

# HONG KONG LORE

by Detective Inspector E. Tyrie, who recently returned from overseas liaison duty in Hong Kong.



A typical backdrop to a shrine to Kuan Ti with Chang Fei (right) and Liu Pei (left).

**A** RED lamp burns before the shrine of the Chinese God Kuan Ti in every detectives' room in every police station throughout the Territory of Hong Kong.

The origin of the custom dates back to the early 1930's when the Senior Officer at Yau Ma Tei Police Station installed a shrine to Kuan Ti — the god of war. The god's courage, loyalty, integrity and devotion to duty were to keep alive those virtues and motivate the consciences of his staff in the daily performance of their duties.

The example was followed by other CID Offices throughout the Territory and much faith is now displayed by devotees in the power of Kuan Ti to influence the outcome of an investigation.

The faithful pray to him daily, seeking inspiration in their fight against crime. Unfortunately others who pray to him and seek inspiration are those often responsible for committing the crimes he is expected to help solve; for Kuan Ti is also the patron saint of triads, pawnbrokers, and many other Chinese. (One of the small anomalies in the myth!)

Where does it all start and what is it all about? They're the questions I asked myself when I first heard of Kuan Ti, and determined to find out more when I attended my first Bi Kuan Ti, or ceremony to invoke the god's attention.

To understand the cause and effect of the idolising of a god such as Kuan Ti one needs to understand a little of the history and culture of the Chinese people. Their worship of different gods, and the homage they pay to a number of deities in the hope of improving their daily lives, goes back centuries and is entrenched in Chinese history.

## The Religion

Each trade and occupation has its patron god. Whether you are a detective, fisherman, sailor, hawker, or whatever, the shrine will be there and homage paid. Each is worshipped in its own way and is as important to its believers as that other mysterious Chinese practice, Fung Shui, but that's another story.

Visit the many temples in Hong Kong on the birthday of a particular god and you will see the tens of thousands of people making their pilgrimages to important temples to pay homage. Living in Hong Kong one becomes acutely aware of the strong beliefs of the Chinese people who follow the faiths of Buddhism, Taosim or Confucianism, or a mixture of all three, with as much conviction as followers of the Christian faith and all its enigmas.

The 24th day of the 6th moon of the Chinese calendar is the birthday of Kuan Ti. This usually falls during late June or early July. In the year A.D. 170, a Taoist named Chang Koh began to gather a huge army in north east China. The army was led by Chang and 36 generals. They wore yellow turbans and began a march across northern China. The army is known in Chinese history as the Yellow Turban Rebels and they subsequently caused the demise of the Han Dynasty. During this time the Prefects and Governors of China called upon volunteers to fight the Yellow Turbans. Three men met in a peach garden, united by a common purpose to fight the rebels, and

took an oath of loyalty to fight and die together. They were Liu Pei, Chang Fei and Kuan Yu. The oath they took is often referred to in modern Hung Mun poems and oaths which form part of the traditions of the triad societies. Kuan Yu was Kuan Ti's name prior to his deification.

## The Battles

The three friends are depicted in the picture which is nearly always found as the back-piece to the shrines erected in homage to Kuan Ti. Chang Fei on Kuan Ti's right, wide eyes staring out of a black face looking ferocious; Liu Pei to Kuan Ti's left carrying the seal of Heaven's authority on behalf of Kuan Ti. Kuan Ti is usually shown with a red face. It is said his face turned red when he was an outlaw before he joined up with his two friends to do battle against the Yellow Turbans. It happened as a result of killing an official who was imposing marriage on a neighbour's niece. He was disguised with the aid of the gods and made good his escape by calling himself Kuan instead of his proper name Yun Chang.

The trio fought many battles and their loyalty to each other never wavered. Kuan Ti proved himself time and again with his sword, "Black Dragon" and his horse, "Red Hare". So brave and mighty did he prove to be that the leader of the opposing armies wished to entice him to join his ranks. He eventually seduced him into fighting for his side after Kuan Ti believed that his two friends had died. Kuan Ti obtained three conditions from the leader of the opposing armies, Ts'ao Ts'ao. One of those was that Kuan Ti could return and rejoin Liu Pei if he heard news that he was still alive.

Ts'ao Ts'ao agreed to the conditions because he wanted Kuan Ti's might on his side. However, he attempted to compromise Kuan Ti several times in the hope that he could make him a permanent member of his army. He made various attempts to bribe Kuan Ti including bestowal of rank, the offering of presents, sexual favours and a variety of other temptations — but all without success. Liu Pei was eventually found alive and Kuan Ti returned to fight with his friend. Thus the legend of loyalty, integrity, courage and devotion to duty and friends was born. Another version of the story ends with Kuan Ti being killed because he would not betray his friends after being captured by the opposing armies. Whichever version is told the theme becomes the embodiment of the code of conduct which Kuan Ti's actions portray.

He was posthumously awarded official recognition, becoming firstly a duke,

then a prince and finally an emperor. He is often referred to as "the Great Emperor who protects the state" and is alleged to have been accorded honours that equal those bestowed on Confucius. So the legend lives on. Believers pay homage to him in the hope that he will enrich their daily lives; those believers who are detectives that he can affect the outcome of an investigation, guiding the investigator to find clues that will eventually solve the mystery of 'whodunnit'. They show their faith when they are promoted or are in other ways successful, or wish to ask Kuan Ti for a little more help if they feel that their efforts are lagging because Kuan Ti's interest may have gone astray. This ceremony is referred to as a "Bi Kuan Ti".

### The Ceremony

The venue is usually the detectives' room, identical to our muster room, and involves offering food and worship to the god. All members of the CID are expected to be involved. The ceremony usually begins with the ceremonial carving of a pig, usually pre-cooked, by the commanding officer, and then the gesture of bowing before the shrine while offering burning incense sticks. The sticks are then placed at the shrine by all those taking part. Not to do so could be interpreted as a bad omen. European officers show respect for the ceremony and the beliefs of their members. Not to do so would be to take the chance of upsetting the harmony of the unit. There could be emotional upheaval of the believing members, which would probably spread to other members, eventually affecting performance of their duties.

Even the cleaning of the shrine and statue of Kuan Ti is done with reverence



*A major temple to Kuan Ti.*

by the faithful. Leaves from the pomelo tree are mixed in water and the solution used to cleanse the shrine of evil spirits. This is just as in the old days when prisoners returning to their homes after being set free from prison would be washed down with the solution before entering the family home, and just as many homes are still cleaned on the eve of Chinese New Year to bring in a year free of the evil and bad spirits of the old year.

Frena Bloomfield, in her "The Book of Chinese Beliefs", states: "There are many beliefs which influence daily life in Chinese communities. Some deal with religious duties or with the mysteries of fortune, others deal with matters which

outsiders might think of as superstitious and which have no factual basis, and it becomes clear that the real religion of the ordinary Chinese is involved with the pursuit of worldly success, the appeasement of the dead and the spirits and the seeking of hidden knowledge of the future. All of this is controlled, so the Chinese believe, by paying ritualistic respect to the dead to keep their spirits quiet and satisfied, by seeking harmony in everyday life and by using various methods of divination. It is around these concerns that Chinese community life is built and it is these customs which the Chinese have carried all over the world with them".

As many more Chinese emigrate from Hong Kong to various parts of the world, including Australia, they will take their culture with them. We owe it to ourselves to try to understand it, and we will be far more able to deal with any problems that arise in the Chinese communities if we can acquire some knowledge of their ways.

### Acknowledgement

*I am grateful for the assistance and advice given by Deputy Commissioner Li Kwan Ha and Detective Superintendent Ken Taylor of the Royal Hong Kong Police in the research and presentation of this article. Detective Station Sergeant William Chan Ping Yi, Ho Man Tin Police Station, also offered invaluable help.*



*Homage to Kuan Ti.*

