making donations (Hamilton, 2008).

### **Faith and Cleansing**

Although the rituals are rooted in the underlying myths associated with the *Jiuhuangye*, many devotees participate without having knowledge of the rituals or the underlying myths, their meanings, and associated symbols (Cheu, 1996). Hamilton (2003) states “that an obscure series of events in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century China are carried forward into our present time and place, where their original meaning may be lost but another meaning may be found” (p. 24). Many devotees today believe and have faith in the efficacy of these rituals and worship because their ancestors did. For devotees, the etic purpose of the Festival is to provide and insure spiritual and communal cleansing. Their faith in the power of the Nine Emperor Gods will be rewarded with health, good fortune, peace, and a long life. Belief is paramount; knowledge of myths is inconsequential.

During my fieldwork, I participated in worship at various shrines involving a donation of five baht in exchange for a bundle of joss sticks, joss paper, and one or two candles (see Figure A65). The first step always began with lighting the candles and placing them in a candleholder. Then, the devotees and myself were directed from one altar to another, offering a *wai* and a set number of burning incense sticks (usually three) in a Chinese censer before saying a silent prayer and moving to the next altar and repeating the actions. This entire practice is performed each day by large numbers of devotees creating an overpowering smell of smoke and sandalwood. Walking barefoot in the shrine, hot ash from the continuously smoldering bundle of joss sticks in my hands often fell on my toes slightly burning them. The location of this final offering and

prayer is often a small back room behind a curtain at the center of the shrines where Kiu Ong resides. It is in this place that devotees kowtowed to the ground three times after offering their final joss sticks. Several months afterwards, I read Heinze's (1981) article discussing the road of the Nine Stars<sup>28</sup>. While I failed to note the exact pattern devotees walk from altar to altar, there were regular direction changes from one side of the shrines to the other, always beginning in the front center, and always ending in a room further back than the rest of the altars in the center. Although only a matter of conjecture, this ritualized procession may actually be an enactment by devotees who are symbolically recreating the path of the Nine Stars in order to call on the gods and their mother, the North Star, who controls death.

Cheu (1996) explains that belief "complements and supplements ritual: the former provides the theory while the latter provides the practical expression" (p. 55). Not having been in Phuket during the Festival in a number of years, Sutinee (personal communication, 2016) flew back to Thailand from Australia as a result of several recent events in her life. After a sibling's death, she wanted to pray for the soul of her departed family member; as a cancer survivor, Sutinee wanted to give thanks to the gods for her improved health. Poom (personal communication, 2016) also recounted stories of people who have moved away to other countries yet return each year specifically to pray and participate in the rituals of the Festival. For these devotees, their belief is strong enough that they allocate time and money to undertake the journey. Many others pray at nine shrines in Phuket within a single day to make merit in what can be compared to a small-scale pilgrimage (Sutinee, personal communication, 2016; see Figure A66).

Devotees believe that the *mah song* must properly cleanse themselves before attempting

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<sup>28</sup> See p. 24, footnote 11.

any of the feats. If this process is improperly done, injury will follow. One young *mah song*, whom I had previously noticed that morning with palm branches through each cheek, was seated along the roadway. Although not quite at the shrine, the vegetation had already been removed, and he was smoking something out of an object that looked similar to a bong. Two other *mah song* stopped walking along the way as well. Not being able to complete the street procession is equated with not cleansing oneself properly or breaking one or more of the elements of the fast and abstentions of the Festival. In another procession, a *mah song* with an entire bicycle used as a piercing object ended his march to Sapan Hin ten feet from where I stood. Covering his face with his black flag with writing on it, he had the bicycle removed. One of his *pi liang* held a pointed metal rod with charm paper on the end and gave the *mah song* some water; he took small sips but spat most out. The same *pi liang* stroked his back a few times in a soothing manner.

Although some devotees may doubt the ease with which a *mah song* accomplishes the rituals, “all agree that he cannot prevent himself from inflicting them, for he is impelled to do this by his possessing god as a sign of the genuineness of his trance” (Jordan, 1972, p. 80). *Mah song* are not supposed to feel pain or be hurt due to the power of the gods possessing them, yet Cohen (2012a) witnessed traces of pain during the piercing, rarer instances of fainting, and some *mah song* requiring stitches at a hospital after the ritual procession ended. Maud (2005) saw a mixture of post-procession reactions from the *mah song* in Hat Yai, Thailand: “Some smoked cigarettes, with smoke escaping from wounds in their cheeks. Several of the mediums appeared to be in shock, shivering quite severely despite the warm temperature” (p. 159).

While *mah song* prepare for the rituals, other individuals may try to mimic them without preparation or belief. Although faith embraced by participants is assumed to be a necessary prerequisite, there is also a craft to these rituals. Whether one defines the craft as proper

preparation through stipulated religious procedures or as skill derived from non-secular knowledge, indoctrination necessitates a specific mastery. For example, a hotel manager in Thailand felt confident enough to climb a bladed-ladder after preparing for several years, but he failed (Hamilton, 2008). More often when stories of injury are related, they involve foreigners or sceptics who attempted to duplicate these feats:

According to Grenville (1996:14) ‘foreign sceptics’ who attempted such emulation have ‘invariably...done great harm to themselves in the process;’ for example, ‘One non-believer tried to scale the ladder blades and very quickly ended up in hospital.’ Everingham ([1990]:11) points out that ‘there are sceptics...limited mostly to foreign [i.e. Western] visitors. A few brave fools have taken up the invitation to try the feats for themselves, reportedly with some nasty, bloody results.’ While [...Rosse, 1994: 49] claims that: ‘Every year there are some serious injuries [in fire-walking and bladed-ladder climbing], sometimes among tourists who get too caught up in the excitement and attempt to mortify the flesh without first purifying it’. (Cohen, 2001, p. 152)

These narratives serve as both a warning and a re-affirmation of the distinctive and “spectacular” aspects of these rituals.

Locals are fond of telling stories about Westerners, who disbelieved in the mediums’ extraordinary faculties and tried to climb the bladed-ladder, already cutting their soles on the first step. In 1999 in the Sam Kong shrine, a Westerner clad in white, a member of a foreign television team, attempted to walk over the “bridge” of nails after the ritual was over; pricked by the sharp nails, he was forced to hop over them by holding fast onto the rails, to the laughter of the local

youths. Westerners thus face a dilemma; while they cannot imitate the apparent feats of the mediums, they are uncertain as to the source of their powers. (Cohen, 2001, p. 97)

In my own fieldwork, Kanyalak (personal communication, 2016) noted that a camera crew making a documentary of the Festival was flying a drone during some of the rituals this year to complete filming that was interrupted the previous year when their reporter injured himself. Kanyalak recounted that this man had successfully walked across hot coals in other countries and was convinced he knew how to properly do so in Phuket. Unfortunately for him, he was burned severely enough to be taken to the hospital and could not complete his documentation of the Festival. Less common are stories of successful foreigners, such as the Westerners documented by Hamilton (2008), who join in the fire-walking ritual in Phuket without sustaining injury.

### **Experiencing the “Spiritual”**

Sutinee (personal communication, 2016) said that the gods are like a “spiritual” presence that one might feel in a breeze or in some other moment. She was very happy throughout the Festival and especially so during the welcoming ritual. The procession to welcome Kiu Ong at Sapan Hin shrine, which overlooks the sea, began shortly after 22:00. The night air was filled with drumming, and firecrackers littered the ground with their charred wrappings. The sky is supposed to open in a circle through which the gods descend into the sea and emerge onto the beach that thus becomes a gateway. A section of the beach was roped off for the *mah song* and their *pi liang* who carried statues of the gods on sedan chairs. Sutinee and I sat close to the edge of the roped area with the *mah song* and *pi liang* in front of us and the sea to our backs. She asked a nearby *mah song* to bless us. Kneeling before him with our heads bowed in a reverential

*wai*, the *mah song* waved his black flag above us once before turning it in the opposite direction and draping it on our heads. After a second of total darkness, I felt the handle of his whip drawing a symbol in a quick motion on the flag before the pressure was gone and the draped cloth removed. This request illustrates her faith in both the gods and the protection they can afford.

My ears filled with the sounds of the rushing sea waves, loud popping of firecrackers, and music from the shrine. The *mah song* were standing near a center tent on the beach; the mediums swayed gently as time passed. Many people were silent or spoke only in hushed, reverential voices, although a couple of young boys did not adhere to this after a while. Around 22:30, female *mah song* from another shrine arrived. Shortly thereafter, a trumpeter began playing as cymbals clashed together and, before I knew what to look for or when, the moment had passed. People stood up and quickly dispersed.

Once we arrived back at Bang Niao Shrine, we waited across the street from the front gates until 23:00 when “the spiritual” is believed to fully arrive. A few minutes afterwards, strings of firecrackers more than ten feet long and covering one side of the entrance like a curtain were lit, which not only created a deafening pronouncement that the Festival had begun but also gave the appearance that the gateway was on fire (see Figure A67). Sutinee stated, “It’s unbelievable – a miracle – like a spiritual energy that connects everyone. Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, all have this connecting energy”. Later in the week, Sutinee noted as we watched prayers being held on the beach at Sapan Hin that these prayers were “Tao[ist]” (see Figure A68). She explained that Thailand has an assortment of religions, Theravada Buddhism being one of them, but the belief in this ceremony has a stronger meaning as there are “many religions, but this is faith”. Ultimately, the “spiritual” becomes more than the essence of the gods; it is also

the faith of believers.

### **The Gods**

As is done in other shrines on the island, many local residents brought their own statues of the gods to Bang Niao and placed them inside the shrine creating an enormous display of figurines of various sizes on and behind the altars (see Figures A69-70). These statues remain at the shrines for the entirety of the Festival to re-charge their spiritual power (Kanyalak, personal communication, 2016). The altars became so crowded that one man had to climb on top of an altar to rearrange statues to make space for those yet to be positioned. I returned to several of the larger shrines in Phuket in the days following the end of the Festival, as I was curious to see the difference between the crowded altars and their typical appearance. The statues brought from the devotees' houses had been returned, and the candles and fruit offerings left behind presented a stark contrast to the prior eleven days. After seeing this and observing the personal shrines set up in people's homes and businesses, I wondered if devotees have favorite gods of which they then have effigies. Sutinee (personal communication, 2016) said she does not have a favorite as it is hard for her to distinguish one god's presence from another. Therefore, she will *wai* to all of the *mah song* as they pass her during the Festival.

Sutinee and her friend, Nalak, explained the names of some of the gods, pointing to their statues at Bang Niao as they did so. They know some of the stories of these gods, but it is impossible to know all of them. Naja is an important god that is found at many of the shrines. "You have Superman; we have Naja," Nalak (personal communication, 2016) remarked as she tried to find a counterpart in English to explain Naja's role as the trickster god—the guardian or protector of the North Star who serves with loyalty and fidelity. He is often depicted with a spear in his hand and a circular, metal hoop diagonally encasing the top of one shoulder, crossing the

chest and going underneath the opposite arm. Naja's statue guards the other gods and is located in the entryway of the shrines before one may access the altars inside.

Throughout the designated rituals that take place during the Festival, *mah song* bestow blessings on the devotees and pose questions to the gods on their behalf. After the Seven Stars Ritual at Bang Niao, a *mah song* waved his flag over several kneeling people, another wrote on charm paper, and a third cracked his whip next to a man kneeling before him. In front of Kwan Im's altar, a woman used divining sticks and blocks. First, she shook a tin can back and forth until one of the sticks with an inscription on it fell out. Afterwards, she picked up the blocks and tossed them to receive her divine response.

On another day at Sapan Hin, while prayers were being said on the beach following a procession ritual, my attention was drawn to an older *mah song* dressed in representation of the god possessing him—Naja. Seated inconspicuously on a red, plastic chair in the shade away from everyone else, the *mah song* spoke in a high voice, muffled in manner. An interpreter mediated between Naja and the seven devotees surrounding him who were asking questions or requesting blessings. Naja answered some questions by writing with red ink on the back of charm paper in characters that appeared to be Chinese. One such paper was then set on fire and burned at Naja's feet while another was handed to an elderly woman who had posed an inquiry as she and her husband kneeled before the *mah song* (see Figure A71). Others received their blessings as Naja touched different body parts, such as knees or stomachs. I believe these areas were injured or causing discomfort as one man's knee was grasped by the *mah song* after which the man limped away.

Csordas (2002) draws a connection between acts of ritual healing and identity politics among the Navajo that may be enacted on a similar, though smaller, scale in Phuket. Csordas

describes identity politics as “the deployment of representation and mobilization of community within plural societies in the name of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, or religion” (p. 141). This Shenist Festival and the Chinese deity Naja, who blesses injuries and ailments within a Thai Buddhist nation, correspond to Csordas’ category involving “three levels of relation”: negotiation within society, representation between societies, and transformation of person in society (p. 163).

### **Chapter Summary**

The intentionality of the Festival is critically important and is more dynamic within the emic than outsider theories of a desire for economic gain that appear to fall short in Phuket. Ritual performativity is a transmission of meaning that is neither static nor unimportant for devotees:

for mediums of gods do become their emissaries and speak in divine tongues [...] a congregation feels it has received grace from a priest’s sacramental act. All this feedback happens because the senders of the messages are also their receivers acting within a context of accepted axioms and meanings. Nor is it adequate [...] to treat a culturally structured collective representation from the motivational perspective of a single individual officiant as if the phenomenon can be explained in terms of an individual consciousness and motivation. (Tambiah, 1985, p. 154).

The “spiritual” is felt by believers and it is their faith that perpetuates the ritual performances. It is through these processes that an identity politics is revealed within the plural, Sino-Thai societies in Phuket.

### **Identity Politics**

An overview of the Thai government's engagement with migrant Chinese and Sino-Thai populations will follow before a present perspective on ethnic heritage and the power of ritual identity is provided. Utilizing Csordas's (2002) identity politics, the identity communicated and enacted in the ritual performances of the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods can be better understood through a discussion of the plural societies' historic and current interactions.

#### **Sino-Thai in Phuket: History and Identity**

Ritual expression reflects negotiations of ethnic identity and place as well as socio-political mobilization of identity (Hamilton, 2008). These rites of identity can be placed into a chronological framework in Thailand. In 1825, when worship of the Nine Emperor Gods was allegedly brought to Phuket, many Chinese immigrants were working in the tin mining industry. In addition to food, customs, dress, and culture, Chinese immigrants to Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia brought their belief system with them. Although there were various Chinese-led rebellions in Thailand (then Siam) in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, members of the Chinese community were still able to engage in successful business opportunities as well as achieve high ranks: "There were two sides to the coin of Chinese relations with the Thai government. Not only were Chinese an object of government policy; they also participated at the court and in government administration to a surprising degree during the nineteenth century" (Skinner, 1957, p. 148). Although China has a long history of trade with and immigration into Thailand, relations between the Thai government and the immigrant Chinese have at times been troubled: "the Thai-Chinese assimilation 'success story' is the result of a series of gross misunderstandings between the Thai and Chinese states and between those two states and the ethnic Chinese community in Thailand" (Wongsurawat, 2016, p. 124). Nonetheless, until World

War II, Thailand had the largest Chinese population outside of China (Wongsurawat, 2016).

During and after World War II, both Thailand and China saw a rise in patriotism and political loyalty that placed “overseas Chinese”—those people who were born in China but lived in another country—in a difficult position, especially as China claimed a continued citizenship for all those living abroad (Skinner, 1959). Fearing the communism so prevalent in China, Thailand began imposing restrictions on the ethnic Chinese community. This “gradual imposition of control” reached its height between 1938 and 1948 (Skinner, 1959, p. 139).

Thai national policy prohibited teaching Chinese language in schools; Chinese texts and course books were seized and destroyed (Wall text, 2016). The anti-Chinese sentiment and practices of the 1950s led to decreased learning and use of the Chinese language in the 1970s. Between 1959-1982, Chinese schools in Thailand were further impacted by a “politically sensitive period” (Wall text, 2016). All Chinese secondary schools were closed along with many of the primary schools, financial support was reduced, Thai teachers were hired, and attendance dropped.

In addition, these nationalistic policies caused a shift in dress, which reflected Thai culture rather than the distinctive and varied cultural styles found among the Phuket population. Such actions resulted in later difficulty in defining ethnic Chinese in Thailand as the postwar definition of being Thai emphasized cultural rather than racial aspects (Maud, 2005). Furthermore, although becoming more economically stable, alienation increased, as Chinese migrants were not allowed to visit China at that point in time (Cohen 2001).

A series of other laws involved economic and business sanctions including mandating the percentage of Thai employees that companies must hire, land policies (1952), and denying citizenship to children born in Thailand whose parents retained Chinese citizenship (1953).

Moreover, if one's father was Chinese rather than Thai, that individual was denied entry into politics (1951), under franchise restrictions, and unable to serve actively in the military (1953). Overseas Chinese were eventually "advised [by the Chinese government] to come to terms with Southeast Asian nationalists. They are to acquiesce [...to] economic and educational systems [...and] abandon Chinese citizenship when necessary" (Skinner, 1959, p. 146). Assimilation eventually became a "strategic necessity" (Hamilton, 2003, p. 13). These laws were relaxed in 1955.

Ritual constantly alternates between ossification and revivalism (Tambiah, 1985). An "elderly informant" (p. 62) indicated to Cohen (2001) that he believed Jui Tui Shrine was the only location on Phuket to practice rituals prior to World War II, although this does not guarantee that the Festival was not observed in subtle or undocumented ways in other locations. This possibility gains merit when assessing the relationship between the Thai Government and the Sino-Thai community at that time. However, in 1985, there was an increase in the public visibility of symbols corresponding with the time frame that the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods began to expand (Cohen, 2001; Hamilton, 2008). The symbols and the rituals representing and involved in the Festival display identity, wealth, and power (Cohen, 2012b). During the capitalist boom years of the 1990s, the Sino-Thai population was considered "highly assimilated" and the number of cults increased (Hamilton, 2008, p. 165). This change is a "powerful expression of the ascendancy of the Chinese in Thai society" (Cohen, 2008, p. 68).

### **Ethnic Heritage: A Unique Identity**

Phuket is a community that encompasses a unique heritage arising from a long history of interactions with China and the assimilation of Chinese immigrants. Simply walking through Phuket Town, one may observe various restaurants and stores

advertising themselves as “Sino-Thai”. The Phuket Thaihua Museum, a former Chinese language school, educates visitors on the history of the island, the locals’ continuous connection with China, and the pride of Thai-Chinese or Sino-Thai who reside on Phuket. This theme was reiterated throughout my time on the island.

During my first day in Phuket, Mohng (personal communication, 2016) made it clear that the Festival is Chinese and that Phuket is a strongly Sino-Thai community. Sutinee’s comment (personal communication, 2016) the following day while showing me around Bang Niao Shrine affirmed such thinking: “We are the dragon people. We have these [dragon statues and images around the shrines] because we never forget where we are from.” Her words are reminiscent of information in Phuket Thaihua Museum:

Chinese migrants, abandoning their homeland, picked to settle [in Phuket]. Working laboriously, enduring hardships, They [sic] kept on maintaining fine traditions, gratitude, and etiquette. Established and wealthy, they never forgot their roots [sic]: who they were... where they came from. Always extending help to people and society, they rose to a widespread and everlasting fame. (Wall text, 2016)

Of course, when encountering Chinese shrines in Thailand, the visual difference between them and the traditional Thai Buddhist temples is difficult to miss (see Figures A72-75).

In 2009, a Federation of Thai Chinese in Phuket was established by nine various associations including the Fujian Association of Phuket, Thaihua Alumni Association, Fuzhou Club of Phuket, and Guangdong Association of Phuket among others. Representatives from the People’s Republic of China have visited the island (Phuket Thaihua Museum). Currently, many attendees of the Festival from abroad are from China (Mueanhawong, 2016). Poom (personal communication, 2016) affirmed that a substantial number of Chinese visitors come every year.

However, it may be questioned if Chinese visitors are as knowledgeable regarding the Festival and share the same underlying beliefs as the Chinese who live in Phuket.<sup>29</sup>

In the course of my fieldwork, a group of more than twenty Chinese visitors to the island was awaiting a procession of mediums outside one of the major hotels. All of them wore matching shirts and stood behind a long *to ui* that was set up for the procession. Initially watching them from the café across the street where I was eating breakfast, I assumed that they were waiting in a similar manner to the local people who were gradually finding a position along the roadway. Soon they began taking long poles with strings of firecrackers attached to one end into the street and proceeded to light the fuses with lighters or candles. I did not pay much attention to the first few that exploded until a number of other strings of firecrackers and small packets of firecrackers were lit and tossed haphazardly into the road amidst the occasional motorbike that drove past. Although some firecrackers are set off without *mah song* being

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<sup>29</sup> The Sino-Thai in Phuket have actively worked to maintain connections with migrant Chinese in other countries in Southeast Asia where the Festival is also practiced. Trade with Penang, Malaysia, particularly with reference to the tin industry, proved beneficial. Of note, a photograph found in Phuket Thaihua Museum captioned “A lantern parade by Fuzhou Club in celebration of Chinese National Day in front of the Club office at Maeyanang Shrine on October 10, 1928”, features a large group of individuals wearing white clothing standing in front of a building that has the Taiwanese flag positioned on the right hand side opposite the Thai flag. The reason for Taiwan’s association with the club, shrine, or celebration is not explained nor even mentioned in the information provided. However, the relationship between the Thai government and those of Chinese descent has not always been an easy one, as noted on pp. 79-81.

present, the majority are reserved for the actual procession to throw towards *mah song* or onto the sedan chairs. Watching this group of adults laughingly light nearly all of their firecrackers before the procession was even in sight caused me to wonder what proportion of visitors coming to Phuket for the Festival, particularly Chinese in this case, truly care about the Festival as a religious practice instead of as a holiday spectacle. Belief in the Festival is important and does exist, yet the Festival may hold more meaning for people of Chinese heritage living outside of China who are engaged in identity politics in plural societies wherein they are neither the majority nor the dominant population.

While Cheu views the Festival as commemorative of these ties, Cohen (2001) proffers another opinion maintaining that these rituals “transpose the link to the homeland from the historical to the mythical plane, and from the human to the divine sphere, thus cementing the bond between the Chinese abroad and their homeland beyond the exigencies of historical circumstances” (pp. 108-109). The Festival emphasizes this mythic connection through beliefs that Kiu Ong resides in China—the same region the Chinese migrants came from—and migrates south in a similar fashion to Doumu, which is why the gods speak and prayers are said in Hokkien (Cohen 2001).

Prayers are not only read in Hokkien, but there is also a dialect used by a number of people on the island known as *pah-sah Phuket* (literally: Phuket language) that incorporates some Hokkien words into Thai vocabulary. Hokkien as a language of its own used to be common in Phuket, but not many people know it now. Poom did point out a school that advertises itself as English and Chinese. He himself cannot speak Hokkien, only Thai and a small amount of English and has never been outside of Thailand. Sutinee and her friends all learned bits of Hokkien at home, not in school. Even though the Thai Government at one point banned teaching

Chinese, there is now a good relationship between the people of Phuket and China involving a student exchange program to better learn the language at a few universities. Interestingly, I noticed shrines played music over sound systems with lyrics that did not sound Thai; upon listening more closely, I heard *Xièxiè* (谢谢), “thank you” in Hokkien and Mandarin. Moreover, Thai is sometimes omitted in writing; for example, a fire escape sign in my hotel was written in English and Hokkien rather than Thai.

Often, instead of offering a *wai* at the shrines, Sutinee would place her right hand over her left—the tips of her fingers from her right hand resting on the knuckles of her left, while the fingers from her left curled under resting against the palm of her right hand. With her right thumb crossed over her left like an “x”, she would bow her head over this gesture, shaking her enfolded hands away from and towards her body ever so slightly several times. According to her, that is the Chinese way of showing respect. Several *mah song* and devotees were also seen using this practice.

There is a merging of Thai and Chinese cultures on the island that creates its own unique blend:

[t]he festival demonstrates the strength and continuous viability of the Sino-Thai community; but this demonstration is not an antagonistic one—while it manifests the community’s cultural distinctiveness, it does not seek self-induced segregation. Indeed, it may be argued that the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods began to flourish during the very period in which the Chinese immigrants became increasingly integrated into Thai society, and felt socially secure enough to parade their religious and cultural distinctiveness. (Cohen 2001, p. 114)

Terminology exists reflecting Cohen’s remarks such as *luuk jeen*, referring to a Chinese child or

a child with Chinese heritage, or *jek*, which is used “to refer to a hybrid identity combining ‘Chineseness’ with ‘Thainess’” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 8). Hamilton (2003) also remarks on this distinctive culture in Southern Thailand that is “far more obviously attuned to its cultural and historical origins than was the case with Chinese in many other parts of” the country (p. 12). The status of being Chinese in Thailand is changing. Within these spaces of identity, there is an increasing “Chinese-ness” that does not necessarily reject a Thai identity thus creating a “mutually constitutive” hybrid identity (Maud, 2005, p. 163). In this social context, “Chinese-ness” and “Thai-ness” are fluid and situational relying on strategy and context that consequently act as an “open signifier” (Maud 2005, p. 163).

While the Sino-Thai of Phuket feel Chinese, they still identify themselves with Thai nationality and loyalty to the monarchy. King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, who died only a few days after the end of the Festival in 2016, was highly revered by my informants. Mohn (personal communication, 2016) said that she loves the King and that he is a very good person, but the fact that he has been unwell lately has made her extremely unhappy. This love and respect was evidenced again six days later as Sutinee and a car full of her friends drove past a statue of the King to which they all would *wai*. Throughout his lifetime, the King and other members of the royal family have made formal visits to the island. Arches over roadways were built around Phuket by the Chinese associations to commemorate these moments. Further, Poom showed me a two-room display area open to the public on Phuket Road that reveals the history and pride of the Royal Thai Navy. Positive feelings for the royal family run deep, and the people in Phuket proclaim themselves to be as Thai as anyone else in the country with the added heritage of a Chinese background. Interestingly, many local Chinese and Sino-Thai displayed a unique blend of religious respect and would *wai* to statues and images of Buddha as well as to

Thai Buddhist monks who are given food early in the mornings as is done elsewhere in the country. As Sutinee stated (personal communication, 2016), there are “many religions, but this is faith” and faith is not restricted to culturally constructed religious categories. Eventually, I decided to ask Sutinee if she feels a stronger Thai or Chinese connection. She considered my inquiry momentarily before conceding that she feels equally Thai and Chinese: “I feel Phuket – unique”.

The culmination of these utterances, observations, and research underlines the partial sustainment and creation of an ethnic group identity in Phuket. While admitting that ethnicity is difficult to define, older anthropological conceptualizations collected and outlined by Barth (1998) could be regarded within this context:

1. is largely biologically self-perpetuating
2. shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms
3. makes up a field of communication and interaction
4. has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order (p. 10-11)

Employing this set of socially constructed determinants, the Festival reinforces a Chinese ethnic identity while allowing for a simultaneous enactment of a Thai identity. However, the assertion that ethnic identity is relatively subjective may be more applicable and beneficial, as is the concept of “situational ethnicity” in which one may choose which identity one maintains (Banks, 1996, p. 13). Going a step beyond Bank’s theorizing of subjectivity, I would posit that there is space for a multi-ethnic identity that has found expression within the Festival in Phuket in the Sino-Thai community. Although Cohen (2001) claims that the integration found on Phuket

indicates that the Festival is about island community rather than a focus of one specific ethnic group, I would argue that there is not only a multi-ethnic identity among Sino-Thai residents on a daily basis but also that these ritual practices invoke a liminal space in which a Chinese identity may reign.

Liminality is discussed by Turner (2009) who uses Van Gennep's conception of three stages of rites of passage involving separation, margin, and aggregation—that is, disruption from a normal state, liminality or a state of being in between, and a return to the normal state. Arguably, all devotees of the Nine Emperor Gods are in a liminal state during the nine days as the Festival itself is an annual rite of passage in the continual process of Chinese person-making in Phuket. In moments of liminality, Turner suggests society becomes “an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of ritual elders” (p. 96). During the Festival, all devotees are subject to dietary, sexual, and other restrictions, demarcate themselves with white clothing, and are equally desiring of the blessings of the gods, collectively undergoing the cleansing process. Schools are closed in order for all ages to participate, and some businesses close earlier than normal. *Mah song* are markedly in a state of liminality when possessed, with younger, neophyte *mah song* encountering events more similar to Turner's rites of passage through their use of larger objects when, or if, pierced. Just as Turner's liminal state is a “moment in and out of time” (p.96), the rituals of the Festival blur the realms of the historic, mythic, and present day. Within the religious context of the Festival, the Chinese identity is provided space to be enacted. For instance, ancestor worship is performed with Chinese joss paper folded into lotuses and boats before being burned in a furnace next to the shrines (see Figure A76).

### **Power, Challenge, and Visibility**

Concepts of power and hegemony permeate the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods. Although they are not necessarily the most prominent features, these themes should be considered alongside the history of the Sino-Thai population. Cheu (1993) asserts that the Festival reflects harmony and control of environment and of oneself. The remembrance of past kings who cared for their subjects like brothers, Cheu posits, “bears significance in a stratified society, where the spirit of brotherhood is steadily being eroded, and socio-political inequality and racial discrimination are getting more deeply entrenched as the state takes control over the pivot of national development” (p. 43). Both Malaysia and Thailand have banned public opposition to the state and, in Thailand’s case, to the monarchy as well through *lèse-majesté*.

Nonini (1998) contends experiential embodiment is a politically dangerous power to the state as it refers to a different order of power: “a Chinese god possessing a person and leading a massed procession through paved streets in the ‘downtown’ district of a Malaysian market town is just such an experiential embodiment—a power dangerous to the Malaysian state” (p. 443). Further, the feats accomplished by the *mah song* serve not only as a means of purifying the community and scaring away evil spirits but also as an ordering of the disorderly: “Pain is a powerful and productive metaphor. Given that the body is the main source of metaphors of order and disorder [...], we can confidently state that pain is the quintessential symbol of disorder” (Jackson, 2011, p. 372). As the gods protect the possessed humans from pain and injury with a promise of rapid healing afterwards, the *mah song*’s body becomes a visible symbol of the cosmic re-balancing established during the Festival.

However, the state is not the only entity that might be frightened by the sight of the embodied gods. Sutinee’s uncle (personal communication, 2016) has been a *mah song* every year

for over thirty years. Sutinee explained that the first time she saw him possessed and his face pierced, she was afraid of him. Of note, she was in her late teens during this encounter. Several years later, she began to understand more about the Festival and became less fearful. As we talked, Sutinee would occasionally pause, look at her cell phone, and show me pictures that her friends were already posting on their Facebook pages of *mah song* at other shrines having “the spiritual come into them”, some beginning to cut their backs with axes or whips. Over the next few days, Sutinee introduced me to various former classmates of hers. One mentioned that her daughter was frightened by *mah song* as a five-year-old but is now ten and enjoys the Festival and going to the shrines; she understands that a spiritual presence is inside of *mah song*.

Visibility and space are key concepts in the discourse on power dimensions. There is a power that is inherent with seeing and being visible. Duara (1988) states: “[a]t any one point in time, the interpretive arena of a myth sustains a cultural universe that enables the communication and negotiation of worldviews” (p. 791). Szonyi (1997) theorizes that belief in the gods’ presence supersedes state authority and causes some deities to be seen as dangerous to order and public morality. Worship is a form of transgressive embodiment. Nonini (1998) proposes two ways in which public space can be religiously appropriated: influx and circumambulation. The first involves a gathering of people within the temple confines for gods’ birthdays, or a moving inward. The second is the processing of worshipers and gods through cities or towns during festivals for the gods, or a moving outward. Nonini discusses the physical occupation of space by Malaysian Chinese in coffee shops as a display of the power of amassed bodies. If that type of gathering is considered an implicit challenge to the state, then hundreds or thousands of devotees and possessed *mah song* crowding the streets or attending shrine rituals is one as well.

Kanyalak (personal communication, 2016) shared her opinion on the growth of the

Festival and asserted that an increasing number of parents who bring their children to rituals at a very young age is making a difference. As schools in Phuket close for the duration of the Festival, children, add to the size of the street processions, attend other rituals, and visit shrines to pray and make offerings. Now, even five year olds have been seen beating on the drums and participating during ceremonies. I witnessed two young boys at 23:30 before the welcoming ritual who, no more than four years of age, attempted to hang off the top edge of a slanted drum—both of their bodies fitting across the face of it—before losing their grip and sliding onto the ground. In addition, many male youths participate in the percussion bands. Therefore, an immersion into and “normalization” of the ritual is one outcome of bringing increasingly younger Thai nationals into regular contact with the Festival.

As a result of the presence of the gods and the rituals and fasts performed, purification of the *mah song* and the community as a whole from past sins is accomplished at the same time that the area is rid of demons (Nonini, 1998; Hamilton, 2008). Devotees seek to achieve moral purity. Through public displays of attending rituals, eating blessed *je* food at temples, or wearing white clothing, especially if stamped with a temple seal after certain rituals, devotees not only assert their presence but also their physical and mental superiority and transcendental power; temples, on the other hand, are focal points as temples are “[e]motionally charged spaces” (Hamilton, 2008; Nonini, 1998, p. 448). However, this cosmopolitical sovereignty is temporary, lasting only as long as the rituals themselves (Nonini, 1998). Although devotees can be said to lack political strength, they do “embody an alternative power” that is continuously re-enacted (Nonini, 1998, p. 463). The rituals require symbols from a different space and time that serve to produce a “[s]econd-order effect of sociality” in which no one individual is held responsible (Nonini, 1998, p. 467).

In the past, certain countries in Southeast Asia have seen the state take action against *mah song* and rituals involving the Nine Emperor Gods or have avoided the topic, denying their existence or prevalence. Japan banned *tâng-ki* from travelling from one village to the next in open processions; this has not been reinstated “as though possession could be legislated out of existence” (Jordan, 1972, p. 81). China avoids the topic of *tâng-ki* while one of Jordan’s (1972) informants in Taiwan claimed there were none existing in the entire country even though Jordan later found nine within a single village. In Singapore, street processions have not “been permitted to use main roads” since 1974 (Heinze, 1981, p. 157). Kanyalak commented (personal communication, 2016) that in parts of Malaysia and Singapore, people are only allowed to hold the rituals within shrine complexes and cannot use any of the roads, which is why she is happy to be in Phuket where the government is much more open. Attempts at regulation may be due to a concern over identity. For instance, Maud (2005) considers how Festival participation may impact devotees’ sense of being Thai.

In studying a merging of Festival processions with a Thai civic religious display in Krabi, Thailand, Cohen (2012b) does not perceive the Festival as a challenge to the Thai government. However, he does consider the possibility that the actions of the Thai government raise a challenge toward the Sino-Thai community in an attempt for further assimilation. The idea is countered by the fact that there was no resistance to merge the Sino-Thai ritual with the Thai celebration and, yet, counterbalanced by conceding that no prior attempt at consolidation had ever been made before on the part of the Chinese community.

By focusing attention and framing experience of what otherwise might not be known, Douglas (2002) claims “ritual makes external signs of internal states” (p. 86). Ritual may be especially understood within this context through conceptions of order and disorder. Douglas

labels the disorderly as dirt or impurity and asserts that social structure is always incorporated into belief. Therefore, Douglas contends, “rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience” (p. 3). Ultimately, Nonini (1998) believes that ritual embodiment establishes an avenue for people to deal with being “stuck” in poor situations in which leaving the country, explicitly voicing concerns, or loyalty to the state is neither appealing nor optional. The use of identity politics in the Festival’s liminal ritual space represents an ordering of both a ruptured and continuous ethnic heritage.

### **Chapter Summary**

The Sino-Thai population in Phuket exists within plural societies and engages in identity politics within the Festival. After a complicated history between the Thai government and Chinese migrants, Thai efforts to assimilate this group of people led to a unique blending of identities by those who call themselves Sino-Thai. Yet, this hybridity does not obliterate a sense of ethnic heritage, as there are constant reminders of this past around Phuket and in the shrines and rituals. The identity communicated and enacted in ritual performances can be better understood through a discussion of the plural societies’ historic and current interactions. Therefore, an overview of the Thai government’s engagement with migrant Chinese and Sino-Thai populations aids in forming a present perspective on ethnic heritage and the power of ritual identity. Within the liminal space of the Festival’s rituals, this ethnic identity may be separated from a multi-ethnic or national Thai identity. Participation in these rituals involves an experiential embodiment and visual use of space—like influx or circumambulation—that can be viewed as transgressive towards the state. Belief in a supernatural authority that has power and provides protection to devotees supersedes the state—for example, the physical trials undergone by possessed *mah song* express an invulnerability as they are safeguarded during the event and

are believed to heal promptly afterwards.

While the Festival's capacity to challenge the state exists and may occur in other regions of Southeast Asia, in the case of Phuket, such power does not appear to currently be cultivated for such a purpose. Rather than utilizing the ability to bring disorder to the Thai government, the growth of the Festival indicates that there is an increasing harmony between the ethnic Thai and the Chinese communities when compared to Singapore and Malaysia. This idea is generally emphasized through the establishment of a unique multiple identity in Phuket that neither entirely rebels from the Thai identity nor consents to complete assimilation.

### Conclusion

From the time the Shenist Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods was introduced on the island of Phuket, Thailand, it has continued to expand and grow in numbers of devotees, *mah song*, and Chinese shrines, particularly in recent years. Over the nine full days of this religious event—held in the ninth lunar month of the Chinese calendar—various rituals enact foundational myths and origin narratives of both the gods and the Festival. In addition to blending the past into an ongoing present, these myths and narratives are also evolving and dynamic actors in the process of place-making and self-ascribed identity.

The various rituals encompassed within the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods enable the Sino-Thai community to reconnect with both an ethnic heritage and their ancestors while cleansing themselves and making merit. Rituals, and the performance of them, contain an inherent intersectionality and multiplicity of meanings and intentions. However, the performativity of the rituals in this Festival transmits meaning for devotees whose emic positionality indicates belief and faith through the “spiritual” presence felt by them during the Festival. In this process, the practicing Sino-Thai community of Phuket are continually re-creating themselves as Chinese persons within these formalized ritual structures that are recognized by themselves and others as “Chinese”. Therein, their ascribed identity as a member of a Sino-Thai community becomes an outwardly prescribed identity as well, thus turning their individual self into a communal person.

Through an amalgamation of myth, origin narratives, history, rituals, and belief in the gods and their ability to heal, protect, and possess *mah song*, devotees garner and recreate a distinct identity. These embodied identities are empowered through the liminal space engendered by the Festival’s rituals. This Chinese identity is tangibly embodied by devotees who wear either

white or yellow clothing and eat *je* during this sacred annual period as well as by *mah song* who are believed to physically have gods and spirits present inside of them during moments of possession. Furthermore, *mah song* who engage in bodily infliction in order to cleanse and protect the community will generally retain scars for years—a very visible form of identification. The Sino-Thai of Phuket are not comprised of a single “blended” identity. Rather, they are a unique conjunction of two whole identities—one Thai and another Chinese—that are capable of co-existing in a distinctive manner. Through the Festival’s rituals, the specific Chinese history and unique heritage of the Sino-Thai becomes both prominent and discernible from their everyday Thai selves.

The use of Hokkien, symbols of secret societies supportive of the Ming dynasty, and narratives relating to the Fujian Province in China all establish a specific regional and historical framework that is lived through the current practices. Belief in a syncretic Taoist pantheon and the Festival’s practices overrides emic theories of tourism or economic gain as a cause for the expansion. Rather, it is the plural Thai and Chinese societies in Phuket, which have a long history of intermingled cooperation and forced assimilation, in combination with this belief that engage in identity politics within the liminal space of the Festival’s rituals.

Although new shrines are being built, there are also numerous shrines that are only recently being “counted” by researchers due to the manner in which Thailand classifies what does or does not constitute a religious space (Kataoka, 2012). The potential power of the Festival’s identity politics, especially in regard to the visual display of influx and circumambulation, has resulted in strict policies in other countries in Southeast Asia like Malaysia and Singapore. The restrictions by the state to control these challenging identities has caused ethnic Chinese citizens of these other countries to travel to Phuket each year where they

feel more religious freedom is provided, thus increasing the number of devotees participating in the Festival. In Thailand today, the Chinese identities re-established in the Festival are not politicized against the state, although secret societies have used it in the past to do so against the Qing Dynasty and there is always the potential for such activation. Yet Phuket seems to have a Sino-Thai community that while relatively assimilated has maintained plural identities.

From my accounts and research, there are people who believe in possessing gods and the power of the rituals, yet there is more to the beliefs than the Festival alone reveals. Additional themes and routes of analytical exploration were not possible within the period of fieldwork I conducted. Moreover, I am not aware of any researcher who has spent a year or more focused on this topic in Phuket. Although Cohen (2001) has written various works on the Festival and returned there repeatedly, I have not read anything to suggest he has lived there for an extended time frame nor has he discussed the prominence of these religious beliefs outside of the Festival.

However, an extended length of time spent in Phuket—minimally a full year—would be critical in assessing the prominence of the shrines and the daily practices among residents of the island. For instance, how many people pray at the shrines outside of religious festivals? What other Chinese religious dates are honored or celebrated? Do *mah song* receive any formal training or initiation? How often are *mah song* possessed at other times of the year? Research would be further benefitted by actually speaking to more *mah song* in their daily lives in order to ascertain if the respect afforded them during the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods continues, if at all, into moments of non-possession.

Other areas of inquiry could involve determining: which myth narratives hold prominence in Phuket; how gender dynamics of the Festival and the *mah song* are altering as Hamilton (2003) notes an increase in the number of women being possessed; to what degree is

the increasing attendance and participation by visitors and devotees from China and other countries in Southeast Asia influenced by the policies and restrictions in their home countries regarding religious cults and circumambulation; and how media and technology might affect the number of youths participating in the Festival as well as the normalization of the more spectacular aspects of certain rituals.

While the Festival is an annual highlight encompassing many key components in devotees' lives, this event in the Chinese calendar emphasizes valued and subtle aspects of daily life among the Sino-Thai in Phuket. The evening after the last full day of the Festival, I watched the *ko teng* pole being lowered and observed the skewers, whips, *siu to*, and other items being blessed and packed into boxes that were then moved to a storage room in Bang Niao's complex (see Figures A77-78). People collected their statues of the gods from the altars to bring home once more. Slowly the shrine returned to its regular state of being as it appears for the majority of the year, but the belief in the invisible "spiritual" by devotees and the physical scars left by the gods on the bodies of the *mah song* remain.

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Appendix  
Photographs

All photographs were taken by the researcher (see Methodology, pp. 14-15).



Figure A1. Street altars stand on charm paper to avoid touching the ground.



Figure A2. Blessings are given to devotees at street altars.



Figure A3. The Five Celestial Generals are preceding the palanquin of Kiu Ong.



Figure A4. Hand signals linking the Festival to secret societies are still displayed.



Figure A5. Divining sticks and blocks are available in the shrines for devotees' use all year.



Figure A6. The *ko teng* pole is raised.



Figure A7. Drums and chimes are heard as the gods possess their *mah song*.



Figure A8. Nine lanterns are lit and hung from the *ko teng* pole for the entirety of the Festival.



Figure A9. Rows of sedan chairs are on either side of the palanquin of Kiu Ong.



Figure A10. Sapan Hin Shrine overlooks the sea.



Figure A11. The beach at Sapan Hin Shrine.



Figure A12. A possessed *mah song* writes in “Hokkien” on charm cloth.



Figure A13. “Master skewer” – conical metal skewer used for piercing.



Figure A14. *Mah song* standing while being pierced.



Figure A15. *Mah song* and their *pi liang* posing for photographs after completing the piercings.



Figure A16. Charm paper, medical needles, and gauze left over after the piercings are complete.



Figure A17. Medical needles are decorated with colored string.



Figure A18. A *mah song* in a street procession ritual.



Figure A19. Many men in Phuket have elaborate tattoos.



Figure A20. Piercings may go through the cheek, ears, or upper body.



Figure A21. Vegetation is sometimes used.



Figure A22. Flowers are less often seen as piercing objects.



Figure A23. Skewers are common instruments.



Figure A24. Heads of the gods or the Celestial Generals top the skewers.



Figure A25. The materials used as piercing objects vary, e.g. an entire bicycle is used.



Figure A26. A child's abacus is used.



Figure A27. Axes and short swords are also common.



Figure A28. Piercing objects vary in size.



Figure A 29. Rifles and pistols were utilized by several mah song.



Figure A30. One mah song did not look “fully Thai” or Chinese.



Figure A31. Female *mah song* are present and may undergo piercing of various degrees.



Figure A32. Evil spirits are chased away from intersections through self-infliction.



Figure A33. Axes, swords, and saws can be used to cut foreheads, backs, or tongues.



Figure A34. Prickballs may be carried to cut their backs to chase away demons.



Figure A35. The skin is torn by the end of the ritual.



Figure A36. Strings of firecrackers occasionally wrap the sedan chairs.



Figure A37. *Pi liang* protect themselves from the firecrackers' debris, smoke, and noise.



Figure A38. It is impossible to see the opposite side of the street through the smoke.



Figure A39. Statues of the gods are covered in ash after being carried on sedan chairs in street processions.



Figure A40. Firecrackers are not supposed to be thrown at the palanquin of Kiu Ong.



Figure A41. *Pi liang* catch a female *mah song* as the possessing god releases her.



Figure A42. Stamps are "collected" from year to year from the bridge-crossing ritual.



Figure A43. The pyre is lit hours before the fire-walking ritual begins.



Figure A44. The pile of coals must be spread out.



Figure A45. Four men scrape the top of the pyre.



Figure A46. Water is used to cool the metal pole after each pass through the coals.



Figure A47. The metal scrape is turned sideways and swung onto the pyre to compact the coals.

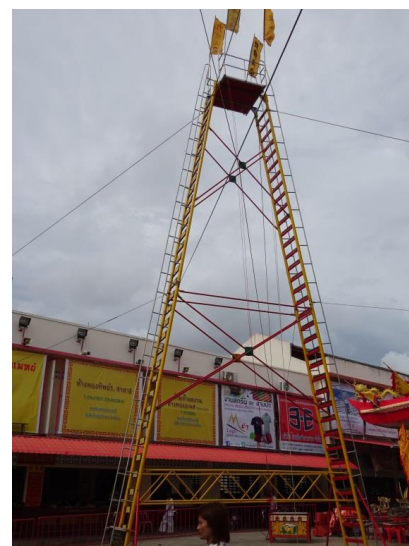


Figure A48. Bladed-ladder climbing ritual involves 72 steps – 36 steps per side.



Figure A49. Only *mah song* climb the ladder.



Figure A50. Charm clothes are thrown to devotees from the top platform.



Figure A51. Flags of the Five Celestial Generals are thrown to select the food offerings.



Figure A52. The offering to the Heavenly Warriors is burned.



Figure A53. Paper effigies of Kiu Ong are kept out of sight until the sending-off ritual.



Figure A54. The effigies are burned on the final night.



Figure A55. Silent prayers are said on the beach.



Figure A56. A make-shift boat of charm paper is burned during the sending-off ritual.



Figure A57. The *ko teng* pole is lowered on the tenth day.



Figure A58. Efficacious twigs and leaves are broken off by devotees and taken home.



Figure A59. Trance dances involve skipping, hopping, or a combination by *mah song*.



Figure A60. Devotees ask *mah song* for blessings.



Figure A61. Scars from prior years are visible.



Figure A62. Larger shrines cook massive amounts of blessed, *je* food for free three times a day.



Figure A63. Devotees line up at the dining tents.



Figure A64. Special tins (center containers) are only used during the Festival to bring shrine food home.



Figure A65. Charm paper is burned for health and good luck.



Figure A66. Devotees pray at nine shrines in one day.



Figure A67. Firecrackers welcome and send off the gods.



Figure A68. Prayers are led on the beach at Sapan Hin.



Figure A69. There are thousands of gods in the Taoist pantheon.



Figure A70. Devotees bring statues from home to replenish their power during the Festival.



Figure A71. Naja's *mah song* answers questions and gives blessings to an elderly couple.



Figure A72. Traditional Thai Theravada Buddhist temple.



Figure A73. Traditional Thai temple interior.



Figure A74. Traditional Chinese shrine exterior in Phuket.



Figure A75. A standard Chinese altar in Phuket.



Figure A76. Joss paper is folded into boats or lotuses to be burned as an offering for ancestors.



Figure A77. All of the flags and *siú to* of the *mah song* are kept at their registered shrines.



Figure A78. The principal *mah song* purifies whips and skewers before storing them for next year.