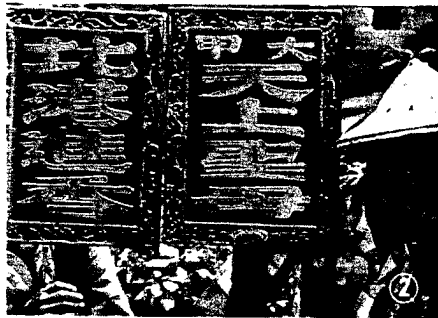


Art 15

甲天
 宮瀾鎮
 天上
 皇駕
 遊
 港
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 香
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Since being brought to Taiwan hundreds of years ago the Goddess Matsu has played a central role in the religious life of the island. The miracles she is said to have performed have made her the most popular deity in the Buddhist pantheon here.

ON THE ROAD TO PEIKANG

by Shi Sung
 translated by Earl Wieman

Every year some twenty to thirty thousand Tachia pilgrims make the trip to Peikang to show their veneration for the Goddess. They come for many reasons, some to present petitions to the Goddess, others to fulfill oaths sworn to her, but all to commemorate her birthday anniversary which falls of the 19th and the 23rd days of the third moon.

Throughout the years, some three hundred temples dedicated to Matsu have been built in Taiwan. Peikang's Chao Tien Kung, however, has remained the most important. On her birthday each year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims arrive from all over bringing their images of the goddess to pay homage to Peikang's Matsu. Incense ashes from the main temple are also placed in censers and taken back to the various temples. This latter ritual serves to renew the ties of the local temples with the original one in Peikang. Since the images of the goddess must be returned to their respective temples in time for the goddess' birthday celebration which takes place on the 19th to the 23rd days of the third lunar month, the pilgrimages to Peikang usually take place a few weeks before the big day.

Hundreds of local believers accompany their images to the main temple, some to present petitions to the goddess, others to ful-

The student's ears become numb from the noise. He fears that the firecrackers will cause a fire; but no, an old man assures him, Tachia's firecrackers have never caused any damage.

It is already after one o'clock when the procession leaves the town of Tachia, and those who have come to send off the marchers return to their homes. The rest are prepared for a journey of over 100 kilometers each way.

The night becomes quiet and the student's numbed ears slowly readjust to the silence. He begins to hear a delicate tinkling which he first takes as imagination; but he soon discovers that it is the sound of bells which are fastened to more than 4000 flags.

As the procession passes by the newly-ploughed rice fields lying dark on either side of the road, the student sees small tables with offerings and incense set up alongside the way. From houses set back from the road, farmers rush

over with incense and kneel in reverence as the goddess passes. The glow of their waving incense looks like fireflies in the night.

Alongside the student walks a gray-haired old lady wearing sandals with a bag strapped to her back. He talks with her along the way to make the night pass more quickly. "You're a student, aren't you? Why are you going to Peikang with Matsu?"

The young man answers shyly and the woman continues. "Ah, good, good, Matsu will be sure to help such a conscientious student. Myself, I do it every year as a way of obtaining a bit of peace. Now that young fellow up front there is here to fulfill a pledge. Year before last, before he went to Keelung to work at the harbor there, he went to the temple and prayed. He promised that if Matsu helped him to prosper at the new job, he would come back and walk to Peikang with her. Now he's made a bit of money and has got married, so he has to

make the trip."

Since telling his story the student feels better, but after another couple of hours his feet seem to be on fire and he notices that the old woman is now far ahead of him.

IV. Master of the Censer

This long march is not at all easy. Every day the marchers must continue until the sun retreats below the horizon; only then can they rest. Even so, at midnight they must gather their spirits and set out again. Although many of them are women and oldsters, the speed of the march is quite fast. But since each time they pass through a town with a Matsu temple they have to stop and pay respects, and they are also slowed by the people who come out to welcome the goddess, the trip takes three days and three nights. The enthusiasm with which the people along the route welcome the Tachia procession is difficult to believe — firecrackers, dragons,

Continued on page 55

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