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PostMagazine

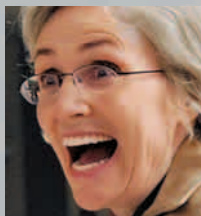
OCTOBER 23, 2011

Phuket's Vegetarian Festival

There will be blood



Divorce ruling
causes trouble
and strife
P16



The growing
pains of
Jane Lynch
P30

Fun with
mushrooms
P60



The village
with towering
ambitions
P64



Clockwise from above:
a *mah song* “cleanses his soul” by piercing his face with an assortment of blades; another opts for hundreds of smaller piercings; a part of the procession uses axes as symbols of devotion; devotees from the Sam Kong Shrine, north of Phuket Town, carry idols as firecrackers explode around them.





Scar struck

Phuket's Vegetarian Festival, during which 'horses of the gods' perform extreme acts of self-mutilation, is one of blood, colour – and photo opportunities. Text and pictures by **Gary Jones**.

T

he Thai holiday island of Phuket sits off the kingdom's west coast. The island has a permanent population of half a million people, and the location's agreeable turquoise waters and chi-chi resorts, as well as its bee-busy sex industry, pull in five million tourists a year.

Phuket is also home, apparently, to more than 2,000 spirit mediums of Chinese heritage. Once a year, they voluntarily become human pin-cushions. Phuket's annual Vegetarian Festival commences on the first day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar. It has been called the "bazaar of the bizarre", the "carnival of carnage" and the "gala of gore". But it's far, far nuttier than that.

This year the festival ran from September 27 to October 5, and for those nine days Phuket's spirit mediums, known locally as *mah song*, or "horses of the gods", publicly slashed and mutilated themselves with cutlasses and other sharp objects. They hacked at their tongues with razor-keen axes and long, serrated saws, blood dribbling liberally down their bare chests to leave great gobs of coagulating crimson gunk on the streets. Many more *mah song* underwent disfiguring piercing of their cheeks with skewers and knives. And with golf clubs, badminton rackets and umbrellas; with handguns and power drills; with motorcycle exhaust pipes and assorted automotive parts; with bunches of flowers and green bananas; with table legs, butcher's hooks and musical instruments; and with rows of dominos held together with superglue. >>





One man thought it a good look to scar himself for life by puncturing his face with a radio-controlled model helicopter. Phuket's Vegetarian Festival is an unusual spectacle.

The origins of the event are unclear. What is known is that Phuket was a centre for tin mining in Southeast Asia, and large numbers of Chinese migrants worked here in the 19th century (people of Chinese ancestry comprise a substantial proportion of Phuket's population to this day). They lived in jungle conditions. Malaria and other tropical maladies were rife.

In about 1825, a travelling opera troupe arrived from China to perform for the miners, but soon became violently sick. Deeply superstitious, the troupe prayed to two gods – Kiew Ong Tai Teh and Yok Ong Sone Teh – and adhered to a vegetarian diet to honour them.

When the fever afflicting the troupe receded, the miners asked how the minstrels had survived. Ritual vegetarianism had been their

saviour, they replied, and the Vegetarian Festival has been held ever since, with Phuket's Chinese observing a strict vegetarian diet for purposes of spiritual cleansing.

Self-butchery was added to the pantomime later, with the *mah song* entering trances to be ceremonially perforated on shrine grounds before joining processions through Phuket's streets. Though the merit-making piercings should only be made using weapons mentioned in Chinese legends (swords and bladed staffs, for instance), it's significantly easier to get your picture in the newspaper with the mischievous misuse of a couple of ukuleles, or a bicycle pump – or an entire bicycle.

This year, festival organisers called for Chinese shrines taking part (Phuket has about 40) to issue identity cards to *mah song*. Prasert Fakthongphol, president of the Phuket Shrine Association, told the *Phuket Gazette* newspaper that this was required “to preserve the integrity of the spirit-medium community” and to stop “fakes”. Identity cards >>

Below: participants take a break at the Bang Neow Shrine to smarten up their deity on their way to the Sapan Hin Shrine and the festival's culmination.





Above: on the final evening of the festival, all the shrines come together for a procession through Phuket Town, which is enveloped in the smoke of millions of firecrackers.

feature the name and photograph of a *mah song*, and details of the god that possesses him – but the 350 penitents of Phuket Town’s Bang Neow shrine were the only ones who carried them.

Charlatans have, indeed, occasionally popped up in Phuket. In 2006, 27-year-old woodcarver Paitoon Khopwej was to join a procession. Terrified at his coming suffering, he hacked the tongue out of a pig’s head, washed it, skewered it with a sword and a sharp-tipped saw blade and wedged the cold organ into his own mouth. When his deception was discovered, Paitoon was beaten bloody by a vexed mob, and elders at the Kathu Chinese shrine filed a complaint with police. The chastened woodcutter served 15 days in Baan Bangjo prison for “deceiving the public”.

Although an impressively tattooed fisherman stumbling through torrential rain with a significant chunk of palm tree rammed through his filleted face makes for an arresting photograph, he’s not an easy

fellow to speak with. That festival participants are allegedly off with the fairies complicates matters further.

On day six of the festival, with one of its largest street processions over, one young *mah song* – having just dropped off his celestial hitchhiker of the morning – shelters at a stall outside Phuket Town’s Jui Tui shrine. The stallholder sells polystyrene trays of mango and sticky rice for 30 baht (HK\$7.50). The lacerated and swollen face of the *mah song* is held together with Band-Aids and he sucks gingerly on a cigarette (officially, *mah song* should not smoke during the festival). He does not look happy.

Asked how it feels to march through the streets for three hours in the rain with a sword stuck through his head, he says he “cannot remember”. And how does he feel now? “Tired.”

The gloomy penitent has no interest in talking and he hobbles away to be washed clean in the rain. ■



CARNIVAL OF CARNAGE

The island of Phuket in Thailand is home to over 2,000 mah song, or 'horses of the gods,' spirit mediums of Chinese heritage. On the first day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar, they commence their annual Vegetarian Festival, nine days in which they enter trances and skewer, slash and self-mutilate themselves with objects as diverse as golf clubs, handguns and assorted automotive parts. Gary Jones went to capture this bazaar of the bizarre.







