

CHINESE CREEDS & CUSTOMS

Volume I

by

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Illustrations by The Author

FOREWORD.

For many years I have been importuned to write a book about China, but the lack of incentive, and the fact that most of the material had been acquired at Government expense, deprived the general public of a good many entertaining anecdotes. During the War I was ordered to produce a handbook on the country, but an attack of sciatica, combined with a more useful employment of my services, brought about the abandonment of this enterprise. The series of articles, from which the present volume is compiled, owe their inception to a request by my collaborator in the Admiralty handbook, for information on the religious tenets of the Colony but, as Scientific data, as required by the British Museum, would hardly appeal to the readers of a Sunday paper, I recast them in more popular style.

The information is by no means all original as there are not enough festivals to form subject matter for a weekly article, and I have drawn heavily on the researches of others, hitherto without adequate acknowledgement, to fill the gaps. I owe a deep debt to my late friends Juliet Bredon, for the Moon Year, and to Sir Reginald Johnston for his scholarly books on China. I am also under obligations to Monsieur G. Bouillard, the enterprising cartographer, for his articles on the Peking Festivals, published in *La Chine*, in 1922-23. I recommend Mr. C. A. S. Williams' *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism* to all students of Chinese Mythology. For local information Mr. Feng York-man has interviewed a host of people from necromancers to Temple guardians in search of local colour, and Miss Chu En-pao has been invaluable for translations, and everything connected with the Chinese characters. Finally without the friendship of the Boat People the articles would have been shorn of much of their originality. A war-time connection with the House brought me into their circle almost as a member of the family, and there is little in their lives with which I am not acquainted. I have attended all their festivals as a member of the junk, even if the "Old Man" had to go by tram to make a place. I have seen their Weddings and Thanksgiving Services, their Festivals and Junketings, in fact, everything but a Funeral, though if I demanded one, I have no doubt they would be ready to oblige. These humble folk possess all the innate good manners of the vanished Empire, and are friends in the best sense of the word. They stand by the Government in fair weather or foul, and have no aspirations but to earn an honest living.

V.R.B.

the Golden Orchids. Unfortunately their beauty attracted the attentions of the famous pirate Chang Pao-tzü (張保仔) who, about 1770 captured the island and Lantau. As they repulsed his advances and were determined to preserve their chastity, death was the only alternative. To commemorate their resistance movement, a temple was erected in Causeway Bay early in the present century.

Though he can hardly be classed as a local worthy, any boy would rather find a pirate in his family tree than a Saint and, after all, Chang Pao-tzü's relics are preserved in a temple. He made his base at Stanley, where his main fleet was concentrated in Chik Chu Wan. The small promontory in the centre of the bay was used as a look-out and signal station, from which he kept in communication with his ships by bell and drum. These instruments are still on view in the Temple of the Queen of Heaven, labelled with their owner's name. In the south of the bay, local inhabitants point out a sort of Tarpaeon rock, from which he precipitated his enemies or prisoners whose ransoms failed to meet his expectations. His depredations extended to the Pearl River, where he maintained an advanced post in a fort mentioned in Hunter's "Fan Kwae in Canton". After his death the business was successfully carried on by his wife, who proved not a whit less efficient in extracting tribute than her spouse.

When the English were forced by the hostility of the authorities in Canton to seek a place where they could careen their ships undisturbed, and settled on Hong Kong, the first landings were made on the south side of the island, near Aberdeen, and a camp was established on the neck of Stanley peninsula now occupied by St. Stephen's School. The Boat People were the first to make friends, but the arrival of the troops was less popular with the cultivators. Old men still remember stories of poisoning the wells, which sound uncommonly like modern atrocity propaganda. There may, however, be some sub-stratum of truth in the allegation, for any outbreak of an unfamiliar disease would certainly have been attributed to design and not accident. With the best will in the world the introduction of an alien element into an isolated population may have disastrous results. The inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego were practically exterminated by measles, contracted from traders and missionaries, who brought in a complaint for which they had built up no immunity. Up to the beginning of the present century typhoid had claimed fifteen times as many victims as battle casualties in the campaigns of every nation, and the disease appeared wherever a large number of men were congregated, who depended on an inadequate water supply. The few shallow wells were probably contaminated, and the sparse civilian population which drew its water from the same source, shared in the disaster which overtook the troops. Early records prove that health conditions were lamentable, though malaria was

probably the chief cause for complaint, and there were thus recriminations on both sides, but it is odd that the well-poisoning story should have survived a century of occupation.

In 1894 Hong Kong was visited by a severe epidemic of bubonic plague, introduced from Canton. The highest mortality occurred in a congested Chinese area then known as Taipingshan near the present situation of Cat Street where there were 70 to 80 daily deaths, during the summer months. People fleeing from the infected district undoubtedly carried the plague to Cheung Chau where the inhabitants, thoroughly alarmed, sought the assistance of the God. A stranger from the Chao Chow district, locally referred to as "Crane brother", who joined in the petitions every day, suddenly announced that the Spirit of the North God had entered into him, and that he could abate the epidemic. He ordered the congregation to get ready a decorated chair for him to visit the houses where the sickness raged, and he would effect a cure with his blessings. The Chinese are always suspicious of outsiders, and prophets are more likely to be successful in their own village than elsewhere, contradicting the accepted theory, so they scorned him as an impostor. Without attempting argument, he simply settled down in the temple and remained for days sitting like a drunkard or a half-wit, mumbling inaudibly the whole time. The villagers finally decided that he was indeed possessed, and agreed, after a consultation of the elders, to give him a trial. A collection was taken up and the man was paraded round the parish in a sedan preceded by a band, without the slightest effect on the incidence of the sickness. He returned to his meditations in the temple and, after several days announced that he was the Emperor of the North, that the people had sinned grievously but that he would cure them if they built a chair of knives for him to ride in. The people by now were fully convinced, and a chair was constructed with knife blades for seat, arms and foot rest. A great crowd of spectators accompanied it to the temple, where the Crane Brother staggered out bare-footed as if intoxicated, and took his seat without evincing the slightest discomfort. Eight villagers acted as bearers and started a parade, preceded by the band, and followed by the temple officials and parties carrying offerings. The whole circuit of the island was made before returning to the temple, where the man alighted without a scratch on his body. This time his progress was successful, as the plague stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

There was a recurrence, however, a couple of years later by which time the incarnation of the Emperor of the North was no longer available. A local fisherman was accordingly called upon to enact the role. This he performed with equal success and emerged unscathed from the chair. Plague has been unknown in the island ever since.

The story of the British Museum being enriched by this curious conveyance is, unfortunately apocryphal, but the Temple sword's connection with the dissipation of disease was revived by an incident which took place during the Japanese occupation. With their usual mania for security, their military authorities confiscated the weapon when they took over the island. Shortly afterwards an epidemic of influenza in a mild form, broke out and the village elders sent a deputation to the Commandant, attributing the disease to the sacrilege which had been committed. They evidently made out their case, for the sword was returned to the altar by the commander himself at the head of a large procession in which the military were well represented. As the sickness was already on the wane, the restoration of the weapon probably had little effect on its disappearance but, as far as the inhabitants are concerned, its efficacy is now unchallenged.



The sword of the Spirit of the North. Cheung Chau

The temple also takes pride in a second, and complementary relic in the shape of a sawfish's snout of considerable size. Grateful petitioners often leave votive offerings of small replicas, of local origin, which are placed on the side altars with an inscription identifying the donor.

THE PATRIARCH OF CHEUNG CHAU

The sheltered harbour of Cheung Chau, only open to the west, where it is screened by the bulk of Lantau, must have been a natural fishing base from prehistoric times. To this day about a third of the population of thirty thousand are fishermen, aborigines of the Canton delta who probably are descended from a race which earned its living upon the waters long before agriculture was introduced, and Chinese civilisation spread to the Mon-Kmer tribes now occupying the southern provinces. It is not surprising that primitive religious beliefs persist in the island despite the counter-attractions of organised religion.



The temple of the Jade Vacuity. Cheung Chau

At the north end of the village is the rich Taoist Temple called Yü Hsi Kung (玉虛宮), the Palace of Jade Vacuity, which contributes well over \$10,000 annually to the charities of the Colony. Its high altar is dedicated to the Dark Spirit of the North (玄天上帝), who was reincarnated in the Crane Man to stay the plague there sixty years ago. According to the temple manager, the iron chair with knife-edged supports in which the embodiment was carried on his healing mission, was removed by Government orders and was sent to the British Museum. The only relic of the episode is the long, demon-expelling sword, which is still shown to visitors. Before the altar stand two figures facing inward. These are Chao Kung-ming' (趙公明), one of the manifestations of the God of Wealth, and the woman adversary who caused his death. She is known as T'ao Hua Nu (桃花女), or the

Peach-blossom girl, for Chao, who was immune to the wounds inflicted by ordinary cold steel, succumbed when she pierced his effigy with peach-wood arrows.



Detail of decoration in temple at Cheung Chau

On the outer wall of the Temple, to the south of the main entrance, are pasted sheets of red paper setting forth the contributions of various guilds to the annual festival, which takes place early in the Fourth Moon. The whole village is thus made aware, that such a Society or individual has promised a floral screen, two set pieces of fireworks, material for the dragon, one lantern, \$7 in cash for crackers, two thousand of the same, a silver plate, and a further contribution towards the tail of the dragon or lion. The catalogue ends with the expression of the hope that an adequate return may be made for the expenditure. This savours of commercialised religion but is not a whit less mercenary than the motive recorded in one of our Hymns Ancient and Modern, where an extortionate rate of interest is confidently expected.

At the southern end of the village is a platform mounted by a few granite steps, on which is a receptacle for burning paper. On the east side is the gigantic bole of a banyan tree, distorted by pollarding, whose corrugated bark offers little hold for the red paper cutouts of children, pasted to its uneven surface as votive offerings. A penthouse arrangement in the form of a tent protects the shrine from the weather and offers shade to all the gossips in the neighbourhood. Before the altar is a granite incense burner, about four feet long, bearing the inscription "The

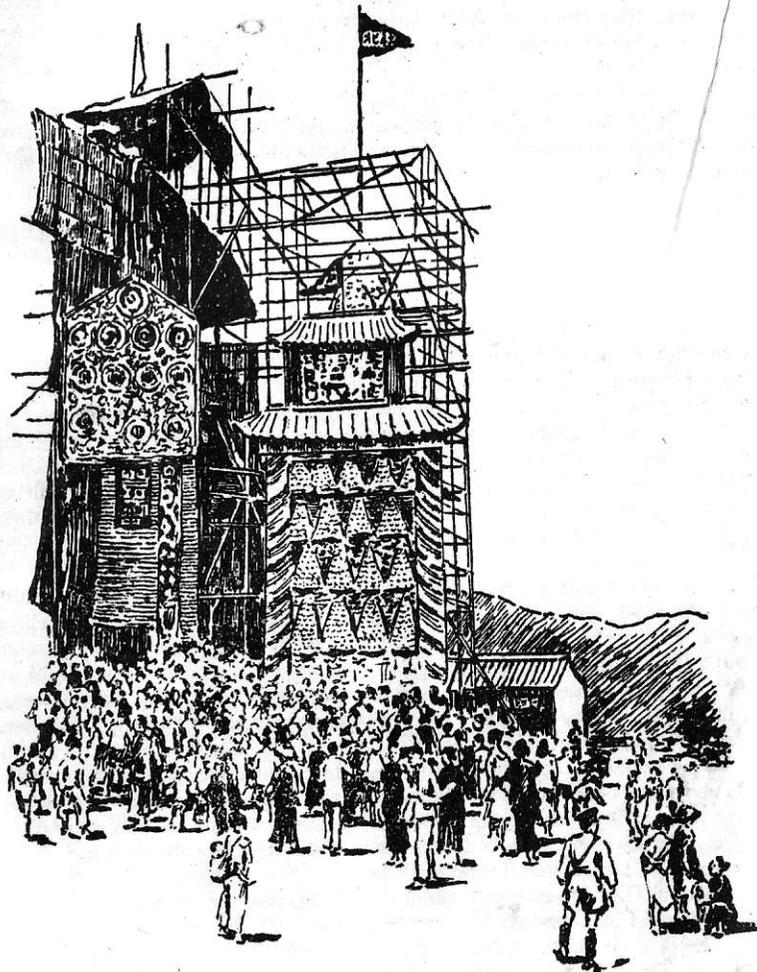


Altar with the Five Vessels (Wu Kung) Cheung Chau

Patriarch of Cheung Chau", whilst the shrine itself is called the altar of the Grand Tutelary Deity. A large Chinese lantern also bears this inscription. There are four shrines to children whom the tree was powerless to save. Successes seem to outweigh failures, and it is recorded that in the year of the Sheep, Hsieh Ying was cured and the parents sent a laudatory poem, to the effect that every trouble had melted away like the morning mist, and their prayer was granted. Besides the official incense burner, the back of the shrine is packed with pots and jars containing individual contributions. Practically all worship is done early in the morning, when the old lady, the self-appointed or hereditary guardian of the tree, waits at the receipt of custom. Her takings are not large, as hardly any of the worshippers contribute more than five cents, ten being quite exceptional largesse. Business is slack during the rest of the day, when a young girl assumes charge of the takings. There is another sacred tree about a hundred yards east of the main street towards its

THE BUN FESTIVAL OF CHEUNG CHAU

The island of Cheung Chau (長洲), with its sheltered harbour, must have been a natural fishing base from prehistoric times. Stone and bronze implements have been discovered on the adjacent island of Lamma, and probably richer finds await the archaeologist, should modernisation disturb the primitive houses raised on piles in the villages of Stanley and



Bun Mountains, Cheung Chau

Cheung Chau. Practically all the communities in the Colony, whose economy depends on the products of sea and land, worship the Queen of Heaven who is primarily the patroness of those who earn their living upon the waters. Though her temple is adjacent to the main shrine, the Spirit of the North, Pei Ti (北帝) in the Palace of Jade Vacuity (玉虛宮) overshadows her in the esteem of the inhabitants of Cheung Chau.

The population is about thirty thousand, of whom a third are Boat People. Normally these flock to the temple of T'ien Hou on her birthday, the 23rd of the Second Moon, which marks the beginning of the fishing season. To her they pray for full nets in the opening year, and render thanks for her favours in the past. In Cheung Chau however, the main annual religious festival is one of expiation and, though Pei Ti extends his patronage to the proceedings, the objects of worship are the spirits of



Like birds let us fly and mate in the sky

all those animals and fish, whose lives have been sacrificed in the past years, in order that man may live. The festival lasts four days, during which time no pig or chicken is killed on land, and the fishing junks lie at their moorings, without casting a net or dropping a line. All meals are vegetarian, though an exception is made in the case of oysters, who are not credited with the possession of a soul.

The actual date of the festival is literally in the lap of the Gods, for the organising committee cast lots before the image of the Spirit of the North, to determine its incidence. The limits appear to be between the last days of the third, and the tenth of the fourth moon. There is always an elaborate theatrical performance daily and nightly throughout the proceedings, so the date depends to a large extent on the availability of a troupe of actors. It is their busy time of the year, for the temples to the Queen of Heaven are by far the most numerous in the Colony, and theatrical companies are booked up for her birthday in the last week of the



The Village Elder and the Lion Dancer

third moon. In their connection with religion, they resemble the performers of the mystery plays in mediaeval times in western Europe. The plays performed by the "Brothers of the Pear Orchard," as these Thespians are known, are called Canton Opera, and bear little resemblance to the more classic drama of Peking. The theatre is a huge matshed, affording protection from the rain and the sun to an audience of perhaps a couple of thousand, who pack themselves in tightly and come and go as they please. No nails are used in the construction, but the bamboos forming the frame are tied together with strips of rattan. The work of erection is incredibly fast, as every workman is a specialist. The dismantling is even faster, as the lashings are cut away with a sharp hooked knife being the only part of the structure for which there is no further use.



Fishermen's Tableau

The real feature of the festival is the erection of three pyramidal towers surrounded by scaffolding to accommodate the cakes which form the sacrifice for the spirits of the slain. These are known as the "Bun mountains" and, when the framework is completed, large round pink and white cakes are affixed in tiers. The most desirable bun, crowning the edifice, is about sixty feet above ground level. In the making of the confectionery, over a thousand sacks of flour and a hundred and thirty pounds of sugar are consumed. As at this time of year the weather is uncertain, the towers are protected with tarpaulins, once the edifice is completed, until the final service and distribution.

It is well worth while exploring the odd corners of the village in the forenoon of the great day, when the guilds will be discovered preparing the tableaux to represent them. The children are being bandaged to the supports, and the artifice is completely concealed as soon as they are robed.

In front of the Lion Temple the bannermen form three large rings, with their triangular silk standards of every colour of the spectrum.



Instrument Makers' Guild

There are probably at least a hundred in each circle, some with spear heads, and others with halberds on their staves. Inside, the crowd is three or four deep, watching acrobats, clowns, or in some cases highly skilled exponents of shadow boxing. In the centre ring a troupe of amateur actors depict the adventures of Hsüan Tsang during his pilgrimage to India in search of the true Buddhist scriptures. A man with a pig's head represents "Bigsie", and there is Monkey and the Marine Monster "Sandy". Most Chinese artists recording their adventures portray the four robed as if for an audience at Court, instead of the rags engendered by contact with the craggy passes of the Pamirs, but the local talent has the travel stained appearance consistent with the accounts of the original expedition.

In the village, floral arches are erected at all road junctions, and the various guilds tax their ingenuity to mount tableaux to represent them in the procession which takes place on the last day. These are most ingeniously contrived, and are very convincing. The actors are usually children between the ages of five and eight, as they have to be carried shoulder high on platforms instead of a wheeled float. A concealed framework enables a child, for instance, to appear to be standing on a fan, held below by a companion, or to be mounted on a fiddle, the badge of the instrument makers' Guild. Another infant stands on a Coca



Taoist Priest

Cola bottle with a false limb arranged so as to give the impression of dancing. There are numerous legendary and mythological subjects, such as the battle between the kingfisher and the oyster, which points a moral like the fables of Aesop. The kingfisher found the oyster open, and attacked him, whilst the bivalve closed his shell imprisoning the beak of his assailant. Neither was willing to cry quits and call the battle off so, whilst they were still locked in useless combat, a fisherman put the pair into his bag. Children are thus admonished that it is better to agree than plunge in strife, from which only a third party benefits.

The girl representing the oyster is of maturer years, as are the couples symbolic of fecundity who display the unicorn as the emblem of large families. The girl is mounted on the mythical beast as a hobby-horse, whose reins are held by her male companion. In contrast a tiny child holding a fan impersonates a Taoist priest in full canonicals.

On the two final days of the festival the participants in the procession form up in the square before the temple of Jade Vacuity at 2.30 p.m. Chinese lanterns lead the cortège, with a band preceding the members of the organising committee. The religious element is furnished by portable images of the chief divinities of the island, with the Spirit of the North in the place of honour. Hung Hsing, worshipped by the Water Folk for his influence over wind and wave, is followed by no less than four representations of the Queen of Heaven, guardian angel of the sailor. The Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, who ranks with, but after T'ien Hou in the estimation of the Taoists, forms part of her retinue. Finally, there is a second image of the patron of Cheung Chau, Pei Ti (北帝), under his title Hsüan T'ien Ta Ti (至天大禰), the Supreme God of Profound Heaven.



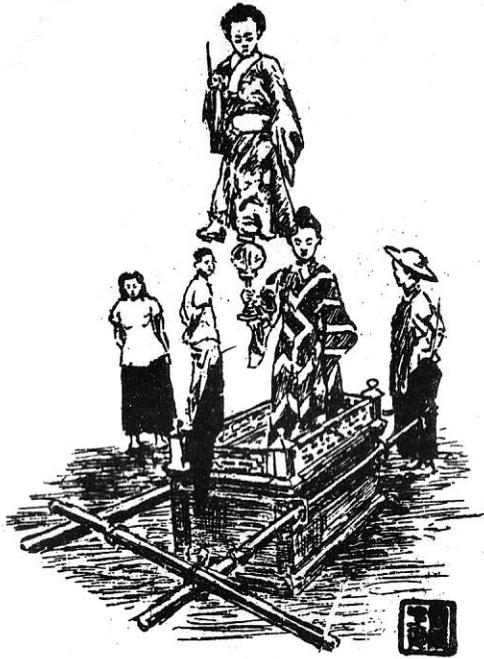
Boys leading Unicorns

Soon the whole street is filled with a mass of colour and animation, for the gaily decorated floats are interspersed with forests of waving banners. Three or four troupes of Lion dancers and clowns entertain the crowd with their antics. Inhabitants of the various streets erect their own decorations and, at the junctions elaborate the floral arches with tableaux of their own contriving some of which exhibit a keen sense of humour. The Chinese are far more censorious than westerners of mixed marriages and demonstrate their disapproval with a sort of Rake's Progress depicting the "Girl who wed a Foreign Devil".

An allegorical display is entitled "The girl who won a husband after three fights with him". The White Monkey, to whose ingenuity Hsuan Tsang was indebted during his search for the Buddhist scriptures, is always a prime favourite, and he figures in his journey to the Eastern Seas.



Two fair princesses, shut up in the palace



Lampmakers' Guild

Great consideration is shown for the children acting in the tableaux and, if the sun is fierce they are protected by umbrellas carried by attendants. The procession halts frequently when the infants are refreshed by soft drinks absorbed through straws. The pilgrimage through the village lasts an hour and a half and, by tradition, is completed at a run to the temple door. The ceremony is known as "Running the God", and its performance credited with inducing luck in the coming season.

The mass for the souls of the creatures, whose lives were sacrificed for food, begins before midnight on the last day, when the hungry spirits surround the Bun Mountains to take their fill. The whole populace gathers round, to see them get their deserts, and profit by their leavings. The priests conduct a service in every way similar to that performed at the Magnolia Festival in the Seventh Moon. The invitation to the ghosts to assemble and partake of the feast is issued, and the sacred elements are consecrated and symbolically distributed. The congregation consists of the whole population of the island, anxiously awaiting the moment for the officiating priest to give the signal for the assault.

As the dead are concerned, only he can determine when their appetites are satisfied. From time to time the celebrant raises an amber monocle to his eye and peers around, to detect some belated spirit whose tardy arrival has handicapped his complete satisfaction. At last he announces that the last has departed, and that the coast is clear. This is the supreme moment for the congregation, which loses no time in the scramble for the luck of the year. The higher the cake, the greater the honour conferred by its acquisition, so the youth of the island swarm up the scaffolding in a wild race to reach the summit and detach the crowning bun. As there are thirty thousand more, there are plenty of consolation prizes for the less active, and the organisers are not without their compensation, for they sit down to a banquet of thirty-six tables to break their fast.

GIANT STRIDES

One of the most attractive spots in the New Territories is the stretch between the two Tai Pos on the southern shore of Tolo Harbour. The road from Shatin, after wriggling its way to contour the three outlying spurs of Tai Mo Shan, straightens out to cross the railway, and, with a right-angled turn, is carried along a causeway with water on both sides. A halt at the corner is always profitable. On the right is Island House, surely one of the finest sites in the Colony, and the causeway itself is ever a scene of animation. It forms a shelter from the seaward for a large number of fishing junks, afloat at high tide and stranded on the mud at the ebb, revealing to the visitor the social habits of the Boat People. Hakka women with valances to their distinctive hats, bring vegetable produce to barter for fish, but they are camera-shy, and without an introduction, turn their faces from the photographer.

The original name for Tai Po (大埔) was, in Mandarin romanisation, Ta Pu (大步) or "Giant strides", for, many centuries ago, it was on the outskirts of a dense forest, the lair of every sort of wild beast. If the collection of firewood necessitated an entry into its gloomy recesses, the villagers were warned to take long steps, lest the tigers and snakes caught up with them.

There is still evidence that the district was once heavily wooded, for the roots of gigantic trees were grubbed up when the foundations of the road were being engineered and, until quite recently, a hill known as Kam Shan (禁山) was thickly wooded. This spur is now called the Embroidered Mountain but, before it was cleared for building it was the Forbidden Hill and its forests were spared in deference to its significance in the local geomancy. A substratum of truth about the wild beasts still clings to the place as it is the market for such fauna as now inhabit the Colony despite the encroachments of man. Civet cats are usually available, and wild boar still roam the wooded slopes of Tai Mo Shan. Comparatively recently an officer of the garrison was badly gashed from knee to ankle by a wounded boar, when armed with nothing more effective than a butterfly net.